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Cell phones increasingly a class act

After years of bans, many schools are allowing the devices to be used as academic tools

By Tara Malone and Lisa Black, Tribune reporters

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With the election weeks away, Fremd High School teacher Jason Spoor asked students in his government class, some of them first-time voters, to research local candidates vying for office.

They would have 15 minutes and one learning tool: their cell phone.

"If you are driving down the street and headed to vote, you don't have a computer at the touch of a hand. You have a cell phone," Spoor told his students last week in Palatine.

The lesson would have been impossible in the past. But with cell phones tucked in the book bags and pockets of three-fourths of today's teens, many high schools are ceding defeat in the battle to keep hand-held technology out of class and instead are inviting students to use their phones for learning.

Under a teacher's guidance, students might record themselves speaking a foreign language, text an answer to an online quiz or send themselves a homework reminder.

"It's one of those things — if you can't beat them, join them," said Jill Bullo, principal of Wheaton North High School, which plans to review its policy this year.

[The subject is new. The story, timeless. Reporter Tara Malone describes this as a classic collision of old vs. new in the classroom. Join the conversation online at Trib Nation>>](#)

As a first step, Wheaton administrators allowed students to use cell phones before and after classes last year, instead of requiring them to be powered off at all times.

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It is the latest twist in the debate about how schools react to the gear that students carry with them every day.

An estimated 83 percent of 17-year-olds across the country have cell phones today, according to a report released in April by the Pew Internet and American Life Project. That's up from 64 percent five years earlier. Among all high-school-age students, 75 percent have the devices.

Younger children were less likely to have cell phones, research showed. But even among 12-year-olds, 58 percent reported owning one in a report this year, compared with 18 percent in 2004.

Across all ages, nearly eight of every 10 students surveyed carried their phone with them to school every day, the study showed.

"Every year, it seems to trickle down one more grade level," said Liz Kolb, author of "Toys to Tools: Connecting Student Cell Phones to Education."

Confronted with such widespread use, many schools are redialing the rules.

Educators say they attempt to balance the opportunity to boost student learning with the concerns of classroom distractions or cheating.

"If I was teaching a class and all the students had their phones and someone was texting them or they used the device to communicate with other students about material on a test ... that's when it becomes problematic," said Greg Fantozzi, principal of Maple Park's Kaneland High School, where teens must stow their phones in lockers during the school day.

What's more, many phones come equipped with cameras and video, which make teachers and administrators "a little nervous about potentially bad things they can do," Bullo said. "If it were a simple phone, it would be different."

Still, York Community High School Principal Diana Smith plans to sit down this week with students to talk about the possibility of their using cell phones for academic purposes. The Elmhurst school currently requires that phones remain off during the day.

"What we know about kids now is they are used to having so many sources of technology available to them," Smith said. "I think we need to be in step with them on it."

In writing new cell phone rules, some schools offer training seminars to show teachers how to make good use of the gadgets.

Glenbrook North High School now provides sessions for teachers on "how can you leverage what they have in their pockets," technology coordinator Ryan Bretag said. They have similar primers for students. The north suburban district began allowing students to use cell phones at their teacher's discretion when they revamped the personal technology policy last year.

Glenbrook senior John Cram pulled out his phone during a lab experiment in his material science class this fall. He wanted to measure the porosity of a cupcake. Using the camera in his cell phone, Cram took a picture, emailed it to himself and then imported the image to Photoshop, where he could more precisely measure each air pocket to calculate the cupcake's

porosity.

"It was out of necessity, really. It was just a natural step," Cram said of turning to his cell phone.

Science teacher Nathan Unterman said he allows students like Cram to use their cell phones during a lab or class exercise just as they might use a Bunsen burner or microscope. He draws the line at tests, though.

With teens so attached to cell phones — "they are basically glued to their hands," one administrator remarked — several schools also make it a priority to teach students how to use the devices responsibly.

This semester at Deerfield High School, students for the first time are allowed to use their phones in hallways between classes in a pilot program that also focuses on telephone etiquette, said Dan Chamberlin one of the school's deans.

"They have to make sure it doesn't vibrate, ring or ping in the classroom," he said.

Students will be disciplined if they arrive late to class because of phone conversations, if they use them to cheat or if they act inappropriately, such as swearing or talking loudly. Last year, when phones were banned, students would leave class to use their phone in the bathroom — "the place you wouldn't want them to use their cell phone," Chamberlin said.

Administrators will review how often students are disciplined, how often they are tardy to class and whether cheating occurs with phones before deciding whether to make the policy permanent.

This year, Township High School District 211 rewrote its policy that prohibited cell phone use during the school day after "literally thousands" of students landed in the dean's office for misusing them. The northwest suburban district — which includes Fremd High School — now allows students to use them in designated areas like the cafeteria and front foyer as well as in classrooms under a teacher's guidance.

Just two months into the school year, 76 students have been referred to the dean's office for cell phone misuse across the district's five high schools. By this time last year, 202 violations had occurred, said Daniel Cates, assistant superintendent for administrative services.

On a recent Wednesday, Fremd students huddled in groups to research candidates for state and federal office, their thumbs dancing across the palm-size screens. Of the 31 students in class, only one did not have a cell phone. Others had two.

"Double productivity," senior Lucas Lassila quipped, holding a cell phone in each hand.

For students who forget their phones or don't have one, Spoor makes phone-related assignments group activities. Some educators said they keep a cell phone or iPad to loan students for classroom use.

Spoor said he asks students for their e-mail address and cell phone number at the start of the school year. Spoor — who asked the teens for pointers when he first bought an iPhone — said he often texts a reminder about big assignments and invites students to text or e-mail him in return.

"Look, this is just a part of who we are now," Spoor said of the personal technology. "It's a tidal wave."

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