

# The Record

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## **More schools support classroom gadget use**

Cellphones were once verboten on most school grounds, destined to be confiscated by a principal or stashed in a locker until the end of the school day.

Now, some districts are not only encouraging students to bring the gadgets to school, they are using them and other devices — laptops, tablets, even Nintendo DSIs — in class.

The about-face is a growing trend in K-12 districts nationwide, from Georgia and Wisconsin to North Jersey. Cellphones, laptops and tablets are relatively affordable, and rare is the teenager who doesn't own at least one. As such, more teachers are incorporating Internet-based programs, applications and videos into their lesson plans, the 21st-century equivalent of the chalk and blackboard.

The initiatives come at a time when budgets are squeezed. And some school districts have found it is cheaper for students to bring their own technology than to spend thousands of dollars building computer labs or buying laptops for each student.

"They are turning to this as a potential model for giving students and teachers what's called a one-to-one opportunity for digital learning, where every teacher and student has a device," said Gregg G. Festa, the director of The ADP Center for Teacher Preparation and Learning Technologies at Montclair State University.

At New Milford High School, it is not uncommon to see students finishing homework assignments on their MacBooks in the cafeteria or using cellphones in class to text an answer.

"It's giving them the freedom and autonomy to use the devices to support what they are doing in their classes," said Principal Eric Sheninger.

Educators aren't the only ones who are ushering in this transformation: Students are one of the biggest drivers. Today's young people are more comfortable texting and typing than they are scribbling on a notepad, and many say they find the bring-your-own device movement an intuitive addendum to their already technology-saturated lives.

"I think that's why most of the students are taking such an active role in this: Because it's not the normal thing that happens at school," said 17-year-old Michael Khan, a senior at New Milford High School.

And while a few play games and share photos in class, Khan said the majority have found it engaging.

About 77 percent of those 12 to 17 own cellphones and 74 percent also have desktop or laptop computers, according to a 2011 survey by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project. About 79 percent own iPods or MP3 players, the survey states.

"Our kids go home, and they are all plugged in ... and then when they come to school we sort of unplug them," said Ridgewood Superintendent of Schools Daniel Fishbein, whose district started a bring-your-own-device program in the high school last fall and will expand it to the middle school.

But some caution that the movement can lead to educational disparities.

"For a district like Paterson, it's another question of equity — even internal equity," said Irene Sterling, president of the Paterson Education Fund, a non-profit that promotes civic participation in the district. "Most of our high school students have smart phones, but a lot of our other kids don't. It's not as ubiquitous the way it is in a district like Ridgewood."

Any bring-your-own-device program in Paterson would have to be partially subsidized, she said.

"I remind you that the average family in Paterson makes \$29,000," Sterling said. "The average in the state is \$85,000. The average in those Bergen County towns is \$100,000."

Proponents of the program say they encourage children to share their gadgets, and they don't want students or parents rushing out to the stores.

"This is really a big, important thing to us — not every student has to have a device in order for great things to happen with learning," said Jill Hobson, director of instructional technology at the 39,000-student Forsyth County school district outside Atlanta. "In fact, we like it when there is a mix of devices and not necessarily every student has a device. That's when we get collaboration and communication and critical thinking happening because students are working together."

Still, some districts are wary of tinkering with the status quo. Teaneck students can bring gadgets, but the district isn't yet using them in classes. Waldwick High School students use personal laptops to take notes and work on writing projects, but can't go on the Internet.

P. Erik Gundersen, superintendent of the Pascack Valley Regional High School District, which has one of Bergen County's oldest one-to-one laptop programs, said the initiative has worked well.

"If we were starting from scratch today and we did not have nine years invested in the program, I think we would certainly consider all of our options, whether it's a one-to-one laptop program or BYOD," Gundersen said of the program, for which the district spends \$1 million annually to lease MacBooks for all of its students.

Though significantly cheaper than one-to-one computer programs, bring-your-own-device initiatives still cost money.

Schools must have enough bandwidth to accommodate the extra online traffic. Money also has to be invested in network security, filtering inappropriate content and professional development for teachers.

Teaneck, for example, budgeted \$40,000 to expand its wireless network. Saddle Brook invested \$30,000 to \$40,000 to upgrade its network four years ago for its mobile computer program.

That financial investment paid off, said Saddle Brook Middle/High School Principal James Sarto, who said that about 98 percent of the school's 820 students have registered devices and signed a contract so they can access the district's wireless network.

And with the ban on cellphones lifted, students are no longer sneaking into the bathroom during breaks or furtively texting under the desk during class, said Sarto.

"It's like Prohibition," he said. "The prohibition has been lifted, and they don't abuse it anymore."

The devices are handy in a number of ways.

Students use cellphones to text answers and conduct polls. Laptops allow peers to collaborate through shared Web-based programs such as Google Docs. And, as happened recently in Saddle Brook, students chat via Twitter and Skype with the authors whose works they are reading.

Daisy Sam, who teaches modern languages in Ridgewood, uses an application called VoiceThread to help students hone their Spanish accents. Students record themselves reading passages in Spanish, upload the videos on their phones and then send them to her.

Some parents worry that the devices could become distractions or that children may unwittingly gain access to websites they deem inappropriate or bring banned content to school. Others welcome the initiatives, even suggesting districts bring in more digital textbooks.

"It also reduces the anxiety of going up to the board to write an answer, said Saddle Brook parent Aishia Cruz. "Everyone hated being called up to the board."

But these programs aren't the only answer. Stefanie Gigante, who teaches Latin at Ridgewood High School and supports the district's device policy, said there still must be realistic expectations about whether these tools will increase educational outcomes.

"Technology use is great," she said, "but it's not the single thing that is going to improve education, and I fear that there are a lot of people — at least on the outside of education — who think that if we can get every kid a laptop, they will learn much better, they will pass the HSPA."

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