

Beardmore in center of public education policy controversy

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Dorothy Beardmore, a Republican, has wound up in the middle of the battle between the State Board of Education and Gov. John Engler over control of public school policy.

"Frankly I don't want a confrontation with John Engler," said Beardmore, a former member of the Rochester and Oakland Intermediate school boards.

It is happening anyway on a board that is split 4-4 between Republicans and Democrats. Some reports say she is "voting with Democrats" against Engler. She prefers the description that she and four Democrats favor public schools while ex-board president Clark Durant and two adherents favor charter schools.

The last two years (when the GOP had 6-2 control), they didn't need me," Beardmore said in an interview. "I could argue 'til I was blue in the face. It's more difficult now. I'm going to be the determining vote."

And she was at the Feb. 7 special meeting when he had vetoed 5-2 to ask that Engler withdraw his executive order No. 11 by Feb. 20. It transfers control of the Department of Education to the appointed superintendent of public instruction.

Beardmore did more than vote yes on the resolution; she made the motion.

Durant was out of the room when the vote was taken. Voting against it were Republicans Gary Wolfram of Hillsdale and Sharon Wise of Owego.

So far, Beardmore said afterward, she has felt no political repercussions in her break with the governor on school policy. She is in the middle of her second eight-year term that ends in the year 2000 and can't be removed.

Beardmore won re-nomination to her second term in 1992, after a challenge from Harry Vermyer and the religious right, which mounted 44 percent of the GOP convention vote against her.

Asked what would happen if Engler failed to withdraw EO 11, the new board president, Kathleen Straus, D-Detroit, said, "If we have to go to court, we go to



Dorothy Beardmore

court."

As Beardmore sees it, however, EO 11 is unnecessary under the Michigan Constitution. "By the constitution, the (elected state) board is head of the agency and appoints the superintendent. By the constitution, he's the top executive officer."

"The governor is turning things around 180 degrees. (Under EO 11) the people who appoint the superintendent were below the man they appoint." The board also wants Engler to modify EO 12, which transfers a 10-page, single-spaced list of duties from the board to the superintendent. Specifically, said Beardmore:

- Property transfers should continue to be decided by the board after a hearing officer's report and recommendation.

- Power over charter schools should belong to the board, which should establish a policy for overseeing them.

- Teacher certification and administrator certification rules are a policy matter that should be decided by the board.

"All he left us with is setting the criteria for (certifying) school counselors," Beardmore said.

"The governor and his advisors think grant receipts are just routine (clutter that prolongs board meetings)," she went on. "But these are policies with money attached. When you look at the money that comes from the federal government, the discre-

tionary funds that go to school districts, I think that's policy."

Many details of Engler's EO 12 are obsolete, said Beardmore, because the functions have been removed from the new 1996 school code, or the staff who performed them were shifted out of the Department of Education by Engler's earlier EOs.

In real life, she said, the board and Superintendent Art Ellis have worked well together.

Beardmore thinks Engler and his advisors have overlooked an historical situation developing within the administration of Ellis, a former university president.

"Art Ellis said he was not a K-12 person; his top administrators are. But now with pending early retirements, they are not going to be there," Beardmore said.

Engler gave the State Board of Education a much-publicized bawling out for "failing schools," particularly in Benton Harbor, where the failure rate on high school proficiency tests has exceeded 90 percent.

The irony, said Beardmore, is that Engler asked for the meeting with the board the same day that two top administrators were scheduled to be in Benton Harbor to help local officials.

"You can't just waltz in and say this isn't acceptable without the support of the community," she said.

After saying, "I am not happy with the way the State Board of Education has carried out its responsibilities because we have failing schools and students," Engler got at a return tongue-lashing from newly elected member Herb Moyer, a Democrat and former superintendent in Monroe County.

"We have areas we need to work on," said Moyer, "but to take on this kind of tenor and to have this kind of lashing out — 'you're failing' — that's very demeaning in light of the fact of many successes. It's demeaning to teachers. It's demeaning to parents, and it's demeaning to students."

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