School may skip computer class

Observer IT Reporter

A tiny school in Knoxville, Tenn., is making 'national' waves with a request to have students excused from computer training.

Administrators at Oakmont School, a private middle and high school, are asking lawmakers to exempt their students from a new state law requiring one year of computer training for all students before graduation from high school. An amendment to be introduced Feb. 15 would let parents give written permission to waive the requirement for their children.

"We want to get our children free from computer training, so we want to get the same benefits given for family life courses," says principal Floyd Rochat. The school has only 12 students, and in Tennessee, like many states, parents can have children excused from sex education because of religious beliefs. "We're asking the same thing with computer training."

Rochat objects to kids using computers to access the Internet, "which is full of corruption," he says. He believes computers can also become a crutch that interferes with a developing child's ability to think. "We want our kids to add three plus two and come up with five, not just key it in and get an answer."

The school's move is apt to call into question the speed with which states are incorporating technology into public schools. In the last five years, 34 states have developed standards for technology education.

In some cases, the requirements are "bizarre," says psychologist Ed Miller, of the Alliance for Childhood, a coalition of child development experts that has called for a moratorium on technology in schools until more is known about its effects on kids. North Carolina, for example, requires first graders to know how to send an e-mail, he says.

Lynn Nolan of the International Society for Technology in Education believes the Tennessee case is the first in which a school has said it doesn't want to offer any work involving technology. Most schools have adopted "acceptable use policies" for students using PCs and the Net, and have installed filtering software to block unacceptable content.

Excluding students from technology will put them at a disadvantage in the workplace as well as at colleges, she adds. "There's a movement toward proficiency in technology. . . . If you don't have the skills, you're going to have to get them before you can enter the (college) program."