

# Dogs once again set to search high schools for drugs, weapons

By **TIM WHITNELL**  
*Special to The Champion*

Halton students considering bringing drugs, guns or explosives to high school may want to re-think their plans or risk facing the dog days of school.

The region's public and Catholic boards, in conjunction with Halton Regional Police, are reinstating a program to use trained detector dogs to search high schools for specific dangerous or illegal items.

The Safe School Canine Initiative, which began last week with the 2003-04 school year, is a more comprehensive hybrid of the earlier Project Hall Walk. The latter program began in Halton in 1997 but was discontinued and put under review in 2000.

"The focus is still on detecting drugs but the difference here is locating guns and explosives, like a pellet gun or firecrackers," said Jacki Oxley, the Halton public board's school and community liaison officer.

Halton police drug and morality bureau officer, Const. Nishan Duraiappah, said the program can only work with the co-operation of the school boards.

"We have to depend on both school boards and the information they provide is (indicating) the dynamics of drug use (among teens) have changed."

"Back in the 1990s people thought there was a drug problem. The board is telling us (now) that nobody is hiding their heads in the sand anymore."

Const. Duraiappah said it will be interesting to see if the prevalence of what he termed "soft drugs," like marijuana and hashish, or harder drugs, such as ecstasy, are on the rise among youths.

He noted the laws are softening on marijuana use and possession but that school boards are remaining vigilant about the possible presence of drugs and weapons, hence the call to police for help.

Utilizing new provincial legislation in the Safe Schools Act, the Safe School Canine Initiative will "use a trained detector dog to search and indicate if there are drugs and/or weapons in the hallways or parking areas of a school," Ms Oxley said in a joint press release with the region's Catholic board and the police service.

"This proactive and preventive measure, which is intended to raise student awareness and hopefully change their behaviour, may be randomly implemented at any high school of the two Halton boards, including the continuing education services sites," she said.

Whereas Project Hall Walk provided a fair warning to parents, students and school administrators of an impending search, this time only the principal and vice-principal at a participating school will know about it ahead of time.

The plan is to use highly-trained sniffer dogs that work with the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency out of Pearson International Airport. They will walk the halls and parking lots of Halton's high schools with their police officer handler, as well as a Halton narcotics officer, the school liaison police officer and a school administrator.

If the dog detects what it thinks is the odour of drugs or residue from a firearm emanating from a locker, the principal will be asked to locate the student whose locker it is and ask him or her to open it.

If the student refuses, the school administrator can open the locker with police confiscating whatever illegal substances may be inside.

While a small number of drug seizures

were made during the three-year Project Hall Walk program, there were no significant drug discoveries and no charges ever laid.

One particular sweep at four high schools around Halton in 1999 uncovered

a trace amount of hashish on the floor in the girls' washroom at Aldershot High School in Burlington and a trace amount of marijuana under a common-area bench at E.C. Drury High School.

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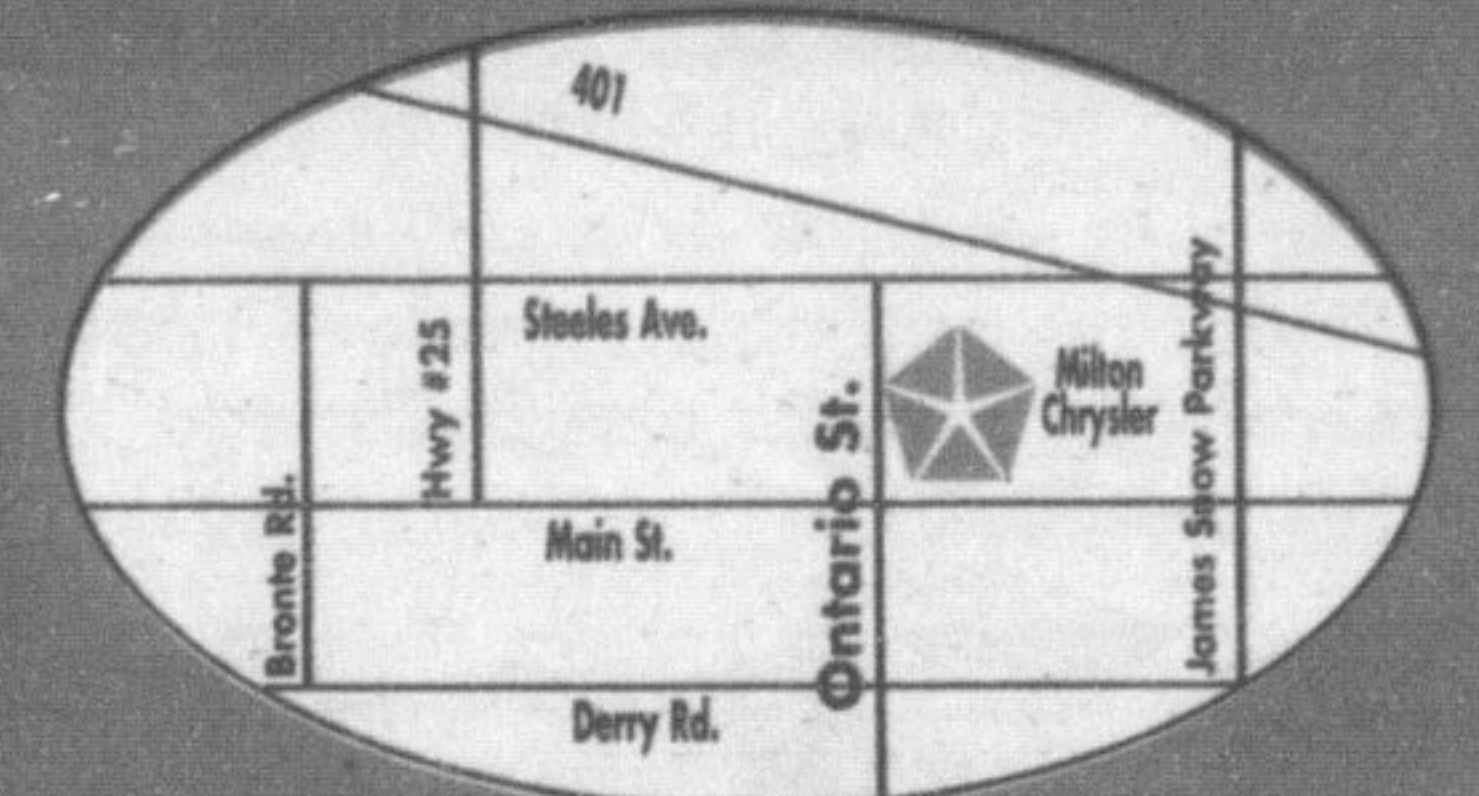


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