

Ohio House panel OKs school prayer

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Without debate or drama, the House Education Committee has approved a once-defeated bill requiring public schools to provide a moment daily for student prayer or meditation.

The 8-2 vote Tuesday night followed a decision by the bill's sponsor, Rep. Dale Locker, D-80 Anna, to accept an amended version that he rejected a week ago.

Locker's withdrawal of support for his own bill and pleas by some lawmakers to maintain strict separation of church and state spelled defeat for the bill one week ago.

But Education Committee Chairman Robert J. Boggs, D-97 Jefferson, kept the bill alive and persuaded Locker to agree to his amendment putting the onus for the mandatory silent period on Ohio's 617 local school boards, rather than individual teachers.

Locker at first feared this would

allow too much leeway on the local level and lead to methods of implementation that could invite an unfavorable court test.

After Locker decided he would accept half a loaf, several committee members who originally voted against the bill in deference to his objection, joined him in support.

As it was voted out of committee, the legislation requires school boards to adopt rules for teachers to open each class day with not more than one moment of silence for prayer or meditation.

It must still be assigned to a floor vote by the House Rules Committee and then work its way through the Senate.

But Rita Warren, an ardent and vocal backer, who says she represents the Christian Civil Liberties Union, said she was "very optimistic it will pass in the House and Senate."

So optimistic, that she is already preparing to embark on a second project—a bill requiring daily recitation in public schools of the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

Earlier, Tuesday, Mrs. Warren of Brockton, Mass., led a rally of about 75 persons on the Statehouse steps in support of the bill.

The crowd sang patriotic songs and carried placards with slogans such as, "Let's get prayer back in school and pornography out."

Reps. James S. Zehner, D-83 Yellow Springs, and Larry H. Christman, D-67 Englewood, both of whom raised separation of church and state objections last week, voted against the measure.

Christman questioned the parliamentary procedure raised in reconsidering the bill but other than that neither he nor Zehner argued against it.