Cell Phones Are Ringing

Will educators answer?

BY REBECCA FORTNER

Teachers often participate in professional development programs to stay on top of technology they could use to teach their students. Rarely, however, do they look at potential roles for technology their students are already using. The cell phone is one such device. Its value as an educational tool is vast and virtually untapped.

Surely schools could make productive use of a technology that is relatively cheap, portable, and already in the hands of the majority of U.S. schoolchildren.

The simplest use for students’ cell phones is keeping track of assignments. Rather than carrying around an assignment notebook, students could use their phones. The calendar and reminder functions can easily handle homework and tests. Kids are much less likely to leave the phone at home, at school, or somewhere else than they are a notebook.

A pilot program in North Carolina extends the cell phone’s reach far beyond keeping track of deadlines. Project K-Nect, a pilot program in Onslow County, uses smartphones as a learning tool in math classes, supplementing traditional math instruction with alternative teaching strategies. The project provides at-risk high-school students who lack computer or Internet access at home with smartphones. Teachers assign math problems for students to solve on the smartphone. If students need help, they can connect with their classmates through instant messaging and dedicated blogs. If they still can’t solve the problem, they can access digital content through the phone. Project Tomorrow, which has evaluated the program, found improvement in student test scores, engagement and participation in class, and collaboration among students.

Cell phone use is typically forbidden in public school classrooms. Teachers rightly object to phones ringing and students updating their Facebook profiles or texting during class. But educators could view cell phones differently— as engaging, interactive tools.

Rebecca Fortner teaches special education in Livingston County, Kentucky.