

Cell Phones In Schools

National School Safety and Security Services has received a number of inquiries after the school shootings of recent years asking if schools should allow and/or encourage students to carry cell phones in school as a tool for their safety during a potential crisis. Similar inquiries have been received after the September 2001 terrorist attacks on America.

We have opposed policies allowing or encouraging students to have cell phones in school. On a day-to-day basis, they are disruptive to the educational environment. This also has been the general position of many school districts over the years. Changing policies under the guise of cell phones being a crisis tool for student safety is, in our opinion, a knee-jerk reaction and is not "the answer" to school crisis preparedness that some may believe it to be.

Some schools banned pagers and cell phones starting a decade ago because of their connection to drug and gang activity, as well as due to the disruption to classes. The focus on their disruption of the educational process has come into conflict with cell phones becoming a convenience items over recent years. However, parents have increasingly lobbied boards to change policies primarily based on the argument that phones will make students and schools safer in light of national tragedies.

We do agree that the use of such devices is more for convenience purposes today than it may have been 10 or more years ago. But while some boards and/or administrators prefer to "cave in" and change policies --- primarily to avoid parental pressures and school-community politics --- we still generally advise them not to do so. From an educational perspective, cell phones primary present another disruption to the educational environment on a day-to-day basis.

Cell Phones Disruptive of School Environment

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 Phones in School 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 presents a greater 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 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.

Concluding Thoughts on Cell Phones in Schools

While a number of schools have looked at this issue, and some have reversed their past positions of prohibiting cell phones in schools, we find that the majority of schools have not jumped on the bandwagon and it is not the big trend that some may believe it to be based upon a number of anecdotal cases. In fact, our 2002 national survey of school-based police officers shows that 68% of surveyed school-based police officers from across the nation believe that student use of cell phones in school would detract from school safety in a crisis and another 10% believe they would have neither a positive or negative influence. 81% of school resource officers indicated that their schools continue to not allow students to use cell phones in school, supporting our observations that the majority of schools have not reversed their prohibition of student use of cell phones in schools.

- From the reading, you are to compose a 5 paragraph essay. The first paragraph should outline the use of cell phones at school and name three reasons it is potentially dangerous. The second, third and fourth paragraph will each explain the three reasons that cell phones can pose a threat to school safety. The final paragraph is your opinion on cell phones and school safety.