



Schools get tougher on student cellphone use

DeKalb, Atlanta districts strengthen their penalties.

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A student's cellphone rings — or buzzes loudly on vibrate — and DeKalb County teacher Artese McCrae finds himself interrupted.

“A lot of times, it's either their parent or it's nothing really drastic,” McCrae said of the distraction, which in the past warranted at least a talking-to after class.

But starting this school year, two metro Atlanta school systems are upping the ante when it comes to the use of cellphones and other electronic devices on school grounds, including spelling out possible fines and in-school suspensions.

Officials with DeKalb County and Atlanta City schools say the biggest motivations to strengthen their policies came from teacher complaints and discipline referrals. They are intended, in part, to re-focus on classroom engagement but also curb any temptation to cheat.

It comes at a time school officials nationwide are grappling with how to control access to hand-held technology during school.

Georgia's Muscogee County earlier this summer adopted a stricter policy; school officials there can now confiscate a cellphone if it is used in class.

Same for students at Rayville High School near Monroe, La., where the principal last April announced “storage fees” of \$10 and up if she confiscated a device.

The issue, experts say, represents a balancing act. Many of these schools including DeKalb's Clarkston High, where McCrae teaches, embrace the same technology as teaching tools.

Clarkston teachers, for example, use podcasts — recorded lessons that can be downloaded to a computer or electronic device such as an iPod.

“We have a lot of technology, but it is used in the instructional environment, guided by the teacher,” said Clarkston Principal Sherry Everett, who, every morning during announcements, warns that devices for personal use “should not be seen” during the school day.

“We need to be clear. We all need to be saying the same things. We need to be consistent,” Everett said.

The system previously banned students from using cellphones and electronic devices during the school day, although punishment could vary from campus to campus.

For the school year that starts Monday, officials for the first time detail systemwide penalties that start with confiscation of the device and escalate the more times a student gets caught. Three or more offenses merit in-school suspension. In each case, only a parent can retrieve the device from school officials.

“We’re not trying to be petty,” said Frankie Callaway, DeKalb’s deputy superintendent for administration. “We’re going to use common sense.”

For parents, who often view cellphones as a potential lifeline to their children in case of an emergency, stricter policies may seem reactionary.

“I’m torn,” said Sharon Jones, who has a unique view as both a mom and as an education professor at the University of Georgia. “I’ve been the one promoting the use of iPhones to help children learn to read.”

Jones’ children have cellphones, but she sets boundaries that include the school day. She notes the examples — often bad — adults set; she remembers checking out at Wal-Mart as the cashier answered her cellphone.

“I do think it is a way to connect with children” said Jones, whose classroom policy is to answer a student’s phone if it rings. “But I think it’s about moderation.”

School officials have other fears. In June, a national poll released by Common Sense Media found more than 35 percent of teenagers cheated in school using cellphones, including texting each other answers during tests and using notes and information stored on their cellphones.

Officials in DeKalb and Atlanta said they had not had similar reports from their schools, although they acknowledged the possibility. They said they wanted to be proactive and set explicit expectations.

In Atlanta, which allows only high schoolers to carry — but not use — cellphones and other devices on campus, officials in December quietly issued a new administrative regulation that will be in full effect Monday, said Chantel Mullen, the system’s dean of student discipline and student relations administrator.

The regulation spells out step-by-step the penalties, including confiscation and suspension. Unlike DeKalb, however, Atlanta includes fines starting at \$25.

“It is a more adult consequence,” Mullen said of the fines, drawing an analogy to getting ticketed for speeding. The message: “Just because you have it, doesn’t mean you should use it.”

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