

Trustee wants plug pulled on WiFi in Halton's public schools

By Bob Mitchell
SPECIAL TO THE CHAMPION

A Halton school trustee again wants to unplug Wi-Fi from Halton's public schools. But unlike two years ago when Milton public school trustee Nancy MacNeill sought a total region-wide ban, this time she wants to limit its use to 90 minutes each day for most students, but ban it outright for the youngest students and those with learning disabilities. Still, it appears MacNeill will have a tough time getting enough trustees on her side when the issue goes to a vote when Halton District School Board representatives meet Tuesday. Both board vice-chair Kathryn Bateman-Olmstead and Oakville trustee Don Vrooman shot down MacNeill's proposal at the October 17 board meeting. They suggested there wasn't enough data to link Wi-Fi use to a variety of symptoms such as dermatological redness, tingling and burning sensation as well as fatigue, tiredness, concentration difficulties, nausea, heart palpitations and digestive problems. MacNeill wants Wi-Fi to be turned on for only the first 45 minutes and the last 45 minutes of each day at each school. The trustee also wants it turned off completely in areas where

JK, SK and Grade 1 students are being taught as well as where students with learning disabilities are located.

"Adults can say no (if they don't want to use Wi-Fi) but children can't," MacNeill told the board. "We have to say yes or no for them." MacNeill told board members new studies are continually providing new information and the medical profession suggests two to five per cent of children have suffered "significant" reaction to a condition known as electromagnetic hypersensitivity (EHS) and that it's "much higher" for children, who have "casual" effects.

That would mean as many as 3,000 students in the public school board could be affected by EHA, MacNeill said in the one-page information sheet presented at the board meeting. "These children can't speak for themselves, especially children with ADT or autistic children," she said. "The teacher probably isn't even going to notice the changes." The trustee said she had learned so much on the subject since she last sought in the ban in the spring of 2011 that "it scares" her. Technically, board officials say Wi-Fi could be turned off as MacNeill suggests, but there has been no wide-spread concern or complaints from students or their parents about any

symptoms possibly related to EHS.

Bateman-Olmstead understood MacNeill's zest, but told board members she couldn't support her motion. Not only does her children use Wi-Fi in their home, but so do all of her friends with children.

"I don't know anybody who plugs their stuff in," Bateman-Olmstead said. "So when I contemplate this, it just doesn't make sense to me. I'm not sure about the research yet."

"I can't imagine taking something like this away from the students. It (using Wi-Fi) will

keep growing until we either have concrete proof (harm) or we don't. I wouldn't want to disable our schools or our students.

MacNeill insisted limiting Wi-Fi use wouldn't affect any "21st century learning" because students can still use apps and other educational tools.

Vrooman commented he would do further research before the next board meeting, but so far he's found nothing to suggest any link between Wi-Fi and any of the symptoms on the list.

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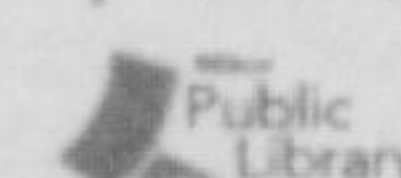


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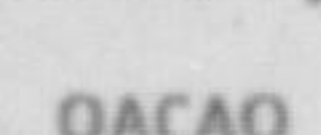
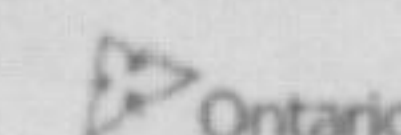
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