

Trustees say they feel compelled to take harder look at Internet filtering

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They suggested some of the ways parents and the general public should be contacted about Internet filtering should include a link on the board's website to a folder that would hold all feedback on the issue for public viewing plus a page of frequently asked questions and answers on the subject.

Those final changes tacked on to the original recommendation passed unanimously.

Trustees said they felt compelled to take a harder look at possible Internet filtering based on new and changed information brought to them by Smith.

"Only pornographic sites is a lot different than a wider filter," said Bateman-Olmstead. She expressed concern that the concept of a broad Internet filter might give students the message the board believes they can't be trusted.

"If you expect negative behavior, you will get negative behavior; that's the nature of youth."

Smith told trustees at the April 2 meeting that the cost of Internet filtering had been modified to \$85,000 in the first year of installation and about \$15,000 in subsequent years.

He also told the board there's the ability to differentiate the filtering of sites whether

they be elementary or secondary schools, by grade level or by students or staff.

Oakville trustee Ann Harvey Hope said that while she appreciated the verbal update of filtering information from Smith at that night's board meeting she would have preferred it earlier.

Lots of public feedback: trustee

"I have been getting a lot of (public) feedback. I wish it (updated information) could have been in the original report. There wasn't really away to clarify it (in advance) with the public, that it means this or it means that."

Harvey Hope also noted that the board has student usage agreements with municipal libraries that are connected to some schools and that if the board decides on filtering of some sort it might contravene arrangements it has made with city/town libraries.

"We would meet with (our) library partners once a decision is made at the board... and see if it meets with their approval," Smith said.

Vrooman said he too has been inundated with feedback on WiFi filtering from the public.

"This is clearly controversial. It's not just (an) operational or pedagogical (issue)... I

received a lot of comments from the public, about 100, on both sides."

Vrooman asked if a filter would block all access to pornographic sites through the board's WiFi feed. If not, how much might get through and what is getting through now, he wondered.

Smith told him principals at elementary schools might have to deal with one to two serious Internet subject access issues related to porn per year; he said the numbers are "far less" at the high school level.

"I can't say it will filter out most (porn) sites. I can't say 100 per cent. The greater concern is those (people) not on our WiFi," said Smith, referring to individuals using G3 or G4 devices; those are capable of sending and receiving wireless data such as voice, text, pictures, etc. He noted too that with the board expanding WiFi outside of classrooms and its new Bring I.T. initiative, which encourages students to bring their information technology devices to school for in-class learning, there's more potential for access to what might be considered inappropriate sites.

Filter won't affect outside devices

Any filter attached to the boards' WiFi won't prevent people who bring their own electronic devices that use another network from accessing blocked websites, said Smith.

"Many (board) staff are opposed to the (filtering) initiative.... In general, I've heard a lot

more opposition than those in favour."

He noted most school boards in the GTA have Internet filters but still deal with access issues pertaining to 3G and 4G devices.

"I've heard from some staff at other boards who say there is some over-filtering going on at their board."

Most trustees who spoke at the meeting said the response from parents and the public has been overwhelming in terms of what they think about WiFi filtering.

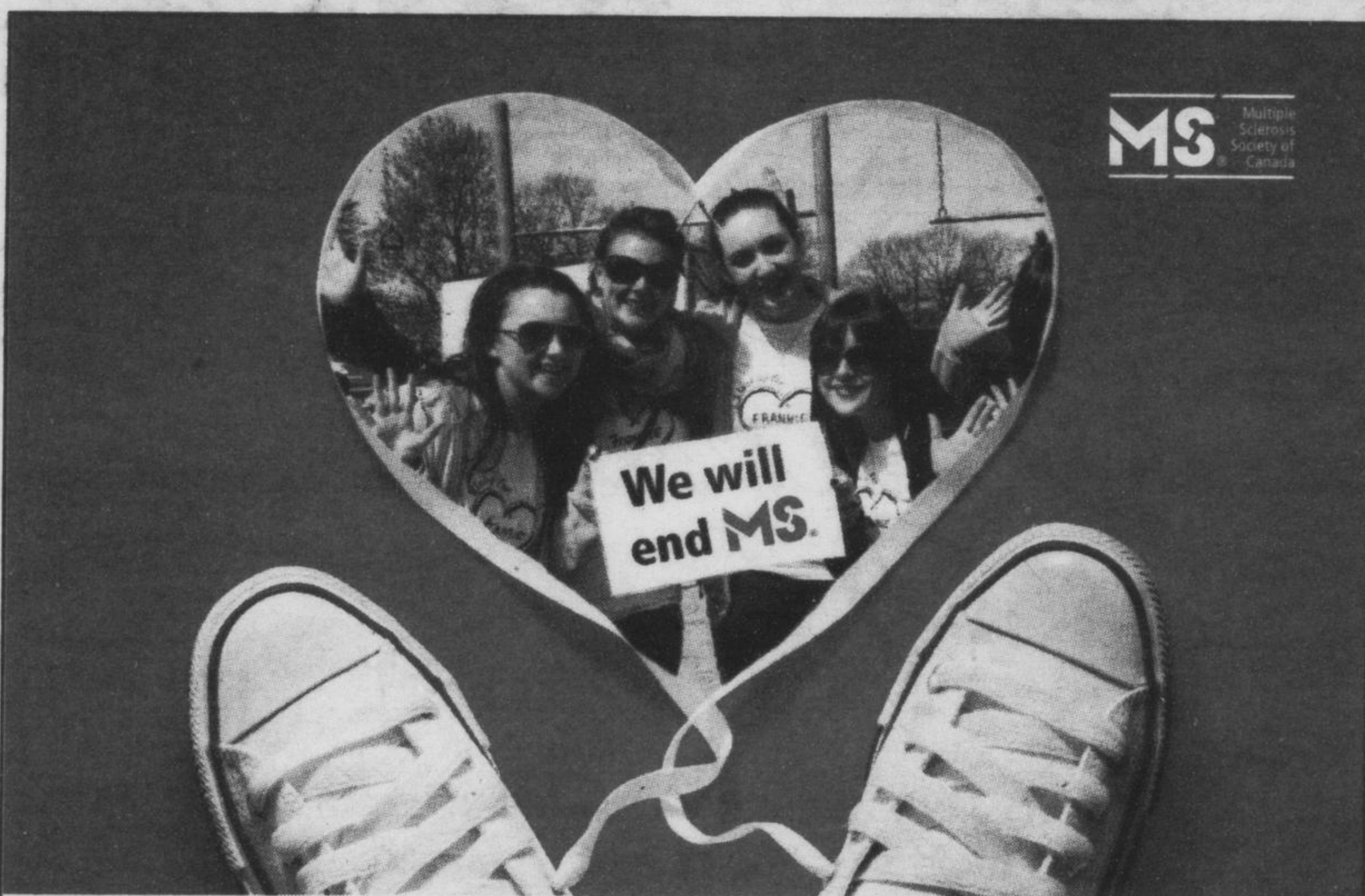
"I had several conversations with families. I'm generally against filtering," although she acknowledged the concerns of families with young children, said Bateman-Olmstead.

Burlington trustee Dianna Bower said her opinion has wavered.

"My first visceral response was let's get this filtering going. Now, I don't know if it will fix the problem."

She said it might be better for the board to put more emphasis on appropriate usage of information technology in schools, what the board calls digital citizenship.

Donna Danielli, a Milton trustee, said she has heard some opposition to an Internet filter from staff but that the vast majority of parents she has been in contact with are in favour of a filter, based on initial information provided by board staff.



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