



**Wi-Fi Committee Meeting  
Monday, May 2, 2011  
Tolmie Boardroom, 556 Boleskine Road**

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**MINUTES**

**Present:**

**Board of Education**

Tom Ferris, Chair  
Dave Pitre, Vice-Chair

**Administration**

George Ambeault, Secretary-Treasurer and Chair of the Wi-Fi Committee  
Ted Pennell, Director of Information Technology  
Denise Archibald, Recording Secretary

**Victoria Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils (VCPAC)**

Darcy Dragseth, Vice-President

**Greater Victoria Teachers' Association (GVTA)**

David Futter, Teacher  
Mike Dodd, Teacher

**Allied Specialists' Association (ASA)**

Melanie Houston, President  
Lisa Armitage, District Psychologist

**Victoria Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association (VPVPA)**

Leslie Lee, Principal, George Jay Elementary School  
Garrett Brisdon, Vice-Principal, Oak Bay High School  
Paul Stevenson, Vice-Principal, Rockheights Middle School

**Regrets:** Trustee Peg Orcheron and Kami Bourgeois, VCPAC

The meeting was called to order at 5:07 p.m.

**1. PURPOSE OF MEETING**

Chair Ambeault stated that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the findings received to date and make a recommendation regarding the future of Wi-Fi in the district. John Bird, newly elected President of the Victoria Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils, has requested that the Committee's recommendation be made at the June 2011 Operations, Policy and Planning Committee meeting.

## 2. **DISCUSSION BY COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

Tom Ferris suggested that each Committee member provide a summary of their concerns about Wi-Fi.

### i. **David Futter, Greater Victoria Teachers' Association (GVTA)**

On behalf of the GVTA's Health & Safety Committee, David is recommending that the Committee take the precautionary approach as there is enough error of doubt. He stated that there is so much information available from industry, non-industry and self interest groups but there is no proof that Wi-Fi is not safe.

### ii. **Michael Dodd, Greater Victoria Teachers' Association**

Michael is in agreement with David Futter and has been clear from the beginning that the Committee takes the precautionary approach. He is concerned with industry involvement and the district should not be led by corporate agendas and should maintain autonomy and set clear goals. He expressed concern that when schools have an open policy, it has created problems for teachers as students are lacking in their ability to focus. Michael asked what kind of plan was being considered for wi-fi before the creation of the Committee and what processes are planned going forward?

George Ambeault, Chair stated that the recommendation of the Committee will determine what will be presented to the Operations, Policy and Planning Committee before going to the Board for approval. In response to Michael's questions above, George stated that schools as groups discuss learning situations such as how to use technology, or what rules to have about a certain topic, as a means of developing a common plan rather than creating widespread diversity throughout the district which is confusing to students, parents and staff members.

### iii. **Garrett Brisdon, Victoria Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association (VPVPA)**

Garrett stated that he is an educational professional, not a health care professional and that even with his background in science, he does not feel competent to make a solid judgment on the safety of wi-fi. His Inclination would be to follow the advice of qualified and authorized health care professionals including the Vancouver Island Health Authority and World Health Organization with an annual review based on their most current recommendations. Garrett also stated that when the district was faced with the H1N1 crisis, he did not try to study the issue but sought guidance from qualified health care professionals.

### iv. **Ted Pennell, Administration**

Ted said that what he has heard and read about wi-fi is interesting. He expressed concern that the district's need for wi-fi was not addressed in the public meetings, or how assistive technologies would be affected. If the district takes the precautionary approach, options will be limited for the new generation of computing devices such as tablets and slates that are wi-fi only. Tablets could introduce new ways for our students to learn and collaborate in the future. Ted concurred with Garrett that he is not a scientist and will rely on health professionals who state that Wi-Fi does not cause harm. He feels confident that the Committee has done its due diligence by their review and assessment and is confident in his decision as there is no refutable proof that wi-fi is harmful.

**v. Darcy Dragseth, Victoria Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils (VCPAC)**

Darcy advised that her comments tonight were being made as a parent not as a VCPAC representative. She stated that it has been a good experience to hear all sides but on a personal level wants to see clear evidence that wi-fi is unsafe and does not believe that the Committee has been shown that. Darcy requested copies of the Nanaimo School District's Wi-Fi- testing results so that she can share them with her parent group. George Ambeault also offered to send Darcy a copy of a report commissioned by an Alberta private school's Board of Education to conduct radio frequency testing which found that the emissions were significantly below the acceptable levels as defined by Health Canada. Darcy stated that the Wi-Fi controversy is worrisome but believes students must have it available to them to be successful in the future. She is leaning towards recommending that the district rely on the advice of Health Canada and the World Health Organization.

**vi. Paul Stevenson, Victoria Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association**

Paul is in agreement with most of what has been discussed tonight but had concerns with some statistics provided by presentations made at public meetings as statistics are cross-sectional studies and do not show the reality whereas longitudinal studies show what has really happened. He also stated that he questions the validity and reliability of the research against wi-fi and believes that the World Health Organization and Health Canada's advice should be followed. He also stated that wi-fi is the best professional development tool that teachers have to stretch our students and this type of technology shows what can be done differently via the use of wi-fi.

**vii. Leslie Lee, Victoria Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association**

Leslie is in agreement with Paul Stevenson and Garrett Brisdon and recommends that the advice of our medical professionals be followed. At her school, George Jay Elementary, hard wiring only would limit access to computer devices and these tools and technologies are very important to her students' learning opportunities.

**viii. Melanie Houston, Allied Specialists' Association**

Melanie stated that with so much information to review, the Committee was not able to define what research was acceptable and what was not. She was in agreement with Garrett Brisdon who stated that he was not qualified to make a judgment as he is an educator, not a scientist.

**ix. Lisa Armitage, Allied Specialists' Association**

Lisa reiterated the need for an administrative analysis of the Committee's findings. She also hesitated to defer only to Health Canada's recommendations alone because other world organizations are not in agreement with their findings. Lisa also stated that she has not heard evidence of benefits to children using wi-fi and feels that the discussion has been that wi-fi is an asset to technology but not to children. In particular, where is it stated that wi-fi is a benefit to special education? She believes that the first choice should be human contact.

**x. Dave Pitre, Board of Education**

Dave is empathetic to presenters but stated his need to balance the wishes of presenters with the needs of the system. He also stated that 21st Century Learning includes new technologies and it is his hope that personalized learning and technology will have a place.

In his work with the Victoria Cardiac Rehabilitation Society, he has seen firsthand the increase in technology. The B.C. Children's Hospital in Vancouver is also fully wi-fi enabled. Dave stated that he only recently became aware that the B.C. Parent Advisory Councils has been engaged in the same discussion about wi-fi for two years. His recommendation will be to rely on the advice of authorized health organizations.

**xi. Tom Ferris, Board of Education**

Tom stated that the Committee has answered many of his questions about Wi-Fi and he has observed teacher presentations at Education Development Policy meetings on their ideas on how they would use this technology. He did not see any conclusive evidence presented at the public meetings and concurred with other Committee members that the Wi-Fi Committee is not a scientific committee. Tom will recommend that the district ask for regular updates from the district's information technology staff, monitor wi-fi health concerns and follow the advice of the recognized health authorities.

**xii. George Ambeault, Administration and Chair of Wi-Fi Committee**

George agrees with much of what has been said by each Committee member and stated that some information that has been presented is outside of the Committee's mandate. George gave a personal example of when he was diagnosed with cancer and that he trusted the advice of health care professionals. At B.C. Children's Hospital and many new hospitals that have been built, radio tags are being used on patients (neo natal through geriatric). This action says that health care professionals believe that wi-fi it is not harmful. It is also important to note that there will be consistent updating of health professionals' studies which the district must continue to review. He stated that any significant issues will be brought forward to the Operations, Planning & Policy Committee for discussion and then to the Board in June of each school year.

**Miscellaneous Discussions:**

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| Darcy Dragseth  | If this goes forward. What about children with electromagnetic sensitivities?  |
| Ted Pennell     | Medical community does not recognize EHS   |
| Garrett Brisdon | Read excerpt from World Health Organization #296 – “...while symptoms are real and some children do have sensitivities, EHS is not a medical or clinical diagnosis.”   |
| George Ambeault | If a student developed a problem, the school would determine an alternative technology teaching method.  |
| Michael Dodd    | Nervous about jumping to conclusions and making a recommendation. If we had an opportunity to bring scientists to the Committee via Skype, would there be a different decision? Pivotal for SD61 to develop exemplary policies. Gathering data, testing, modeling, doing due diligence, revising goals, determining what we are going to test, when are we going to test – yes there is a cost issue but .. Need to slow down. Everyone has only heard what they wanted to hear. |
| Tom Ferris      | No decision made here today will be binding. Presenters typically only come out when they feel strongly on an issue.   |

- George Ambeault Stated that many presenters did so on several occasions. We could ask the medical officer for cumulative effect info.
- Tom Ferris Agree to agree but also that members of the committee were not in agreement.
- David Futter Trustees will have to have another discussion around where this technology will fit in. Not convinced that a blanket system in the district is right when there are some that will be negatively affected. Where will they go? Need free zones. Still very concerned for teachers. As employers you have a responsibility that everyone in the school district is looked after. We don't know what the cumulative effect is (one router may be fine but additional routers may cause concern). Pre testing needs to be done. Olle Johannson is a scientist who has found evidence and works for a respected organization.
- Tom Ferris Append something about cumulative effects with recommendation to the Board.
- Ted Pennell Where do you make the connection that it is wi-fi causing the issue? Science says it is not. Where do you go to avoid wi-fi? Wi-fi is picked up from the neighbours in every school. Refer to Dr. Perry Kendall's letter.
- Michael Dodd Believes tablets could be used by downloading information rather than using wi-fi. Kids are bombarded and losing personal contact. Leading educators are looking at ways to use technologies to teach students. Worried about creating a generation of students susceptible to marketing tactics. Needs to be kept in control.
- Paul Stevenson Educators in this district (and Sooke and Saanich) stated that are exploring Michael's concerns using wi-fi as an assisted tool to ensure a high level of motivation.
- Garrett Brisdon Garrett believes that David Futter has raised some legitimate concerns but he has confidence in teachers to manage this and focus students in the right way. He will distribute a document he prepared listing 11 education benefits of using wi-fi. Learners are changing and we can't ignore that. Garrett gave a personal example of when he was watching the Winter Olympics on TV last year with his children and their friends. The children were using laptops connected to wi-fi and were conducting research on the events and athletes as the coverage unfolded on TV. He said that it was a very good example of how he was a passive learner and they were active learners. Wi-fi technology is a powerful opportunity that we must take advantage of.

Tom Ferris stated that he would draft a recommendation and have George Ambeault, Chair, send it out to the Committee by email for their comments and feedback.

### 3. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 6:38 pm.