Should cell phones be banned in school?

YES
As a former New York City public-school teacher, I can tell you that cell phones don't belong in the classroom. A student with a cell phone is an uninterested student, one with a short attention span who cares more about socializing than education.

When I was teaching, all too often I turned around from writing something on the blackboard to find students text-messaging or otherwise playing with their phones.

Come the end of the term, a handful of students would fail the class and far too many would drop out of school. The onus for failure should be placed on distractions in the classroom, specifically cell phones.

Parents think of cell phones as a connection to their children in an emergency. But I wonder what the last situation was that genuinely called for an immediate phone call to a child. In most cases, contacting the hospital or the police would seem more urgent. And parents can always call the school's main office to reach their children.

Cell phones are status symbols for teenagers because when their phone rings while the teacher is talking, everyone laughs. Because playing video games on their cell makes them look cool. Because text messaging their friend in the next room is more fun than learning about topic sentences. So is listening to the new Three 6 Mafia song they just downloaded onto their cell.

And saying students can store their phones in the locker is a joke. If they have cell phones, they're going to bring them to class.

—Jesse Scaccia
Former English teacher, Franklin D. Roosevelt High School, Brooklyn, N.Y.

NO
Schools make rules to facilitate a quality education in a respectful and safe environment. Cell phones are a distraction in classrooms and have no place there. I support rules banning their use—by students and staff—in the classroom. But cell phones should not be banned from students' possession entirely, because that is, in effect, not allowing students to have cell phones while traveling to and from school.

My children's time before school and after should not be under the school's control. Making sure my children have cell phones and can contact me during those times is my right as a parent.

It's not just about safety or reassurance. Yes, I want my kids to call each morning when they arrive at school and each afternoon when they leave, and there are so few pay phones anymore on which to do that. But my children's lives are also enriched by the freedom to travel to a variety of extracurricular activities or social engagements without an adult chaperone. That is only possible because an adult is just a phone call away.

If my children are not allowed to keep their cell phones during the school day—off and in their backpacks or lockers—the school system is governing my parenting and my children's behavior during non-school time. The school has no such right. Besides, teachers should be teaching, not spending precious time tagging and bagging confiscated electronics. I trust my kids to make responsible and respectful choices, and I trust their teachers and administrators to do the same.

—Elizabeth Lorris Ritter
Parent, Bronx High School of Science, New York

Citation:
Lift the Cell Phone Ban By David Rapp

Cell phones could become the next big learning tool in the classroom. So why have schools been so slow to embrace them?

Without a doubt, cell phones can cause serious disruption in the classroom. From urgent text messages flying across the room to lessons interrupted by rap-song ringtones, these gadgets are responsible for nationwide frustration among educators. And, in extreme cases, students have used their cell phones to cheat on tests and harass other students, even during class time. While such disturbances are certainly a nuisance in school, not all teachers see cell phones as the enemy. In fact, for some, they’ve become a teaching solution.

Cell Phone Solution

between the alarms, calls, and text-messaging, it’s easy to see why some classrooms have implemented a no-cell phone policy. But educators know that with students, cell phone use is inevitable, so why not use the devices for good? Many schools in Asia and the United Kingdom—where they’ve been using high-speed 3G, or third-generation, cellular networks years longer than the United States—have already turned cell phones into teaching tools. Recently, several school districts in North America have done the same. At the Craik School in Saskatchewan, Canada, such an experiment turned into an integral part of the curriculum.

Craik’s program started with a discussion in the staff room between the school’s principal, Gord Taylor, and teacher Carla Dolman. Many of the children had received cell phones for Christmas, and the phones had become a distraction. “So we tossed out the idea of rather than looking at them as an evil thing,” says Taylor, “that we look at them as a tool for learning.” They realized that the text message and alarm functions would be useful for reminding students of homework assignments and tests, for example. They decided to run a pilot project with eighth and ninth graders.

Testing the Waters

Initially, only about 40 percent of the class had cell phones, but kids who had them were willing to share. The text message function was mainly used at first, but as Dolman became more familiar with the myriad functions, it became clear that these gadgets had a lot more classroom potential. Video and sound recording came into play, and the phones’ Bluetooth networking capabilities allowed for easy information sharing. Dolman found they worked perfectly for her classes’ “lit circles,” in which the students divide into smaller groups to discuss different aspects of a particular book. Previously, she found it difficult to monitor each of the different groups simultaneously. But kids who had video functions on their phones could record their discussions then Bluetooth it to Dolman’s phone, and she could watch each individual discussion, without missing a moment. Dolman says such problems like class disruption were minimal. “It’s a stereotype of teenagers—that you can’t trust them with a cell phone. Our experience was that if you give them the opportunity to use them, and you give them guidelines to go with that use, you won’t have problems.”

Principal Taylor agrees. “The one thing we really stressed with the kids was the whole idea of appropriate use,” he says. “They make darn sure that the volume is turned off. A lot of adults need to learn that.”

As for the kids, they loved using the phones for class work, but parents in the district have had mixed reactions, says Taylor. “Some thought we were crazy, and were very strongly opposed to it, and some embraced the idea initially. As time went on, about 90 percent came to say it was a good idea. They didn’t see it as a gadget, or as a replacement for learning, they saw it as a tool for learning.”

Taylor’s colleagues have been more enthusiastic. “In our school division there are about 90 principals and about 600 teachers, and I would say that out of the principals, there were about 15 to 20 that really were gung-ho and wanted to know what we were doing.” The rest, Taylor says, thought the program was innovative and at least worth a try. “There were no negative thoughts on it whatsoever.”

Learning Curves

Taylor sees the cell phone as a necessary tool to teach to kids. “We would be burying our heads in the sand if we said that cell phones were not a part of everyday life,” he says. “I don’t know a businessman out there who doesn’t carry a cell phone. I don’t know a lawyer or accountant out there who doesn’t carry a cell phone. Why wouldn’t we have them in phone. Why wouldn’t we have them in schools?”
Given the example of the Craik School, why haven’t more American teachers embraced cell phone use in the classroom? In fact, few U.S. schools are even considering their use. Liz Kolb, author of the recently released book Toys to Tools: Connecting Student Cell Phones to Education (ISTE, 2008), says that Americans have traditionally seen cell phones as nothing more than a social toy. “We hear stories about students using cell phones in negative ways, like posting videos of teachers to YouTube, or cheating via text messaging,” she says.

Many teachers simply don’t know the teaching potential cell phones have, Kolb says. “There are some teachers who have never sent a text message, so the fear of their students knowing more than them about a tool in the classroom is often very inhibiting.” Professional development, Kolb says, is a necessity for normalizing the idea of classroom cell phones.

**Corporate Help**

Matt Cook, a math and science teacher in the Keller Independent School District, near Fort Worth, Texas, knows his cell phone inside and out. He’s used it to document results in his classroom. In fact, his familiarity with cell phone tech sparked his imagination, and led him to get in touch with Verizon and AT&T, as well as software company GoKnow, based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. All three companies have agreed to donate technology to the district for a pilot program to use cell phones in fifth-grade classrooms. (Other cell phone companies are certainly interested in classroom possibilities. Qualcomm has a similar program in the works called K-Nect.)

“I firmly believe that to prepare kids for their future, we need to start speaking the language of kids,” says Cook. “They’re using this stuff anyway—let’s teach them how to use it productively.”

The GoKnow software turns the students’ smartphones into computers, allowing students to use word processors, spreadsheets, and art programs, among others, on their cell phones. For example, every child learns the concept of the water cycle: how water moves on, above, and below Earth’s surface through the processes of evaporation, condensation, precipitation, and so on. With GoKnow’s cell-based applications, a student could draw a concept map showing the relationship between the processes, create an animation illustrating how it all looks, and write up a text report on what they’ve learned—all centralized on a desktop-like interface on the smartphone’s screen.

At the end of the day, the students can upload all their work online. “The kids sync their phone up to the server. The parents can look at the work they’ve done, and the teachers can make annotations and grade the work, all online,” says Cook.

Elliot Soloway, founder of GoKnow, sees the key to popularizing cell phone use in classrooms is to make it easy to integrate into a school’s existing curriculum. GoKnow’s software has been engineered to make the process as easy as possible, he says. “We can do this in eight minutes with a teacher. Sit down with your paper-and-pencil lesson, and we’re going to show you how to transform that lesson into a cell phone–based lesson you can integrate with your existing curriculum.”

Soloway says that if the Keller program is successful, smartphones could become a part of the curriculum in neighboring districts. “We’ve talked to other districts in Texas that are watching,” he says. If cell phones in classrooms do catch on, the schools would, in effect, be getting low-cost computers into their students’ hands.

Dolman thinks that the possibilities for cell phones will only increase as kids become more familiar with the technology. “The more we discover what we can do with them, the more valuable they are. If you can harness what students are interested in, you have massive amounts of potential. And if you can get that into the classroom, you’re set.”

**Citation:**


http://www.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=3751073
Why Schools Should Stop Banning Cell Phones, and Use Them for Learning  By Audrey Watters August 29, 2011

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.

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.

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.

MLA Citation:

Cell Phones and Text Messaging in Schools – a report by the school safety council

1. Cell phones have been used for calling in bomb threats to schools and, in many communities, cell calls cannot be traced by public safety officials.
2. Student use of cell phones could potentially detonate a real bomb if one is actually on campus.
3. Cell phone use by students can hamper rumor control and, in doing so, disrupt and delay effective public safety personnel response.
4. Cell phone use by students can impede public safety response by accelerating parental response to the scene of an emergency during times when officials may be attempting to evacuate students to another site.
5. Cell phone systems typically overload during a real major crisis (as they did during the Columbine tragedy, WTC attacks, etc.), and usage by a large number of students at once could add to the overload and knock out cell phone systems quicker than may normally occur. Since cell phones may be a backup communications tool for school administrators and crisis teams, widespread student use in a crisis could thus eliminate crisis team emergency communications tools in a very short period of critical time.

National School Safety and Security Services has received a number of inquiries after school shootings over the years asking if schools should allow and/or encourage students to carry cell phones in school as a tool for their safety during a school shooting or other crisis. Similar inquiries were received after the Columbine High School attack in 1999 and the September 2001 terrorist attacks on America. We set forth on this page a look at the historical perspective of cell phones in schools, a detailed explanation of how they can detract from safety in a crisis, and recommendations for addressing the current day reality of cell phones and other technology being a part of today's students' lives and how schools must adapt realistically.

Cell Phones Disruptive of School Environment
From an educational perspective, cell phone use during classes and in other areas of the school can easily present a disruption to the educational environment on a day-to-day basis. School disruptions can come in a number of forms. Ringing cell phones can disrupt classes and distract students who should be paying attention to their lessons at hand. Text message has been used for cheating. And new cell phones with cameras could be used to take photos of exams, take pictures of students changing clothes in gym locker areas, and so on.

Cell Phone Use During a Crisis Can Create Less Safe School Emergency Response
In terms of school safety, cell phones have been used by students in a number of cases nationwide for calling in bomb threats to schools. In far too many cases, these threats have been difficult or impossible to trace since they have been made by cell phones. The use of cell phones by students during a bomb threat, and specifically in the presence of an actual explosive device, also may present some risk for potentially detonating the device as public safety officials typically advise school officials not to use cell phones, two-way radios, or similar communications devices during such threats.

Additionally, experience in crisis management has shown us that regular school telephone systems become overloaded with calls in times of a crisis. While we do recommend cell phones for school administrators and crisis team members as a crisis management resource tool, it is highly probable that hundreds (if not thousands) of students rushing to use their cell phones in a crisis would also overload the cell phone system and render it useless. Therefore the use of cell phones by students could conceivably decrease, not increase, school safety during a crisis.

Cell phone use, texting, and other outside communications by students during a crisis also expedites parental flocking to the school at a time when school and public safety officials may need parents to be away from the school site due to evacuations, emergency response, and/or other tactical or safety reasons. This could also actually delay or otherwise hinder timely and efficient parent-student reunification. In extreme situations, it could thrust parents into a zone of potential harm.

Cell phone use also accelerates the unintentional (and potentially intentional) spread of misinformation, rumors, and fear.

Cell Phones and Text Messaging in Schools Contribute to School Rumors and Fear
We also track more and more school incidents across the nation where rumors have disrupted schools and have even resulted in decreased attendance due to fears of rumored violence. The issues of text messaging in particular, and cell
phones in general, were credited with sometimes creating more anxiety and panic than any actual threats or incidents that may have triggered the rumors.

"We are now dealing with 'Generation Text' instead of 'Generation X'," said Ken Trump, President of National School Safety and Security Services. "The rumors typically become greater than the issue, problem, or incident itself. Attendance can go down overnight and rumors can fly in minutes," he noted.

Ken's advice to school and safety officials includes:

1) Anticipate you will have an issue that catches fire like this at some time. Identify ahead of time what mechanisms you will use to counter it.

2) Have redundancy in communications: Web site, direct communications to students and staff, mass parent notifications, letters to go home, etc.

3) Discuss some potential scenarios with your district and building administrators and crisis teams to evaluate what the threshold will be for going full speed on your response communications. If you go full speed on every single rumor, you might need two full-time employees just to counter rumors in one average secondary school. Try to get a feel for at what point a situation might rise to the level of being so disruptive or distracting that it warrants a full-fledged communications counter assault by school and police officials.

4) School and police officials should have unified communications so as to send consistent messages. We train in our emergency preparedness programs for the use of joint information centers (JICs) in a major critical incident response. But even on lower scale incidents, it is important for school leaders to be sending a message consistent with that of public safety officials to their school-communities.

5) Have a formal crisis communications plan and professionally train your administrators and crisis team members on communicating effectively with media and parents. Professional outside communications consultants, district communications staff (for those with such in-house resources), and related specialists can help develop and audit communications plans, and train staff.

"The key is to be prepared to fight fire with fire. Today's high-tech world and rapid communications must be countered by school officials who have a solid communications plan for managing rapidly escalating rumors around school safety issues," Trump said.

For examples of specific incidents of rumors, many of which were driven by student use of cell phones, see School Threats and Rumors.

**Cell Phone Policies and Practices in Schools Must Meet the Times But Be Clear and Enforced; Emergency Guidelines and Crisis Communications Plans Must Be Strong**

School boards and administrators have the final say in whether cell phones are or are not banned in their schools. We respect local control and their right to make these decisions. If a school district chooses to ban cell phones, we support that as we support those districts choosing to allow students to have cell phones in schools.

We do believe, however, that school leaders must make a firm decision, set it in written policy, implement it consistently, and communicate expectations to students, parents, and school employees. Equally important is that they enforce their policies in a firm, fair, and consistent manner for the long haul. Saying in writing that the district bans cell phones but in practice allowing them or having a "don't ask, don't tell" practice day-to-day is unacceptable.

School administrators allowing students to possess and/or in some fashion use cell phones in schools and/or on school property must provide clear guidelines and expectations to students and parents. They must enforcement them consistently.

From a safety, security, and emergency / crisis preparedness perspective, school boards, administrators, crisis teams, and public safety officials must have a detailed conversation on the impact of cell phones on day-to-day school climate, their potential adverse impact on security, and their high-risk for detracting from efficient school emergency response and
management in a critical incident. We now strongly encourage school districts to have crisis communications plans to manage and respond in a timely manner to rumors and to communicate on security incidents and in crises. We also advise school and safety officials to develop their emergency plans with the expectation that cell phone use in a critical incident will accelerate rumors, expedite parental and other flocking to the school, create traffic and human movement management problems, potentially hinder efficient parent-student reunification processes, etc. In short, school and safety officials must "double-down" on their planning and preparedness for issues likely to be created by cell phone use during a crisis.

School leaders should talk with students, parents, and staff about their expectations regarding cell phone use during a crisis. There should be candid discussions of how cell phone use can hurt school and first responder efforts to keep students and staff safe during an emergency. And students, parents, and staff should be told how responsible use and non-use during a crisis can help make the situation more safe and less risky than irresponsible use and use at critical times when attention should be given fully to receiving directions from those responsible for keeping everyone safe.

School leaders should maintain an adequate number of cell phones on campus for administrators, crisis team members, and other appropriate adults. School and safety officials should seek to provide such equipment as a part of their crisis planning. Additionally, while not necessarily advocating that schools provide cell phones to teachers, we do believe that school policies should allow teachers and support staff to carry their cell phones if they choose to do so.

Concluding Thoughts
Technology evolves. Society evolves. And so must our thinking on the role of technology, cell phones and other technology in schools. Regardless of whether or not school leaders formally allow or prohibit student cell phones on campus, they must have preparedness plans designed upon the assumption that at least some students will have and use cell phones during a crisis situation. Emergency preparedness guidelines and crisis communications plans must be in place to respond to and manage such conditions.

Citation:
Cell Phones in Classrooms? No! Students Need to Pay Attention By Greg Graham September 21, 2011

In the battle for the hearts and minds of students, the front line for educators has changed over the last couple of decades. Rather than the age-old struggle for access, the foremost concern today is one of attention. Sure, there will always be issues of access, but for the most part that battle has been won. We’re no longer suffering from an information deficit; we’re suffering from an attention deficit.

The shift from access deficit to attention deficit has some very practical ramifications for schools. Certainly it gives perspective on the question of whether to allow cell phones in the classroom. On KQED MindShift (and reposted here on MediaShift), Audrey Watters argued for cell phones in the classroom because they (or at least smartphones) are powerful research tools. But the ability to get to information is not the problem; what students lack is the critical thinking skills to sort, filter and interpret information. Recent research has shown that students are good at getting to information, but weak at knowing what to do once they get there. So we must be protective of the classroom as a uniquely effective learning environment.

In 1997, writer and critic Howard Rheingold proposed two rules for our rapidly changing world: “Rule Number One is to pay attention. Rule Number Two might be: Attention is a limited resource, so pay attention to where you pay attention.” This was before text-messaging, smartphones, Facebook, Skype, YouTube or Twitter. Not surprisingly, the business community responded quickly to the importance of attention. Business strategists like Michael Goldhaber began referring to our economy as an “attention economy.” Echoing Rheingold, Goldhaber stated in 1997, “What counts most now is what is most scarce now, namely attention.” Their words are much truer today than they were in 1997.

Distracted students
This scarcity of attention is certainly an issue with today’s media-multitasking students. A study released in January 2010 by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that total media exposure per day for young people ages 13 to 18 increased from 7 hours and 29 minutes in 1999 to 10 hours and 45 minutes in 2009. Use per medium increased, but the largest increase was time spent multitasking. My work as a teacher confirms this. At the beginning of every semester, I ask my students how many media they use while doing homework. The great majority of them admit using some combination of two or three of their cell phones, laptops, televisions and iPods while studying. Out of a class of 25, only one or two still value shutting everything off and focusing completely on their work. Taking Rheingold’s two rules and applying them to the classroom can give schools the framework for a well-informed policy regarding cell phones.

Rule #1 – Pay Attention
Teachers are vying for their students’ attention. Of course, this is a venerable struggle, but in the past students’ only options were looking out the window, passing notes, or throwing spit wads at each other. Most teachers will tell you the struggle is much tougher today; it’s one of those things they talk about at meetings and lunch breaks. Just the other day, the topic was brought up at a departmental meeting where I teach, and the stories and opinions (universally negative) immediately came gushing forth. The teacher sitting next to me told me he has a “one-and-done” approach: The students are warned in the syllabus and on the first day of class, and as soon as one of them pulls his or her cell phone out during class, he or she gets the boot. While I have a hard time being so strict, I respect his strategy; we teachers are all aware that our top competitor is that little electronic wonder lovingly buzzing in our students’ pockets or purses.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg has been under constant pressure to lift a ban on cell phones that he instituted in 2007 for New York’s 1.1 million-student school system. According to CBS News, New York had long maintained an “out-of-sight, out-of-trouble” approach to cell phones until Bloomberg’s department of education started using metal detectors to not only search for weapons, but confiscate cell phones as well. Bloomberg has remained steadfast, surviving not only the outrage of parents and students, but a court battle as well. In March 2008, an appellate court ruled that “the Chancellor reasonably determined that a ban on cell phone possession was necessary to maintain order in the schools.”

New York schools are not unique. School systems everywhere are outlawing cell phones, but students are undeterred. In a recent survey by Pew Internet, 65 percent of students admit bringing phones to class even though they are banned. They put them in their socks, their underwear, their sandwiches, whatever it takes. Fifty-eight percent of the students in those same schools admit sending a text message during class.

To make matters worse, parents are not allied with teachers in this. As a matter of fact, one can safely assume that the majority of students’ texts during school are exchanges with parents. In the same Pew survey, 98 percent of parents of cell-owning teens say a major reason their child has the phone is so that they can be in touch no matter where the teen is (a
blessing and a curse to students). This business of parents always being connected to their children has wide-ranging
implications (in her book “Always On,” professor Naomi Baron points to “the end of anticipation”), but as pertains to cell
phones in the classroom, parents are simply added to the growing list of distractions.

**Rule #2 – Attention is a limited resource, so pay attention to where you pay attention**

Students need to understand that their attention is an in-demand resource, i.e., everyone wants a piece of them. When I
talk to my students about this, they are very receptive. They have an awareness deep down that they are too busy, too
distracted, too harried. Many of them don’t have a point of reference, a time they can remember when things were
simpler, quieter, slower. This is especially true of those born in the 21st century who’ve never known a time when they
weren’t “always on” — virtually connected to loved ones and the wider world. According to Pew, 84 percent of cell-
owning 13-17 year-olds acknowledge sleeping with their cell phone next to them, and it is a “fairly common practice” for
that group to sleep with their cell phones under their pillows so that a call or text will awaken them.

This issue of attention is more than just teachers wanting to control students; it is about the importance of students
learning to focus on one thing. A growing amount of research by neurologists confirms what our mommas already told us
— we think best and perform best through focused, undistracted attention. In 2009, Stanford researchers studied the
cognitive capabilities of media multitaskers and came to the following conclusion: “People who are regularly bombarded
with several streams of electronic information do not pay attention, control their memory or switch form one job to
another as well as those who prefer to complete one task at a time.” When comparing the two groups, Stanford researchers
sought to discover where media multitaskers are superior.

Alas, says lead researcher Eyal Ophir, “We kept looking for what they’re better at, and we didn’t find it.” Students need to
be challenged and trained in the art of single-tasking. Where better than the classroom? As Neil Postman urged in his
book “The End of Education,” schools need to be engaging in technology education. He wasn’t talking about teaching
students how to use technology, but rather “learning about what technology helps us to do and what it hinders us from
doing.” In Postman’s mind, technology education should be a branch of the humanities, providing students with a
historical perspective on ‘humanity’s perilous and exciting romance with technology.’

**Preserving the Classroom**

When I asked her thoughts on cell phones in the classroom, Dr. Baron, who is executive director of the Center for
Teaching, Research, and Learning, pointed to the varied roles filled by the classroom. “A classroom is many places at
once,” she said, “a room for sharing ideas, a space (literally) for contemplation, a setting for social interaction. None of
these functions harmonizes with intrusion from the outside.”

Indeed, the classroom has a hallowed place in our society, and it still functions pretty much as it has always functioned.
Countless people point to a time in their lives where a certain teacher in a certain classroom made all the difference in the
world. Just ask. The other day I was walking through a building on my campus. Inside one of the small classrooms was a
goofy-looking middle-aged man holding court with 25 or 30 students huddled around. I have no idea what the man was
teaching, but he did so with gusto. I slowed past his room, drawn to whatever was happening in there. He loved what he
was talking about, and his students were sitting on the edge of their seats, leaning toward him. Just as I started picking up
my pace, the entire room burst into laughter. He was just getting warmed up.

That scene is repeated every day in hundreds of thousands of classrooms around the world. From the most prestigious
halls of higher education to my son’s kindergarten class led by the delightful Ms. Norman, teachers keep joyfully passing
on knowledge and wisdom to the students under their tutelage. There never has been — nor will there ever be — a more
dynamic learning context than face-to-face in close proximity. Everything possible should be done to protect that timeless
environment from interruption and distraction.

Citation:

attention264/