

Reprieve may be coming for Halton teaching assistants

By CAROL BALDWIN
Special to The Champion

An eleventh-hour reprieve may be granted to Instructional Assistants who work in Halton's elementary schools.

The 492 instructional assistants with the Halton Board of Education will escape the Harris cuts until the next school year if a report submitted to the board of trustees is approved at this Thursday's board meeting.

Lynne Gurzi, president of the Halton Instructional Assistants Association (HIAA), said her members were told last month they would have to collectively shave 80 hours a day from their roster to stay within their budget.

But it looks as though their jobs may be protected for the remainder of the school year following a finance committee meeting and a subsequent special board meeting which were almost completely devoted to a report on Instructional Assistants (IAs).

"As a result of that meeting I received a call from Bob Williams (director of education) at my house, and he said they will be reversing the decision," she said. "Apparently they can find the money to accommodate the hours required, at least until June."

Mr. Williams agreed. "Based on the meeting, the superintendents and I reviewed the situation. We have agreed to live within our budget, that we will not be making changes as far as reducing

hours (for IAs) for the number of the schools identified in the report."

Both Ms Gurzi and Mr. Williams said the proposal to the board includes a recommendation to review the instructional assistants' \$8-million budget and come up with ways to save money without drastically slashing the IA's hours.

"It allows us some time to review the situation," explained Mr. Williams.

"The instructional assistants' budget is used for a number of purposes... There are a number of different types of jobs that come out of the IAs budget."

Ms Gurzi said one of her concerns was that hours may have been cut arbitrarily from schools with a lot of IA time. For example, she said,

"One school may have 45 support hours and they (the board) might say, 'Okay, we're taking two-and-a-half hours from you.' But there may be a school with only 16 hours that will have more flexibility," she explained. "Obviously if they (the 45 hours) were needed, the need didn't go away."

The HIAA president advised a more individualized approach to budget cutting and more cooperation between the secondary school and elementary school groups. "There should be a swinging door between those budget lines," she said, noting that students with special needs who are now in the senior grades of the elementary school system will soon be in the secondary school system.




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No conflict, board decides in salary committee dispute

Should trustees with spouses or children who are employed in the school system be allowed to sit on a committee that negotiates the salaries of board employees?

'No' is the answer some trustees arrived at when a motion to approve the membership of the salary committee came up at a Halton Board of Education meeting recently. Their reservations were overshadowed by the majority, however, who said yes.

One of those objecting to allowing trustees with conflicts on the salary committee is Oakville Trustee Linda Lane.

"In the past some of the current (salary) committee members have declared a conflict of interest on salary issues," she said, referring to the Sept. 14 meeting when two trustees declared a conflict over contract ratification issues. "There may appear to be a public perception of bias, and in my view we can't afford to have that."

However, argues board vice-chair and Oakville Trustee Penny Siebert, whose husband is a member of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation, "I can sit on the salary committee because we have seven groups - CUPE, secretaries, social workers, instructional assistants, and so on - and I would have a conflict on only two of those groups."

Since all trustees on the salary committee do not sit on every negotiating team, Ms Siebert says, conflicts can be circumvented by avoiding the negotiating team for which there is one.

"Conflicts are very personal, and everyone in that situation knows better than anyone else what a conflict means. And, I suspect that every trustee has spoken to their lawyers about it," said Ms Siebert. "Trustees have nothing but their reputations."

Flo Belford and Tim Kingsbury, the two Milton trustees, voted to accept the originally proposed slate of salary committee members. Both will be on the committee.

"There may appear to be a public perception of bias, and in my view we can't afford to have that."

Oakville trustee Linda Lane




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