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Literacy test alternative gets the green light from Province

BY TIM WHITNELL
Special to The Champion

There's always a portion of the high school student body at risk at some point of not graduating, with one segment of that group likely not capable of specifically passing the provincially-mandated literacy test.

The general concern for such students has prompted the Ontario government to give the go-ahead to an alternative to the test, an option that would allow students struggling with reading and writing to graduate on time.

The Grade 12 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLC) is part of the government's Students-At-Risk project. The provincial government has allotted \$50 million to the province-wide initiative with \$750,000 earmarked this year for Halton's public board.

The at-risk funding is for four focus areas: OSSLC teacher training and implementation; Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) technical support; numeracy support; and program pathways development.

The literacy course will be for that segment of the student population identified as likely not able to pass the OSSLT, which is based on grade 9 literacy expectations.

It would be for those performing academically at Level 1, the lowest of the four provincial achievement standards, essentially with marks in the 50 to 60 per cent range.

Pupils with a poor attendance record also will be considered for the course. Students have opportunities to pass the literacy test in the fall of either grade 10, 11 or 12. Those eligible for the new literacy course are students who have unsuccessfully written the test at least once and have already had two chances to write it.

"(Passing) the literacy test is preferred; the course is a last resort," said Mag Gardner, the former Lester B. Pearson High School vice-principal hired as the board's new principal of its at-risk program.

"We've got to do something for these kids. We're going to start small so we have successes. The exciting thing about being an educator now is there are many, many ways of learning," Ms Gardner observed earlier this month during a presentation to trustees about the literacy course.

New program will help many

Some board officials have referred to the at-risk general student population as being in the 13 to 15 per cent range. Ms Gardner said she can't quantify the exact figure but noted the struggles of those students, particularly in literacy, are real.

She did produce Ministry of Education statistics from 2000 that stated 28 per cent of Ontario's high school students go on to university, 23 per cent head off to college, 24 per cent get a job after earning their high school diploma while another large portion, 25 per cent, leave high school without graduating.

The literacy course is a full-credit grade 12 course to be offered as part of the English program.

The Ministry of Education Web site says the literacy course has been developed "to provide students who have been unsuccessful on the test with intensive support in achieving the required reading and writing competencies, and with an alternative means of demonstrating their literacy skills."

Students demonstrate literacy skills by completing a variety of oral and written tasks and assignments throughout the term and in a final evaluation. In Halton the course will be piloted during the first semester at two locations — Oakville-Trafalgar and White Oaks secondary schools in Oakville. Students mainly from those two schools will participate in the pilot project.

When the course is expected to be ready for full implementation, in January 2004, it's expected to be available at all of Halton's 22 public and Catholic high schools. "We're trying to get a sense from the schools as to who needs it," said Ms Gardner.

She noted the fortuitous timing of the new course as students who don't pass the literacy test this October will have a chance to take the course starting with the second semester.

The course is 110 hours. Students will have the chance to choose some of what they read and write. They will keep a portfolio of work that will be evaluated. Halton board trustees seem to view the development of a literacy course as a good thing.

"We've known since the introduction of the literacy test that it wasn't servicing those in need. This is long overdue," said Oakville Trustee Mary Chapin.

The Halton board must have its plans for the at-risk initiative in to the Ministry of Education by the end of September.

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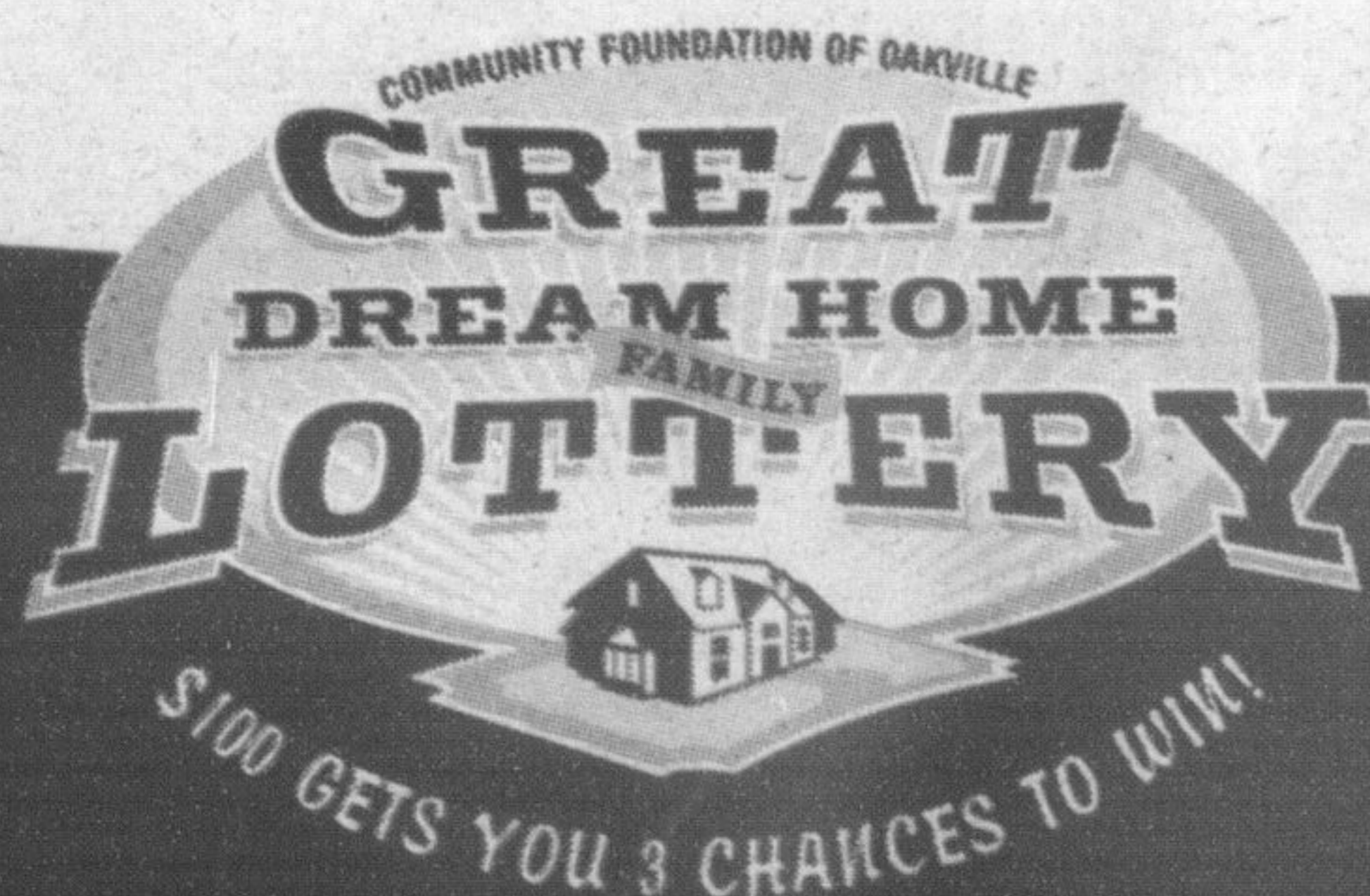
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