SCHOLASTIC

Testing the Waters

initially, only about 40 percent of the class had cell phones, but kids who had them were willing to share. The text message function was mainly used at first, but as Dolman became more familiar with the myriad functions, it became clear that these gadgets had a lot more classroom potential. Video and sound recording came into play, and the phones' Bluetooth networking capabilities allowed for easy information sharing. Dolman found they worked perfectly for her classes' "lit circles," in which the students divide into smaller groups to discuss different aspects of a particular book. Previously, she found it difficult to monitor each of the different groups simultaneously. But kids who had video functions on their phones could record their discussions then Bluetooth it to Dolman's phone, and she could watch each individual discussion, without missing a moment. Dolman says such problems like class disruption were minimal. "It's a stereotype of teenagers—that you can't trust them with a cell phone. Our experience was that if you give them the opportunity to use them, and you give them guidelines to go with that use, you won't have problems."

Principal Taylor agrees. "The one thing we really stressed with the kids was the whole idea of appropriate use," he says. "They make darn sure that the volume is turned off. A lot of adults need to learn that."

As for the kids, they loved using the phones for class work, but parents in the district have had mixed reactions, says Taylor. "Some thought we were crazy, and were very strongly opposed to it, and some embraced the idea initially. As time went on, about 90 percent came to say it was a good idea. They didn't see it as a gadget, or as a replacement for learning, they saw it as a tool for learning."

Taylor's colleagues have been more enthusiastic. "In our school division there are about 90 principals and about 600 teachers, and I would say that out of the principals, there were about 15 to 20 that really were gung-ho and wanted to know what we were doing." The rest, Taylor says, thought the program was innovative and at least worth a try. "There were no negative thoughts on it whatsoever."

Learning Curves

Taylor sees the cell phone as a necessary tool to teach to kids. "We would be burying our heads in the sand if we said that cell phones were not a part of everyday life," he says. "I don't know a businessman out there who doesn't carry a cell phone. I don't know a lawyer or accountant out there who doesn't carry a cell phone. Why wouldn't we have them in schools?"

Given the example of the Craik School, why haven't more American teachers embraced cell phone use in the classroom? In fact, few U.S. schools are even considering their use. Liz Kolb, author of the recently released book Toys to Tools: Connecting Student Cell Phones to Education (ISTE, 2008), says that Americans have traditionally seen cell phones as nothing more than a social toy. "We hear stories about students using cell phones in negative ways, like posting videos of teachers to YouTube, or cheating via text messaging," she says.

Many teachers simply don't know the teaching potential cell phones have, Kolb says. "There are some teachers who have never sent a text message, so the fear of their students knowing more than them about a tool in the classroom is often very inhibiting." Professional development, Kolb says, is a necessity for normalizing the idea of classroom cell phones.

Corporate Help

Matt Cook, a math and science teacher in the Keller Independent School District, near Fort Worth, Texas, knows his cell phone inside and out. He's used it to document results in his classroom. In fact, his familiarity with cell phone tech sparked his imagination, and led him to get in touch with Verizon and AT&T, as well as software company GoKnow, based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. All three companies have agreed to donate technology to the district for a pilot program to use cell phones in fifth-grade classrooms. (Other cell phone companies are certainly interested in classroom possibilities. Qualcomm has a similar program in the works called K-Nect.)