

Public school board set to hire on 54 EAs

By **ROBB SWYBROUS**

Special to *The Champion*

Halton District School Board trustees at their regular board meeting last week approved a motion to hire 54 new educational assistants (EA) from its list of qualified professionals.

The October 16 approval means 27 high-needs students who're currently not attending school, or who attend on a limited basis because they don't have EA support, will be going back to class full-time.

It also means an expenditure of about \$1.5-million that trustees will have to account for when balancing next year's budget.

"We need EAs, we need support to keep our high-needs kids in school," said Education Director Dusty Papke.

"If we can't find off-setting savings and if the ministry is not willing to assist us, then there is the potential that we will have a year-end deficit. Whatever that deficit is we are responsible for dealing with it in our next budget."

Mr. Papke said a potential deficit doesn't affect the board's legal requirement to pass a balance budget for the 2002-03 school year.

That budget was passed in June by trustees as per Ministry of Education guidelines.

"The requirement is that a board pass a balanced budget which we did," Mr. Papke said.

"But quite often things come up during

the year and that's what this is."

The education director said he didn't know how the board is going to come up with the funds to account for the hirings. He said there's a chance the ministry will kick in some cash to pay for the EAs but that's not the expectation.

"Hypothetically, sure (the ministry might help pay)," he said.

"Certainly we've made them aware of our situation. They recognize the difficulties that we face."

Board Chair Ethel Gardiner said trustees had no choice but to pass the motion.

She said the right for all children in Halton to attend school is paramount over finding the money to pay for the new EAs.

"It's unbelievable that any board of education should have to go through this to get money for special education kids," she said.

"If we end up in a deficit at the end of the year than so be it. Hopefully, this will be some relief for students, families and staff."

Mr. Papke said the board already has a list of qualified EAs who could be interviewed for the positions.

Forty-one of the new EAs will work with high-needs students, while 13 are earmarked for junior and senior kindergarten classes with more than 24 students in them.

With the board approving the motion Wednesday, Mr. Papke said interviews can take place immediately with the hope of getting EAs and special needs students into the schools in the region as soon as possible.

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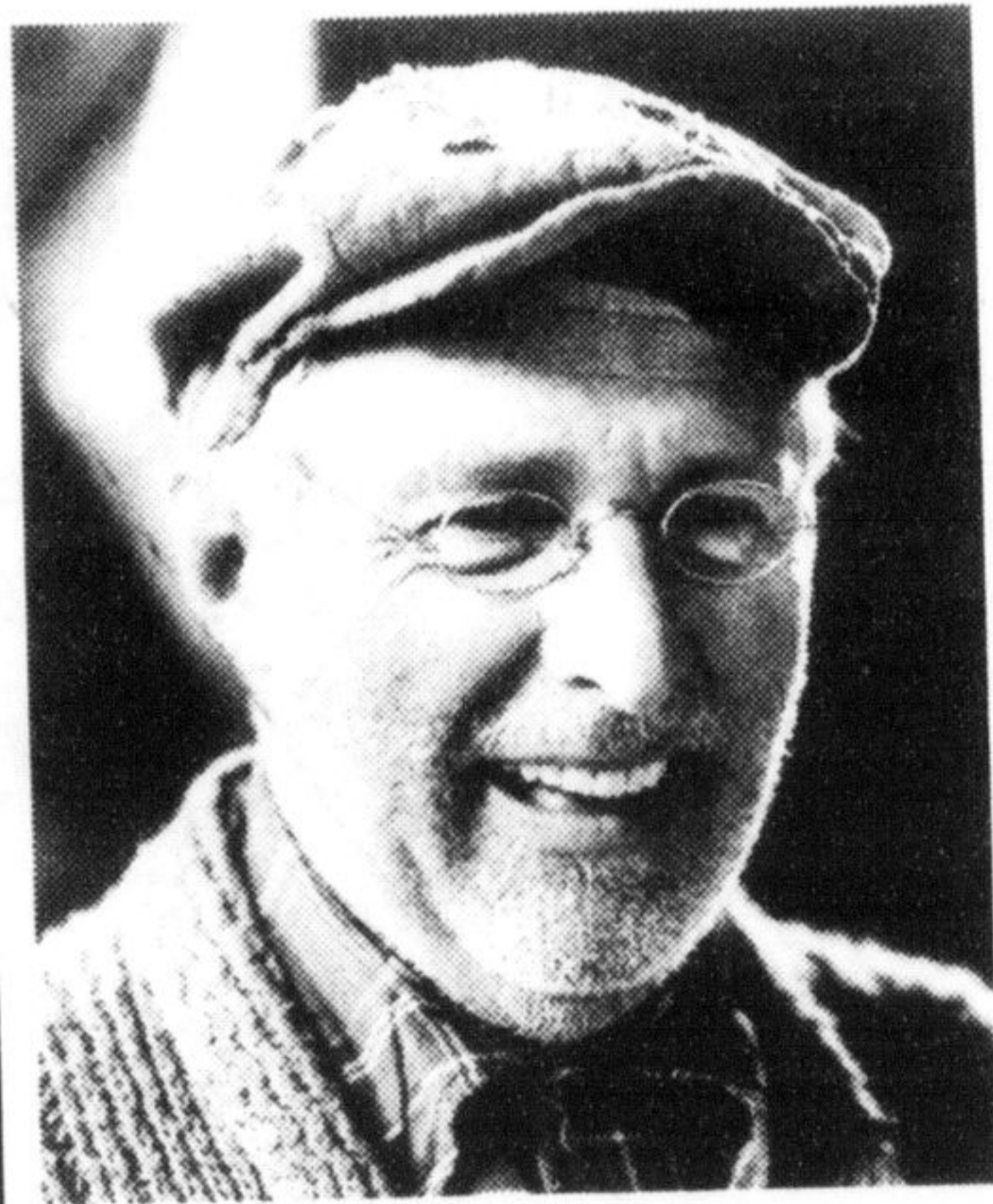
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