

Suspensions are not rare in any of Halton's schools

By TIM WHITNELL

Special to The Champion

A recent suspension of a Burlington high school OAC student is not a rare occurrence within the Halton District School Board.

While the nature of the offending material may be unique — a five-day sentence for severely criticizing a teacher in a letter circulated to other students — suspensions of varying lengths for a multitude of reasons are common within the board, occurring on a daily basis at various schools.

A look at the full board agendas made available to the media by the new school board now includes a monthly list of suspensions imposed at every public elementary and secondary school in the region.

Among the sparse details provided are the number incidents for each day and a general description of the punishable offence.

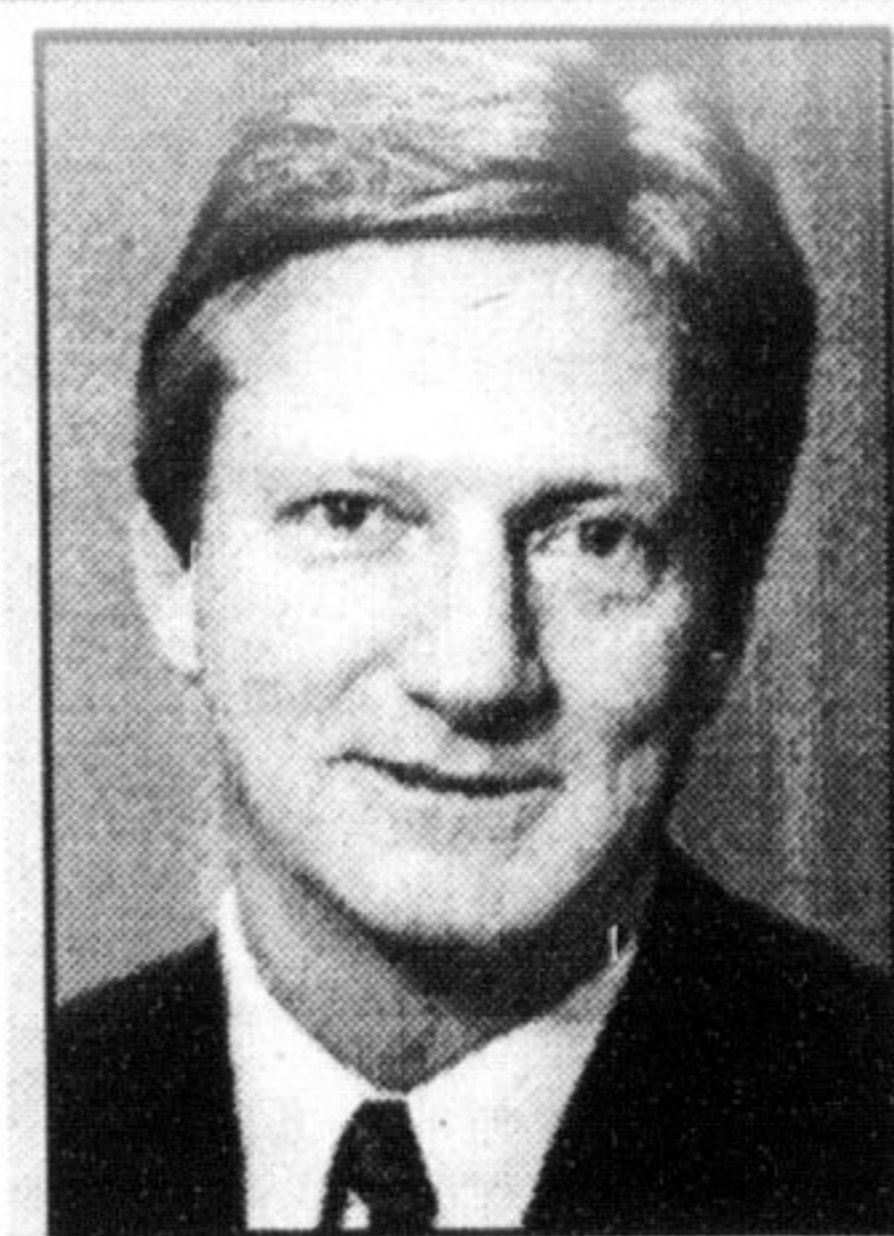
The list usually goes on for five or six pages per month. There were 200 incidents consisting of at least one day of suspension reported by principals across the region for December 1997; the previous month involved about 160 incidents.

The raw figures, without a detailed explanation about length or reason for each suspension, seem overwhelming, but Halton education director Dusty Papke said they must be taken in context.

"When you first glance at it, it looks like a lot. I've looked at the figures and considering we have more than 40,000 students, you're talking about 0.2 per cent of all students (being suspended monthly). For the number of students we have, it's not unusual."

Despite being the board's top administrator, Mr. Papke said he won't hear about many of the suspensions.

"It's the principal's job by law. I would get a copy of all of them, they come into the office, but I probably personally wouldn't see them. I wouldn't be aware



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DUSTY PAPKE

unless an appeal is made," he said, noting almost all suspensions are not appealed.

"I think that means, in the majority of instances, the sentences were deserved," he concluded.

Mr. Papke said under the Education Act, a principal can unilaterally suspend a student for up to 20 days, usually after consulting with the students' parents. "They can make a recommendation but a principal can't expel a student, only the board can do that."

The director said he wasn't aware of any lengthy suspensions handed out since he came to the Halton board in June 1997, but he wouldn't be surprised if some 20-day sentences were given. He said no expulsions have occurred at the board in his time.

The perception as to whether kids are behaving worse at school now or if principals are being less lenient is difficult to determine, said Mr. Papke.

"There is a lot of debate as to whether there's more physical confrontations now or before. Maybe we react to it more now, we're more aware. Maybe it (violence) is more blatant."

"The previous NDP government's Zero Tolerance policy led (generally) to an increased number of suspensions for physical violence," he added.

School boards and individual schools have their

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Tale of two seasons

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