

# Txting away ur education

Texting threatens to eclipse the real reason students go to school: to learn. But will schools, or parents, finally act to curb this disruptive obsession?

By Patrick Welsh

When students graduate from T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Va., on Thursday, school officials will do what they should have done back in September: Take possession of all the iPods and cellphones. As students go into the graduation ceremony, they will be searched and their electronic toys will be taken away. At a meeting of some 560 seniors a few weeks ago, the principal told them that they “could live without their cellphones for two hours.”

He might have been a bit presumptuous. The iPods are bad enough. Every day, students — between and often during class — are plugged into their iPods, seemingly off in another world.

But it's cellphone text messaging that both parents and schools need to declare war on. Texting has become an obsession with teenagers around the country. According to the Nielsen Co., in the last quarter of 2008, teens were averaging at least 80 texts a day, a figure double what it was the year before.

T.C. Williams' handbook for parents boldly declares, “The operation of electronic devices including cellphones and iPods is not permitted in the school building. These items will be confiscated for a minimum of 24 hours on the first offense.”

Reality, though, is something else. The rules are so inconsistently enforced that kids consider them more an inconvenience than a real threat. Even parents send text messages to their kids during class time.

And the problem is getting worse, as students become more adept at disguising their texting. One student admitted to often sending 10 texts during my class. Others admitted to sending and receiving more than 200 texts over the course of a day. Most kids are such pros that they can text while the phone is in their pocket, a purse or under the desk, while maintaining eye contact with the teacher.

For the most part, all this subterfuge might seem like innocent adolescent behavior, but evidence suggests that texting is undermining students' ability to focus and to learn — and creating anxiety to boot.

Many students have come to feel that they cannot live without texting. Says senior Laura



By Sam Ward,  
USA TODAY

Killalea, with a hint of hyperbole:

“Most of my friends would die if they had to go to school without their cellphones.” Another student, Yasir Hussein, admits that when he doesn't have his phone he gets anxious. “I feel like I am in the dark, secluded, isolated.” Cellphones have taken such control over teens that virtually all the students I talked to said they often feel as if their phones are vibrating when they don't even have them.

MIT professor Sherry Turkle told me that texting is “an always-on/always-on-you technology.” She says cellphones cause not only “the anxiety of disconnection,” but also “the anxiety of connection which comes from the expectation that you will respond immediately to a message you get.”

Despite all the technological advances that were intended to increase communication and efficiency, adolescents as well as adults are living in what Maggie Jackson, author of *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*, calls “an institutionalized culture of interruption, where our time and attention is being fragmented by a never-ending stream of phone calls, e-mails, instant

messages, text messages and tweets.”

For students, these “advancements” only add to the difficulties an already distracted generation has had maintaining focus to do serious school work. “Attention is at the heart of any in-depth intellectual activity. When your times of focus and reflection are always being punctured by a cellphone buzzing, it's hard to go deeply into thinking and problem solving. You cannot be creative,” says Jackson. “Texting is undermining kids' opportunities to learn. ... They will shy away from challenging material.”

One of the great ironies of the high-tech revolution is that devices meant to facilitate communication are actually helping to destroy it. For my students, rethinking what they wrote and hammering out second or third drafts is beyond all but a handful. In fact, texting has a language all its own, with its own abbreviations and terse messages, all of which hardly translates into good writing.

Math and science teachers at my school see the same, with kids wanting the quick answers instead of going through the struggle that will help them understand what is behind the mathematical or scientific principles involved.

Even so, there is hope.

“We have fallen into bad habits with all the new technology,” Jackson says, “but we can push back on the distractions, control those habits. We need to look at it all with fresh eyes, tally up the cost that distraction is costing us and our children and make changes.”

The summer break is upon us, but administrators and parents need to consider two changes before students return in the fall:

► Parents should disable the text messaging function of their kids' cellphones.

► Those students who curse teachers out and refuse to hand over their phones — as has happened often at T.C. Williams — will have to be punished. A crackdown the first day of school in September will set the get-tough tone for the rest of the year.

At the very least, administrators and parents can agree that the school day should be the one time when kids can do without their cellphones. Or maybe I'm just being presumptuous.

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