

'Public schools'

State board redefines meaning, but rough road ahead in House

By TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Clark Durant nudged Michigan education a step closer to parochialism as a split State Board of Education endorsed a new definition of "public schools."

Durant, R-Grosse Pointe, won 5-2 approval Aug. 16 of proposed governance changes that now go to the Legislature. The recommendations face trouble in the House of Representatives, where many Republicans and most Democrats are protective of public schools.

"Much too broad," objected Dorothy Beardmore, R-Rochester, the lone Republican to fight Durant on the board. Current law defines public schools as school districts, intermediate districts and public school academy corporations.

The new draft would redefine a public school by its "mission" of teaching academic skills. It's close to the definition pushed by Teach Michigan, a group that openly favors striking the anti-parochial section of the Michigan Constitution and allowing state-paid vouchers to be used by parents at any school, public, private or church-related.

Said Beardmore: "As long as their mission focuses on whatever their mission was, they can go ahead" with assurance of state money. "But how does their approach meet state standards?"

Beardmore said the Durant-backed code assumes public money "belongs to the family or student. It's a terrible blending of private and public money. It's not legal, constitutional or ethical. It's a back-door entrance to diverting the foundation grant (state school aid) as a voucher."

Barbara Roberts Mason, D-Lansing, who joined Beardmore in opposing the new draft, criticized Durant, the board president, for stacking the disapproval with backers of charter schools. "I would like to hear three addi-

tional people with other viewpoints," she said after hearing Durant's hand-picked speakers, including former Milwaukee superintendent Howard Fuller.

Durant, an attorney and conservative GOP figure elected to the board in 1994 with religious right backing, had his votes lined up and mostly let opponents talk without rebuttal. Voting his way were Republicans Gary Wolfram of Hillsdale, Marilyn Lundy of Detroit, Sharon Wise of Owosso and Ruth Braun of Saginaw. Wolfram and Braun are appointees of Gov. John Engler.

A bone of contention was the charter school concept, also called PSAs for public school academies. Current law allows a limited number for academies to receive charters from universities and state foundation grants while operating largely outside the domain of local elected school boards.

Durant's forces support PSAs with ideology: "choice," "competition" and "freedom." Opponents said PSAs should first be tested and researched.

Fuller, a rumored candidate for Michigan's open superintendent of public instruction job, bluntly urged Michigan to charter an unlimited number of academies, even though "it's too early to analyze" their success in Milwaukee in his tenure.

Opponents said PSAs should be considered experimental until research proves their value.

"It is indeed too early to make any analysis of charter schools in Milwaukee," said Mason.

Said Beardmore: "Before we rush to create more PSAs, we should find out what their successes are and what their challenges are. This has not been thought through," she added, calling Fuller's advice "foolhardy."

Public comments consumed two hours of the board's morning meeting. "Durant's rhetoric does not

match his true meaning," said Joan Donnell, Bloomfield Township mother of two. She blasted Durant for forcing the resignation of state superintendent Robert Schiller Aug. 3. "Dr. Schiller wanted to improve public education in this state, not dismantle it," she said.

"Let charter schools ride their course before we jump ahead to home rule," said Dirk Koorstra, a Zeeland teacher. He warned that smaller "autonomous" schools advocated by Durant "can be controlled by special interests."

Julius Maddox, Fontaine teacher and president of the Michigan Education Association, urged a "sound, researched-based" approach. Maddox said both parties in the Legislature supported core curriculum standards, school accreditation and proficiency tests, and cautioned against "a radical course of change."

Barbara DeMarco, West Bloomfield parent representing People for the American Way, said Durant's agenda is "the destruction of public education." She called "choice" and "freedom" mere "buzzwords."

Julie Dennis, a Rockford teacher, urged research before adoption of "unfounded proposals."

Besides Fuller, one of Durant's chosen speakers was Chuck Stockwell, a 16-year veteran of the Wayne-Westland School District before he left to start a charter school. Stockwell accused the local board of trying to frustrate his group's effort by taking vacant school buildings off the market.

"The department (of education) must become proactive and educate superintendents," Stockwell said. "We've made repeated efforts to talk to our local school board — to no avail."

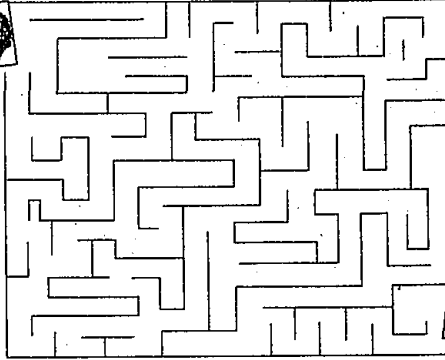
Stockwell said charter schools face a money hurdle: They can get no state foundation grants until they've been open for three months — at a cost of \$500,000 to \$1 million in operating capital.



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