

Student Cell Phones Should Be Prohibited in K-12 Schools

By Jon Akers, Kentucky Center for School Safety

Let me begin by saying that I am acutely aware that my position on the issue of allowing students to have cell phones in their possession at school, during school hours, is a minority opinion, at least as far as the general public is concerned. Nevertheless, this is a long-held opinion for me, and I still stand firmly by it. In fact, as a veteran educator of thirty years (twenty-five of which I served as a school principal) and, as the current state director of school safety, I am only firmer in my opinion after the rapid increase of add-on features to cell phones in recent years, i.e. cameras, Internet, text-messaging, games, music, ability to record, etc. In short, the technological capability of the cell phone has changed drastically since its inception. My opinion has not. I should also hasten to add, based on the countless number of principals with whom I have had the opportunity to interview in my current role, my opinion is one that is shared by the vast majority of school principals in the state. As a matter of fact, I have yet to speak to any school principal that is actually in favor of allowing students to have cell phones in their possession in school during the school day. Thus, the central question becomes, “Why are most school principals in Kentucky against students having cell phones at school while most parents, students and others in favor of it?” What is at the crux of this debate and why have cell phones become so prevalent in our schools? I will attempt to answer those questions based on my school experiences and some research that I have done on the topic.

First, in my research regarding student cell phone use, I have learned that there have been hundreds of policies developed in states around the country attempting to control students having cell phones at school. However, to date, forty-nine states have either abandoned or deferred the decision over to their local school districts (an action I consider to be “passing the buck” rather than to risk making what would most likely be an unpopular decision). When

handed this decision to make, many districts and/or schools initially developed strict policies to control the problem; however, after being met with strong resistance, many revised those policies to be more lenient, largely surrendering to student and parental pressures.

As one quickly discerns when looking into this issue, few have chosen to take on the considerable challenge of controlling student cell phones in schools.

A prime example can be seen in our own state where many schools are struggling with the issue of students being allowed to have cell phones in school. KRS 158.165 basically leaves the issue of “use of personal telecommunication devices by a public school student” to each school district. As a result, there are widely varied specifics and technicalities in the school policies across the state. Some distinguish between students “possessing” and “using” cell phones. Many mention “regular school hours”, “regular school days” and “instructional time”, but fail to define the terms. A few districts allow each school to set the rules for cell phone use and, of the one-hundred sixty Boards with cell phone policies, nine specifically ban the use of cell phones on school property and eight mention allowing students who are volunteer firefighters to possess cell phones while at school. Clearly, there is very little consensus on what to do about this problem, which simply serves to fuel the unending debate.

Secondly, principals have expressed extreme frustration to me regarding the enforcement of Board policies that attempt to address cell phone usage in the schools. I have been told that many parents and students blatantly violate their Board of Education policies concerning this issue. Some principals say that despite the policy being well written and published in several documents (Board of Education Policy, Student Code of Conduct and Student Handbooks) many students and parents simply do not believe it applies to them...therefore,

the principal oftentimes must contend with the wrath of both the students and parents when enforcing these policies.

Those policies, generally, are either that:

- 1) Students are prohibited from having phones in their possession during the school day; or;
- 2.) Students are permitted to possess cell phones during the school day, but the cell phone must remain in the “off” position, a policy most principals say is ineffective.

In most cases, when a student breaks the policy, the cell phone is confiscated and returned at the end of the week to the child’s parent; a second offense usually results in the phone being kept longer. Even more frustrating to principals is that these policies are often compromised when superintendents (or their designees) are pressured by parents/guardians to make an exception for a child’s case when he/she has violated the cell phone policy. As many principals have told me (and I, too, have experienced) when one exception to a given rule is made, others perceive and express that they are entitled to the same special treatment. Many times when this occurs, such policies are seriously weakened.

But, still the question remains, “Why, did many school districts initially respond to the advent of cell phones with such strict policies?” Well, I can only reply based on my experience as a principal and from what I have been told repeatedly by numerous other principals; that is that when students have cell phones in their possession during school hours, many disciplinary problems stem from their abuse. Whether they are being stolen by other students who may not have a cell phone or just want a fancier one, used to phone in bomb threats to the school or to harass another student, the valuable time of educators is frequently being used to address cell phone abuse by some students. Exacerbating the problem are the features that competitive cell phone companies are quickly adding to their respective phone services mentioned above. Even at best, they are a distraction to students in a learning environment. Indeed, if some will debate whether cell phone use should be allowed for someone while driving a motor vehicle, then could not the argument be made also that it is more difficult to compute calculus while listening to an iPod, something many students are allowed (or either sneak

to do while in class working on assignments?

12 Problems Caused by Students with Phones

1. Bullying or harassing other students with unwanted voice or text messages
2. Text-messaging or phoning friends during class time
3. Cheating (i.e., recording, sending or receiving test questions and/or answers)
4. Secretly taking inappropriate photographs of other students and distributing them
5. Photographing exam answers to use during the exam
6. Phoning in bomb threats to the school, which cannot always be traced
7. Phoning others outside the school to meet at the school during or after school to witness or participate in a fight or confrontation
8. Experts have stated that cell phones could be used to detonate a bomb if it is near or on the school’s campus.
9. In a true emergency, massive cell phone usage can overload cellular phone systems, crippling critical official and emergency communication.
10. In larger school districts, gang members have, reportedly, used cell phones to communicate with one another during school hours.
11. School administrators and law enforcement officials have learned that drug deals have been made via cell phones during school hours.
12. During school emergencies, massive numbers of students have called their parents via cell phones and, as a result, those parents have bombarded the campuses, thwarting emergency protocols and procedures.

Thirdly, one of the primary reasons for the wide prevalence of cell phones in our schools is that parents are demanding to have immediate access to their children while they are at school. Parents are quick to single out school shootings (such as at Columbine) and the terrorist attack on September 11th as compelling reasons to have their children constantly accessible to them via cell phone. Undoubtedly, their feelings in this regard are understandable, but the fact is, thankfully, that these occurrences are extremely rare and the possibility of such a tragedy occurring at

any school is miniscule; the likelihood of a student being able to use a cell phone during such a time, similarly small. Moreover, if to communicate with their parents was the only reason that students used cell phones during school, I and other principals would not advocate prohibiting them from having them. Unfortunately, I believe this is far from the case.

Finally, the city schools in New York, Philadelphia, Detroit and New Orleans, along with the Milwaukee Public Schools have banned cell phones due to many of the reasons I have cited above. The abuse of these communicative devices by many students has simply ruined their intended use. (And...don't even get me started on the Internet issues, i.e., myspace.com, facebook.com, etc!)

So, what's the answer? Well, I tend to be rather conservative when I'm asked to provide a viable solution to this problem. I say, "Leave the cell phones at home and bring back pay phones!" We seem to have survived without cell phones before their invention. Furthermore, I feel that the current barrage of illegal and immoral acts committed daily (on cell phones by students during the school day) far outweigh the parent's right to talk (and in some cases, interfere) with their children during a school emergency.

In conclusion, school officials can rest assured that they have at least one ally in the state that will support their position if called upon to do so. I have carefully weighed the pros and cons on the issue, and I believe that if we want academic achievement to abound in our schools, we must first make the learning environment as safe and emotionally stable for all students as we can. Students having cell phones during the school day in school does not work toward that end.

As a seasoned school administrator and the executive director of the Kentucky Center for School Safety, I rest (what I firmly believe to be) my strong case.



Suggestions for Cell Phone “Situations”

1. Leave things as is. (Definition of some for “insanity”: Doing the same thing repeatedly but expecting different results.)
2. Attempt to work with parent groups, chronicling and explaining all of the negative issues associated with cell phones, both academically and behaviorally. (Incidentally, there are still some parents today who refuse to allow their children to take a cell phone to school. Perhaps, these parents could discuss with parent groups how their children manage to survive during the school day without these devices.)
3. Have school officials to review their disciplinary data to determine the extent to which this problem detracts from instructional time. Then, if the case can be made that these devices truly create a significant academic or behavioral distraction, share it with the local Board and request that they revisit their current policy to determine if it can be strengthened.
4. Create specific policies that address the more abused features of the cell phones, such as the camera, etc. (Cite the problem of the inappropriate abuse of them in locker rooms and restrooms.)

Finally, what have I hoped to accomplish by sharing my opinion, which just happens to be the opinion of many of my fellow-principal colleagues? At the very least, my hope is that:

- it will stimulate discussion between all school leaders and their parent base to look, realistically, at the serious, negative implications inherent in student possession of cell phones in schools during the school day;
- school leaders will weigh these issues to determine the parent willingness to request that these policies be tightened; and,
- that more school districts will stand up and take the unpopular position of prohibiting their students from having cell phones during the school day, except during extreme situations, such as when it has been determined that a student has a gravely ill loved one.