

A modern-day dilemma: At what age should phones be allowed in school?

By The Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff

12.12.16

G8

It's certainly not unusual to see high school students talking and texting on their cellphones between classes or at lunch. But what about elementary school students, too?

Students in Montgomery County, Maryland's public elementary schools could soon be allowed to bring cellphones and other electronic devices to campus under newly proposed rules.

Students would not be able to use the devices during the school day in elementary schools unless a teacher permits them as part of classroom instruction. But students could use phones and tablets after dismissal or on school buses if the rules pass.

"The reality is, they are in our elementaries now," said Patricia O'Neill, a county school board member who noted that cellphones are commonplace in middle schools and high schools. She said the proposed change would largely focus on "keeping up with the times."

Using Cellphones For Safety Or Planning Reasons

The idea is part of a broader update to the district's regulations on personal mobile devices. The change could take effect as soon as the next school year. School board members discussed the change at a recent committee meeting. It requires approval from the superintendent, who oversees the schools in a district.

Parents often want districts to allow elementary school students to carry cellphones, said Ann Flynn, director of education technology at the National School Boards Association. Many parents want to stay in touch with their children for safety or planning reasons.

Schools around the country have their own rules for mobile devices. For example, elementary school students in Loudoun County, Virginia, are allowed to bring cellphones but can use them only in emergencies. In Arlington, Virginia, and Washington, D.C., cellphone policies are up to individual schools.

Too Much Responsibility For 7-Year-Olds?

Some in Montgomery aren't so sure about a rule change.

Lisa Cline, a PTA leader in Gaithersburg, Maryland, said current practices are sufficient. Families are allowed to get special permission if a child needs to bring a cellphone to school. She worries about the effect cellphones could have on elementary school culture.

"To expect a child to turn it off – and not touch it when it's in his backpack – is a lot to ask for a 7-year-old," Cline said.

Paul Geller, president of the countywide council of PTAs, said he has heard parents voice concerns that cellphones could be a distraction in the classroom or a burden for teachers. Some also worry that allowing cellphones could intensify the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

Cellphones Could Help Meet Districts' Technology Needs

Geller said some parents might appreciate their children having cellphones when they walk home alone or take buses long distances. Others say cellphones, when used as part of a teacher's lesson plan, might help meet the district's technology needs, he said.

Catherine Carpela, who has taught first-grade and third-grade classes in Silver Spring, Maryland, said she doesn't support the idea. She believes it could add to the many responsibilities teachers already bear.

"I don't want to spend my time monitoring inappropriate cellphone usage when I could be using that time for instruction," she said.

Carpela also questioned how devices would be secured. Most young students stow their belongings in cubbies or backpacks, not lockers.

Rules About Appropriate Use

School district administrators have proposed revisions to the district's regulation on personal mobile devices, which include phones, tablets and laptops.

The new regulation would include a number of rules about appropriate use. It would also have a requirement that students using their own devices at school access the Internet through the district's network. This would limit exposure to potentially harmful sites.

It would continue to allow high school students to use mobile devices during lunch. School board member Rebecca Smondrowski suggested extending lunchtime use to middle-schoolers, as well.

Smondrowski said the regulatory change does not aim to promote cellphones in elementary schools but recognizes their presence and provides guidance for their use. There also could be benefits for instruction at some point, she said.

We Are Living In A Digital World

"More and more, as we're moving into a digital time and digital instruction is becoming greater and greater, this allows teachers to take advantage of resources when possible," she said.

Sherwin Collette, the district's chief technology officer, said the update would mesh with a broader goal of allowing students to use their own devices to add to the other technology used for classroom instruction. "There is a benefit to the district as well," he said.

Collette said district staff compared Montgomery with other school systems as they considered amending the regulation and underscored that cellphones already are coming into elementary schools.

"Schools work with their students and families around the ground rules about that, and they deal with issues of discipline that arise when one is stolen or comes out of the backpack when it shouldn't," he said. "Parents understand that the school system's not responsible for any damage to them."

Amanda Lenhart, a researcher who studies teenagers and technology, found that, on average, U.S. children get their first cellphones when they are about 10, an age when many children are in elementary school.

"I think parents wrestle with this a lot: What is the right age to give a child a cellphone?" she said.

Reproduced with permission. Copyright © 2016 Washington Post. All rights reserved.

Using evidence from the text, make a case for or against elementary students using cellphones in the classroom.