

Schools Call on Cell Phones as Teaching Tools

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When one school district in the greater Washington D.C. area decided to get more relaxed about cell phones, it apparently went all the way – not only allowing their use in the hallways and cafeteria, but the classroom too. As Prince George’s County Public Schools Tweeted to students about this radical policy reversal over the summer, the response was as expected. “They were ecstatic,” said William Blake, assistant principal at Henry A. Wise, Jr. High School in Upper Marlboro, Md. As of the first day of school Aug. 26, the new measure replaced an all-out ban on cell phone use in the district’s 23 high schools.

But using smartphones in the classroom doesn’t mean students will be able text, surf, talk or access media, as most teens do for much of their waking hours. Instead, the district is joining a growing wave of schools using wireless devices -- in particular, phones -- as teaching and learning tools.

“It’s a shift, when you think about traditional teaching, where the teacher is at the blackboard and the students are just in listening mode. This is a policy that allows you to get to students where they are,” Blake told Foxnews.com in a recent interview.

And where they are is online, and networking, and messaging. Most of them have phones. According to a survey conducted by Bethesda, Md.-based market research specialist Grunwald Associates, by the time they enter high school, 51 percent of all students carry a smartphone to school with them every day – and the number is likely higher than that. A Pew research survey in 2013 found that some 78 percent of teens had cell phones -- 47 percent of those smartphones with access to the Internet and capacity to download and engage a variety of multimedia and messaging programs. And by now, that number is higher too.

So in districts where, say, there are not enough tablets in the classroom for every student to access wireless applications – why not use their phones?

Teachers are now using applications on smartphones that allow students to work on collaborative projects, like Edmodo, poll their students with programs like Poll Everywhere, or collect, share, and disseminate materials and photos with Dropbox. There are apps for reminders and social science and history resources. In Prince George’s County, high school teachers are incorporating Socrative 2.0, which allows teachers to gauge student response in real time with activities, games, and quizzes related to class material – all through phones.

“Most of our teachers are becoming more excited about social media and website applications,” said Blake. “They are asking for professional development and assistance; we are starting to frame our professional development around using cell phones in the classroom for instruction.”

But questions, of course, remain. Allowing teens to bring their phones to school – and in the case of this one Maryland district, use them for leisure at certain times of the day – could open the door to inappropriate use and distraction. Parents that put limits on cell phone use may feel usurped by the school in this regard.

To add to that - what if not all kids have phones? Does this raise a question of inequality and mounting pressure for parents to buy one? Proponents counter that by saying kids typically share their phones during group

projects, and that parents are generally supportive when they realize the devices are being used for a positive academic experience.

But how much are they really learning?

“I’d be very curious about how they are tracking the kids using their phones ... and how do they know it’s working?” asked Kirsten Cullen Sharma, a clinical child psychologist with the Child Learning Center at New York University.

While she agrees there is “a lot of potential” with engaging smartphones in the classroom, including stimulation for learning, there are warnings to heed, too.

For starters, the movement away from interpersonal interaction only increases as school administrators give in to the “if you can’t beat ‘em join ‘em” mentality, and rely more on devices where students are focusing more on screens than the individuals standing right in front of them. In fact, they are looking at screens more every day, in and out of the classroom.

“Kids really need opportunities to socialize interpersonally. That’s been something people have been wanting to talk about -- how screens impact social development.”

While proponents might say that using apps in the classroom helps create a team environment that allows kids to network with each other around school work, even after hours, there’s a growing body of evidence showing that when allowed to use wireless devices in the classroom, students are easily distracted by their ability to message and access other media apps. By the time they get to college, for example, where mobile devices are often allowed, students freely admit to texting in class.

In a 2011 study by the University of New Hampshire’s Whittemore School of Business and Economics, 65 percent of students polled admitted to sending 1 to 10 text messages in a typical class session. In a study by St. John’s University of law school students during a typical class period, more than half were using their laptops for non-class purposes for more than half of the time they were there, “raising serious questions about how much they learned from class.”

Some may question how high schoolers would be able to overcome the same temptation. “I can think of many ways students would misuse their cell phones in the classroom,” said Jessica Dumont, a public school teacher in Connecticut, who otherwise “welcomes technology in my classroom.”

“I can’t think of how you can monitor the (smartphone) use to keep a safe environment conducive to real learning,” she added.

School teacher Todd Hougas agrees that the broadening utility of phones is both a blessing and a curse, he told Foxnews.com

“Seriously, how many of us have been across the dinner table from a teenager who blatantly ignores dinner companions as their thumbs move with blinding speed as they text with multiple friends concurrently,” he said. “This is just one of the obvious obstacles that any instructor would have to hurdle when integrating smart cells into their lessons.”

That said, Hougas added, he is not averse to the technology wave, if done right. “I believe cell phones are just one more tool that a good instructor can add to their tool box.”