

Good evening Chairman Brewer, school board members, Dr. Russo. As you know, I'm Monica Smith, President for the Hampton Council of PTA/PTSAs and am speaking on behalf of those members. I would like to address you about the proposed cell phone policy.

First, I would like to thank the Policy Committee and Hampton City Schools for being forward thinking and recommending this change and being willing to work towards a solution. I appreciate the fact that the PTA concerns were considered and that they acknowledged the research showing that 80% of VA school districts allow their middle school students to carry cell phones. If all these school districts can do it, why can't Hampton.

Whether the policy allows it or not, cell phones are here & they're in our schools!

As you know our PTA supports the change in policy to allow middle school students to carry cell phones. I have explained the safety concerns before regarding the fact that there are no pay phones anymore and that our students are at bus stops, walking home, going to JV sports at High Schools and attending after-school activities without access to a phone or ability to call for help. More recently, I've heard concerns from parents due to the current economy. There are instances with both parents working; parents working 2 jobs OR now having to work odd shifts or longer hours that don't allow them to be there in the mornings or afternoons when students are going to and from school. Knowing that their child can call them if there is a problem, gives those family members peace of mind. Also, due to the current economy, we realize that most of the items that Hampton City Schools & PTA had discussed to address safety issues can not be done now. Such as re-installing pay phones at schools, having office staff answer phones longer after school ends & providing transportation for JV sports.

I would like to address the concerns that you specifically mentioned at the school board meeting last week. I'm so glad that this dialog has started now so that we know the concerns and can start to work together to address them.

There was a concern about gangs arranging jumpings and using technology to do many different things. In response to that, the type of kids that are in gangs or arranging jumping of other students are not the type to worry about a silly cell phone rule. They're working under much higher category offenses and are going to carry them regardless of this rule. I am much more worried about what else they are carrying other than that cell phone. If I were that student being ganged up on, I would want to have a cell phone on me to call for help. As a parent, I would want my child to be able to call someone if they see a situation like that. This is exactly one of the reasons why parents want their child to be able to have a cell phone before and after school.

There was another comment about the argument of convenience being couched in the safety argument. PTA is not trying to hide the fact that cell phones will be convenient. We have simply brought the safety concerns forward because those were our biggest concern. Those safety concerns are real and cell phones offer a safety device that was not available in the past. The fact that they're convenient is an added bonus. Yes, cell phones are convenient and will be a great help to us parents trying to keep up with our children's busy schedules. And yes, cell phones have made the teacher's job more difficult and we're not arguing that. But please keep in mind, cell phones are adding to their job no matter what the policy because they need to watch for them being used whether they're allowed or not. Parenting is a tough job, and improving communication with our children will make our jobs much easier. Wanting to ease a parent's job is nothing to be ashamed of.

There were also concerns about cell phones not being age appropriate for middle school students. Many 6th graders have cell phones now. Our children are technically savvy and have the tools. We need to

teach them to use them responsibly. After all, it's a simple rule: if you have a cell phone when you get to school, then turn it off. That could even be a reminder on morning announcements. That's not something that a 6th grader could not understand. Middle School students are being allowed to walk from middle schools to high schools for JV sports. Some are even issued expensive lap-tops for which they must be responsible. A parent needs to be the one to determine maturity & appropriateness for their student. Note that another option for middle schoolers is that the policy could require them to stow them in lockers. Unlike high school students, they all have lockers and have time to get to them before class.

Now for concern about parents. That is a great point that parents also need to understand the cell phone responsibility. They need to respect those rules themselves. PTA would be glad to help communicate expectations and guidelines. Really, a middle school student should only have a cell phone if a parent feels it's necessary. Initially, PTA suggested policy requiring a signed permission slip for a Middle School student to carry a phone. We would support any policy that enables parents to send their middle schooler to school with a phone if they deem it necessary. Currently, policy doesn't allow any exceptions and parents can not give their students a cell phone under any circumstances even for the 1 student last year that we brought to your attention that was being stalked at the bus stop.

There was a comment about there being phones in classrooms for students to use. Yes, the students can use a phone to call the parent, but the parent has no way of contacting the student if there is a change in plans or an emergency. The office phones aren't on after school hours and students aren't necessarily in a specific classroom for after-school activities. Secondly, the existence of classroom phones doesn't help when students outside of the school: at bus stops or riding their bike home.

There was also a comment about taking photos with the cell phones. Currently, students are allowed to carry cameras to school, so banning cell phones isn't going to address that.

Overall, even with the current policy (as HEA stated themselves), cell phones are in our middle schools. Children who are going to be cheating or using phones during school are the ones that will sneak in schools regardless of policy allowing phones. The only people being deterred by the current policy are the responsible parents and children. We need to focus on building the responsibility & to do that may need to look closer at the consequences. I think it would be helpful to look at the consequences and discipline policies at school districts who are successfully allowing cell phones. I have made contact with a Fairfax County school board member who championed this change in 2003 for them to ensure the safety of their students. She said it is working well there and is going to get some tips and information for me as soon as you can.

In conclusion, we know it is not an easy issue. There are many aspects to consider and I know that those speaking on both sides of the issue all have the safety and education of our students at heart. However, we strongly believe that we need to change with the times and keep up with technology. Cell phones are a fact of life which we need to acknowledge. As technology changes, we need to help teach our students the responsibility that comes with that. We want to be able to take advantage of a technology that can help improve our children's safety. Our PTA is willing to help however needed to make it work.

One more thing in response to the HFT survey that was presented tonight. I just want to remind you that we had a 1 week petition last year and collected over 200 signatures in support of the policy. I re-instated that on-line petition just this past Monday and have already collected 70 more.