

Why Schools Should Stop Banning Cell Phones, and Use Them for Learning



By [Audrey Watters](#)

Last week, a [study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project](#) found that cell phones have become “near ubiquitous”: 83 percent of American adults own one. Over half of all adult mobile phone owners had used their phones at least once to get information they needed right away. And more than a quarter said that they had experienced a situation in the previous month in which they had trouble doing something because they did not have their phones at hand.

The findings of this Pew research — the reliance of adults on their cell phones — stands in sharp contrast to the policies of many schools, where cell phones remained banned or restricted. Students likely have these same needs as adults: to get online and find information they need right away. But often students are banned from using their cell phones in schools, something that students themselves list as [one of the greatest obstacles](#) they face in using technology in the classroom.

For many schools, these are formal rules, written in school policy or in student handbooks. But as phones become more like extended appendages in everyone’s lives, schools are rethinking their policies. [MindShift](#) [asked](#) teachers how or whether these rules were changing and received some interesting feedback.

SHIFTING POLICIES

Educator Nilda Vargas reported that students can use cell phones to access their online books, while teacher Shekema Silveri replied that although she requires cell phone usage in her class, the school policy against it hasn’t changed. “Most teachers are still afraid of cell phones in the classroom because they know little about how to use them as a tool for learning,” she wrote on [MindShift’s Facebook page](#).

High school teacher Kim Ibarra said that her school has gone from a “no cell phones in school at all — not even in the hallways or at lunch” policy about four to five years ago, to “cell phone usage in the classroom *if* the teacher has asked for permission ahead of time with an explanation of what will be done and

why it is necessary” about two years ago, to “cell phones can be used in the classroom if the teacher has students using them for educational purposes” last year, and back to the more prohibitive “students may use cell phones in the school only at lunch in a specified area” — the policy for this upcoming year.

Many teachers noted that written policies don’t always mirror informal ones, and that there’s a groundswell of those who recognize that cell phones need not be seen solely as distractions or as ways for students to cheat. More educators are realizing that cell phones can enhance learning.

High school teacher Jamie Williams describes his school’s policy regarding cell phones:

My high school’s policy is cell phones should be off and out of sight. If seen, they are taken and the student is written up. Our handbook says students may use phones with teacher permission. I’m a huge tech nerd and make my students use their phones throughout my class. My biggest gripe is that most students have these great smartphones and barely use the device to a 10th of their potential.

Williams teaches art and technology classes. For his art class, he asks students to use photos they’ve taken on their cell phones as the basis for paintings they’ll create. During tests, Williams allows his students to use both their handwritten notes and those they’ve saved on their phones. In his video class, most students have phones capable of shooting in high definition, and use them for projects. This year, he’s hoping to make a large-scale mosaic of student life created solely from cell phone images.

Williams notes that it’s difficult for students to have to go from one class where they’re expected to make full use of their phones to another in which the phone has to be off and hidden. He also points to the irony that in a lot of these latter classes, students are “asked to do research on a desktop computer that absolutely has less processing power than the computer in their pocket.”

And that’s probably one of the most important observations: Many students already carry a powerful computing device in their pockets, while oftentimes much of the technology hardware at schools is woefully out-of-date. By allowing cell phones, schools may find they have equipped students with better devices — that can work as calculators, cameras, videocameras, books and notebooks, for example — at no or low cost to the school.

BRING YOUR OWN DEVICE

Cell phones are, of course, just one piece of a BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) program, and this [wiki](#) created by Manitoba educator Darren Kuropatwa gives some tips on how

to prepare for, and take advantage of, cell phones and other devices brought into the classroom from home.

But the biggest obstacle remains the attitudes of those educators and administrators who still frown on the devices and fear their usage, who confiscate them from students, and who see them as a distraction rather than a powerful tool for learning. It's clear that schools must come up with an acceptable use policy for cell phones in the classroom. But as more adults indicate that they're "lost" without their cell phones, it hardly seems acceptable that we ban students' access to the devices.

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