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Potential reduction in funding for school bus transportation has public board concerned

By **JASON MISNER**
Special to *The Champion*

A new Ministry of Education formula to determine funding for school bus transportation in Ontario has tentatively left the Halton District School Board with \$1 million less for 2005-06 than this fall.

The board doesn't know yet if the cut will go through or what it might mean for busing kids to school. But some are clearly uneasy about the prospect of fewer dol-

lars and questioning the fairness of it all.

There are 13,000 students eligible for busing and that's how many the board budgets for.

"What it looks like we're going to receive in the future is a reduction in our transportation grant," said Karen Lacroix, the board's manager of transportation.

The board will get a 2 per cent increase in funding for 2004-05 to bring it to \$9.2 million. The year after that, the board is

projected to receive \$8.24 million.

It's a potential drop that has Ms Lacroix concerned.

"We've done everything we can do. We're efficient as we can be. To me, when I look at this, there seems to be some factors that are not quite right within the formula.

"It's a million dollars (less); it's a lot of money."

Busing in Halton is an integrated system,

which means the public and Catholic boards share transportation for efficiency, but each have their own policy stipulating who qualifies for busing.

What complicates things further is the public board had planned to review the school's walking distance policy if transportation funding was increased. But since that doesn't appear to be the case at this point, a review won't take place, Ms Lacroix said.

"The motion before the board was to undergo policy review if we're receiving enhanced funding," she said.

Ministry of Education spokesperson Linda Nicolson said the new funding formula for transportation has been in the works since 1998.

She said school boards have been asking for a more fair and equitable system to reflect changing transportation needs in the province.

A review of the formula, she stressed, will begin the next school year in September to ensure it meets the 72 boards' needs in Ontario.

"Over the next several months the ministry will consult with the transportation review committee and other education partners to ensure that factors that impact student transportation are reflected in the new model, and that adjustment parameters are reasonable and fair."

Ms Lacroix said she's hopeful funding will change for the better.

"Maybe there will be a change which will have a positive impact for the Halton board. We're efficient as we can be so it is right, is there a flaw in the formula somewhere, how can we be losing money? That is the big question here in Halton."

Sounding downtrodden, public school board chair Mary Chapin said she's upset by the potential funding cuts to transportation — especially since the local system has proven to be the most lauded one in

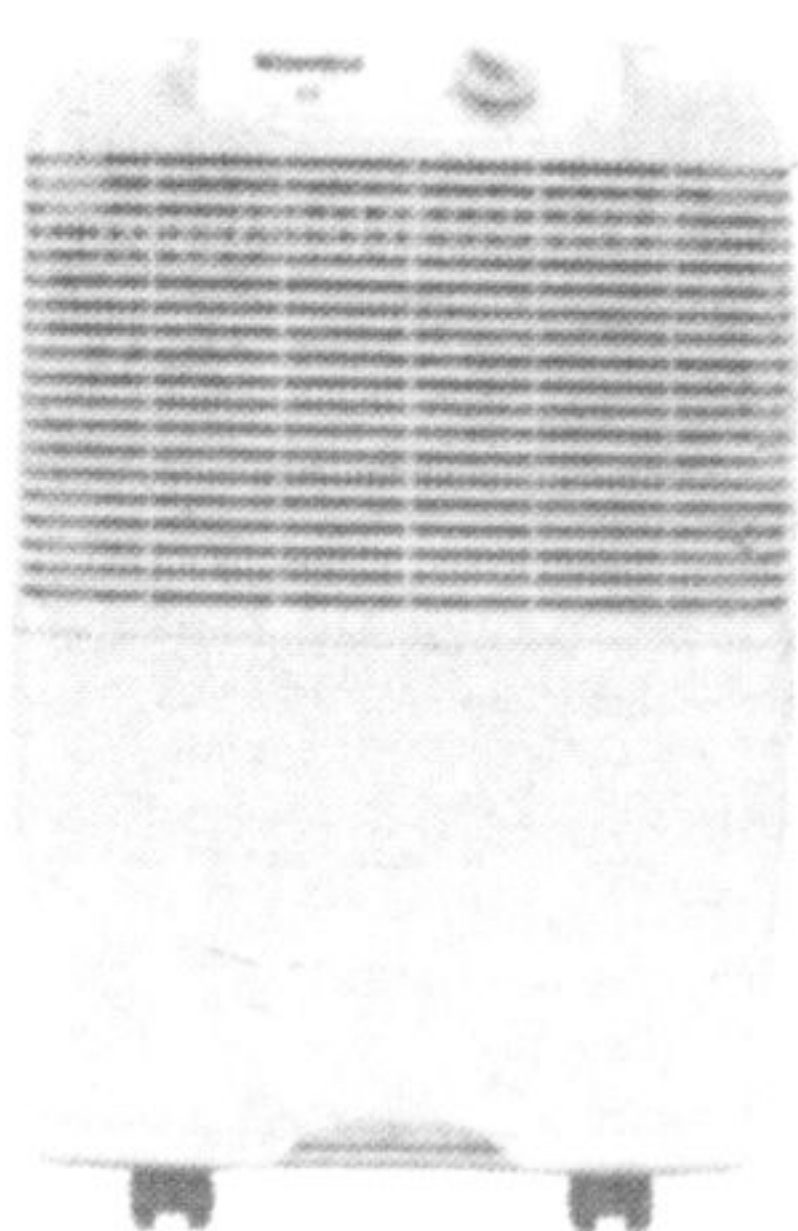
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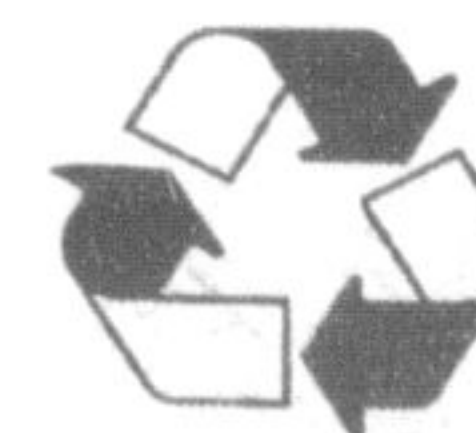
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