

Mobile trouble

As with any new technology, mobile telephones are proving both a blessing and a curse. **David Neiger** reports.

Chatting in class or cheating on tests has taken on a whole new dimension now that many students own mobile telephones. And a growing worry is the potential of new technology such as video phones to intimidate teachers and invade students' privacy.

"What you don't want is any situation where teachers feel constrained to do what is the responsible thing—for example, breaking up a fight in a playground," says AEU federal president Pat Byrne. "You might be reluctant to do that if you thought someone, a particular student, for example, would take a film or picture and use it against you in some way."

Depending upon the extent that mobile phones are a problem in their particular school community, many

schools are now developing mobile telephone policies. While having a policy does clarify certain issues, Byrne cautions that the policies can easily become "administrative headaches which the schools increasingly have to deal with".

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A blanket ban

South Australia's Mawson Lakes School, north of Adelaide, has a well-documented mobile phone policy that is available on the internet for students and parents. According to assistant principal Sue Lemmer, the school recognised it needed a policy

when students of different ages—even in the primary school—were disrupting class by texting messages to each other and friends outside the school.

The school's policy places a blanket ban on mobile phones in class or during recess and requires the students to leave the phones with the front office during the school day. It also warns students not to leave their phone in their bags or lockers.

For Kirrawee High School in the southern suburbs of Sydney, mobile phone use by students at school had become a serious problem before a policy was put in place. Deputy principal Clive Houldin remembers students "text messaging during class, not concentrating, phones going off at inappropriate times" and basically causing a significant distraction.

"We even had one student a couple

of years ago who was operating a business via his mobile phone during school,” Houldin says. Although he respected the student’s enterprise and initiative, the use of the phone was inappropriate and disruptive to other students trying to complete their senior studies. The school felt compelled to implement a total ban on the use of phones.

“Our policy is that the phones should be turned off from the time they enter school to the time they leave school,” he says. To ensure that phones are not used during tests and exams—particularly when students are going to the toilet, the school policy requires that students turn off their phones before any exam and place their phones in a box at the front of the examination hall.

The bill budget

At Orange High School in rural New South Wales, a mobile policy was introduced to help students manage their budgets. According to Glenys Lill, the head teacher of welfare, the main problem facing the student and school community was the monthly mobile bill.

“A lot of the students were racking up huge phone bills,” she says. “A number were holding down jobs essentially to pay their phone bills.”

Lill believed it would be “almost impossible” to ban the use of mobile phones at school because it would be very difficult to police. “Along with students, we developed a policy where we could regulate their use and keep the teachers happy whilst allowing students the privilege of using their phone at school.”

What’s in a mobile policy
Mobile phone use may be



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Anna Bligh, Queensland Minister for Education and the Arts.

skyrocketing, but guidelines on their use in schools and public places have been slow to appear. There are now some comprehensive guidelines from the ACT Department of Education, Youth and Family Services that outline the key elements of a school’s mobile phone policy. These include when phones can be used, the appropriate use of picture phones and disciplinary procedures when the policy is breached. The internet site also contains legal guidelines regarding a school’s liability for loss or damage to personal property, including mobile phones.

The Queensland Department of Education and the Arts has also prepared a set of guidelines, including a checklist, to alert schools “to the potential misuse of the phones and what action could be taken to prevent them becoming a nuisance.” Education and Arts Minister Anna Bligh sums up the policy as follows “...there are some clear-cut expectations about the use of mobile phones. They’re not OK for private use in the classroom and if students use them to bully, cheat or take inappropriate images of others, they can expect to be disciplined.”

Where r u 2day?

Despite all of these problems, however, mobile phones can be used to a school’s advantage. At Leongatha Secondary College, office staff have a system in place, from MGM Wireless in South Australia, which allows them to automatically text a parent’s mobile if their child is absent.

According to senior campus principal Tracey Summerton, parents can then advise the school via phone, SMS or a note if there is a legitimate reason for the absence, with this reason automatically logged on the roll. This system has had a positive effect on absenteeism, says Summerton, and the students have acknowledged “a very general sense of appropriate justice around here that if you’re doing the wrong thing and you get caught, that’s your bad luck.” ■

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ATAGLANCE

■ A mobile phone policy at school helps reduce classroom disruption and threats to privacy and teacher authority

■ Policies range from an outright ban through to ‘responsible use’ agreements developed with the students

■ Policy guidelines from various state governments are available on the internet to assist schools.

W Further information

www.mawsonlakes.sa.edu.au/parents/PolicyMobilePhone.pdf

www.decs.act.gov.au/policies/pdf/mobilephones.pdf

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