

# Controversy surrounds homophobia pilot project

By KIM ARNOTT

Special to The Champion

Some of Halton's Catholic school board trustees are concerned that a pilot project on homophobia may be sending its high school students the wrong message.

The aim of the six-week long pilot project, running at Burlington's Assumption high school and Georgetown's Christ the King high school, is to increase awareness around issues of homophobia.

But trustees are afraid the program might offer students a different perspective on homosexuality than the Catholic church promotes.

The program, being offered to students on a volunteer basis during lunch hours or after school, is run by the Halton Organization for Pride in Education (H.O.P.E.).

"The organization itself leaves me greatly concerned with where they're coming from in terms of their ideas on homosexuality," said Burlington Trustee Joanne Matters.

Noting that she visited the group's Web site, Ms Matters

added, "Clearly they are not identifiably in line with the Catholic church's position on morals."

But school board Director Lou Piovesan told trustees at a board meeting last Tuesday night that he spoke directly to the area bishop about the program and received his approval.

"It has nothing to do with promoting a lifestyle that is incompatible and not endorsed by our system," he said, adding that the program is concerned with creating a safe environment for all students.

Following a 1997 survey by the Halton Regional Health Department, which found that gay students in the region frequently feel isolated and vulnerable, H.O.P.E. was established.

It was recently awarded a \$14,000 grant from the federal government to run the youth peer education program aimed at preventing homophobia and hate crimes in Halton high schools.

Mr. Piovesan noted that there have been difficulties in some Catholic high schools with taunting and verbal abuse of students "whose lifestyle is not in keeping

with the majority of students."

"I have met with some of those students and they have shared some of their concerns with me that are pretty serious," Mr. Piovesan added.

Burlington Trustee Bob Van de Vrande said he has received a number of phone calls from members of the public who are concerned with the program.

"People are freaking out," he said. "They're expressing very major concerns."

He questioned whether the program is appropriate in a Catholic school setting and suggested a generic anti-bullying program, delivered by teachers, could be more effective in countering harassment problems.

"This is a controversial issue presented by a controversial group," said Mr. Van de Vrande.

Mr. Piovesan said the sessions held with volunteer students are monitored closely by board staff to ensure the content is appropriate.

"I'm aware that there are sensitivities here on both sides of this issue," he said.

## OPP recruiting new officers

The deadline is fast approaching for the Ontario Provincial Police's second OPPBound recruitment program, which will be held this summer in Orillia.

This year, the OPPBound recruiting venture is aimed at increasing the awareness of employment opportunities for Aboriginal women and men in policing.

The one-week camp will serve as a vehicle to provide qualified Aboriginal women and men with an opportunity to explore a career with the OPP.

The application deadline for OPPBound2004 is this Saturday. The five-day mini-OPP recruit camp will be held at the Provincial Police Academy

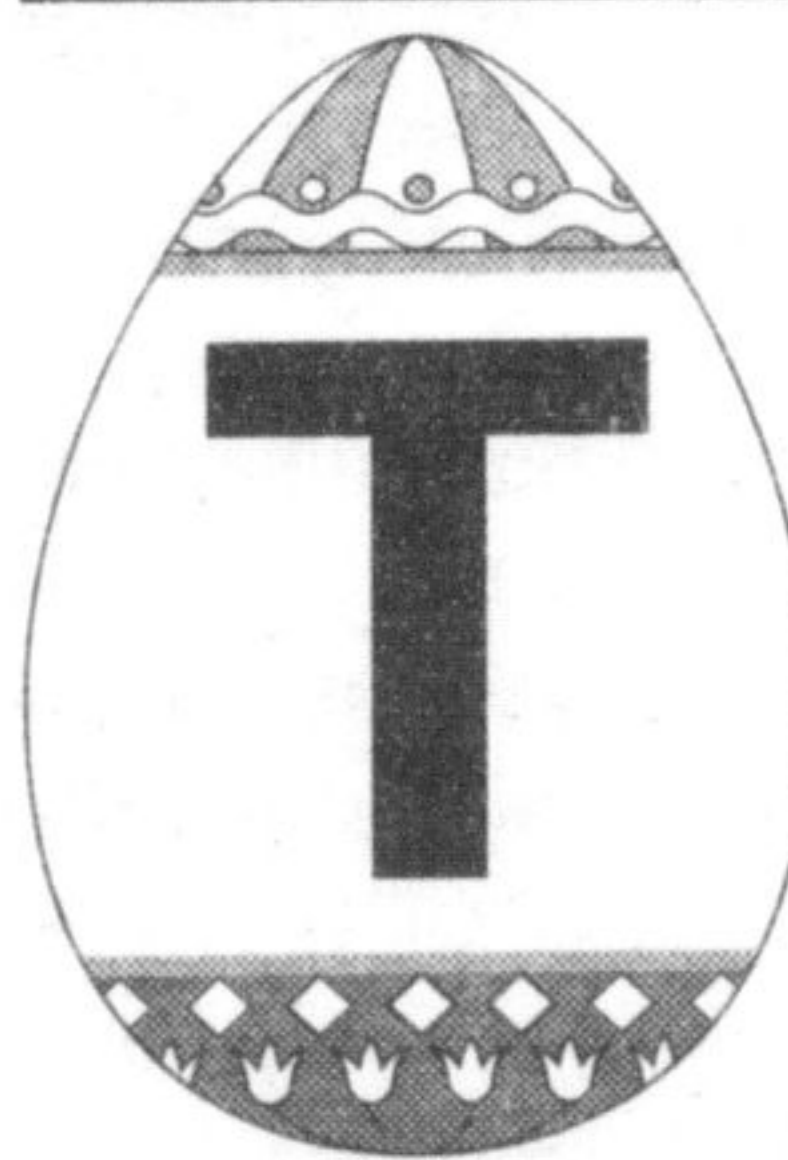
from July 11 to 15.

Participants will learn about the history and traditions of the OPP and the program will include a number of mentoring sessions with key Aboriginal officers who will share their experiences.

Participants will also have the opportunity to experience a week in the life of an OPP recruit, taking part in firearms exercises, fitness drills, police vehicle operations and other practical exercises.

Aboriginal men and women interested in this program can find information and apply on-line at opp.ca or by calling the OPP Uniform Recruitment Unit at 1-866-393-3337.

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