

Cell Phones at Pleasant Grove High School

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Near the end of the 2023-24 school year, we asked teachers at Pleasant Grove High School to name the biggest obstacles to student engagement in the classroom. The top answer, without hesitation, was “cell phones.” We then asked the follow-up question: Do we really want to tackle how to manage cell phones in the classroom? The answer from teachers was an overwhelming yes, so we began developing a new cell phone policy for the upcoming school year.

The policy we settled on was the result of a teacher task force, parent focus groups, surveys of parents and teachers, feedback from students and all stakeholders, research, and attention to detail. While the process and resulting policy are important, what follows below is what we learned through its implementation this school year.

The Policy

When we began our teacher task force and parent focus groups, we did not anticipate a policy that actually separated students from their phones. Personally, where we ended was not what I had in mind at the start. However, as we studied the research, we learned that the greater the separation from a device, the less of a distraction it is.

The conversation evolved into expecting students to leave their phones in a hanging cell phone pouch/caddy during every class. I recall asking the teacher task force, “Do we really want to take this on?” There was almost a theatrical pause before the teachers agreed to move forward and take it to parents.

Parents were overwhelmingly supportive.

In the parent survey and focus groups, we learned that parents were very supportive of the school implementing a new policy. They knew cell phones were a challenge and were relieved to hear that we were considering a change. However, when we settled on our current policy of using the pouches and brought parents into the conversation, we anticipated significant pushback. We were pleasantly surprised that most parents were supportive, as long as there was reasonable flexibility. This remained true as the year progressed. Almost all parents were appreciative and felt that a stricter policy was long overdue. We had overwhelming support rather than resistance; we made many friends and very few enemies.

Students didn't hate it as much as we expected.

Probably the most surprising thing we learned was that students genuinely acknowledged that separation from their phones helped them focus. While they didn't offer thunderous applause for the policy, a consistent theme from students was that it wasn't that bad and helped them concentrate. My personal belief is that although they can't articulate why, they feel the benefits of being free from the pull of technology, even if just for a short time.

Perhaps my favorite comment from a student came from a class discussion a few months into the school year. A teacher asked the students what they thought of the policy. One student mentioned that they didn't like the policy unless they had a class where they needed to concentrate... and then it helped. The teacher reported that the class all agreed that this was a good representation of how they felt. Think about that comment for a minute; it is insightful on many levels.

It was harder than we thought.

A common theme among teachers, parents, and students in our community was the desire to be firm yet reasonable. Consistent but flexible. We wanted to avoid power struggles between teachers and students, allowing teachers flexibility to implement the policy in a way that fit their classroom management style. We wanted to allow reasonable exceptions for special circumstances (accommodations, emergencies, etc.). We didn't want the focus to be on restricting cell phones, but rather on increasing engagement.

This balance proved extremely difficult. If we measured our success based on how well we walked this fine line, then we fell short, as it required a degree of nuance that stretched our entire faculty and staff. However, as we reflect on the school year, we have gained valuable experience and insight that will help us improve and adjust for the future. I am optimistic that as the years go by, we will be more successful at finding the right balance and developing a cell phone-free culture.

Things did not go as planned, and that's okay.

At some point, our policy was referred to as a "cell phone ban." It was funny how a phrase catches on and spreads. It was not a cell phone ban. We relied on teachers committed to enforcing the expectation in their classrooms and students seeing the benefits, not a heavy handed ban. The weight of the success thus fell on the teachers implementing the policy in their classrooms. It was a genuinely challenging task we asked of teachers, and there was varying success. Additionally, not every teacher was convinced that the pouches were necessary. Based on conversations with teachers in April of this school year, about half of our teachers consistently used the pouches daily.

Some might argue that this indicates a failed policy. I disagree. What we have now is a basis for conversations with a full year's worth of experience on the benefits and drawbacks of using the pouches. We hope to build on that experience and increase the use of the pouches with more consistency as the next school year begins.

On a side note, many students thought they were beating the system by bringing old phones, cases without phones, or even cardboard phone replicas to put in the pouches. These students, however, were so determined to keep up the facade that they faithfully kept their actual phones tucked away in their backpacks or pockets—out of sight. Their motivation to beat the system actually resulted in them keeping their phones away. That was a win for us.

Teacher responses

The feedback from teachers who successfully implemented our policy was overwhelmingly positive. One teacher noted that for the first time in many years, they felt the weight of watching for cell phones lifted, and they once again enjoyed teaching. It adds a subtle burden to teaching when a teacher must constantly be on the lookout for phones. But one glance at the full cell phone pouch was a breath of fresh air that immediately lifted that burden and allowed teachers to focus on teaching.

Other teachers reported an unexpected benefit. Previously as students engaged in group work there were several students who would withdraw and turn to their phones. However teachers noticed that groups, especially with quiet students, were much more engaged with each other because there was no phone handy to turn to.

Looking back on the school year, we recognize that things were far from perfect. Every administrator and school leader knows that once a school year starts, countless distractions and priorities can derail any well-intended plans made in the summer. This happened to us at PGHS. However, what we have learned will serve as a foundation as we continue to improve how we address the distraction created by cell phones in our classrooms.