

Know your text-messaging limits before being caught at school

September 4 2008, By Tony Gonzalez

Beneath the desk, agile fingers flit across the keypad. Above, eye contact with the teacher never breaks. The cell-phone text message is sent, unnoticed. Or noticed.

Then it's up to teachers to offer a warning, or confiscate the cell phone, and almost unavoidably disrupt class time - yet another text-messaging distraction that teachers and administrators see as a growing nuisance.

The Pew Research Center reported this year that 71 percent of American teens own a cell phone (compared with 45 percent in 2004), that 50 percent of teens sometimes use informal capitalization and punctuation in school assignments and that 38 percent have used texting lingo (such as "LOL," for "laughing out loud") in schoolwork.

During class, teachers see students texting on phones "hidden" in pockets. High-pitched ringtones, which adults can't hear, add a new challenge.

"In this day and age, if you take a cell phone away from a teenager, it's like carving out their heart," said Steve Hill, principal at Jefferson High School in Bloomington, Minn.

To avoid such gruesome punishment, parents and students may heed the advice of Hill and other teachers and administrators, who offer the following warnings and suggestions for teen texting etiquette at school.

1. There's a time and a place for texting.

At Humboldt High School in St. Paul, Minn., teacher Paul Richardson, 26, says that many students have a firm grasp on when text-messaging nicknames and abbreviations are acceptable.

"I've heard other teachers be vocal about being frustrated with some of the slang that shows up in papers," Richardson said. "I feel like, as long as they can switch back and forth (from formal to informal styles), and if they're writing, they're learning to communicate in a writing way."

Kofi Adragani, a graduate student and statistics instructor at the University of Minnesota, explicitly wrote in his syllabus: "All course work must be fully readable; text messaging acronyms and jargon are not accepted."

"I see abbreviations so many times," Adragani said. "Sometimes I can't single them out to find out what they stand for."

He doesn't worry about texting during class. Students suffer if they do: "For someone to come to my classroom for a lecture, but spend their time text-messaging, is a waste of time. But that's their business."

2. Know the consequences.

Teachers said students don't often test the rules after a cell-phone confiscation demonstrates that a teacher means business.

"Usually after the first time, the issue is corrected," said Jinger Gustafson, principal at Oak View Middle School in Andover, Minn.

The rules are simple, after all: Turn phones off during instruction; no text-messaging during tests.

But rules and consequences do change. This year, some schools have banned cell phones even during passing periods and lunchtime. Some have added fines or long-term confiscations.

Administrators understand that outright bans are impractical, but are on the lookout for cases of text-message cheating. Such cheating can earn students a zero score on a test or an F in the class.

3. Don't push it.

A cell-phone reprimand is distraction enough, but prolonged argument about cell-phone use or confiscation rules between the texting student and the teacher only extends the distraction.

"Sometimes the kids argue back with the teacher, which causes more of a distraction," Hill said. "It also damages the relationship when teachers and students argue about something that shouldn't even occur."

4. Ask in advance.

Many teachers will allow students to receive emergency messages or stay in touch with parents during family crises. But teachers won't assume a cell phone is being used for an emergency, so students should ask ahead in such situations.

5. Expect texting to become a teaching tool.

As teachers and administrators realize that texting isn't going away, some are suggesting that the medium be embraced as a classroom tool. Besides using texting for emergency responses, teachers could use texting-centric lessons.

A 10-text message version of "Romeo and Juliet," for example.

"I don't know how much longer we can try to stave off the entry of technology into schools," said Bruce Locklear, principal of Edina High School. "It would make sense for us to embrace it and identify a positive use for it. But we're not quite there yet."

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