

How to Deal with Cell Phones in School

by Nancy Barile, Award-Winning Teacher, M.A.Ed.

Here's the good, the bad and the solution for cell phone usage in the classroom. There's no bigger classroom distraction than a student using a phone. Teachers struggle with cell phones in school on a daily basis. On one hand, teachers want students to learn how to manage their phones on their own. On the other hand, the distraction phones create can be detrimental to both students and teachers. Power struggles ensue, wasting valuable class time. Because of this, teachers need practical and enforceable strategies for dealing with phones in their classrooms.

The Good

Most schools allow students to have cell phones for safety, which seems unlikely to change as long as school shootings remain a common occurrence. But phones aren't just tools for emergencies; they can also be valuable tools in the classroom. If there's a word or concept a student doesn't understand, the student can find information instantly. Phones have calculators as well as spelling and grammar checks. Most importantly, phones allow students to communicate with one another and with experts in fields of interest. The question remains, however, whether the use of cell phones in school outweighs the distraction they cause.

The Bad

Most teachers will tell you that cell phones adversely affect learning in the classroom, and research backs that up. Common Sense Media, a nonprofit organization that promotes safe technology and media for children, reported that "50 percent of teens 'feel addicted' to mobile devices." The report also stated that 78 percent of teens check their devices at least hourly, and 72 percent of teens feel the need to immediately respond to texts, messages on social networks, and other notifications. The paper also found that multitasking—for example, toggling between multiple screens or between screens and people—impairs a child's ability to learn and work effectively.

Students tend to be highly susceptible to the kinds of distractions smartphones provide. My colleague caught a student watching *Grey's Anatomy* during her class. Other students tweet, text, and listen to music when they should be on task. According to Jeffrey Kuznekoff, who conducted a study on phone use by college students, "You're putting yourself at a disadvantage when you are actively engaged with your mobile device in class and not engaged in what's going on." Saraswathi Bellur, a researcher at the University of Connecticut, found that multitasking in class "is likely to harm academic performance."

The Solution

Some of my fellow teachers and administrators say that students need to learn how to effectively manage their phones in the classroom on their own. Personally, I think my students need a little help with this. This year, I implemented a phone storage system in my classroom. Students were required to place their devices in a pocket with their name on it when they entered the classroom. I made this procedure an official classroom policy, and I explained my rationale to students in a frank discussion.

Parents and students both had to sign off on the policy. Storing phones was a game-changer in my classroom. Students didn't balk at it, and they actually seemed to appreciate the time away from their phones. They realized that they could be without their phones for a whole class period without the world ending.

Researcher Jesper Aagaard suggests that in order to pay more attention in class—or even outside of school—students should try to obstruct their habits by turning phones off or putting them in airplane mode to keep from constantly checking them. If you share this advice with students, it may help them to see the issue and work to change it. When I explained the research on the negative impact of cell phones in schools to my students, they more readily agreed to store them during class.

The use of cell phones in schools is not going to go away, so learning to effectively manage and handle them is a valuable skill for students to learn. I became more in tune with my own cell phone addiction through this process. Now, along with my

students, I'm working to enjoy my life without my phone a bit more.

CELL PHONES IN THE CLASSROOM: LEARNING TOOL OR DISTRACTION

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These days, more and more students are bringing cell phones to class. Even elementary school-aged students have cell phones in their pockets and backpacks. However, the news of Ontario's decision to ban cell phones in classrooms opens again the debate about whether or not students should have cellphones in school. It also brings up the question of whether it's possible for technology to exist in the classroom as a learning tool—rather than simply a distraction.

ONTARIO'S CLASSROOM CELL PHONE BAN

Starting in September 2019, cell phones will be banned in Ontario classrooms during instructional time. The new ban means elementary and secondary school students won't be able to use their cellphones in the classroom unless it is for educational purposes, medical reasons, or as a support for students with special needs. How the ban is enforced will be up to individual boards and schools. By banning cellphones, Ontario's Education Ministry hopes to remove distractions so students can focus on acquiring foundational learning skills they need, including reading, writing and math. The decision and renewed debate has many teachers and parents left wondering: can cell phones ever really benefit students in class, or are they best left tucked away?

CELL PHONE USE IN THE CLASSROOM

Students check their phones in the classroom an average of more than 11 times a day. That can add up to a lot of time spent distracted from schoolwork. And when students are distracted, it's a recipe for extra stress, frustration, and catch-up time for everyone. With students spending up to 20% of their in-class time texting, emailing, and checking social media, it's no wonder the debate about cell phones in the classroom is alive and well.

HOW CELL PHONES CAN BE USED EFFECTIVELY IN THE CLASSROOM

If properly managed, cell phones can be used as tools to help children learn in the classroom. The following are some of the pros of allowing cell phones in school:

1. Using educational learning apps: Cell phones give students access to tools and apps that can help them complete and stay on top of their class work. These tools can also teach students to develop better study habits, like time management and organization skills.
2. Incorporating digital platforms into lessons: Using social media can keep students interested in class and encourage them to participate in the discussion. Some teachers create twitter hashtags or message boards students can use during class discussions to share thoughts and ideas. This can be especially helpful for students who might not be comfortable speaking in class.
3. Supplementing lessons with digital materials: Teachers can take advantage of cell phones by providing students with resources to find more information about a topic. This can include videos, news stories, online discussion groups, and more. Allowing students to access these resources in class can help encourage participation and discussions.
4. Providing easy access to more information: Cell phones can give students access to more information, letting them research more about a topic while having class discussions. This is especially true for current events that have not yet been covered in school textbooks.

THE DRAWBACKS OF ALLOWING CELL PHONES IN CLASSROOMS

While cell phones can be used as learning tools, it is a challenge to make sure students are using them for school-related tasks. A cell phone can easily turn from "classroom learning tool" into "classroom disruption".

Cons of allowing cell phones in school include:

Sample Teacher Activity

1. Distractions and interruptions: When students use their cell phones to check social media and text their friends in class, it leads to distractions for those students as well as for their peers. This can cause disruptions in class, particularly if the teacher is constantly telling students to turn their devices off.
2. Cyberbullying: Cell phones can also lead to increased problems with bullying on the schoolground. Cyberbullying can be harder to see than other forms of bullying, making it difficult for teachers to identify and stop when it is happening.
3. Cheating: Cell phones can be a helpful learning tool in class. But they can also be used by students to access information while taking a test, leading to cheating. Even if a student isn't caught, this can lead to him or her having a poor understanding of the material in the future and is unfair to students who studied hard to do well.
4. Disconnection from face-to-face activities: While cell phones can help encourage participation by offering different channels, this can also lead to less in-person discussion and fewer learning opportunities. Learning to work together with others is an important part of students' education and can be lost with too much dependence on cell phones and other digital technology.

THE BOTTOM LINE: SHOULD STUDENTS HAVE CELL PHONES IN SCHOOL?

There's no easy answer: there are both pros and cons to students having cell phones in school. Although they can be used as a learning tool in the classroom, this only works as long as students use them effectively. This means for teachers who decide to use cell phones (or any other digital device) as part of their lessons, it's important to set ground rules and keep a close eye on how they are being used.

(Before writing the response, make sure to read both passages of text.)

The passages provide information about cell phones at school. Write an essay analyzing if cell phones are good or bad for students in school. Use evidence from both passages to support your essay.