

Wi-Fi safety to be tested

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The Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board will test its schools for electromagnetic levels before and after it phases in the use of Wi-Fi.

The board approved the purchase of two electromagnetic field monitoring units at a cost of between \$1,500 to \$2,000 during its monthly regular board meeting Thursday night.

The units will allow staff to monitor electromagnetic levels to ensure they don't exceed limits Health Canada has set.

"We have been assured that Wi-Fi was safe or we wouldn't have approved it, but because some parents are still concerned, this will allow us to alleviate their concerns," board chairwoman Diane Lloyd said. "That monitoring will allow us to give security to our parents and the public that we are looking after it properly."

The board approved Wi-Fi, used to connect computers and electronic devices to the Internet without wires, last spring but was met with growing parental concern about the issue in the fall, prompting the board to investigate a monitoring system, Lloyd said.

"When parents are concerned, we are concerned. One way to alleviate those concerns is to get this monitoring," she said.

The hot topic drew about 60 people, including several school board trustees and trustee candidates, to a meeting on the issue at the Evinrude Centre in October.

While Health Canada and the local medical officer of health, Dr. Rosana Pellizzari, say there's no evidence the wireless technology is unsafe, the local chapter of Citizens for Safe Technology says Wi-Fi shouldn't be in schools until there's evidence it is safe.

Trent University associate professor Magda Havas, who studies electromagnetic radiation, has said Health Canada is basing its stance on faulty science.

Peterborough parent Malini Menon criticized the public board during the October meeting, saying they were treating children like "guinea pigs."

She confronted the board during Thursday night's meeting as an announced delegate.

Menon said the board approved Wi-Fi without proper consultation with the public and parents.

"The public has remained largely unaware of the existence of the plan (to phase in Wi-Fi)," Menon said. "For a school board to conceive of and approve a plan without input from the public is unacceptable."

Parents and students were consulted as stakeholders when the board's technology committee was seeking input on its Wi-Fi plan, Lloyd said. The policy was also sent to the regional student councils in Peterborough, Northumberland and Clarington for input before coming back to the board for approval, she said.

Education director Rusty Hick told the board Wi-Fi systems within a given school would be stopped if monitoring detects unsafe levels.

"Student safety is our absolute first priority," he said. "Clearly if there were any levels of anything, whether it was tap water or whatever, that approached a level of danger to our students, we would stop immediately and proceed only after medical advice."