

Trustees postpone gifted screening process changes

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Just a few years after the Halton District School Board implemented its gifted program in primary grades, changes may be on the horizon for the program's entry process. However, at a recent meeting, trustees deferred the decision until an extensive consultation process has taken place and until trustees receive more information, with years of data about the program.

Oakville trustee Kathryn Bateman-Olmstead, a supporter of the primary gifted program, said there's not enough information currently to make a decision for or against the staff recommendation.

A full gallery of parents and their children was in attendance at the meeting to hear the debate. The Association of Bright Children of Ontario (ABC Ontario) and its Halton chapter sent out a press release earlier in the week asking the trustees to reject the staff recommendation. The staff recommendation was set for a decision yesterday, but trustees deferred it until the fall.

At issue is the screening process for giftedness. Historically, the public board has done a blanket screening of all its students in Grade

4 for a possible Grade 5 entry into a self-contained gifted class.

In the spring of 2010, the board rolled out its primary gifted pilot program in Burlington, where Senior Kindergarten (SK) students were screened for giftedness after a teacher nomination. The screening happens within the first few months of the school year. Students scoring at or above the 98th percentile in a psychoeducational assessment were eligible for entry into a self-contained gifted class. The following year, the pilot was rolled out in the remaining Halton municipalities.

The first cohort of the program, in Burlington, is currently in Grade 4, when they would normally be screened for giftedness.

The board staff recommendation asked trustees to move the mass screening to Grade 3 from Grade 4. It also asked for an overhaul of the screening process prior to the mass screening. The change would mean students who are showing traits of giftedness and are in need of additional intervention could be referred for gifted assessment by a classroom teacher through a school resource team at any grade level and at any time during the year.

As a rationale for the change, board staff showed there are currently 28 students

who were identified as gifted in the primary grades who are currently in Grade 4 in Burlington. Another 23 students were identified in the mass screening process this year. Four of those 23 students had been assessed for giftedness in the primary grades and didn't meet the criteria.

Superintendent of Education David Boag said several concerns have arisen. He said many students have been missed by the primary screening process. Furthermore, to date, 394 assessment nominations have been made, but only 124 of those were identified as gifted. This is a 31.5 per cent efficiency rate. The time to assess all those students was about \$135,000.

The data shows that teachers' success rate to identify giftedness in their students increases as they age, with a success rate of 26 per cent in SK, compared to 51.1 per cent in Grade 2. Boag added children's assessment becomes more accurate as they age. The report noted a child's IQ becomes more stable at ages eight to 10, so testing prior to that age may be less valid.

Milton trustee Donna Danielli said concerns have been raised by the community that changing the primary screening process was the first step to phase out primary screening.

The sentiment was echoed by other trustees. Director of Education David Euale said he didn't believe the changes would phase out primary screening for giftedness.

Danielli asked board staff how they would maintain steady class sizes with the new referral process.

Boag said the profile of the primary gifted program has been raised to the point where people are talking about it and thinking about it. He said the board may not get as many referrals, but it would get better referrals, resulting in a greater success rate of identification.

Burlington trustee Jennifer Hlusko said the greatest concern for parents of gifted students is that Grade 1 placements will be removed.

"If this recommendation passes, I fear there will be no Grade 1 placements," she said. She added, that if placements do continue, it would only be for the students with behavioral problems or the children of wealthy parents who can pay for their child's assessment.

Furthermore, she said the change would result in fewer placements, thus reducing the number of classes, possibly having one for all of Halton. She said parents would either

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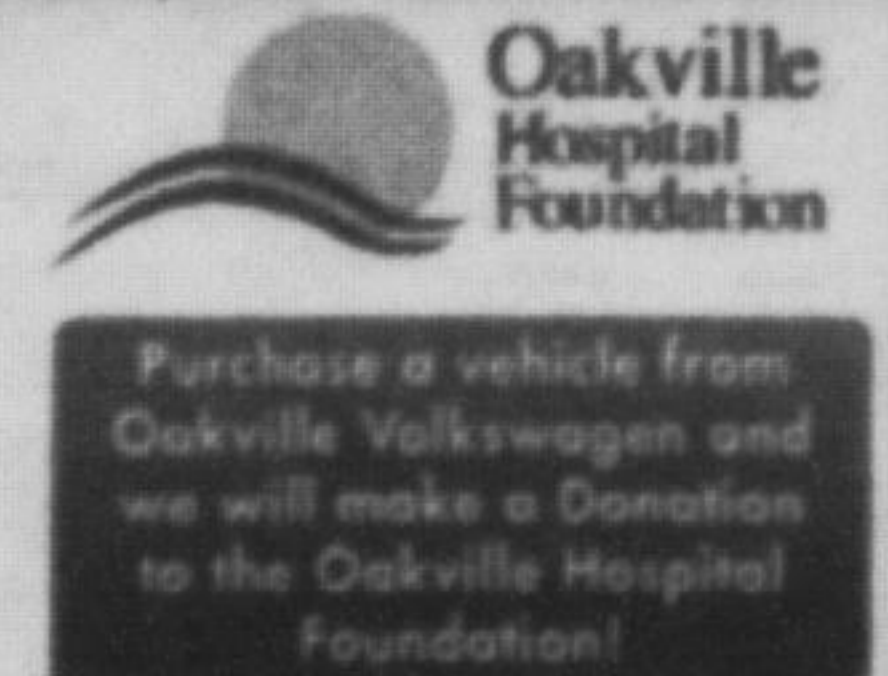
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