

Both sides in teacher talks growing more optimistic

By **TIM WHITNELL**

Special to The Champion

There's been no hugging or high fiving around the negotiating table, but it appears to be a case of no news is good news as it relates to contract talks between the Halton District School Board and its high school teachers.

Representatives of the public board and the 750 full-time equivalent secondary teachers met with a mediator for 11 hours last week and have decided to continue talking.

The next mediated session is May 7.

Spokespeople for both sides indicated the meeting was cordial and somewhat fruitful.

"I think there are a lot of areas where progress was made and some positive signs about many

of the items on the table. We hope to clarify the rest and look for an agreement May 7," said Joe Harwood, president of District 20 (Halton) of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, Monday.

Mr. Harwood's counterpart at the Halton public board wasn't as specific, but nonetheless expressed guarded optimism about the first round of talks in two months.

"I think we're all trying to work for the same end result, to get an agreement, and that's very positive (because) sometimes it doesn't come through in mediation but certainly it did with us," Dawn Beckett-Morton, the board's executive officer of human resources, also said Monday.

"I think everyone's trying to do their best with the process and that's all we can ask for at this stage."

Ms Beckett-Morton said the board and its high school teachers had several face-to-face meetings the afternoon and evening of April 24, followed by some separate meetings with the provincially-appointed mediator.

The secondary teachers have been without a contract since August 31, 2002 and been on a work-to-rule campaign since late February.

In the most recent add-on to the job action, implemented in mid-April, the teachers' union announced it was withdrawing its members from on-call work in the event of a colleague's absence.

That prompted the board to react by cancelling some high school field trips and other extra-curricular activities.

Ms Beckett-Morton has said the board feared schools might be left in a situation where there aren't enough teachers to cover classes for ill or absent instructors.

Mr. Harwood has said it was for reasons of student safety they chose to withdraw on-call duties rather than refusing to do supervision of students in cafeterias, libraries and hallways.

In any event, Mr. Harwood said Monday an understanding was reached with the mediator that there would be no escalation of the work-to-rule campaign during the break before the next mediation session.

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According to C.S. Lewis, heaven will be, above all, a

place of joy: "Dance and game are frivolous, unimportant down here; for "down here" is not their natural place. Here, they are a moment's rest from the life we were placed here to live. But in this world everything is upside down. That which, if it could be prolonged here, would be a truancy, is most like that which in a better country is the End of ends. Joy is the serious business of heaven." An excerpt from Letters to Malcolm.

"Joy is the serious business of heaven." I believe that statement. Personally, I wouldn't trust a Christian who

doesn't regularly experience side splitting belly laughs. Heaven is a place of forever joy. Joy is the mark of heaven in you.

Some of us need to start learning to dance and laugh more, or else heaven is going to seem like an eternity. This Sunday check out one of the many great local churches in Milton.

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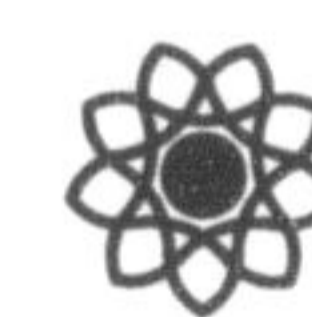
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