

Catholic brass fears students may switch

By DENNIS SMITH

Special to The Champion

Catholic school board officials are hoping high school enrolments don't drop off next fall.

Students and parents are upset by a labour dispute that has cancelled extra-curricular activities since September. It's the third such dispute in four years affecting local Catholic high schools.

Halton Catholic District School Board officials hope the situation doesn't spur their secondary students to switch to public high schools next fall.

"We're a little concerned, but we don't know the numbers yet," said Fred Sweeney, director of education for the Catholic board.

He expects to have a clearer picture of next fall's enrolment at the end of February, when Grade 8 students have made their decisions.

He said it's very rare for students to switch high schools between semesters. Halton's public and Catholic high schools will be moving from first to second semester in early February.

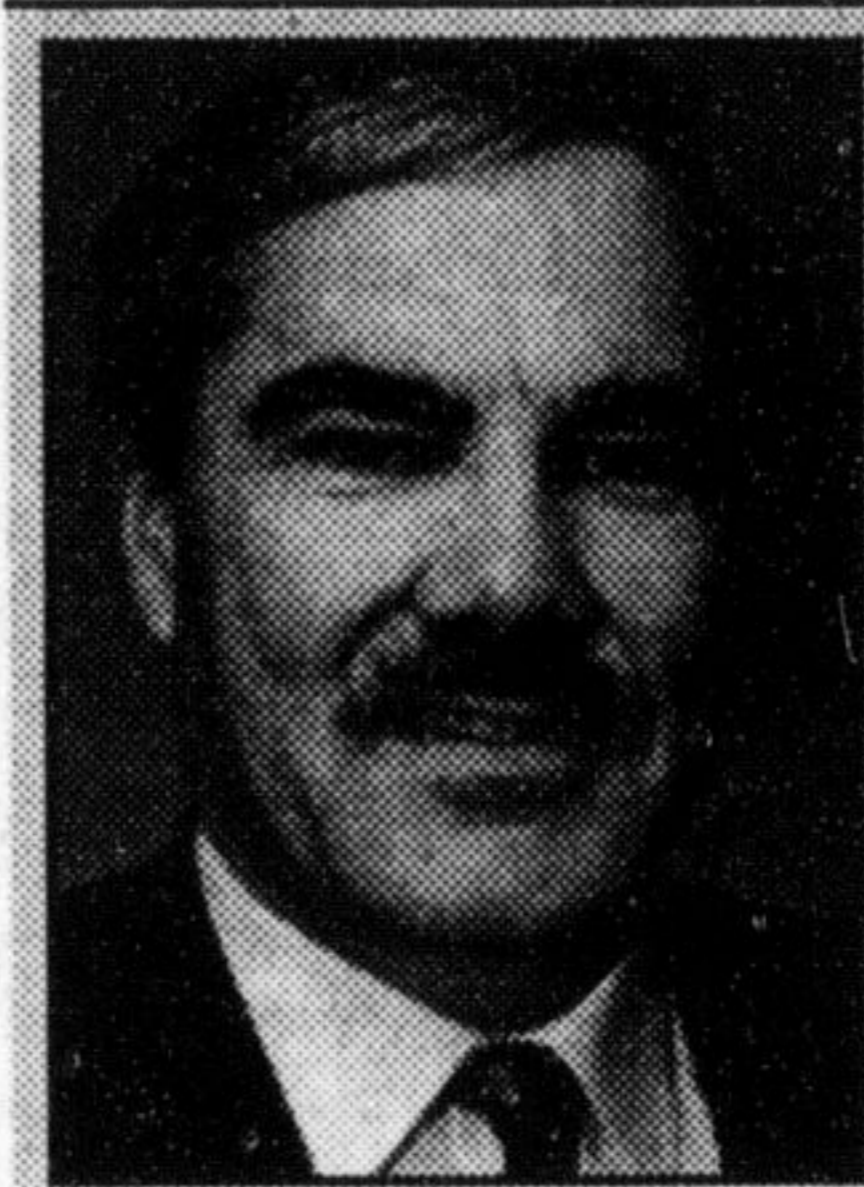
Students develop ties and friendships at a particular school, which usually makes them reluctant to move, said Mr. Sweeney.

The education director added teacher staffing levels are already set, which also makes large scale mid-year switches difficult.

Mr. Sweeney does expect to lose about 150 enrolments next month through students completing all their OAC credits at the end of the first semester.

Moving students to public schools has been discussed by the Parent Action Group. But this new organization of concerned Catholic parents has opted to organize petitions and blitzes first.

When the topic was raised, some parents expressed concern they would be eroding the Catholic system if



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FRED SWEENEY

their children switched boards.

But the Halton District School Board has received some calls about the issue of changing to public high schools next fall, said Keith Johnson, a superintendent with the public board.

He said if the labour situation were reversed, there would probably be calls by people considering moving away from the public school system.

"We've had inquiries from our principals about what response they give if new students want to enrol at their schools," said Mr. Johnson. "We guarantee open access to our system"

When asked about mid-year transfers, the superintendent said it's possible, but there may be limited courses available to switching students.

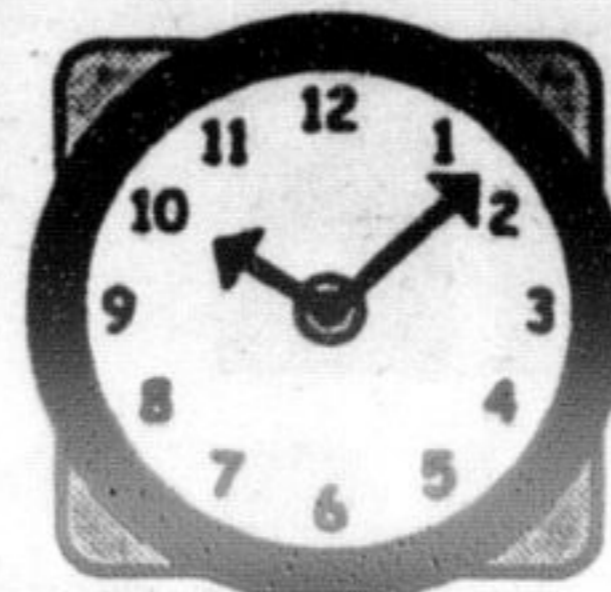
"Students from Grade 9 up to Grade 12 would probably be alright, but in Grades 12 and OAC there are limited spaces available in some courses," he said.

Mr. Johnson said Ontario residents have open access to public schools throughout the province for all grades.

Catholic high schools accept non-Catholic students but there are conditions for those enrolling in Catholic

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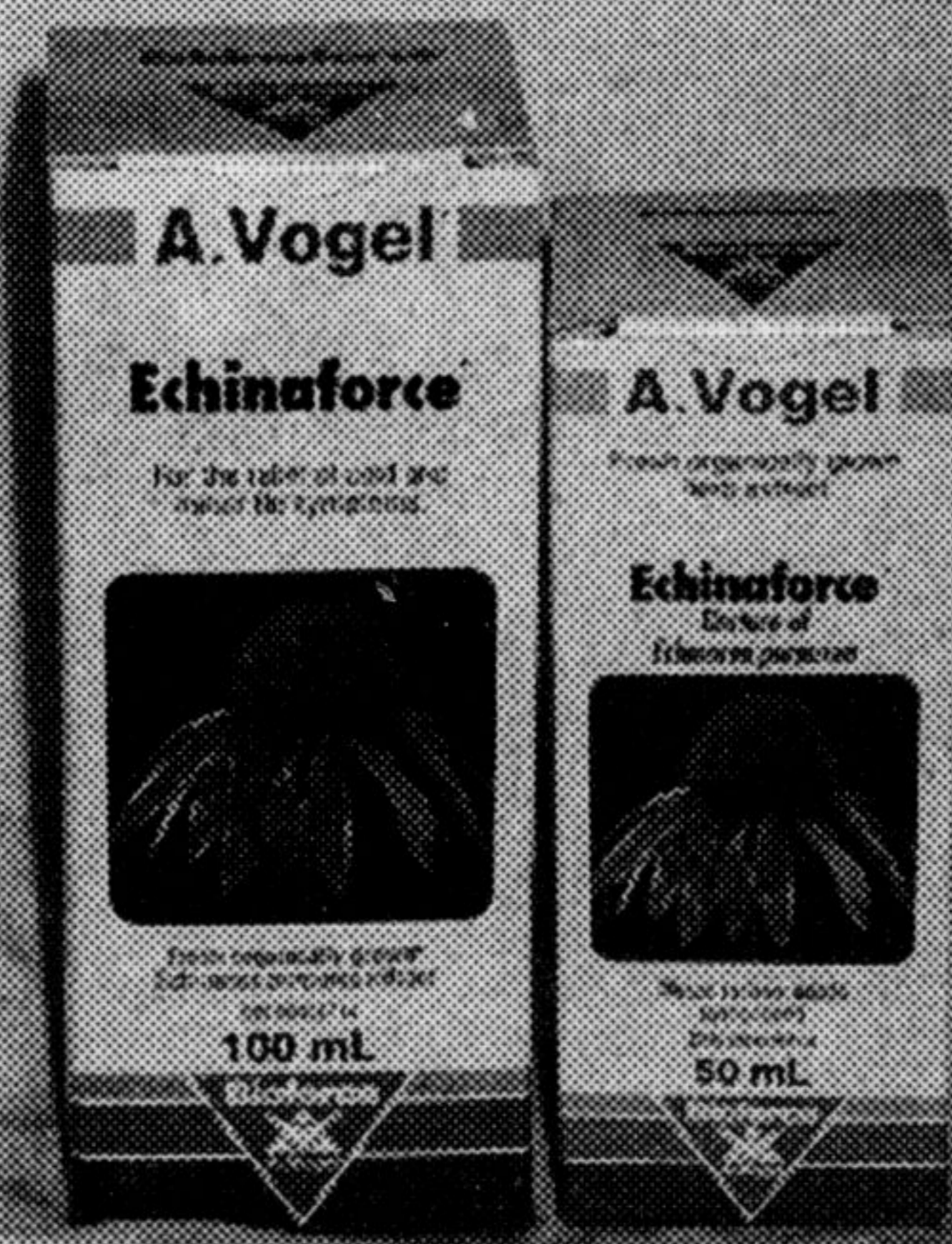
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