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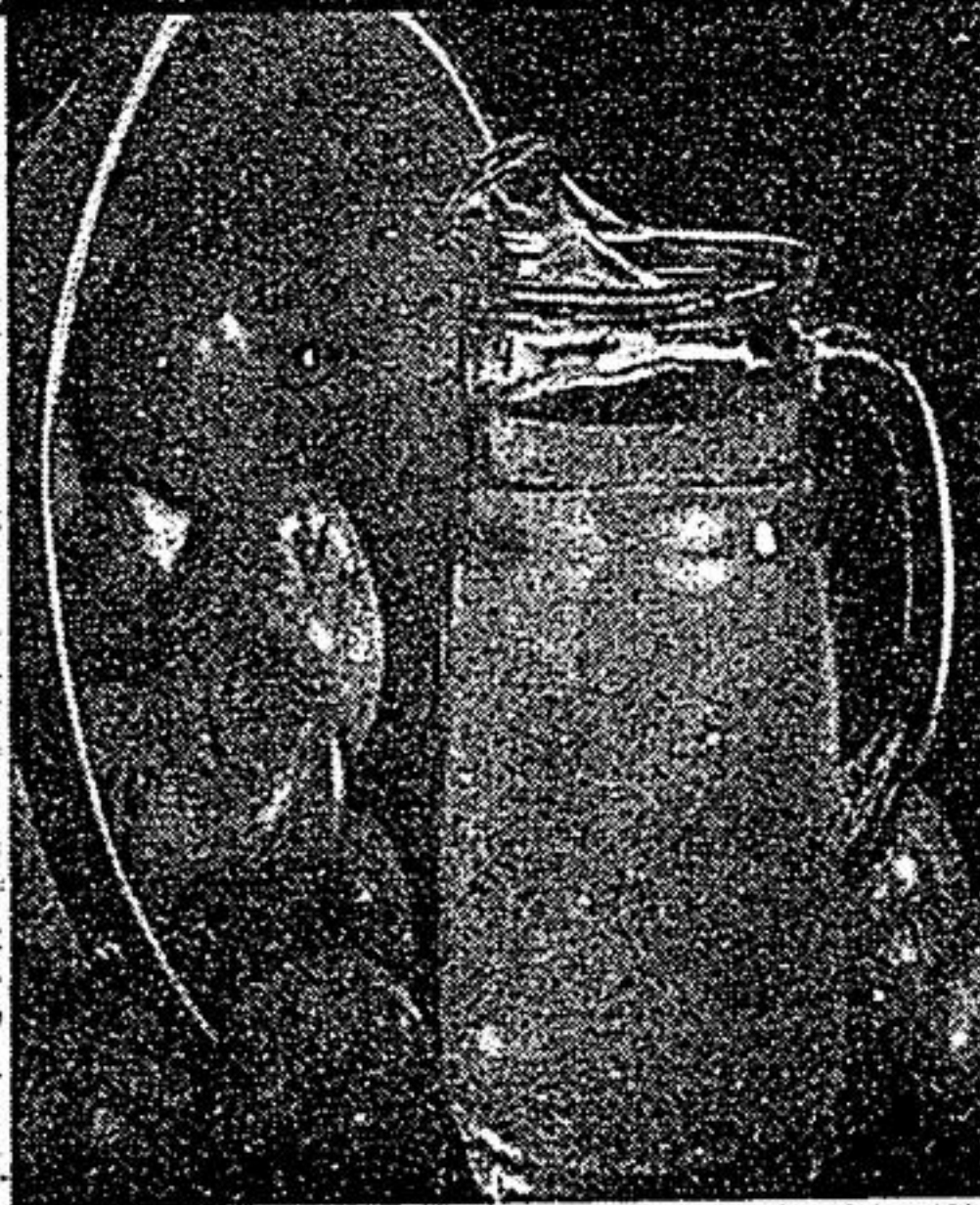
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Dickson Hill students to be sent to other schools

School closure irks parents

BY GIANNI COLAVECCHIA
Staff Writer

Some parents fear a plan to close a Markham school could lead to the demise of French immersion programming for their children.

The York Region public school board wants to close Dickson Hill Public School, which has a comprehensive French immersion program, next year. The move would disperse more than 325 kids to English-language schools in Buttonville, Milliken Mills and Stouffville.

Trustees have approved the plan in principle and could give it official approval by the end of this school year, which parents say does not give them enough time to make arrangements for next year.

"Our problem is they are going at 100 miles per hour on this thing," Dickson school council chairperson Don Hill said.

Hill, a 41-year-old Unionville resident with two children attending

Dickson Hill, said parents are worried the three English schools will not have the proper resources to meet the steadily growing demand for French programs.

If that's the case, he is concerned parents will pull their children out of the schools.

And without the enrolment to support it, he said, French programs could die.

"If I wanted to teach my kids French passively, I would put them into English schools and have them take French classes. They're not going to give the kids the same experience. This thing is going to be so watered down, why even keep your kids in it?" Hill asked.

"I don't want my kids changing schools three or four times in their public school experience."

The public board has turned over official ownership of Dickson to a newly created French board.

Superintendent of schools Jaimini Randev said officials promised parents they would get at least a year to deal with a closure.

"I think, in fairness, they were told," he said.

But officials could extend their lease with the French board by a year, he noted, buying that much extra time for parents.

Randev added programming at the

three English schools will not be any different than what is offered at Dickson.

"I don't think the quality of the program is dependent on dual track or single track," he said.

As a single-track school, Dickson provides little English training for students until they reach Grade 4. The emphasis on French remains even after that grade.

Dual-track schools, which the three English schools would become, offer English-speaking and French-speaking programs in separate areas within one building.

The public board has nine elementary French immersion schools, where many of the programs are "overflowing," Randev said.

Officials hope to add eight immersion schools over the next five years throughout York Region, giving children a chance to take French programming closer to their homes.

Now, many students are unable to attend French immersion schools because they are too far away, Randev said.

Board officials are soliciting input from parents and are examining alternatives.

Statistics show the public board's elementary French immersion program has grown by about 500 students in the last five years.

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