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This Digest discusses the results of a survey on the installation and use of telephone

lines in K-12 classrooms. A summary of the observations, comments, and opinions from teachers and educational administrators from around the world as well as references to conference presentations and printed articles about the subject are included.

INTRODUCTION

In June 1994, a Texas Center for Educational Technology (TCET) "customer" (a teacher in a Texas public school) requested information/documentation that could persuade the school district administration, the school board, and the community that telephones in K-12 classrooms are necessary. Since TCET did not have information on file concerning the use of telephones and telephone lines in education, the request for information was forwarded to educators worldwide via the Internet. Several educational listservs and conference groups on the Internet posted a request for comments, observations, and opinions from educators having experience with telephones in the classroom. TCET received responses to the information request from large and small schools (public and private). Geographically, responses came from school districts all across the United States and from Australia. Although reports included a few cautions and negative observations, the vast majority of comments were resoundingly positive favoring the installation of telephone lines in classrooms.

Respondents agreed overwhelmingly that in an age of information and communications, it is essential to equip K-12 classrooms with modern communications tools including telephone lines. Students and teachers need to learn how to use communications tools to gather information to support learning in various curricula.

The survey indicated that telephone lines are used in classrooms in predominately two ways: voice communications and computer communications (telecommunications and telecomputing). A couple of respondents mentioned the use of phone lines for the exchange of FAX messages.

VOICE COMMUNICATIONS

As expected, most respondents indicated that improved parent/teacher communication was the primary advantage of voice communications. Many also reported improved intra-campus and inter-campus communications. Telephone installations improved office to classroom communications in many schools. With classroom telephones it was not necessary to disrupt the whole class with an announcement over the PA for a student to come to the office. The office can contact the teacher by phone and the teacher can quietly tell the student to go to the office.

Ken Phillips, Principal at Taylor Elementary School in Cleveland, Tennessee, installed a key electronic telephone system as a flexible, versatile solution to the need for an intercom system. Three telephone lines come into the school. The phone rings only in the office. If a call for a teacher is determined to be important enough, it is transferred to the teacher's phone. The system can also be an intercom and they can even pipe background music into the classrooms.

Many respondents found that a telephone in the classroom helped considerably with discipline management. John Eye, Media Generalist/Computer Coordinator in Round Lake, Minnesota, stated "I observed a teacher walk a disruptive student right up to the phone to call home, explain the situation, and discuss a solution." Some school districts have also reported a considerable decrease in absenteeism because of phones in the classroom.

According to Nancy Martin, Principal at Monroe High School in Monroe, Washington, one of the pluses of phones in the classroom is "...more immediate access from the classroom to the main office in cases of emergency (medically fragile students or accidents for example)." In a related scenario, some schools include phones as a key part of security.

Many reported an increase in teachers' morale (teachers are finally being treated like the professionals that they are). Apparent increases in efficiency and productivity have accompanied increases in morale. Quoting Leeanne Needham, Technology Specialist with the Issaquah School District in Issaquah, Washington, "What a difference the phone made! We were much more productive as educators. The most beneficial part was the improvement of teacher/parent communication."

In an article in "Education Technology News" (February 16, 1993), Lockwood Elementary School, Montana, reported that having telephones in the classrooms improved student morale. When students complete outstanding work, they are encouraged to call their parents and relate the good news.

In some high schools with classroom telephone installations, the teachers put information in their voice mail about homework and assignments for the week, easily retrievable from a student's home. This has resulted in considerable improvement in communication between teachers, students, and parents. Announcements for sports and other events are sometimes posted on voice mail.

At some schools, students use classroom telephones to obtain local research information and to contact content experts. These activities enhance learning and add current knowledge to many curricula.

In the Reader Exchange column of "Learning94" (August, 1994), Beverly Blackman Dornburg of Bill Brown Elementary in Spring Branch, Texas, reported that she used a speaker phone in her classroom to let her students communicate with their pen pals in Australia! Similarly, Lockwood Elementary School teachers had their students talk long distance with President Clinton during the presidential campaign to get, first hand, his position on various issues. Students also talked with an executive of Taco Bell to obtain information about the corporation's new automatic taco-making machine.

Gellerman (1994) discusses many applications of various telephone systems that are

now in K-12 schools. Major uses include: (1) making important school information available to the community, (2) allowing connection to electronic grade book programs, (3) ability to check on a student's progress (homework hotlines), (4) obtaining test schedules via voice mail, and (5) checking attendance records. A few high schools have installed telephone registration similar to that used at many universities.

Potential negatives of having telephones in classrooms include abuse of the communications tool by teachers and/or students. Proper use of the system needs to be part of orientation for students and teachers. A phone ringing in the classroom can be disruptive, but probably no more so than the teacher from across the hall coming in to borrow something. Most of the schools are preventing this by answering all calls in the office. Calls are then forwarded to the classroom only when the teacher has a free period or if the call is an emergency.

COMPUTER COMMUNICATIONS

Computer communications via telephone lines (telecomputing) allow teachers and students access to information for conducting research in almost any area of the K-12 curriculum. It opens connections to content experts from around the world via E-mail, E-mail lists, and newsgroups and allows for the exchange of document and data files. Survey respondents reported that the best way to connect classrooms to the Internet (and other information highways) is to establish a local area network (LAN), a computer network throughout the school. Once the LAN is in place, equip it with a communications server that allows any computer on the network to connect to the outside world.

The negatives of telecomputing are few but include the fact that the telephone line is not the best connection (access) to the Internet, although it is the most economical. The worst negative might be the "garbage" that is accessible through the Internet. Some means will need to be established to control what information students access. Flanders (1994) discusses various aspects of this issue.

FAX

Yet another mode of communication via telephone lines is the FAX machine. In his response to TCET's request for information, Gary Bowers of Region X Education Service Center in Richardson, Texas, reported that Lawrence Livermore Laboratories in Livermore, California, faxes answers to questions from middle school students in the Livermore area.

Gellerman (1994) also reports that some schools will now FAX course information, enrollment forms, and student grade reports.

PRIMARY DETERRENT TO INSTALLATION

For many school districts, the principal hindrance to installing telephones or telephone outlets in classrooms appears to be the cost. Many districts have found ways to minimize the expense, however. Several schools have four or five lines coming into the school that are connected to a key telephone system or a PBX system from which lines are run to each classroom. Other schools have found different ways to split one line into four or five to similarly cut down the cost of phone bills yet provide the classrooms with this essential communications tool.

In a presentation at TelEd '93, Fergus (1993) revealed one sizable school district's solution for putting phone lines in classrooms. The Des Moines Public School District chose to install its own telephone system to serve the entire district. Although it was a large financial investment in the beginning, money was saved in the long run, and there is a telephone in each classroom. The district phone system was installed in 1985. They are currently wiring eight schools per year and should have all sixty schools in the district wired and telephones in all classrooms by the end of 1995.

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