

Students lobby to use smart phones in classrooms

CPS | Group hopes phones can be used as teaching tool

August 21, 2010

BY [ROSALIND ROSSI](#) Education Reporter/rrossi@suntimes.com

Smart phones can equal smart kids — that's what a group of Chicago Mikva Challenge students say.

Kids should be able to use now-banned cell phones in Chicago Public School classrooms to look up definitions, do on-the-spot internet searches, record lectures for later review and conduct surveys, among other things, kids said in a 53-page white paper of CPS technology recommendations released Friday.



Students Tiffany Witkowski and Carlos Ballesteros show how they can do research on cell phones.
(Jean Lachat/Sun-Times)

"We're trying to get teachers and principals to let cell phones be used as an educational tool, not just a distraction," said one author, Carlos Ballesteros, 17, of Phoenix Military Academy. "We're hoping to change things for the better."

The 15 student members of the Mikva Challenge Education Council also recommended that other Net Generation staples — such as YouTube, Skype, and online games — be woven into CPS lessons. In a report to be presented to Chicago Schools CEO Ron Huberman on Sept. 1, they even offered suggestions for teachers and principals:

- Let teachers use now-banned YouTube for educational purposes, such as showing kids videos of veterans describing their experiences in World War II.
- Use videoconferencing to allow kids to take classes offered at other schools or to hear guest speakers.
- Allow kids to use personal laptops in class for note-taking purposes.
- Create a website for teachers to share technology-savvy lessons and educational online games.
- Let teachers videotape lessons, to help them improve their delivery but also to allow kids to review them later. Teachers also could videotape special lessons for small groups of students stuck on the same concept.
- Require principals to create an annual report on technology spending, so students can see where the money is going. One Mikva Education Council member said her school was spending technology money "frivolously" on flat screen TVs.

But smart phones in particular represent untapped promise, some authors said, because they are so commonplace. Kids should be allowed to use them for non-educational purposes while changing classes and during lunch, and to use them for educational purposes only during class, the report says.

In schools with wireless internet, the many applications on smart phones can be used to do calculations, surveys, charts, web research, and even record teacher lectures for later review.

"Most of the things you can do with a laptop you can do with smart phones," Carlos said. "They are way less expensive than getting every kid a laptop."

The authors would like to raise outside funding to bring cell phones to every CPS high school student, Carlos said. Without a phone service package, the phones themselves are not that expensive, he noted.

The authors also recommended that students sign a contract pledging to use cell phones in class only for educational purposes — and not test cheating. Author Tiffany Witkowski, 16, said her high school — Von Steuben — created a cell phone contract this year, and kids who signed it have a special phone icon in the corner of their student identification badge.

"Students spoke out for this," Tiffany said. "They felt, living in the 21st century, students can't function without their cell phones."

Brian Brady, Mikva Challenge executive director, said the authors researched technology innovations at other schools, interviewed teachers and CPS officials, and worked for months on docs.google creating their report.

"The students did a lot of complex thinking," Brady said. "These young people are trying to start a conversation about how to get young people ready for college in the 21st Century. I think it's a really mature report."