

Eliminating middle schools concerns local parents

By JANET BAINE
Staff writer

Starting high school at Grade 7 did not sit well with many of the 200 people attending a public meeting at Stewarttown School, Wednesday.

The meeting was the first of 16 on the Halton Board of Education's renewal report — a plan to revamp the education system from the ground up to cut costs and improve services.

"(Discussion) got heated at times," said Acton/Esquesing trustee Ethel Gardiner, who hasn't decided if she'll support the changes. "But after all, parents are advocates for their children and I think that is a parent's prime responsibility."

"We need fundamental change," Education director Bob Williams said. "We can't tinker anymore, we can't cut a little here and a little there as we've been doing."

Most of the discussion centred on two issues under consideration: closure of schools in Halton Hills and students entering high school at Grade 7.

Schools are operating at 80 per cent capacity, and the board wants to close 8 to 12 schools, concentrating resources on the remaining schools. Excess capacity is in Halton Hills and Burlington and a consultant is being hired to work with a team to identify the schools.

A related issue is the idea of students entering high school at Grade 7 and doing away with the Grade 6-8 middle school configuration. This way students would only have to switch schools once before

they graduate.

OAC (Grade 13) will be phased out by about 2002, leaving more space in the high schools for the younger students, explained Superintendent Kit Rankin, leader of the school programs portion of the report. High schools have better facilities and older students could provide a positive role model for the Grade 7 and 8s, she added.

However local parents said they are concerned that Grade 7 and 8 students would be exposed to smoking, drugs and "raging hormones" sooner if they are sent to high school at that age.

"It seems to me you're trying to sell us a bill of goods here," said Acton parent Susan McPhail. "If financial constraints are what's driving this, tell us that. Don't try to force it down our throats saying that it's best for the kids."

Hers was one of many comments made by parents who disliked the idea.

However, Oakville trustee Penny Siebert said her children attend Queen Elizabeth Park School, a high school which starts at Grade 7.

"I've had a positive experience. My kids are average, but I haven't had serious difficulties. There are some very different concerns, different issues, but I think we can work them out," she said.

In spite the criticism, Williams said this was the best public meeting he has attended on education issues.

"We are making fundamental change in the way we deliver education in Halton. That is both exciting and a little bit terrifying for all of us involved in the process," Williams said. The board will

collect more data on starting high school in Grade 7 and will also consider alternatives.

"I haven't made up my mind (on the report)," Georgetown trustee Dick Howitt

said. "There's a lot of good things in the report and what I hope is that school closure and having K to 6 schools don't drown out all the other good things. And I'm afraid that's what might happen."



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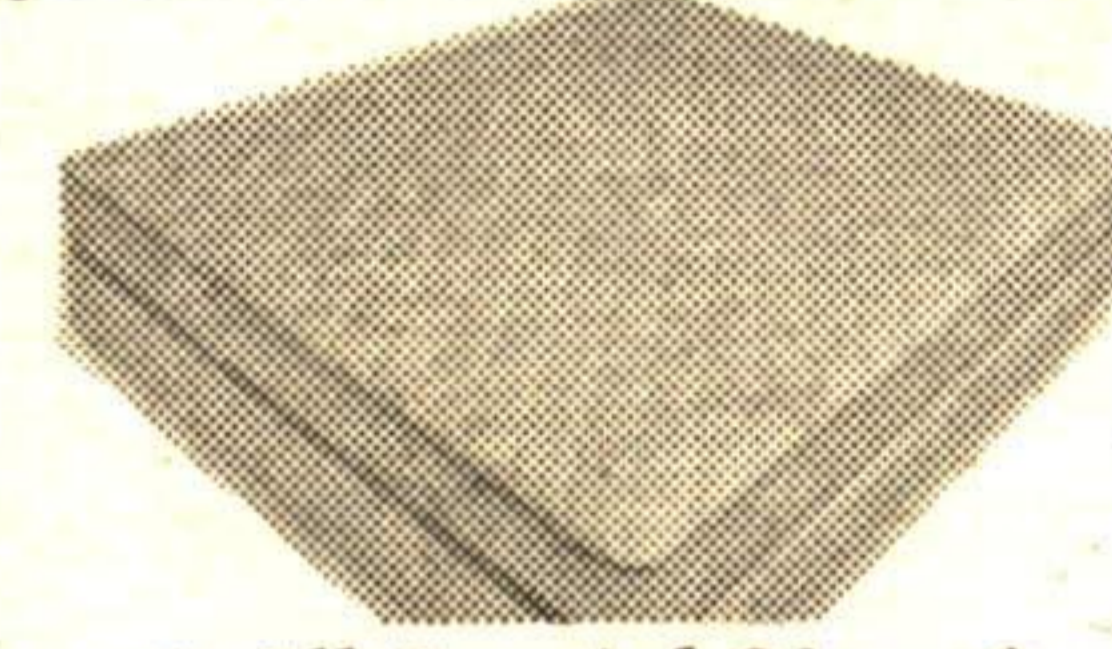
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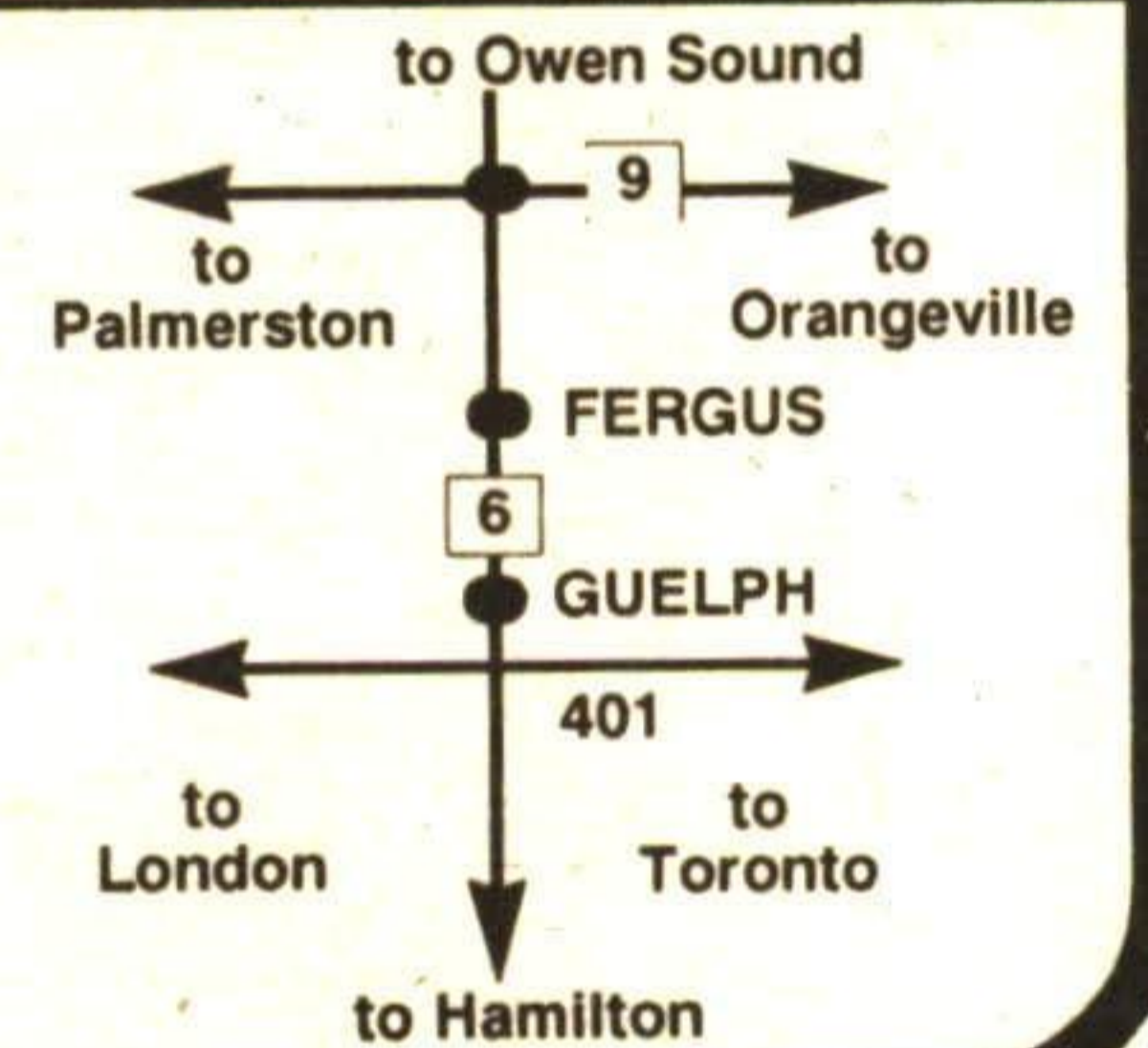


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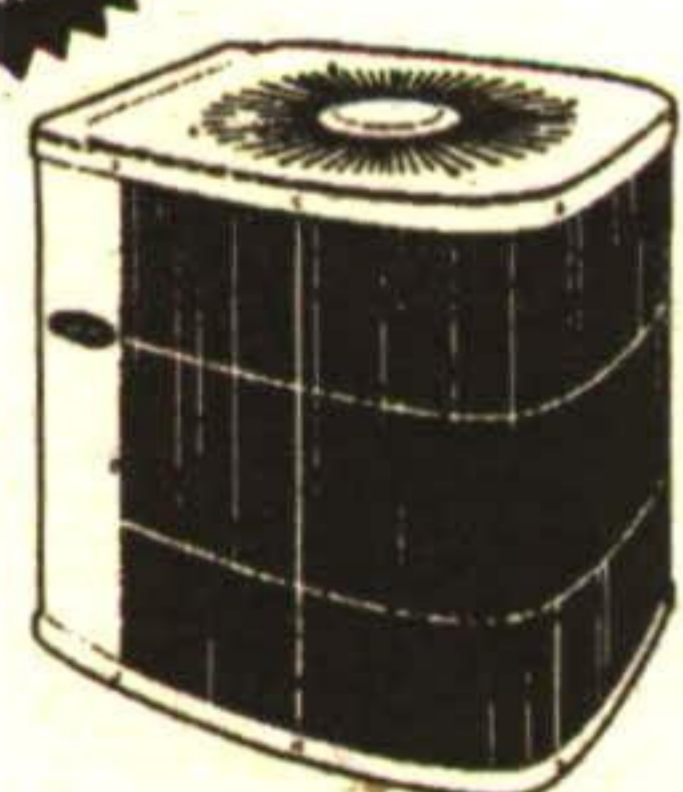
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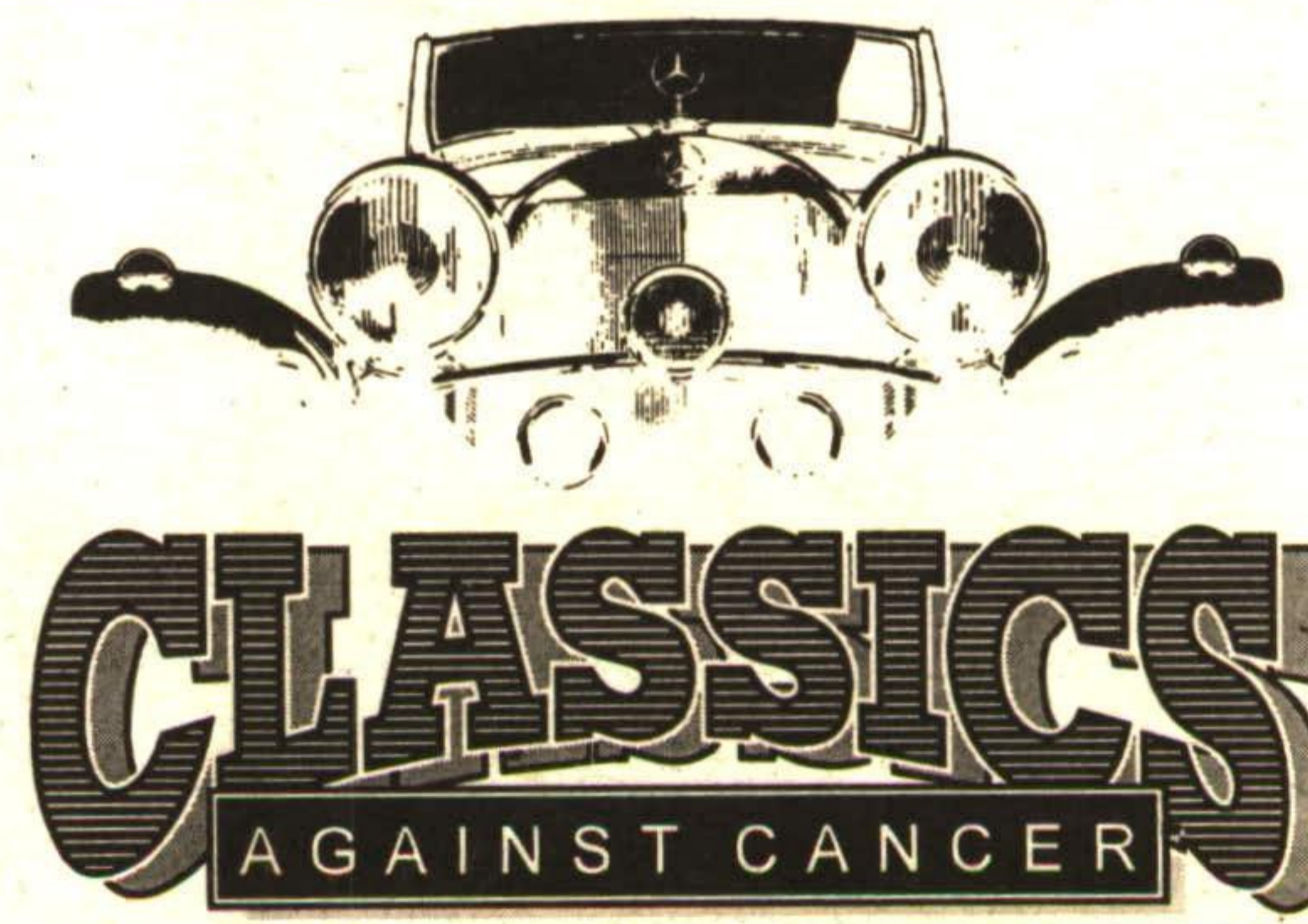
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