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Students and Cell Phones: Controversy in the Classroom

By **Katherine Shaw**

Cellular telephones have been widely available for over fifteen years, but schools and legislators haven't yet reached a clear decision on their appropriate use in schools. With cell phone use becoming more and more ubiquitous, particularly among high school students, and cell phones becoming more and more sophisticated, tempers run high when it comes to students, schools, and cell phones.

In the early to mid 1990s, many states passed laws banning students from bringing cell phones (and pagers) to school. At the time cell phones were expensive; the popular belief was that students who did own cell phones would use them to facilitate drug deals. This view changed as cell phones became more common, inexpensive, and popular. By the late 1990s several states had already repealed their ban on student cell phones in schools.

The tragedy at Columbine and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 brought further attention to the student cell phone debate. Many more states lifted bans on student cell phones after 9-11.

However, once state legislation was no longer the guideline, individual school boards had to make the difficult decision of whether or not to allow cell phones in the classroom. Teachers have been overwhelmingly in favor of cell phone bans, but parents are often equally adamant that their children be allowed to carry cell phones at school. And many teachers themselves acknowledge that they rely on their cell phones, particularly for making calls during planning periods, lunchtime, and before and after school; it seems only fair, they say, that students be allowed similar (if more limited) privileges.

Pros and Cons of Student Cell Phone Use

Proponents of student cell phone use point to the many benefits of cell phones. Cell phones, they say, are useful to both parents and students when scheduling after-school activities and changes in family plans (such as afternoon pick-up times). When parents are able to contact students on cell phones, office staff receive fewer calls from parents--calls that often require that messages either be carried to the classroom or relayed to teachers via in-class telephones.

In addition, cell phones can be lifesavers in an emergency, providing police with vital and timely information. Cell phones have another use in emergencies: by contacting parents directly, students help keep school phone lines open instead of jammed with calls from worried parents.

Some teachers also point out that cell phones have legitimate academic uses. Older students can conduct phone interviews during class time with teacher supervision, for instance. Also, many cell phones now have Internet capability, built-in calculators, and memories able to hold entire books. For schools with limited technologies available to students, cell phones mimic the computers that the classroom may lack.

Detractors say that drawbacks to student cell phones outweigh the benefits. The primary concern is that cell phones distract students. Even though most schools require that phones be turned off during school hours, such a rule is difficult to enforce; for instance, students who leave class for a bathroom break could use the phone while out of the room. Cell phones are now so small that students can use them surreptitiously in class as well, particularly text messaging and video games. Should a phone ring in class, the entire classroom is disrupted--and teachers report that many students will answer the call.

Cheating and inappropriate photos are also concerns associated with cell phones. As cell phones become more sophisticated and powerful, opportunities for cheating increase. Teachers have caught high school students taking pictures of tests to pass along to students in later classes, for instance, or accessing photos of textbook pages or notes during tests. Inappropriate photos taken in locker rooms and restrooms have also become a problem in some schools, which carries the potential for lawsuits; many school systems have banned camera phones while still allowing traditional cell phones.

In some areas, only the more privileged students own cell phones, leading to envy, additional socioeconomic stratification, and sometimes theft. Opponents of cell phone use in schools point out that it's unfair to allow well-off students to benefit from them and deny the same benefits to poorer students.

Limiting Student Use of Cell Phones

Many school boards have tried setting limits on cell phone use without banning cell phones completely. Requiring that phones be turned off during school hours, confiscating phones from students caught using them in class, and requiring that phones be set to voice mail only have all had limited success. Some teachers are so frustrated with cell phone interruptions that they collect the phones at the beginning of class and return them as students leave.

Takeaways

- Student cell phones can be lifesavers in an emergency.
- Cell phones ringing in the classroom are more disruptive than talking.
- Schools need to work out policies regarding student cell phones now.

With fears of lawsuits if students without cell phone access are caught in true emergency situations, some school systems have banned student cell phones from campuses but have supplied students with donated phones that only call emergency numbers. Other schools require that students turn phones in to teachers before tests; students caught with cell phones during testing are given automatic failing grades. Virtually all schools prohibit students from disrupting classrooms with ringtones, music, or sound effects from cell phones.

Short-Term Solutions

It's not clear when--or even if--the controversy regarding cell phones will be resolved. What is clear is that cell phones have become a permanent part of society. Some teachers argue that trying to ban student cell phones is as futile as former efforts to ban calculators from classrooms.

Still, schools need guidelines to govern inappropriate cell phone use. Teachers should post school and classroom policies regarding cell phones, and the class should discuss these policies at the beginning of the school year. Consequences for violating the policies should be substantial enough to make an impression.

The Future of Cell Phones in the Classroom

Cellular technology has improved drastically in the last few years. Even more drastic improvements and changes are just around the corner. Keeping up with technological advances is not easy, particularly when benefits and drawbacks may not be clear, but it is necessary. Well-thought-out cell phone policies enable schools to continue to reflect the society they serve.

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