

Gish says state board ducks tough school issues

By MARK SCHAUER
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FRANKFORT, Ky. — The Kentucky Board of Education's inaction has helped create "an air of crisis" around school reform, a member has warned his colleagues.

Tom Gish, a newspaper publisher from Letcher County, asserted in a letter dated March 25 that "the whole reform movement is about to slide over the cliff."

He complained that the agenda for the board's just-completed April meeting was full of "rubber-stamp stuff" and that the board had become the Education Department's "amen chorus" instead of asking hard questions about school reform.

He accused the board of "wasting its time" and "betraying the public trust" by dealing only with inconsequential issues.

"The problems facing reform are many — yet no effort is being made to take advantage of the enormous skills and intelligent concern that characterizes state board members," Gish wrote.

The letter was addressed to Joseph Kelly, the state board chairman, and sent to the other members. (State school board members are appointed by the governor.)

"As is normal with Tom, he presents some very interesting, very insightful observations," Kelly said.

Letter contends 'air of crisis' hangs over KERA reforms

He said he did not agree with everything in the letter, but Kelly said he is very fond of Gish and thinks he "challenges us to go beyond even the high standards we set for ourselves."

"He puts his heart where his mouth is," Kelly said. "When Tom has something to say, I'm real attentive."

Other board members reached yesterday also said they respected Gish but did not share his views.

"I don't think we're a rubber stamp," said Deborah Morrow, a board member from Madisonville.

The board has made a difference, Morrow said, but "I don't care what you do, you can always do better."

"I'm sure that there are some groups at the Pentagon that have meetings that some people don't feel are worthwhile," she said.

Gish's letter did not surprise other board members because he has often been the most bluntly critical of the progress of school reform, especially in Eastern Kentucky.

"In a lot of ways, Tom serves as a conscience for me, and for other board members as well," said Helen Mountjoy, a board member from

Daviess County.

She did not agree with assertions he made in the letter but she said he may see things in schools in his part of the state that she does not see in the schools she is familiar with.

Gish said, for example, that scores on the American College Test have fallen in many mountain schools in recent years and that students' educational needs are being neglected.

But Mountjoy, who is the chairwoman of one of the board's two standing committees, said ACT scores overall may be lower because more students — not just the top ones — are taking the test.

And although Gish said schools have taken the billions of dollars that came with the Kentucky Education Reform Act and had a "six-year good times party," while children have been lost, Mountjoy said she has seen districts spend money improving their staffs and programs.

But, Mountjoy added, "I'm not in a position to know how every dollar was spent in every district."

After receiving Gish's letter, Mountjoy said, she scheduled a dis-

cussion about the distinguished-educator program for the board's June meeting. Distinguished educators are chosen by the Education Department to help schools that do poorly on state tests.

Mountjoy agreed with Gish that it is time to talk more about what distinguished educators are doing, although she discounted some of the questions he raised. For example, Gish questioned why some distinguished educators were spending only 15 hours a week in their assigned schools.

Mountjoy said one explanation could be that some of the educators are assigned to several schools. Since students are in school 30 hours a week, an educator with two schools could spend only 15 hours at each.

She also disagreed that the board is the Education Department's "amen chorus." She cited several examples of the board not going along with the department's recommendations, including issues involving the after-school, management-assistance and school-facilities programs.

"There are things that are changed almost every month" as the result of state board criticism, Mountjoy said.

She said she sees good things happening with reform and noted that the General Assembly chose to make few changes in the law this year.

Gish could not be reached yesterday to elaborate on the letter.