

Need for EAs may put board budget in the hole

By JASON MISNER

Special to The Champion

A surge in the number of special-needs students has forced the Halton District School Board to risk a deficit of nearly \$1 million by hiring 27 new educational assistants.

Students not being able to attend a full instructional day due to a lack of EAs prompted school board trustees to pass a staff recommendation Wednesday night to hire 27 EAs — at a cost of around \$880,000 — as well as 25 lunch-time supervisors, at a cost of \$62,000.

Lunch-time supervisors are needed because high-needs students can't be left alone.

The hirings come despite a lack of funds to pay for them.

The school board passed a balanced budget of \$329 million in late June, which included spending \$44 million on special education, to serve about 8,200 students as well as hire 431 full-time

EAs.

At the time the board had a reserve fund with special-education money set aside to hire new EAs. But in late July the Ministry of Education, in announcing \$100 million in special-education funding — the board received \$3 million for last year and another \$3 million this year for Intensive Support Allocation (ISA) claims — also clawed back boards' reserves.

That money has been put into a contingency fund in which boards can apply for emergency funding. The parameters of how to qualify for that fund haven't been established yet by the ministry, but Education Director Dusty Papke said as soon as they are, the board will submit a request immediately.

If no money comes forward, then the board will be in a deficit situation.

"Under any criteria, this (EA need) should apply and we will be applying to this fund as soon as we can," Mr. Papke told trustees.

"Without the funding, these kids need the support."

A report to trustees says despite the possibility of a deficit budget, "As the school year begins, we are experiencing tremendous pressure for additional EA support ... staff feel that we are unable to (accommodate) many high-needs students in school without the additional staff."

The report — which didn't identify the number of new students — cites the need for more EAs due to a trio of factors, including new high-risk students entering the school year with needs like "severe" behavioural concerns, deteriorating health and scheduling issues.

"At the present time some of our students are attending school for less than a full instructional day as we are unable to provide the schools with enough support to provide a safe, healthy learning environment."

It added the board is working with school principals "to re-assign and adjust support levels to stretch existing EA resources as far as possible."

Brenda Kearney, superintendent of education, student services, told the board, "We are experiencing a large number of pupils to the Halton system that we had no knowledge of" because of factors like students moving into the system late.

The local board has also seen an increase in students moving from the Toronto area.

Mr. Papke told trustees officials will continue to pore over the budget to find additional savings, but "this is going to be much more difficult this year."

After the meeting, Mr. Papke said he suspects other school boards — particularly those in the GTA — are facing a similar demand for EAs.

Ministry spokesperson Wilma Davis said it's not known yet when the Province will have the contingency funds eligibility requirements ready.

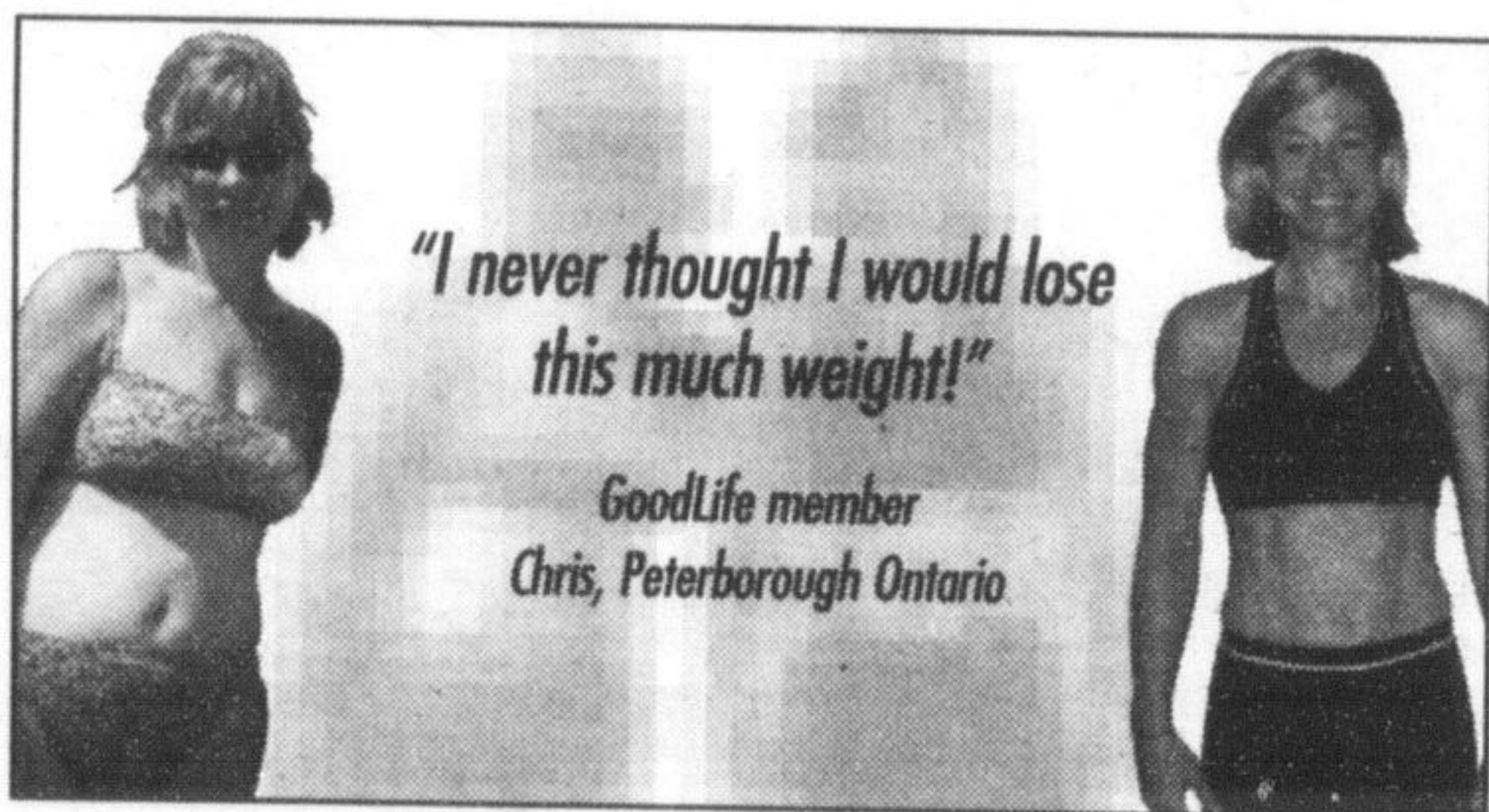
"I know that the whole thing is being worked on as we speak."

Halton Hills Trustee Ethel Gardiner said she doesn't have a problem risking going into deficit to help special needs students.

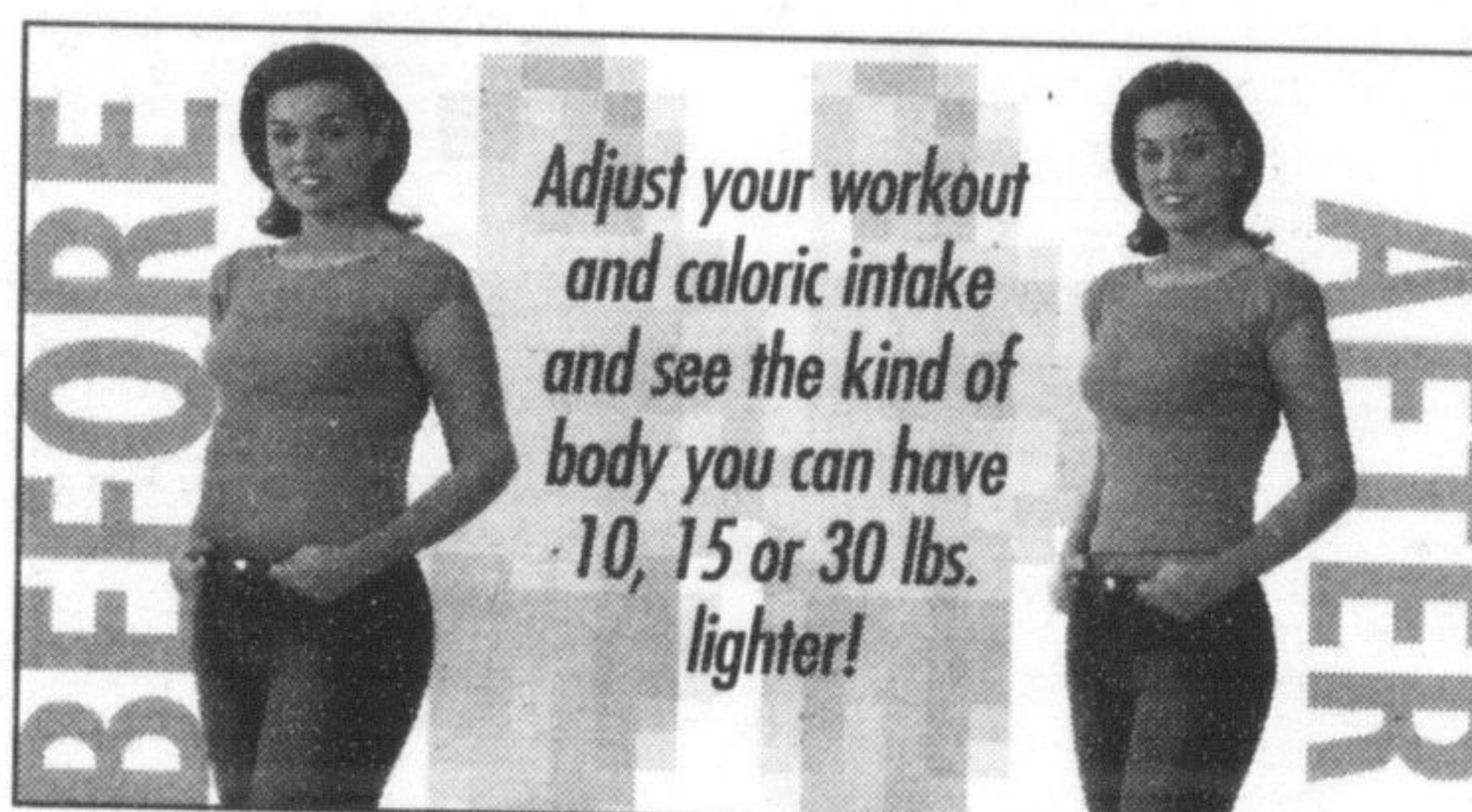
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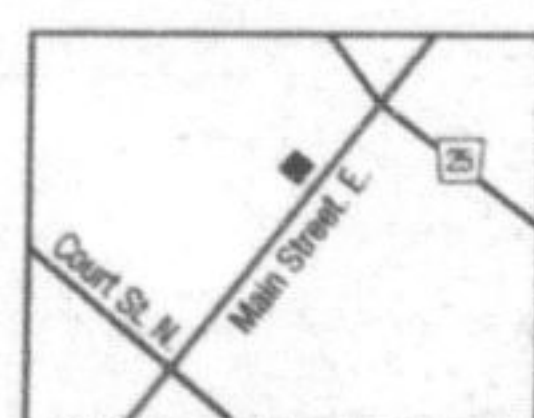
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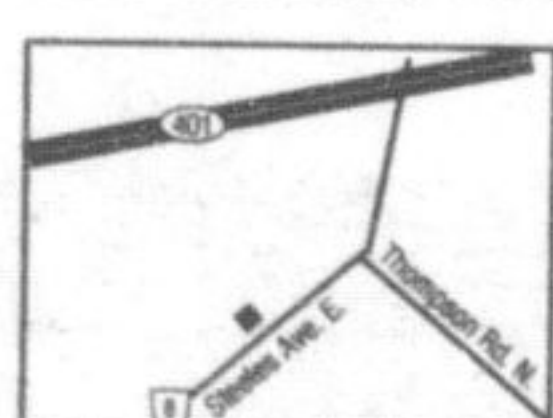
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