

Robert Baldwin School

Open area does not mean open concept



Baldwin

Kids love school

During their recess break a reporter asked several Baldwin pupils for their comments on the open area school.

Bonnie Snow and Alison Cropper, both in grade six, said they like the open design and have no difficulty concentrating. Both girls go on to middle school next year and they wonder how they'll adjust to conventional classrooms again.

Grade five students Marnie Loughheed and Kathy Richards said they find it noisy when the oral French class is in session in an adjacent area. Marnie added she likes being able to see everyone.

Richard Wilson, grade three, commented he likes the school because he likes to work. On the other hand, Mark Heagle, grade four, said the open areas were "too noisy", while Kelly King complained about class periods changing frequently. "There are too many different things to do," Kelly said.

"I love it!" said Patricia Rowley, unequivocally.

Mixed use of space for future schools

Emmerson Lavender, director of the Halton Board of Education, said open areas will be provided more selectively in schools of the future.

"I would say the trend now is toward a more discriminate use of areas," Mr. Lavender said. "Schools won't be all open or all closed. What we want is a more effective use of space."

Some subjects, such as oral French, require a room with four walls, he pointed out.

Rather than having the equivalent of six or seven classrooms in an open area, future school designs may feature pods of open areas equivalent to two or three classrooms.

The director gave the use of wide hallways at Robert Baldwin School not only for traffic but also for art work as an example of effective use of space. Treating auditorium stages acoustically to permit their use for music classes while the gym is in use was another example he gave.

FOLDING WALLS seen in background permit flexible use of classrooms at Baldwin School. Carpeting keeps the sound level low. Additionally, children learn to work quietly to avoid disturbing neighboring classes.

Mothers praise school's staff

Parents The Champion talked to echoed the words of Baldwin Principal John Lenz who said it's teachers not architecture that's important. The parents praised the staff highly.

The Champion spoke with several mothers who are volunteers in the school. They were generally satisfied with the open class areas.

"I'm very happy about everything I've seen at Robert Baldwin," said Angela McLean. She attributed the good things happening at the school to the staff.

Sue Cardwell agreed. "They get such terrific teachers — and teachers make the school," she said. Joan Williams said she was against the open area idea at first. Her son needs quiet to concentrate, she said, but added he seems to be coping with the openness.

"I do go for the open concept as far as getting the children organized for the outside world, where they'll have to work in open areas," Mrs. Williams commented.

Bobbie Smith's son has classes in a portable this year and likes it, she reported. She wonders whether he'll have difficulty concentrating when he moves to a class in the open part. However, she added she liked Robert Baldwin School and voiced praise for its principal.

Mrs. Smith said she's heard other parents complain about children being allowed to get up when they want to but said her impression is that discipline in the school is very good. "Children getting up to go to the resource area may be distracting to some," she said.

The open concept school is no different from the one-room country school which housed eight grades, commented Rosalind Richardson.

"I've come to the conclusion that children who are able to learn to play on their own find the open-concept school fine," she said, adding these children can block out everything but their immediate tasks. "I'm a volunteer at the school. I've walked around doing things and the kids don't even look up," she reported.

Although Robert Baldwin School has an open architectural design, it does not follow an "open concept" program, stresses principal John Lenz. Folding walls, vision barriers and curtains allow areas to be closed off or opened up as needed, but the program followed by the kindergarten to grade six children is conventional. A set time-table is followed and all basic subjects are taught.

The school, a source of some controversy while still in its blueprint stage, is in its fourth year of operation. Parents are welcome to come to the school any time they want, but few do, Mr. Lenz said. Perhaps knowing they can come is sufficient satisfaction, he mused. The parents do turn out in full force to support activities such as plays and open house, he noted.

The school features an open resource area (library) with classrooms arranged around the periphery on three sides. The resource area is thus accessible to children from all classes and easily visible to teachers, who can supervise children using the area as well as those in class. (There is a librarian as well.)

Adjacent to the library on the fourth side, offices and a staff lounge provide a buffer between classrooms and the noisier parts of the building — the activity area, gymnasium (all-purpose room), and music room (which doubles as a stage).

The classrooms are divided by folding walls, curtains or vision barriers (free-standing room dividers).

Gold, yellows and oranges

provide warmth and cheerfulness and add to the spacious look. Carpeting in the classrooms deadens noise. The only sound noticeable to the visitor is the soft hum of classes in session.

The terrazzo-floored activity area is used for messy activities such as painting. It also holds the boot storage racks which, while containing dirt and mud in the non-carpeted areas, are a headache for principal Lenz, who frequently finds himself trying to match children with stray boots, mitts and scarves. All children's boots look alike, it seems, and name tags wear out quickly.

Innovative though the design is, and controversial though it once was, it's not the architecture that's important in a school, said Mr. Lenz. It's the teachers.

Vice-principal Colton Roberts agreed. How teachers are selected to teach in open area schools makes a difference to their satisfaction, he said. "All the teachers at Baldwin are here because they choose to be," Mr. Roberts said. They applied to work at Robert Baldwin; they were not assigned there.

The school's first staff members were chosen after 75 hours of interviews. This year eight or nine applicants were interviewed from within the region for one position.

There are some differences as a result of the open design, however. Teachers are always on view, Mr. Lenz pointed out. This has the advantage of offering teachers an opportunity to learn from each other, im-

proving the over-all teaching quality, he said. The flexible use of space also allows teachers to combine classes or to teach together.

Although carpeting absorbs much of the sound, the children learn to work quietly out of consideration for their neighbors. "There tends to be more co-operation among teachers and students," Mr. Lenz commented.

The open arrangement seems to produce a warm comfortable atmosphere for the children, Mr. Lenz observed, adding that the decor contributed to the feeling.

Most children don't find the openness distracting, the principal said. But some do, and that's why the new addition has conventional classrooms. "It's good to have both," he said.

The new section adds 180 pupil places. In September there will be some classes at every grade in open and closed classrooms, selected according to their needs. (Classes will continue to mix students of every level of ability.)

The new addition has eight classrooms, but changing two existing classrooms to seminar and storage rooms gives a net gain of six rooms. The resource area will be enlarged at the same time.

There are 590 pupils in the school this year, 222 of them in grades one and two. The school is currently using seven portables.

Approximately 100 pupils from Dorset Park, the area served by Baldwin, are being bused to Pineview School. The Pineview children will

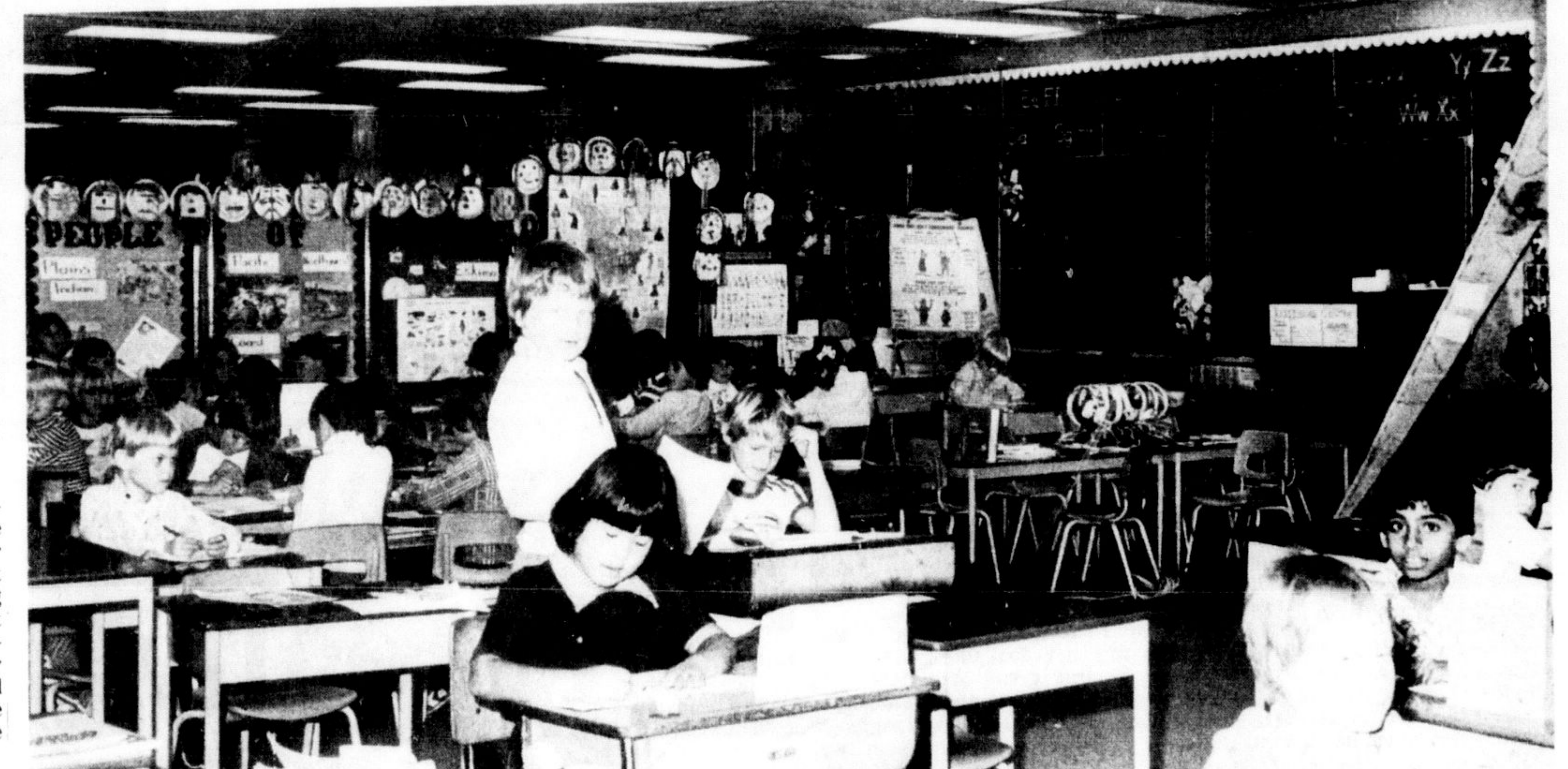
likely be transferred to Baldwin in September, although no firm commitments can be made until decisions about transferring grade six children to W. I. Dick School are made, Mr. Lenz said.

Completion of an elementary separate school across the street is also expected to relieve some of the pressure on Baldwin. Mr. Lenz anticipates some students will transfer and new residents in Dorset Park may be separate school supporters, attracted by the availability of a school.

Although the new addition has traditional classrooms, the walls separating the rooms do not extend all the way to the outside wall. The purpose of this design is to provide a second fire exit for each room, Mr. Lenz said.



PRINCIPAL and Vice-Principal John Lenz and Colton Roberts say it's the staff that makes the difference in a school, not the architecture.

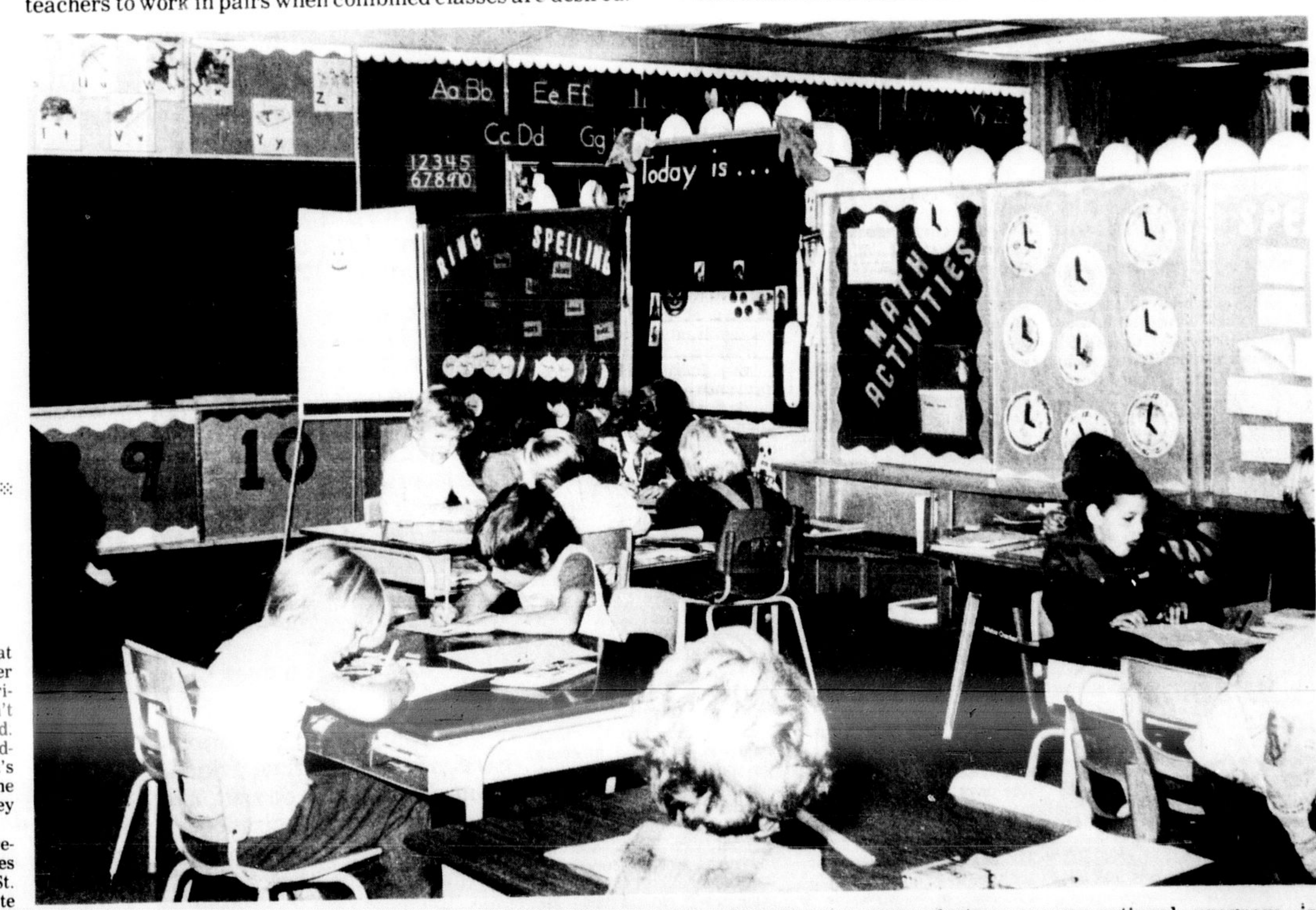


TWO CLASSES share space in Baldwin School, allowing teachers to work in pairs when combined classes are desired. The open design also makes it possible for teachers to observe each other at work and learn from each other.



WASHING UP. Terrazzo-floored central activity corridor is used for messy activities, such as painting. It also contains the boot storage racks, so mud is not tracked through the carpeted classrooms.

Stories and photos by Olga Darcovich



VISION BARRIERS in background cordon off class area at Robert Baldwin School. Although the school is architecturally an open design, a conventional program is followed.

Teachers say

It's quieter than expected

"It's a different feeling altogether," was the way a new teacher described her experience of the architecturally-open Baldwin School. "It's quieter than I ever believed possible," she added. "There's more noise in a conventional classroom."

She said the opportunity to share equipment and books and the accessibility of the resource centre were particular advantages of the school. Other teachers mentioned the opportunity to pick up

ideas and methods from fellow teachers a consequence of the open design they liked. Stan Hutchison, in his second year teaching at Baldwin, said the open design facilitated team teaching and cross-groupings of classes. Teacher Judy Wilson, in her third year at Baldwin, said the school has the best of both worlds. "You have lots of areas to go to if you want quiet," she commented. Both teachers and kids have to learn to co-operate, she noted, adding, "But

that's important." Having the library in the centre of everything is an innovation Ms. Wilson likes. It allows her to keep an eye on pupils in the resource area while she is teaching in the classroom space. But there's one aspect of conventional classrooms Mr. Hutchison misses. He finds he can't tell amusing anecdotes in the open area because the resulting fear-of-laughter would disturb others. Enthusiasm for the school extends to secretary Donna

Robbins, who has been at Baldwin since it opened. Her desk faces the activity corridor but Ms. Robbins doesn't mind being interrupted. "We're here for the children," she commented. "It's important for them to feel the office is open and a place they can come to."

In addition to her secretarial and receptionist duties Mrs. Robbins, who holds a St. John Ambulance certificate in first aid, handles any minor ailments that come along.