

Winlaw parents win lobby for no Wi-Fi in school



Kootenay

Lake School District superintendent Jeff Jones says they are acting 'well within the Canada Health guidelines.'

Bob Hall photo

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Published: May 09, 2013 4:00 PM

Winlaw parents have successfully lobbied the school district to have Wi-Fi turned off in their local elementary school.

At the Kootenay Lake School District board meeting on April 16, a group of parents approached trustees with concerns Wi-Fi could cause health problems.

“Many of us requested that the wireless modem at our school be turned off during school hours,” Clare Kelly told 103.5 the Bridge. “We feel that there are no long-term health studies that have been conducted on the effects of wireless frequencies on children or on pregnant women.”

At that board meeting, superintendent Jeff Jones explained there is a district-wide initiative to install wireless technology in all the schools as part of an infrastructure upgrade.

“In our school district, in the last two years, we’ve had a plan roll out where we install wireless in every one of our schools and the purpose of this is to support the changing needs of students,” he said.

As students bring their own devices to school more often, the district is looking toward “ubiquitous” access to technology, said Jones, a successful endeavor until now.

“As technology evolves, the notion of walking down to the library to get information is becoming archaic,” he said. “More and more we are seeing use of devices not attached to wires.”

But when Winlaw elementary school parents expressed concerns, the district decided it best to honour their wishes.

“Of course we assured them that throughout the school district we’re well within the Canada Health guidelines in this context and we’ve been cautious to be careful about what we’re installing in our schools. However, there are a number of people in that community who have expressed their concerns,” he said. “The school community wasn’t quite ready, I don’t think, for this technology so it was easy for us to say ‘we can turn it off.’”

Teachers and administration staff at the Winlaw school aren’t using wireless technology so after making some adjustments to existing electrical, the Wi-Fi will be turned off. It can be turned back on should the sentiments of the community change, said the superintendent.

“We’re working to solve this with the community,” said Jones. “It didn’t seem to make sense to force the issue.”

Kelly, who approached the board along with parent Colleen Emery, said they “were very pleased that the board listened attentively to what we had to say” and that action has been made in their favour.

But she still questions the use of wireless technology that could be harmful to the public. She suggests a district-wide policy address this concern. In 2011, Saanich School District 63 banned Wi-Fi in elementary schools.

“I am really thrilled that this is becoming a public dialogue,” said Kelly. “Many of us are investigating what evidence do we have to say this is safe for our children and we don’t have any. As wireless devices become more common, how are we going to respond to that in the context of the schools?”

Jones said as other schools received their Wi-Fi upgrade, he heard little to no comment.

“It’s taken as a matter of course,” he said. “It’s becoming a growing expectation that there is wireless available. I just think it makes sense to have it in our schools as well.”