

A View from the Principal's Office

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A View from the principal's office – Cell phones

I am often asked, “Have kids changed over the time you have spent at Hartford?” My answer, more often than not, is that I am not sure that kids have changed but the world around them certainly has. Specifically, the omnipresence of the cell phone has shifted student engagement in school in a variety of ways. It is not an exaggeration to say that our administrative team spent three weeks during the summer talking about the best response to the distractions and disruption that emanate from many students' phones. We continue to struggle daily with students around their devices. Some students are addicted (literally, you can research it), some believe that access to and use of their phone is their right, others are of the opinion that they are fully able to manage their phone – despite significant evidence to the contrary. We find ourselves in the middle of conflicts that are the result of mean-spirited and cruel behavior originating with a post or text. Young people thrive in social media – neither cell phones or social media are inherently good or bad; however, in the hands of the teenage yet-to-be-fully-formed brain, significant social and emotional damage can be done. We want to partner with our students as they learn the valuable lessons inherent in phone use. We recognize that many of our students – especially those who are older – use their phones appropriately and as a tool to support learning and organization. After yet another week of struggling with students who are unable to manage this tool, I am writing to each of you.

Some parents have suggested that we simply take their child's phone when they are at school; this is a parent's prerogative, not a blanket policy appropriate for a school. When we have taken this step because circumstances have dictated that we do so, we often see an improvement in all sorts of school-related matters; everything from improved engagement in classes leading to improved grades and to a reduction in inappropriate behaviors in our classrooms and hallways. We have had luck collaborating with parents when the phone becomes an issue for a learner. We have some students who begin their day dropping their phone off in our offices or with an administrative assistant. Our teachers work hard to engage

students and the cell phone is a barrier for some. I am not of the opinion that draconian measures will support student learning – I am of the belief that some of our students cannot function in a school (life?) without their phone. It is our responsibility to support their learning.

I always struggle when I pose a problem without offering some solutions (or at least a few suggestions). If your child is unable to engage with others when they have access to their cell phones, limit the time they spend on the device. All research agrees that cell phones in a teenager's bedroom often disrupt their sleep patterns and can, in extreme cases; result in students not sleeping at all. If your child exhibits addictive behaviors around their phone, if their response to your request to hand over the phone or get off of it is disproportionately aggressive to the request, if he or she becomes overly emotional about their phone – any of these taken to the extreme can be a sign of cell phone addiction. I encourage you to do your own research on this topic; many studies include helpful suggestions for families and schools to support students' appropriate use of the phone. We know that too many hours on a screen can literally change our brain. This generation of young people is growing up in a time when the damage that can be done by the phone has a long-term impact. Once again, there is too much research to ignore on this topic.

I hope we can partner to support all of our children's learning and that when we find the need to ask a student to hand over their phone, they will do so. Some of our students are requiring that we take much more significant measures before they accept the reasonable expectation that our students engage in learning when they are in classes.

Thank you in advance for your partnership – please know that this is a significant issue for us and represents the greatest change that I have seen in the lives of our students.

Thanks for reading,

Nelson Fogg
Principal, Hartford High School