

More schools are allowing phones, so teachers use them for education

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Cellphones are still absent from most U.S. schools, with many teachers seeing them as distractions. However, new data show they may be gaining acceptance. Photo by: Hero Images/Getty Images

BUFFALO, New York — Cellphones are still absent from most U.S. schools. Still, new data shows them steadily gaining approval. More school leaders are bowing to parents' wishes to keep tabs on their kids. Teachers are also finding ways to work them into lessons.

About 6 out of 10 public schools did not allow cellphone use in 2015-2016. This was down from more than 9 out of 10 in 2009-2010. This is according to data from a survey by the National Center for Education Statistics. Among just high schools, the shift over the same period was especially surprising. Schools that did not allow cellphones dropped from 8 out of 10 schools to around 3 out of 10 schools.

The nation's largest school system, New York City, is among those that have abandoned rules against cellphones. Some students had been paying \$1 a day to store phones in specialty trucks. These are parked nearby the schools. This was a promise Mayor Bill de Blasio made when he was running for office in 2015. He said this would help parents stay in touch with children.

The survey numbers released in late March do not surprise Liz Kolb. She is an education technologies professor at the University of Michigan. Kolb has studied cellphones in schools since 2004. At that time, phones were off-limits in almost every district, she said. That began to change as more students began carrying them. Students as young as age 10 use cellphones.

Parents Win The Fight For Phones

"We've seen a lot of schools say, 'Well, I'm not going to fight the tidal wave of parents coming at me that are upset,'" Kolb said.

Teachers also are taking advantage of the technology, Kolb said. She added that many districts are spending millions of dollars on technology. They buy tablets or laptop computers for the students to use. These have countless academic applications and programs teachers can use.

"There are teachers who have found that having the cellphone is like having a computer in your pocket, so it's a way to have another learning tool," she said. She also pointed out this doesn't cost the district more money.

Students might download a dictionary application for English. They might use Google Translate in foreign language classes. Kahoot! connects to the classroom's smart board. This app allows students to compete in educational trivia.

Phones In School Are Too Distracting

Still, some school districts are moving in the opposite direction. The school board in Mansfield City, Ohio, last year tightened its rules. It now demands the devices be turned off and out of sight in classrooms. This is unless the teacher says otherwise.

"The cellphones were a distraction," Superintendent Brian Garverick said. "And it's not just in our district, it's everywhere — you see an increase in cheating, you see an increase in texting during class."

In Connecticut, Seymour High School Principal Jim Freund said teachers tried to limit cellphone to lunch and other noninstructional times. However, students were still playing games or on social media when they shouldn't have been.

Freund said students didn't have the self-control to keep themselves off their phones.

More Work Gets Done Without Phones

The school created the rule against phones in December. Since then, students have reported getting more work done in study hall, Freund said. He also said the cafeteria has grown louder. Students are talking to one another more instead of being on their phones.

"I will never go back — ever — to allowing the use of cellphones," Freund said.

In schools that have begun allowing cellphones, principals and experts say rules can be very different.

Kolb has written the book "Toys to Tools: Connecting Student Cell Phones to Education." She said districts are struggling with creating the best rules. Kolb said she has seen cellphones create tension between teachers who allow them in class and those who do not. They want cellphones to

help students communicate. They want them to help students learn. They do not want cellphones to be a distraction.