

Chicago Students Push District to Loosen Cellphone Rules

Chicago teens push district to loosen cellphone rules

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When 15 students from Chicago's [Mikva Challenge](#) education council suggested technology reforms to district Chief Executive Officer Ron Huberman, exploring the on-campus use of cellphones, and particularly smartphones, was just one of 18 bullet points.

But for their teachers, it may have been the scariest one.

Students on the council, created to encourage teenagers to become more active in civic affairs, say the recommendation to allow cellphone use in hallways, during open periods like lunch, and in class as “teacher-defined learning tools” was meant to give teachers more choices about how the technology should be used. But some of their teachers have opposed the idea since the release of the council's white paper in August.

“Most teachers, they're automatically against it,” says Lisa Jean Baptiste, a junior at Harper High School in Chicago and a member of the council, which was set up by the Mikva Challenge, a nonprofit that exposes the city's youths to opportunities to participate in the political process. “I don't think they understand the whole policy.”

Another factor is whether educators view cellphone use as one issue—a disciplinary matter—or two separate, but closely linked, issues of both student discipline and classroom learning.

Even students say they began thinking about cellphone-policy changes as a way to curb conflicts involving students, teachers, and school security personnel. Only after suggestions from advisers did they consider the potential of using phones to take field-trip pictures, hold text-message back-channel discussions, vote in teacher-prompted Web polls, or do math on a phone's calculator.

“I just think the way that we were thinking about this is that a lot of schools don't have the [technology] resources other schools are privileged with,” says Tiffany Witkowski, a junior at Von Steuben High School. “And a lot of students have their own cellphones.”

Reducing Disciplinary Issues

But Witkowski also says a policy revision would cut down on disciplinary issues.

At Von Steuben, Witkowski says, students have the option of signing a cellphone contract that allows them to bring the phones onto campus. As a result, discipline problems related to the phones have receded, she says, because students “know the consequences.” Any student improperly using a phone has the device taken away until the following Monday.

The truth, say several members of the education council, is that while smartphones might be one way to get more previously unconnected students online, they understand the limitations. And focusing only on cellphones, rather than all their 18 technology reform recommendations, makes them a little uncomfortable.

“By having cellphones as an educational tool, that’s not saying that schools should forget about getting laptops and computers as a resource,” Witkowski says. “But it’s an easier way to have resources without really having them.”

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