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Cell phones get top marks in class

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247-4758

April 6, 2009

Students sat in small groups in Tony Neeley's science classroom, staring intently at a projected image at the front of the class. A question popped onto the screen. Neeley gave the students a six-digit number and said, "Go." Instantly thumbs began dancing over cell phone keypads. Within seconds, phones trilled the signal that a text message had been sent. At the same time, answers began dropping into view on the screen, one answer for each group of students, identified by a student's cell phone screen name.

In less than an hour, the Mary Passage Middle School students worked their way through more than 70 questions for a semester exam review, with every eighth-grader participating in a drill that looked more like a game show than a quiz.

"They only get one crack at it so they have to make sure they are right," said Neeley.

Cell phones, considered a nuisance or worse in many schools, are welcome at Passage. At least eight teachers are using them for a range of lessons, from reports to quizzes in English, social studies, science and math classes.

Principal Kipp Rogers is the man behind the move. Rogers teaches a math class in addition to his administration duties.

Last year the school ran out of calculators needed for a math exam, so he let a student use the calculator function on his cell phone. The student was excited to use a phone instead of a calculator. He found 19 of his 22 students had phones, a finding that squared with a 2008 Harris Interactive research study reporting four out of five teenagers carry cell phones.

But Rogers was aware of the potential for trouble, from students sending messages to each other during class to cheating or taking inappropriate photos and sharing them, an activity known as

"sexting."

Rogers, his faculty and the students developed an acceptable use policy. They are not to send text messages to anyone outside the building during class hours. They are not to take photos. They are not allowed to upload anything to YouTube or other Internet sites not approved by the school.

"For the most part, the kids respect the rules," Rogers said. "I never had any problems with kids using them inappropriately in my class. We spent a lot of time talking about their digital footprint and that what they do can be tracked."

He said he initially worried about "the haves and have nots," but students work in teams for most assignments requiring cell phones, so there is always at least one phone among the group.

One of the first exercises students learn is how to use Google to find information with their phones. Using key words, students can look up definitions, download weather, get directions, search for information about a location or object, translate a word or phrase into Spanish or French or receive the latest sports scores for their favorite teams.

"They think it is the coolest thing," Rogers said.

Students also use their phones to take photos and assemble reports and story projects. Some classes have blogs developed by the students with uploaded text, photos and audio clips. Most of the programs he and the other teachers use are free.

One of the most common uses is to turn the phone into a response tool similar to clickers used with other software programs. Instead of punching a button to answer a question, students text the answer and send it to a central polling Web site the teacher projects onto a screen. Some of the sites allow students to compare answers, similar to a poll or survey.

Sixth-grader Cassie Garn said her English teacher uses cell phones for several exercises.

"This is more interesting and people pay attention," she said. "It's fun. It beats writing stuff down and everybody likes to try to be first."

She said her teacher, Brie McArthur, roams the room to make sure students are sending answers and not texts to friends.

"It's all related to work," Garn said. "We're not texting other people."

Teachers said participation is up and discipline problems are down in classes using cell phones. Rogers is looking for ways to expand the phones' uses. "It's fighting a losing battle to ask them to leave them at home."

Cell phones in classrooms

Several cell phone functions can be used as education tools:

- Camera
- Audio recorder
- Video recorder
- Calculator
- Calendar
- Text message center

Mary Passage students use

those functions to:

- Build class blogs
- Assemble albums
- Create multimedia reports
- Answer quizzes and exams
- Test reading comprehension
- Solve math problems
- Conduct experiments and comparisons
- Find reference material and information

Source: Mary Passage Middle School

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