

Analysis

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# Rawlings near end of struggle

Time of delusion  
almost over, says  
school reform author

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SUN STAFF

In its most dramatic moment so far, the 1997 legislative session featured a former resident of Baltimore's Edgar Allan Poe housing project poised to deliver a quarter-billion dollars to his home city's school system.

In return for the five-year financial commitment, Del. Howard A. "Pete" Rawlings was promising a bureaucratic and political revolution, wresting control of the failing system from the mayor as well as the school superintendent and handing some of it to the state.

Opponents in Baltimore say he sold out for a relative pittance, giving up hard-won political power as well. Those in Montgomery and Prince George's County instead see a crass money grab.

Rawlings pushes on, suggesting that his adversaries must be unaware of the system's persistent failures. Of the city school administration, he has said: "They think we're playing games down here [in Annapolis]. They think we should send money and mind our own business. They have deluded themselves and convinced others in the community they are doing a good job."

The time for delusion is over, says this postal worker's son who graduated from Douglass High School and went on to become a mathematics professor.

"We must demand the best possible education for our children," he says.

His bill [See Rawlings, 5A]

# Rawlings near end of long school reform fight

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cleared the House of Delegates on a vote of 78-61 Saturday evening. Final General Assembly approval is considered likely before the legislative session ends at midnight tonight.

But given the measure's tortured progress, another crisis would not be surprising. The \$254 million bill has been opposed bitterly in Baltimore — despite the money it provides — and stands near enactment only on the strength of Rawlings' leadership.

When the legislation was most vulnerable, the bill drew opposition from influential black ministers, a revered former congressman, the president of the NAACP and one-time liberal allies from the Maryland suburbs of Washington.

A black legislator with great respect among his colleagues and immense power as chairman of the Appropriations Committee, the 60-year-old Rawlings brought unique qualifications to his task.

"You can't call me a racist. You can't accuse me of not being knowledgeable of city public schools," he said last year. "Be-

cause I'm in a position to raise these questions, it peels away some of the other issues that cloud the focus."

While the matter was debated in the House Saturday night, Rawlings offered what amounted to the final lecture in a master class on consensus building. He spoke of the needs of Baltimore's schoolchildren, of statewide responsibility even in a deeply divided Assembly, of the six-year legal and legislative struggle to rebuild the city system.

The bill before the delegates grew out of a consent decree signed by the mayor, governor and others to settle lawsuits over conditions in the city schools. Rawlings was just one of the people who negotiated the settlement, but in the Assembly, the legislation is seen as his.

He stood by his desk at the very center of the chamber, turning right and left as if to address each of his colleagues individually. He accented his resonant voice with sweeping, jabbing gestures which seemed simultaneously to cajole and soothe.

"It was his baby," said House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr., who,

until Saturday night, feared the bill might be lost. "He's a courageous, caring man." Similar words were used by opponents as well as by allies.

"He's got an intellectual side. He's got a bullying side. And he's got a dramatic side. They're all fascinating," said Del. D. Bruce Poole, a Washington County Democrat who voted for the bill.

Rawlings had passionate individual supporters throughout the chamber, but he was defending an extraordinary outlay of cash at a time when Maryland is torn by regional competition for scarce resources. That rivalry robbed him of his usual big-county allies — liberal and African-American representatives in Montgomery and Prince George's, who deserted him to proclaim uncommon solidarity on behalf of their own poor children.

Both sides used the same rhetoric.

"Is the issue of educational funding going to be addressed in a divisive and parochial way?" asked Del. James C. Rosapepe, a Prince George's Democrat. He contended Rawlings was doing precisely that — and attempting

to enforce his views by killing opponents' bond bills.

Rawlings hardly attempted to deny the charge.

"If this bill goes down," he said Saturday morning, "all their school construction money is coming out of the budget. They won't get anything. Not a dime."

But he had even more serious difficulties.

In Baltimore, an ominous picket line of opposition was established by City Council President Lawrence A. Bell III, the powerful Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance and former U.S. Rep. Parren J. Mitchell, who all signed a letter to legislators last week opposing the bill.

Also signing, finally, was the president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, former 7th District Rep. Kweisi Mfume. "I think we can do better," Mfume said.

Rawlings was wondering at that moment if he could do anything at all. Urged by their county executives, suburban and rural legislators were demanding levels of assistance equivalent to the city's — though most of them were wealthier and none had the in-

tense concentrations of poverty found in Baltimore.

Rawlings prevailed ultimately for several reasons: He had taken pains to include Republican legislators in his budget deliberations this year, according them a full and courteous hearing on their suggested cuts. Many of them voted for his bill Saturday.

Other support came because of the bill's management reforms and because Rawlings had shown repeatedly in recent years that he was willing to impose penalties — withholding state aid — when Baltimore school administrators failed to produce.

"A lot of people voted for the bill because they realize he was willing to take a tough stand," said Poole.

"He has taken on the most powerful interest groups and many of his African-American colleagues who disagree with the approach," said the House majority leader, John Adams Hurson. "He's been an example of what I'd like to see more of in myself: doing what's right."

After the House approval, Rawlings was asked if this bill with its money and its message of change could be the accomplishment of a lifetime. "I hope not. I plan to live quite a bit longer," he said.

Could it be the accomplishment of his life so far?

He smiled. "Oh, yeah."