

# Arms-length panel hears Halton education concerns

By **TIM WHITNELL**

Special to The Champion

The Halton District School Board has gone 'naked', exposing its actions and concerns in education over the last few years. Now it's waiting to see if the Education Improvement Commission (EIC) likes what it sees.

Recent turmoil and massive change in education has brought in the EIC, an arms-length agency of the Ontario government, to investigate the status of the province's 73 school boards.

Five EIC members, including two commissioners, were part of the reconnaissance team that visited the Halton public board last week to gather feedback on how trustees and board employees have adapted to changes imposed by the government.

What they heard from board director Dusty Papke is that his people feel they have done a good job, under the circumstances, of educating students but communication — both internally and with the public — and employee morale needs significant improvement.

"Tremendous changes have resulted in employees experiencing a period of mourning, a sense of loss, a belief that a negative per-

ception exists about public education, a belief that employees' work is not valued and they are used as scapegoats to drive a political agenda," he told the EIC.

Mr. Papke said Mission 2000+, a professional development day put aside in October, will try to address the issue of self-esteem by bringing all Halton board employees together to develop a mission statement and beliefs.

Among his many observations was a conclusion that a number of professional activity days taken away by the government should be reinstated.

After the two-hour public portion of the meeting, Halton Hills trustee and public school board chair Ethel Gardiner said she liked Mr. Papke's overview of the board's achievements and current difficulties.

"This is what we have done and what do you think?," is how Ms Gardiner termed Mr. Papke's address to the EIC.

"We should never be offended when they (EIC) tell us how we can improve. It's all for the benefit of the students," said Ms Gardiner.

The board chair said pressing issues like lack of new schools in

growing communities and a \$6 million cut for special education were stressed, once again.

"I hope they will take from this presentation, and I'm sure they've heard this from other boards, to adjust the funding model to make it fairer. If all schools had no excess school spaces, it would be a fairer model."

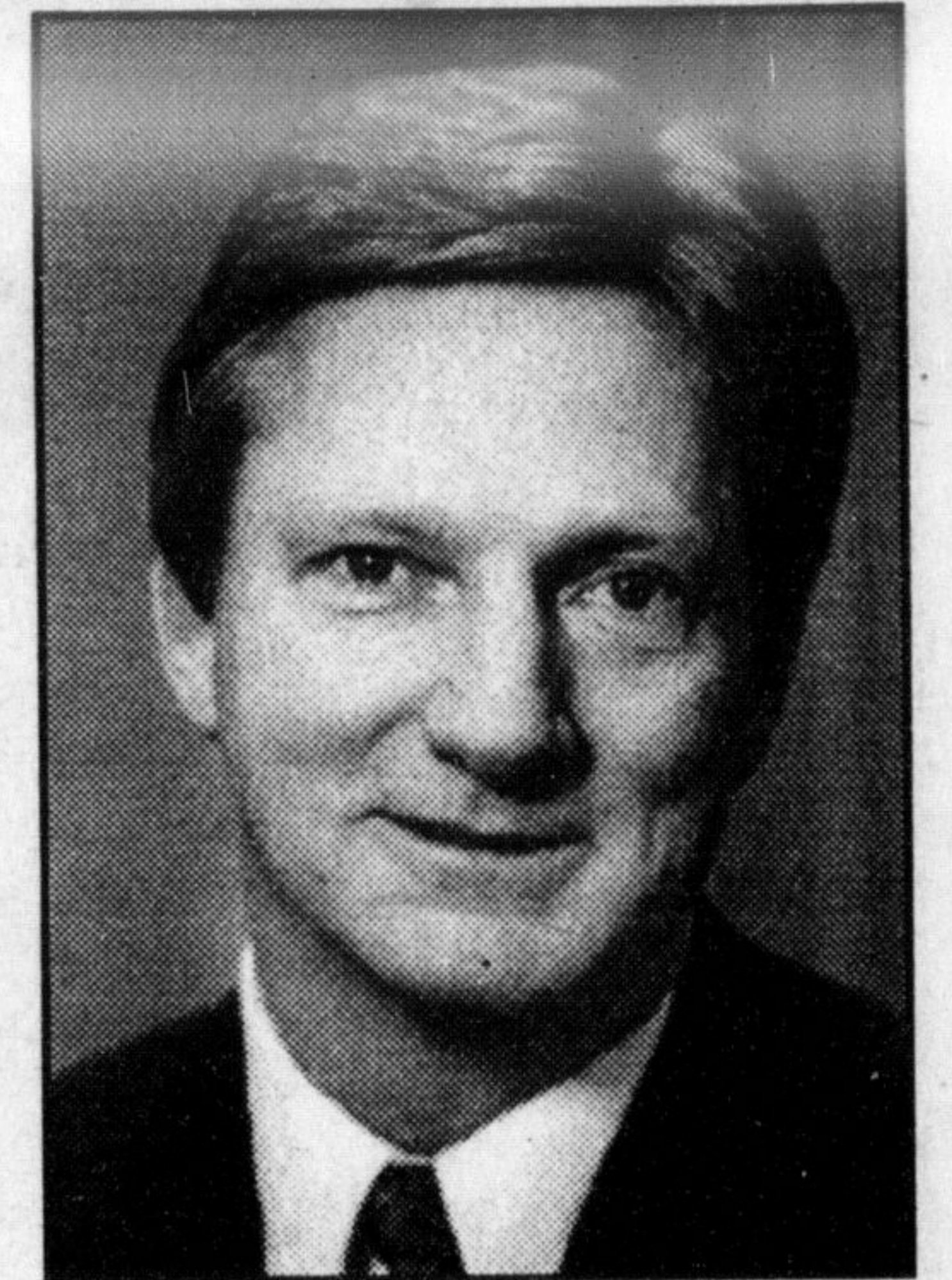
However, as Mr. Papke noted in his speech to EIC co-chair Ann Vanstone and fellow commissioner Betty Moseley-Williams, Halton board administrators are hamstrung by 1,600 excess pupil spaces in the elementary sector and another 4,000 in high schools, which prevents the generation of provincial money to build new schools.

Special education funding, for students with unique needs, also needs to be a top priority, said Ms Gardiner.

A Halton mother with a deaf daughter took advantage of the EIC's visit to approach Ms Vanstone outside the meeting and give her a letter for the new Minister of Education, Janet Ecker.

The parent told a sympathetic Ms Vanstone she fears bottom-line management style, where cheaper is better, may result in special education students being taught in centralized locations, separating them from their siblings who are mainstream students.

The EIC has visited about two-thirds of the 73 school boards in Ontario. A final report for Halton, detailing the EIC's recommendations and observations, is expected by late September.



**Dusty Papke**

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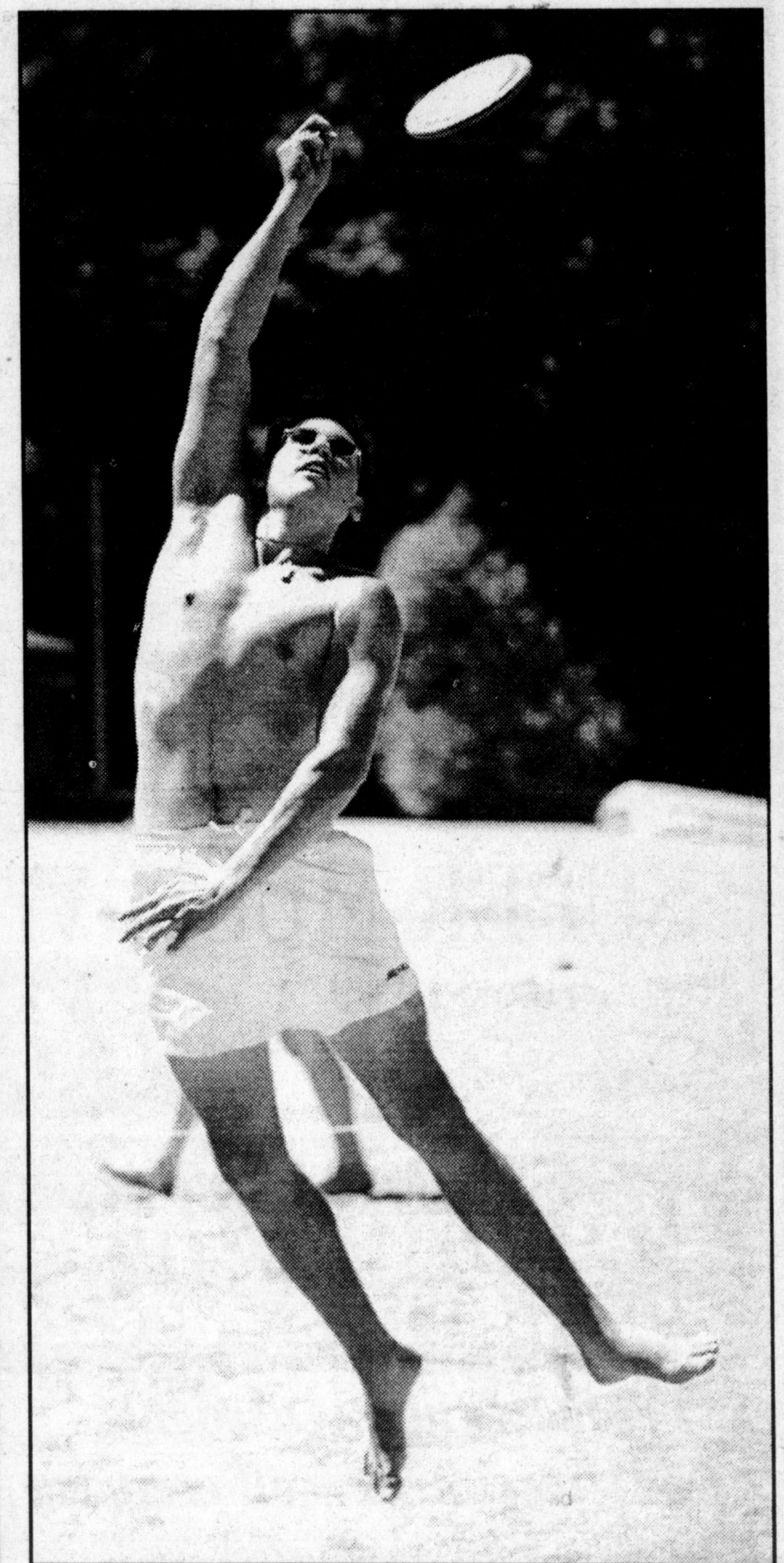


Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

✓ On his toes

Or off them, actually. Travis Hanes leaps for a frisbee at Kelso Beach on a recent sunny day.