

No charges laid following investigation into assault allegations by school trustees against a colleague

By **JASON MISNER**

Special to *The Champion*

Halton Regional Police say charges won't be laid after an investigation into allegations that Halton District School Board Burlington Trustee Debbie Downs assaulted two fellow trustees.

Following an investigation involving as many as three detectives, Sgt. Jeff Corey said it was determined charges wouldn't be filed.

"The Halton Regional Police has concluded its investigation and no charges will be laid," he said, refusing to divulge specifics about the case.

"In the opinion of police, there was insufficient evidence to support a criminal charge in any of the three allegations."

A board source, who didn't want to be identified, said Burlington trustees Jennifer Hlusko and Peggy Russell alleged to police last month that Ms Downs had physically assaulted them.

At press time, Ms Russell declined to comment on the allegation that she was one of Downs' co-accusers.

"I am not prepared to provide any statements, or any comments or answer any questions at this point in time," she said in a voice-mail message left Monday evening.

Several calls made to Ms Hlusko weren't returned.

According to police, one trustee alleged an assault took place in February 2001 and in the spring of 2002. The other trustee alleged an assault took place in February 2004.

Ms Downs made a public statement during a school board meeting March 2, in which she informed trustees and board staff about the allegations and subsequent police investigation.

"I was dumbfounded by the absolute fabrication of these charges

and categorically denied the allegations," she read from a prepared text.

"I was informed by Halton Regional Police that there would be no further pursuance of these charges, as they were unfounded.

"I would like to reassure my constituents and, in fact, all Halton parents, students and Halton District School Board staff that my reason for sitting at this table is to make positive and beneficial strides for student achievement. Even in light of these recent events, rest assured my goal remains unchanged."

There was no discussion among trustees following Ms Downs' statement.

After the meeting, Ms Downs said she was "absolutely flabbergasted" by the allegations. She said she has never assaulted any-

one, and said the motive for the allegations "is beyond my ability to comprehend."

"I'm just feeling sad," she said. "I'm sad anything like this would have to occur. I don't understand this."

Ms Downs said she decided to make public the investigation because she said she wants to ensure innocent people don't go through what she did.

"I think something needs to be said. I think this is a serious enough incident that people need to know what their elected officials are doing. I have nothing to hide — nothing."

Acknowledging the incident will make for tense times at the board, she said. "I will try very hard to cope in some manner."

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