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HOLD THE PHONE

When it comes to cell phone, board policy must weigh safety against disruption.

A cacophony of ringing cell phones is annoying anywhere, but in the classroom it's an unacceptable distraction. A decade ago, it would have been an unheard-of distraction, as well. Few adults owned or used cellular phones then, and even fewer children.

But times have changed. As the prices of cell phones fall, their use is growing, especially among teenagers. Increasingly, school boards are having to decide how to deal with students who bring these ubiquitous communication devices to school.

It might seem like a no-brainer to ban student use of cell phones in schools, but few policy decisions are that clear-cut. The necessity for banning another electronic communication device -- the pager -- has been widely understood and accepted. Cell phone bans, however, present a conundrum: During the Columbine shootings, students were able to call for help on their cell phones, drawing dramatic attention to the safety aspects of cell phones.

Inexpensive equipment and low-cost family service plans have made cell phones "affordable to just about anyone," says Lisa Ihde, manager of wireless education programs at the Cellular Telecommunications Industry Association in Washington, D.C. Parents want the phones, says Ihde, to communicate with their children throughout the day. The association doesn't know how many of the phones that parents buy go to their children, but anecdotally, cell phone use by teens seems to be on the rise.

School boards can find themselves at odds with parents or their communities when forming policies about student cell phones, despite the conviction held by many educators that student cell phones do not belong in school. "Cell phones ringing during a class would be very distracting to the learning environment," says Mary Beth King, vice president of the Plano, Texas, school board. "We are committed to maintaining the sanctity of the classroom."

Even among those who endorse cell phone restrictions, there is disagreement. Some educators believe only a total ban will prevent disruptions. Others argue that bans don't teach children to use technology like cell phones responsibly.

Pagers versus cell phones

In the early 1990s, electronic paging devices or pagers became synonymous with drug dealers. Although pagers had other, more benign uses, schools and state legislatures

quickly passed policies and laws forbidding their use in schools, often with severe penalties attached.

According to the Education Commission on the States, 16 states have passed laws that ban student possession of pagers in schools. Of those states, five mention only pagers. The other states include cellular phones and other electronic devices. All the laws allow for school boards or principals to make exceptions, some for medical emergencies.

The Montgomery County (Md.) School Board passed a ban on electronic communication devices five years ago to comply with Maryland's regulations. For the first offense, principals could use their discretion for punishment. The second offense required principals to report the incident to the police. At the time, no one spoke out against the ban, according to board member Bea Gordon, because "pagers were the issue," she says.

It was a different story when parents and students found out the ban covered cell phones as well. "We are hearing a great deal from parents who believe [the phones are] a part of modern-day life and students should be able to use them," says Gordon, whose district is in an affluent suburb of Washington, D.C. "We are approaching that point where we will have to make a distinction between pagers and cell phones."

Montgomery County's state legislature tried to do exactly that recently by proposing Maryland's law be amended to allow cell phones in schools. That effort failed, Gordon says, with lawmakers from large, urban areas on one side and rural lawmakers on the other. "Those from rural districts didn't see the need for cell phones," she says.

Community support

Some school boards have faced dissenting parents over the ban, while others have earned community support. The Plano Independent School District has banned electronic communication devices since 1995. Board vice president King says the board put the policy in place before many students had access to cell phones or pagers.

"Parents have been very understanding about the policy and supportive of [there being] no disruptions in student learning," says King. "We are also very good about facilitating communication, should a parent need to reach the child during the school day."

In Franklin, Wis., the school board first banned pagers, then broadened the policy to include two-way electronic communication devices. Dave Szychlinski, president of the Franklin School Board, says the broad language was necessary because it could include up-and-coming technology, such as handheld computers like Palm Pilots. "Students functioned well before cell phones," says Szychlinski. "They're not necessary for students in their daily activities."

Before the Cobb County (Ga.) School Board banned pagers and cell phones in 1997, teachers complained that students interrupted class when they forgot to turn off their beepers or ringers. Also, students talked on the phones between classes.

Board member Curt Johnston says parents were unhappy at first, but became used to the rule. On the other hand, students complained that they were being punished for the misbehavior of only a few students, a point he sees as valid. "I would prefer to confiscate devices and charge in-school suspensions for in-school users or disrupters on a case-by-case basis," says Johnston, "but not ban possession by students who use them responsibly."

Some schools do have policies that are less restrictive than a total ban. At the Minuteman Regional Vocational Technical School District, near Boston, the policy prohibits using electronic devices in a way that disrupts the educational process. It's acceptable to have cell phones and pagers on silent mode, as long as the students don't place or answer calls during class. A small number of students use their phones or pagers inappropriately, says Minuteman School Committee member Paul Schlichtman. When that happens, the principal confiscates the device, and it is returned when the student's parent comes to school to retrieve it.

The physical size of a school district could be a deciding factor in whether to allow students to carry their phones in school, says Schlichtman. At Minuteman, some students live more than an hour from school. When these students are involved in after-school activities, using a cell phone rather than a pay phone to call home is less expensive and more convenient.

However, at city schools such as Madison Park Technical-Vocational High School in Boston, where Schlichtman works, students don't travel long distances. The school is a block from a rapid transit stop and within two blocks of several major bus lines. Madison has a ban on carrying electronic devices on campus. In practice, says Schlichtman, students at both districts have cell phones. Only when they are careless, by leaving the ringers on or displaying the devices to others, are they caught.

Some kind of restriction on cell phones in school is necessary, says Schlichtman, who believes the phones do not add any educational value to the schools and can be serious distractions. "High school students are social animals," says Schlichtman. "A cell phone or pager can very easily become the focal point of a student's day. A page could signal a meeting at the lavatory, a call to skip fourth-period class in favor of a trip to Dunkin' Donuts, or any other message that distracts from teaching and learning."

Legislating the future?

Pennsylvania state law prohibits students from carrying pagers on campus. It does not mention cell phones or other electronic devices. The Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) recently added a ban on cell phones and laser pointers to its model policy. Sharon Fissel, director of policy services for PSBA, says association officials spoke with a number of Pennsylvania school districts that already had cell phone bans in place before forming the policy.

Fissel did hear from educators and others who believed cell phones could be a valuable safety tool for students. However, she says, most districts made convincing arguments that any benefit of cell phones was overridden by the disruption they caused.

After PSBA adopted the ban, many school boards in Pennsylvania moved to adopt similar policies, including the Allentown School Board. But Allentown board member Dick Nepon cast a dissenting vote. He advocates regulating cell phones rather than an outright ban. "I believe it is our job to teach people how to use technology effectively," says Nepon. "It's not our job to make administration's task easier at the expense of slowing technology's intrusion into public school life." A ban on cell phones sends a message to students that they can't be trusted to control themselves, a message that schools should avoid, he says.

After all, says Nepon, technology continues to bring changes. In the future, schools might even supply students with personal digital assistants that will function as textbook, calculator, and Internet browser combined -- as well as cell phone and pager and "probably things we haven't dreamed up yet," he says. "It makes no sense, to me, to limit the future, to attempt to legislate a hold on change."

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SAMPLE CELL PHONE POLICIES

Here are some excerpts from school board policies on cell phones and pagers. Use the web links to view the complete policies of districts that put their policies online.

Plano Independent School District

"A paging device is a telecommunications device that emits an audible signal, vibrates, displays a message, or otherwise summons or delivers a communication to the possessor. The board may adopt a policy prohibiting students from possessing paging devices while on school property or while attending school-sponsored or school-related activities on or off school property."

Moline School District 40, Moline, Ill.

"Prohibited student conduct: Disciplinary action may be taken against any student guilty of gross disobedience or misconduct, including, but not limited to, the following: using or possessing electronic signaling and cellular radio-telecommunications devices, unless authorized and approved by the building principal. Electronic signaling devices include pocket -- and all similar -- electronic paging devices."

Ferguson-Florissant School District, Florissant, Mo.

"Pagers, laser pointers, cell phones, or other electronic devices not part of the instructional program will not be allowed in school. They will be confiscated and returned only to a parent or guardian."

Cobb County Public Schools, Cobb County, Ga.

"Students are not allowed to use, wear, possess or store in their locker: cellular telephones, communication beepers, other electronic communication devices, including all 'look alikes,' at school during the regular school day or at school-sponsored events. Any student found in violation of this policy shall be subject to in-school suspension."

Montgomery County Public Schools, Montgomery County, Md.

"Possession of portable pager on public school property. In this section the following words have the meanings indicated: 'Portable pager' means any device carried, worn, or transported by an individual to receive or communicate messages. 'Public school property' means the grounds of any public school.

"Except as provided ..., an individual may not possess a portable pager on public school property. This section does not apply to: handicapped students using portable pagers for medical reasons; law enforcement officers; visitors on public school property for an authorized program, meeting, or function; faculty or staff members employed by a county board; members of any volunteer fire department, ambulance company, or rescue squad, who are designated to possess a portable pager on public school property by the chief of the volunteer fire department, ambulance company, or rescue squad, and the school principal; and students whose portable pagers are contained in vehicles that are on public school property and are not found to be connected with criminal activity."

Allentown School District, Allentown, Pa.

"The possession of beepers, pagers or other electronic communication devices by school district employees where supportive of the general welfare and the educational program of the school is endorsed. The possession of beepers/pagers/electronic communication devices by students has been found to be not only disruptive but, in many instances, contributory to illegal purposes, such as alcohol and other drug abuse."

Pennsylvania School Boards Association policy guides for Pennsylvania school districts:

"The board prohibits possession of laser pointers and attachments, cellular telephones, and telephone paging devices by students on school grounds, on buses and other vehicles provided by the district, and at school-sponsored events.

"This prohibition does not apply in the following cases, provided that the building principal approves in advance of the presence of a telephone pager: a student who is a member of a volunteer fire company, ambulance or rescue squad; or a student who has a need for a telephone pager due to the medical condition of an immediate family member.

"Unauthorized possession of laser pointers, cellular telephones, and telephone paging devices shall result in confiscation of the item by school personnel."