

Dysart Unified School District takes new look at old cellphone policy

by **Amy B Wang** - Oct. 15, 2010 08:23 AM
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"Do albino alligators live in the wild?"

During a field trip to the zoo last year, one of Desere Hockman's eighth-graders caught her off guard with that question.

Instead of waiting until they returned to school, the Canyon Ridge Elementary science teacher had another student look up the answer right away - on her smartphone.

Where texting in class was once almost unthinkable, Dysart officials are hoping a new policy will mean more teachers will join those who, like Hockman, are embracing students' cellphone use.

"Cellphones bring such a unique tool that is completely portable," Hockman said. "Essentially, you have a laptop in your pocket."

In early September, the board revised student discipline procedures regarding the use of electronic devices to allow students to use cellphones in the classroom for research.

Students with capable electronic devices - for instance, a 'smartphone' with a Web browser - are now allowed to use them in the classroom under teachers' direction. Students still may not make phone calls or send text messages.

Initially, the policy change was born of financial need.

"The ideal situation would be for us to be constantly updating our [computers](#) and constantly updating our programs," school board member Jerry Eynon said. "With all the cuts to our budget, it's a real scramble trying to keep up with technology.

"These days, you pull (a new computer) out of the box, plug it in -whoops! Yours is obsolete. A new one's on the shelf."

The district's goal is to eventually have one Web-enabled device per student, said Dysart technology training coordinator Sunshine Darby. However, with 24,000 students in Dysart and ever-shrinking budgets, officials realized that goal would be a long way off - unless they considered a change in what previously was a ban on cellphones in the classroom.

"The goal is to try to harness the power of a lot of these Web-enabled devices that kids already have," said Scott Thompson, Dysart's executive [director](#) of business services. "Kids are walking

around with smartphones and iTouches and all kinds of devices that have more computing power than most computers we had in the schools 10 years ago."

District officials are unsure of how many students have Web-enabled devices, which include everything from iPads to Nintendo DS game consoles. They are awaiting the totals from a survey sent to students earlier this month. Darby said there are a few teachers who have been using cellphones in class for several years. Hockman is one of them. Before this year, though, she and others would have to clear such use beforehand with their principals, explaining exactly how and why the phones would be used in class.

Through sites like polleverywhere.com, Hockman often poses a question verbally, then asks her students to use their phones to respond by text. For her, it's a way to get feedback right away. For many of her students, it's a natural way to communicate with their teacher.

"The reason is the technology innovation and to create a 21st-century learner in my classroom," she said.

Dysart is encouraging such innovations for cost-efficiency: The district could buy instant-response technology but outfitting a classroom would cost about \$2,000, Darby said.

Darby said many teachers do not know about the policy change, and a few may resist the idea. The district is working out training programs to address questions and concerns: How can a teacher effectively manage a classroom full of students texting? How can schools prevent cheating or inappropriate use?

By January, the district aims to have trained representatives at each school in "classroom integration" and "classroom management." By fall, professional development would be available to all teachers.

In September, board members emphasized that no student would be required to purchase a new device because of the new policy.

"We never want to put [parents](#) in the position where they feel like they have to go out and buy something expensive to keep up," Eynon said. "We'll work with that in any way that we can."

Cell phones in the classroom

In September, the Dysart Unified School District governing board voted, 5-0, to allow students to use cell phones in class "for research purposes." Here, Dysart officials and staff discuss how the policy change will affect teachers and students.

Scott Thompson, executive director of business services: "We're going to be careful so that kids don't feel pressured to have these devices in the classroom . . . We're just trying to deal with the reality that many of them already do."

Jennifer Tanner, school board president: "It's not going to be required . . . It's only if those kids already have that technology on them and have that permission. Kids who don't have them: they're still going to be able to (participate)." ,br>

Sunshine Darby, technology training supervisor: "I don't think that (Dysart teachers) really know about it yet. The ones that do are already using it. We've got those trailblazers out there. Our goal is to get everyone using it."

,br> **Desere Hockman, Canyon Ridge eighth-grade science teacher:** "Everything has its problems, but good classroom management usually takes care of it. We don't give any leeway of the rules. You need to be on task or your phone will be collected."