

Copyright makes web a turn-off

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FEBRUARY 28, 2006 SCHOOLS have warned they will have to turn off the internet if a move by the nation's copyright collection society forces them to pay a fee every time a teacher instructs students to browse a website. Teachers said students in rural areas would bear the brunt of cuts if the Copyright Agency was successful in adding internet browsing charges to the \$31 million in photocopying fees it rakes in from schools.

The agency calculates the total due by randomly sampling schools each year for materials they copy, and extrapolating the results.

The battle between the schools and the agency will go to the Federal Court over its attempts to make schools pay for asking students to use the web.

Negotiations between the Ministerial Council on Education Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, representing the schools, and the agency have broken down over plans to change the scheme to include a question in the survey on whether teachers direct students to use the internet.

"If it turned out we'd have to pay them, we'd turn the internet off in schools," the council's national copyright director Delia Browne said.

"We couldn't afford it; it would not be sustainable. How on earth are we going to deliver education in the 21st century? How are taxpayers going to afford this."

The move has teachers up in arms, with some warning "ludicrous" charges for using websites would increase the gap between haves and have-nots.

"Kids in rural areas, particularly, depend on websites," said Sui-Linn White, creative and performing arts head teacher at a Sydney school.

"There's a whole section of the NSW Art Gallery website aimed at education, and teachers in rural areas depend on sites like that."

The Copyright Tribunal held three days of hearings on the issue in September 2005, but it is now expected the matter will be heard in the Federal Court later this year.

Agency chief executive Michael Fraser said schools paid only \$10 per student per year for photocopying.

"For less than the cost of maintaining the grounds, emptying the garbage bins and managing the tuckshop you can access all the material you want and make photocopies," he said.

"It would be tragic if schools had to shut down the internet, we don't want that. "What they pay will be for the tribunal to determine."

This report appears on australianIT.com.au.