

# Public board teaching assistants vote to unionize

By CAROL BALDWIN  
Special to The Champion

Reduced hours plus a perceived lack of respect for seniority and educational qualifications prompted teaching assistants with the Halton Board of Education to vote 95 per cent in favor of unionizing.

The Halton Instructional Assistants Association (HIAA) will be negotiating its first contract in the near future, probably in January. Its president Lynne Gurzi is ready to go to bat for Halton's 492 teaching assistants.

And, she says, wages and benefits will not be at the top of the agenda. Recognition and respect will occupy that space.

Ms Gurzi says Halton is the only area board

of education that does not recognize education as a qualification for its teaching assistants, "which is a bit of a mystery to me. There is an educational assistants' program at Sheridan and Mohawk colleges, and all the surrounding boards recognize those qualifications. Not Halton.

"We have a four-part grid based on years of service. Education is not considered. With or without a post-secondary school education, we get the same salary... We have three groupings and the swimming instructors are the only ones who need any special education or qualifications," she says, adding that this group does receive the highest rate of pay. However, she says, assistants who work with special needs children because of their expertise in that area

make no extra money. "There's no consistency in requirements."

And, she says, the teaching assistants have no formal job descriptions. "The job descriptions in 1988 indicated that a driver's licence would be helpful and previous work with children would be an asset."

It's this lack of defined qualifications that allows the board to "hire people off the street, when those with a history with the board have been given less hours or no hours."

She says employees are being put on surplus lists or having their hours reduced when new workers are being hired.

Consequently, the members of HIAA voted to certify and will soon be union members awaiting their first contract. "People were real-

izing that we really needed to go this route," says Ms Gurzi. "We need a collective agreement to set paths out to the way things need to be, and to follow those things to the letter of the law."

Ms Gurzi says pay equity legislation did help them secure some benefits. However, she says, "The Dufferin/Peel board compared its assistants to audio visual technicians (in the rating process). We were compared to caretakers."

She says the HIAA members were fortunate to have had the support of other teacher groups and the opportunity to learn from them. And, she says, a special presidents' council in which representatives from different educational organizations are encouraged to share ideas and opinions also helped her tremendously.

## Board begins facing cutback challenge

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The Halton Board of Education's renewal plan is set to go, with budgets roughed out and support staff prepared to lend a hand.

However, there seem to be as many unanswered questions about the process as there are answers, and many of those questions are coming from staff members.

"Every staff member in the system will see significant changes to their job," said Director of Education Bob Williams. "People's jobs are on the line, and they know it."

Consequently, staff members have been encouraged to use the board's on-line computer network to clear any concerns, and, said Mr. Williams, it has already received 30 to 40 questions from staff.

Burlington Trustee Sheila Flook wanted to know how many staff members would be devoting a chunk of their time to this extensive renewal project. But, Mr. Williams suggested, there is no way of knowing how many people might be asked to lend a hand or how many hours they would be expected to contribute.

However, the renewal plan does state, "The director will devote at least three-quarters of his time to the work of renewal in the next six months. His regular duties will be assumed by other senior staff or postponed/eliminated for this period of time."

Also, Superintendent of Education Services Kit Rankin is expected to devote "approximately half her time to the School Programs Project for the next year."

Mr. Williams was asked by Oakville Trustee Anise Docherty if he knew of any other board of education that was undertaking such an extensive renewal project.

"Not, yet," he replied. "But, once they know what they are up against (with provincial cuts), I'm sure they will."

The exercise is touted by its designers as an ongoing process that will effectively trim the education budget to compensate for the reduction in transfer payments from the province, without sacrificing quality of education or putting any additional burden on the taxpayers.

"We have never approached downsizing in anywhere near as systematic an approach as we are doing now... We didn't look at the whole system (in the past). This is a different mindset for us," said Mr. Williams. "People will look at different, more efficient ways of doing things... We will have to make reductions that are far greater in scope than anything we have had to deal with up to now."

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