

Mobile phones in schools—educational tool or distraction?

December 1 2016



K-12 students in China are not allowed to use mobile phones in schools, but some districts are introducing e-Readers. Credit: Zhao Jun for China Daily, used by permission

Is the mobile phone a learning tool or a distraction for K through 12 students? A new survey from the University at Albany reveals a complex answer regarding mobile phone school policies in China: Chinese teachers and parents are rooted in their belief that phones are a learning disruption, while students see them as support for their school-related work. Adults and children do agree, however, that mobile devices should be banned during classes and exams.

The study, conducted by an international team of researchers at Shenzhen University and at South China Normal University, along with UAlbany School of Education Associate Professor Zheng Yan, offers a rare glimpse into China's schools and the attitudes of Chinese teachers, parents and students toward [school mobile phone](#) policies, and provides insights for schools internationally.

As in the U.S., the rapid increase of mobile phone use among K-12 students in China has been unprecedented, but phone use is banned in schools there, especially in elementary and middle schools. "Should schools continue to ban students' mobile phone use? It is critical to analyze the school [mobile phone usage](#) policy as a complex policy-making process rather than a simple and straightforward task. Teachers, parents, and students are the three major players in this process but each of them has different impacts. This can apply to the U.S. schools." said Yan.

The survey, entitled Three Different Roles, Five Different aspects: Differences and Similarities in Viewing School Mobile Phone Policies among Teachers, Parents and Students, was conducted to explore perceived differences in policies among the three groups, from five different aspects: impact, decision, implementation, assessment and improvement. 1,226 teachers, parents and students from 17 elementary, 16 middle and 13 high schools in the Pearl River Delta Economic Zone of China were questioned. The study was accepted for publication in the November 2016 issue of Computers & Education.

"There are numerous implications on how to best regulate student mobile phone use, in China and the U.S. and beyond," said Yan. "The different attitudes on the impact of mobile phone use may be key factors in identifying how existing policies are not effective and how we can strengthen them."

The researchers offer examples of potential areas for improvement, including the development more suitable, sufficiently balanced strategies, rather than simply prohibiting students from using their devices at school. Recognizing the complex divergence among the three groups (parents, teachers and students), education leaders should also consider putting more energy into keeping parents informed about the realities of student mobile phone use to obtain more support from them in utilizing mobile phones as learning tools.

"The smartphone technology has become extremely popular, especially among young people," said Yan. "As more schools move to a 'bring your own mobile phone' model, it's possible that constructive uses of mobile technologies will find their way into the classroom."

Previous studies have indicated the concerns and problems associated with student mobile phone use have prompted bans while teachers can utilize various instructional benefits of mobile phones. The researchers propose future studies could deeply investigate the relationship between mobile phone use and academic achievement with multiple methods and further explore the best ways to bring mobile phones into schools.

The study's findings include:

- Students from all school levels generally reported that mobile phones use could "help their learning" and "assist in referring," which was not the case with teachers and parents.
- Teachers and parents from all school-levels agreed on negative impacts, including "disturbed learning," "disturbed resting," "disturbed classes by ringing" and "cheated in exams." Students generally disagreed with these opinions.
- Teachers reported most strikingly that mobile phone use caused greater adverse effects on students.
- Teachers, parents, and students from all school levels generally

agreed on the policy of mobile phones "not allowed during classes and exams."

Teachers from all school levels and [parents](#) from elementary and middle schools generally did not support the policies of "allowed during recess" and "allowed taking to school, but not allowed during class," but supported the policies of "not allowed entirely." However, high school [students](#) preferred the policies of "allowed during recess" and "allowed taking to school, but not allowed during class." They disagreed on the policy of "not allowed entirely."

More information: Qiufeng Gao et al. Three different roles, five different aspects: Differences and similarities in viewing school mobile phone policies among teachers, parents, and students, *Computers & Education* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.compedu.2016.11.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2016.11.007)

Provided by University at Albany

Citation: Mobile phones in schools—educational tool or distraction? (2016, December 1) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-12-mobile-schoolseducational-tool-distraction.html>

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