

Balanced budget to provide more teachers

By JASON MISNER

Special to The Champion

The Halton District School Board has passed a balanced budget that will provide for more teachers, maintenance, office supplies and minor school program enhancements.

But just how long the \$329 million budget stays balanced will be up to Ontario's Ministry of Education, the board warned.

The board passed 8-1 the budget at a special meeting Monday night. It also passed a \$44 million budget for special education, serving about 8,200 students. But \$3 million of that has yet to be released to the board from the ministry, as has been previously committed.

If that money doesn't come down the pike, it will leave the board in a deficit situation and the shortfall will have to come from somewhere else in the budget.

That has board Chair Mary Chapin perplexed. The board included the increased funding in its budget because it's holding the ministry to its word.

"That money was qualified and approved by the provincial government," she said in an interview after the budget was passed. "We're taking the minister at his word that that money is there for approved applications."

"I believe we're right to budget to use that money and if it doesn't come through then it will be the ministry that's put us into deficit."

Education Minister Gerard Kennedy angered some local school boards when he recently decided to hold back \$102 million of special education funds owed to boards across the province. The money was already approved by ministry officials, but Mr. Kennedy decided to hold it back

because of rising costs and concerns about the process.

"We have not planned to be in a deficit, we have planned to use the money that has been approved," Ms Chapin said.

Board staff said the budget doesn't involve any major cuts.

"The budget plan presented is balanced for 2004-05 with a focus on maintaining high quality programs and services throughout Halton's public schools," stated a budget report prepared by Carla Kisko, the board's superintendent of business services.

The budget of \$329 million for 2004-05 is an increase of 3.8 per cent from last year's \$319 million. It includes the hiring of 74 teachers to accommodate the 2 per cent increase in student enrollment in elementary schools (at around 900 students) and 1 per cent in secondary schools (at around 160).

The funding formula was introduced by the former Conservative provincial government in 1998. It funds schools on a per-pupil, equalized basis, regardless of geography or board uniqueness.

In addition to the teacher hires, the Halton budget also includes an increase of \$600,000 for day-to-day maintenance, like for plumbing and fixing door knobs; a one-time grant of \$629,000 for projects to address energy savings, primarily by replacing old windows and caulking around doors; \$1,000 for general office expenses, like photocopying, for the board's 71 elementary schools; money to replace pianos in the elementary schools; and \$425,000 to create five portables for elementary schools, part of the Liberal provincial government's commitment to reduce class sizes for JK to grade 3 to 20

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MARY CHAPIN

of the dilemma in crafting a school budget is there's very little room for discretionary spending.

After including costs for all of the mandated ministry programs as well as costs for salaries and benefits of teachers and non-teachers, like custodial staff, the board is left with only about 5 per cent of flexible spending, Ms Kisko said in an interview after the meeting.

"A budget is simply reflecting what we're getting in terms of our (ministry) allocation," she said. "The grants are what really set the tone in our budget process, they determine our bottom line. Their (ministry) base funding to school boards has to be refreshed and they haven't done that, so we're still challenged by that."

About 80 per cent of the school budget is absorbed by costs of teachers and non-teachers alone.

students.

Education Director Dusty Papke said it's a tight budget, with every penny allocated to where it needs to go.

"There's no excess in the budget," he said in a later interview. "We'll stretch every dollar the best we can."

Despite some of the enhancements, part

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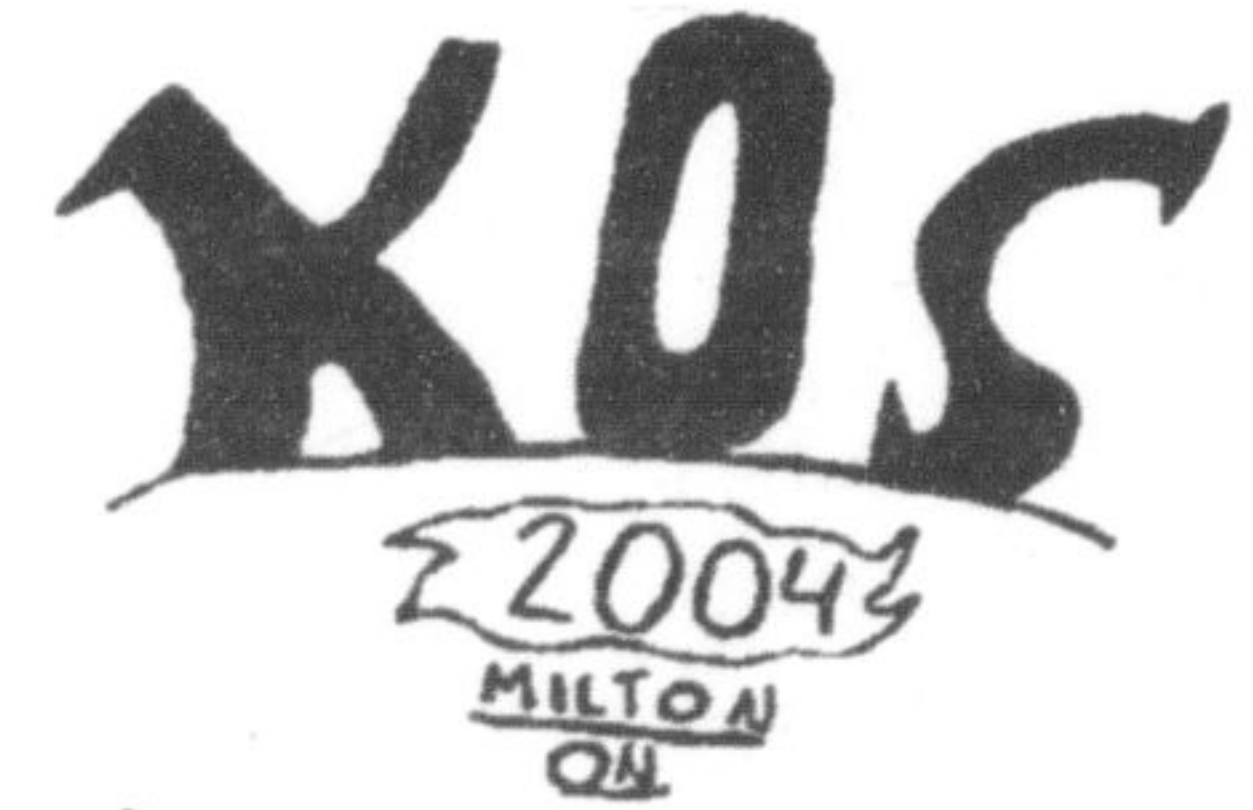
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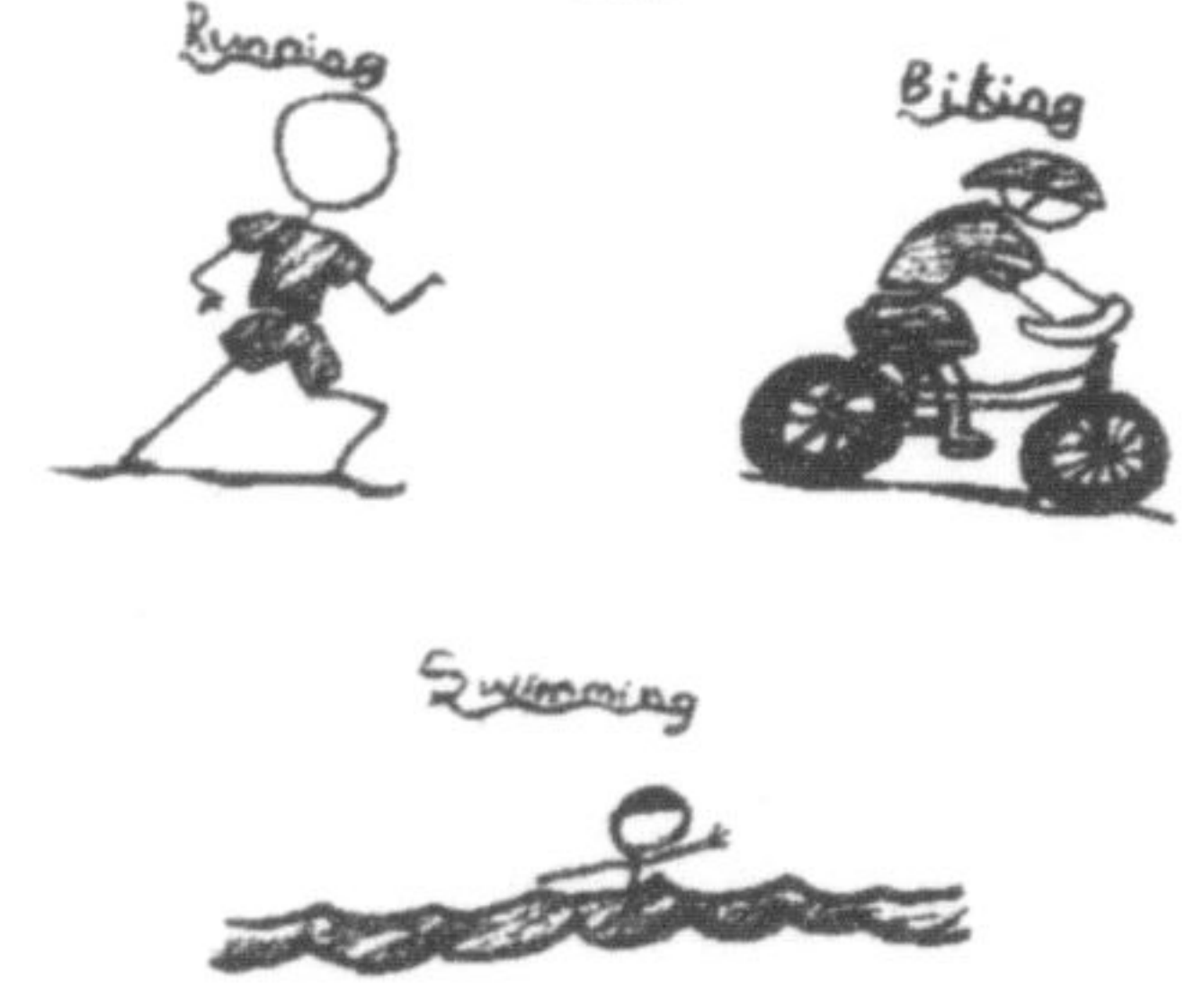


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