

Teachers experimenting with cellphones as learning tool

BY LAURA ISENSEE

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Students In Tandy Caraway's Intensive Math class, from the left, Selina Quezada, 16, Erika Abreu, 15, and Cynthia Torres, 16, at Miami Killian Senior High School, BYOD, bring your own device, in the classroom. The girls are working on an iPhone to create a cryptogram.

EXPO FOR TEACHERS

The Education Fund will hold an expo for teachers this weekend. It features workshops on using mobile technology in classrooms and also seminars on Science, Technology, Engineering and Math, or STEM, projects.

The event is Saturday from 8 a.m. - 3 p.m. at the Miami Beach Convention Center.

For more information, visit EducationFund.org.

Some teachers are experimenting with the Miami-Dade school district's new BYOD - Bring Your Own Device - policy. Students can bring hand-held devices, tablets and laptops to class, as more instruction becomes digital.

At Miami Killian Senior High, where cellphones are typically off-limits during class, teacher Tandy Caraway had an unusual request for her morning math students.

"Take out your phones, whatever device you have," she told the 10th-graders on a recent Thursday.

About 10 teens pull out smart phones. Students without devices partnered up with those who had them. They logged onto the wireless Internet. They texted answers to a poll about using mobile devices at school. Then they got busy solving algebra word riddles.

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"Now everything's technology, so you're just used to it," Stephanie said.

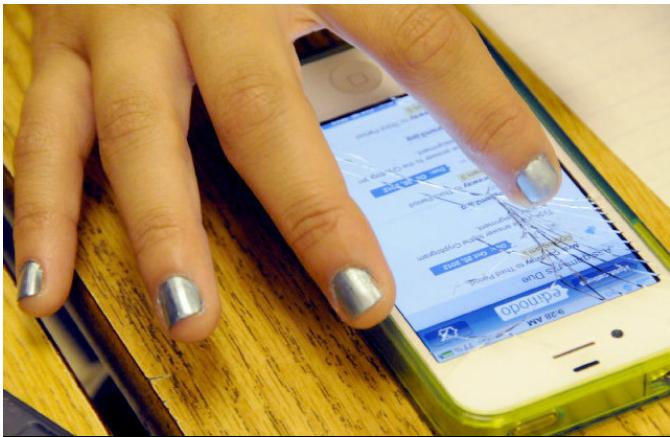
Caraway's class is among those experimenting with the Miami-Dade school district's new BYOD - Bring Your Own Device - policy. Students can bring hand-held devices, tablets and laptops to class, as more instruction becomes digital.

Teachers see cellphones as "here to stay" and a way to get kids excited, according to a recent study by Pew Internet about how teens do research in the digital age. The study found half of teachers surveyed said cellphones are not allowed in class. But among those who do allow them, 42 percent say students use them to look up information, and 38 percent use phones to take pictures or record video for an assignment. Still, on digital technology overall, the jury is still out. The Pew study found 64 percent of teachers surveyed said current technologies "do more to distract students than to help them academically."

Caraway said the new approach poses a learning curve for teachers.

"They have to learn how to implement it in their class and still make it effective, as opposed to kids just have their cellphone out because they want to play on their cellphone," Caraway said. She will be one of dozens of teachers giving workshops at The Education Fund's expo for teachers Saturday at the Miami Beach Convention Center.

The BYOD policy is born partly out of necessity. The school district doesn't have the money to buy laptops for all of its 350,000 students. Not all kids in Miami-Dade, where most qualify for free or reduced lunches, can afford to buy one. A \$1.2 billion bond measure, which voters approved Tuesday, will support other technology, mostly network infrastructure, but not buy devices for individual students.



In Tandy Caraway's Intensive Math class, at Miami Killian Senior High School, BYOD, bring your own device, in the classroom, Thursday, October 25, 2012. Stephanie Rosado, 15, works on her iPhone, to create a cryptogram.

"I think by the end of this year, we'll have a better sense of how many kids are really able to do that -- what the gap is between kids that can provide their own device and places where we need to furnish devices," said Sylvia Diaz, administrative director of the instructional technology department.

Deborah Karcher, chief information officer for the district, said schools need time to ramp up. So far, all Dade's high schools have wireless hot spots, but not all have campus-wide wireless Internet. The district is working to install that with federal grant money. "I think what you're going to see are pockets and the pockets will grow," Karcher said.

At South Miami Middle School, Suzanne Banas has experimented with using iPads. She calls it "iTeach, iLearn."

"The goal is, if I teach something I'll learn, and they're doing it in a fun way," she said. Students pick a science topic they've (supposedly) learned. They shoot video and edit it.

They created a video that teaches a science lesson geared to elementary students. Some videos so far feature gerbil-powered light bulbs and strange properties of water.

Banas, who teaches physical science to 140 students over six periods, has two or three iPads available to share, no budget to buy more and limited Internet bandwidth. "I don't have the money, I don't have the bandwidth, but I think it would be really engaging for kids to have access to," Banas said.

Banas and Caraway received \$750 each in grants from the Verizon Foundation, through The Education Fund. The money, more than \$20,000 for 27 "disseminator" grants, are meant to help teachers share successful ideas or projects.

Even younger students are getting exposed to technology in the classroom.

At Auburndale Elementary in Miami, Yahaira Rufin has her first-graders use iPod touches and digital players for reading exercises in a pilot program with Innovations for Learning, a group in Illinois that focuses on digital learning and online tutoring. The pilot expanded this year to kindergarten and first-grade classrooms in nine struggling schools, and the school district bought 580 devices, according to Innovations for Learning.

With the players, Rufin's students listen to a text and read along in a booklet. With the iPod touch, they work on drills, like frequently seen words. "I love it because not only do you see the kids, and they're so enthusiastic, but I know it's controlled by me," Rufin said.

Caraway, who has taught for seven years at Killian, said the technology is more productive. If she graphs math problems on the board, they could go over four in a period. But with the devices, they can look at four graphs 10 different ways.

She said the tools make her more of a facilitator, but classroom management is still paramount. How does she make sure students don't text or play games on their phones? "You set time limits, you know their posture and demeanor," she said.

In the morning math class, her students work quietly on algebra equations that students created. The answers give clues to solve word riddles. (One final answer: "It's all about the K," a popular saying at Killian Senior.)

Not all the students are fans.

Erika Abreu, 15, prefers writing it out with paper and pencil "100 percent" more. "On the phone, it's more confusing to me," she said. "I've always learned on paper, so I think that's the reason why, and I don't use my phone for math. It's something new."