

More Schools Use Cellphones as Learning Tools

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At a school district outside Chicago, students participated in a French class by using cellphones to call classmates and speak with them in French.

And when school starts this fall at Mason High School near Cincinnati, students like Mrudu Datla will pack iPads and iPhones in their backpacks.

"(Using technology in everyday life is) not that new to us because we grew up with technology," Datla, a sophomore, said.

Although schools have traditionally banned or limited cellphones in the classroom, 73% of Advanced Placement and National Writing Project teachers said their students use phones in the classroom or to complete assignments, according to a Pew Research Center study released in February.

"Teachers are starting to take advantage of the opportunities of cellphones in the classroom," said George Fornero, superintendent of Township High School District 113, located outside Chicago, whose school system has begun allowing its students use cellphones.

Dan Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, said this trend first emerged after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

"The issue of security and red alerts on terrorism threats became an issue, and school systems began to relax the prohibition on cellphones in schools," he said.

Though many of these changing policies banned cellphone use except in emergencies, teachers are lifting the bans and incorporating phones into their curriculum.

Natalie Milman, a George Washington University education technology professor, said that although security was one factor, others were involved.

"As a parent, I can see parents pushing for it when you think of the shootings that happen," she said. "However, with youth, (having a phone) is a very natural part of their ecosystem. It doesn't make sense to close that opportunity for them when they go to school."

She said parents and teachers are realizing educational value of mobile phones, as new features have made these devices relevant to education. "Most people are now coming to school with a computer in their pocket," Domenech said.

During the past few years, some schools, such as Mason High, have implemented "bring your own tech" programs, allowing students to use their devices for schoolwork.

With mobile apps and the Internet at their fingertips, teachers and students are now using phones as clickers to answer questions, providing feedback on student progress, and also to document labs, collaborate on group projects and capture teachers' notes, Milman said.

However, mobile devices have also created concerns.

"(Mobile devices) promote a certain kind of learning ... it's limited," Milman said. "It can be overused and used in ways that aren't educationally meaningful." For this reason, she said, it's important teachers to receive proper training.

Their use has also created worries about cheating, visiting inappropriate websites, sexting or overuse. Policies banning phones were in place to counter these problems, but Fornero said no-tolerance policies were difficult to enforce and distracted administrators from tackling larger issues.

"The kids taught us a lesson: They're still going to bring their phones anyway, so let's allow them to use them in a constructive way," he said.

Bringing cellphones into the classroom raises questions about students who don't own personal devices and schools without necessary infrastructure. Milman said a lot of inequities exist, favoring more affluent, suburban communities.

But Domenech said during his visits to schools around the country — even at schools in poorer areas — he saw that most students owned a mobile device. So far, BYOT programs have been schools' temporary solution, with most students owning mobile devices, to circumvent the digital divide.

Funding has been available for educational training, Milman said, but money for the necessary infrastructure — Wi-Fi access and technical support — has been harder to come by. Fornero said his school system received only local funding for improving its infrastructure.

However, according to Richard Culatta, director of the U.S. Dept. of Education's Office of Educational Technology, the federal government is looking to close that large divide. About 80% of schools in the country don't have the infrastructure to support digital learning, according to government data.

"That's hugely problematic as we look at engaging with fantastic digital resources for learning that are available," he said.

President Obama announced the ConnectED initiative on June 6, which aims to connect 99% of schools around the country to broadband Internet, and the Department of Education is working to prepare teachers to use technology.

While Domenech estimated only 25% of schools now allow phones, he expects that to increase significantly over the next few years. Milman said to address schools' concerns, administrators should establish clear policies with parents and students and consequences for violating them.

"There are schools around the world who are already using these," Milman said. "I think the schools that are not quite there should look to those schools and learn from them."