

Teachers begin using cell phones for class lessons

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Writer

(AP) -- Ariana Leonard's high school students shuffled in their seats, eagerly awaiting a cue from their Spanish teacher that the assignment would begin. "Take out your cell phones," she said in Spanish.

The teens pulled out an array of colorful flip phones, iPhones and SideKicks. They divided into groups and Leonard began sending them text messages in Spanish: Find something green. Go to the cafeteria. Take a picture with the school secretary.

Leonard's class at Wiregrass Ranch High School in Wesley Chapel, a middle-class Florida suburb about 30 miles north of Tampa, is one of a growing number around the country that are abandoning traditional policies of [cell phone](#) prohibition and incorporating them into class lessons. Spanish vocabulary becomes a digital scavenger hunt. Notes are copied with a cell phone camera. Text messages serve as homework reminders.

"I can use my cell phone for all these things, why can't I use it for learning purposes?" Leonard said. "Giving them something, a mobile device, that they use every day for fun, giving them another avenue to learn outside of the classroom with that."

Much more attention has gone to the ways [students](#) might use phones to cheat or take inappropriate pictures. But as the technology becomes cheaper, more advanced and more ingrained in students' lives that

mentality is changing.

"It really is taking advantage of the love affair that kids have with technology today," said Dan Domevech, executive director of the nonprofit American Association of School Administrators. "The kids are much more motivated to use their cell phone in an educational manner."

Today's phones are the equivalent of small computers - able to check e-mail, do Internet searches and record podcasts. Meanwhile, most school districts can't afford a computer for every student.

"Because there's so much in the media about banning cell phones and how negative phones can be, a lot of people just haven't considered there could be positive, educative ways to use cell phones," said Liz Kolb, author of "From Toy to Tool: Cell Phones in Learning."

Even districts with tough anti-use policies acknowledge they will eventually need to change.

"We can't get away from it," said Bill Husfelt, superintendent of Bay County District Schools, a Florida Panhandle district of 27,000 students where cell phones aren't allowed in school, period. "But we've got to do a lot more work in trying to figure out how to stop the bad things from happening."

Seventy-one percent of teens had a cell phone by early 2008, according to a survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project. That percentage remains relatively steady regardless of race, income or other demographic factors. Meanwhile, many schools are low-tech compared with homes outfitted with home networks, wireless Internet and a smartphone for every family member.

Most schools still have prohibitive policies curtailing cell phone use -

often with good reason. At Husfelt's district, seven students were recently arrested after they got into a fight on campus that he says was instigated through text messages.

In other parts of the country, teens have been arrested for "sexting" - sending indecent photographs taken and sent through their cell phones. Students also use the devices to cheat: In one poll, more than 35 percent of teens admitted cheating with a cell phone.

But phones are so common now that seizing them is huge hassle for teachers.

"It's just a conflict taking them up and having to deal with them," Husfelt said. "It's too disruptive."

Teachers who have incorporated cell phones into their classes say that most students abide by the rules. They note that cheating and bullying exist with or without the phones, and that once they are allowed, the inclination to use them for bad behavior dissipates.

"Kids cheat with pen and paper. They pass notes," said Kipp Rogers, principal of Passage Middle School in Newport News, Va., "You don't ban paper."

Rogers started using cell phones as an instructional tool a couple of years ago, when he was teaching a math class and was short one calculator for a test. He let the student use his phone instead. Twelve classes, including math, science and English, now use them. Students do research through the text message and Internet browser on some phones. Teachers blog. Students use the camera function to snap pictures for photo stories and assignments.

Classes often work in groups in case some students don't have phones.

In Pulaski, Wis., about 130 miles north of Milwaukee, Spanish teacher Katie Titler has used cell phones for students to dial and record themselves speaking for tests.

"Specifically for foreign language, it's a great way to both formally and informally assess speaking, which is really hard to do on a regular basis because of class sizes and time," Titler said.

Jimbo Lamb, a math teacher at Annville-Cleona School District in south-central Pennsylvania, has students use their phones to answer questions set up through a polling Web site. Instantly, he's able to tell how many students understood the lesson.

"This is technology that helps us be more productive," he said.

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