People are using cell phones everywhere, even in schools, leading some school systems to ban them during the academic day. “Cell phones don’t contribute to learning and are potentially a distraction,” says Thomas Sherman, Virginia Tech professor of education. “There are already enough distractions; there’s no need to add another.”

Sherman, who researches how children learn, explains that cell phones may inhibit younger children from learning the full range of communication.

“Cell phones mediate or ‘stand between’ people,” he says. The words are sent but the non-verbal information is not. Some consider the voice tone, facial expression, and physical gestures as important to the meaning of a message as the words. When communication is frequently mediated, it is possible children will not learn these subtle aspects of communicating well. Today much communication is mediated with telephones, computer e-mail, and video. It is appropriate to limit this mediated communication with young children.

Modern cell phones are sophisticated devices that, like games, television sets, and computers, operate from screens. The idea of excessive “screen time” worries many educators. Children can spend two to four hours each day in front of screens. Much of this time has limited physical and mental activity. Often solitary entertainment screen time can occupy the majority of children’s out of school free time. Educators recommend that children engage in active play, read, play social board games, and fantasy play. “Screen time” should be limited.

Sherman listed a few other reasons for not having cell phones in school including that the ringing can be a distraction. Cell phones could contribute to social inequities creating a new level of “have/have-not” distinction. There may also be a “keep up with Jones” response as new and fancier phone technology comes along. Cell phones are small and getting smaller, thus, are easily lost and a potential target for theft.

“There are no good reasons for children to have cell phones,” he says. One of the reasons frequently given for youngsters to have cell phones is to allow them to be able to contact someone in an emergency. “But schools are safe places so emergencies don’t happen often,” Sherman says. “Schools are good about recognizing emergencies and making the appropriate contacts. Besides, it is not good to give children the impression schools are unsafe—exactly the opposite of the truth.

“There really are no clear learning related uses,” Sherman says, “and several disadvantages.”

It also is not accurate for families to think that the cell phone is making it easier for daily planning. Sherman suggested that waiting until the last minute to make plans—thus necessitating a call to the child—is a poor model for children. It is a better model for children to be learning to plan and study with a longer perspective. Parents should keep children informed and within a well planned context.

“Young students don’t need this electronic tether to home and parents. They should learn to make decisions and experience the consequences. If children can’t make, on their own, the decisions needed at school, they may never learn to be independent thinkers. We just don’t need to be so ‘connected,’” Sherman says.

Thomas Sherman is a professor of teaching and learning at Virginia Tech.

**Article 1:** Answer the following questions about “Cell Phones Don’t Contribute to Learning.”
Directions Article 2: Look at the title of the piece. This should reflect the main idea of the article.
Reading and the Cell Phone: An Up and Coming Romance
By Terence W. Cavanaugh (FLORIDA READING ASSOCIATION, Winter 2006)

In this article, Dr. Cavanaugh stretches our notions of literacy by providing examples of how technology, in this case cell phones, can be used for reading and writing.

Cell phones and schools are not usually associated together, at least not in a good way. But this form of technology is one that has been undergoing great leaps and improvements, and perhaps one day soon teachers will be reprimanding students for forgetting to bring their cell phones to class, or teachers will be listening to excuses from the student who didn’t complete his reading homework because the phone battery was recharging.

Today cell phones seem to be everywhere and in nearly every hand. And before anyone dismisses the idea of using cell phones for reading, consider how readily available these tools are. The digital natives of today, also known as a member of the Millennial Generation, seem to have been born with a cell phone, to the extent that in 2003, over 43% of school aged children owned at least one wireless device (Patrick 2004). Breaking down that statistic you will find that in 2003, 70% of middle and high school students and 61% of upper elementary students had cell phones (Branigan 2004), and the numbers have only been growing since then.

First let’s think about the phone. Today’s cell phones have a number of interesting functions and abilities beyond just voice communication. One factor of the constant technology growth is that today’s better cell phones actually have the computing power of a mid 1990’s personal computer (Prensky 2004). Now, a number of cell phones also have the ability to use removable memory cards, which can be used in the phone and in a computer. Almost all cell phones now can send and receive text messages, do note-taking (as voice or text), have calendars, and the ability to play games – which actually means that they can run additional software programs. Some phones have abilities which are becoming more common, such as being able to browse the Internet or play MP3s.

What does this have to do with reading? Well for one thing, students are already reading their phones: texting or messaging has become a common tool for students. What I’m suggesting is that teachers start thinking about using the communication tools that students already have, are using, and are quite comfortable with. Let’s start having our students use their cell phone also as a reading tool – Books on Phone. One of the early cell phone books to receive a lot of attention was written by an author in Japan named Yoshi, who self-published a book titled Deep Love as a serialized book that was distributed as downloadable text files to be read on cell phones (Steuer 2004). Within three years of its release the cell phone book’s download site had accumulated over 20 million hits, being very popular with female teen readers.

Already there are a wide variety of book types available for cell phones, including non-fiction, poetry, graphic novels, short stories, and whole novels. For the cell phone, these electronic books break down into three basic formats: audiobook, web book, and Java book.

In some ways the modern cell phone is like the VCR of yesteryear – remember the flashing clock that perhaps you or your parents couldn’t get to stop. Enter the digital native: children took to VCRs and cable television programming and used them with what seemed like instinct. Today cell phones occupy a similar niche in the technology environment, so if you really want to know what your cell phone can do, sit with a teenager and get him or her to take you through step by step some of the options and abilities of your phone.

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Article 2: Answer the following questions about “Reading and the Cell Phone: An Up and Coming Romance.” Remember to go back to the text!

1. What does the title suggest that the article is about?

2. What claim/argument is being made by the title?

3. As you read, did you remember to underline the most important idea in each paragraph? Do it now if you forgot! Review each of these ideas. What do all or most of the details deal with?

4. Looking at what you underlined, what patterns do you see in the details and diction (author’s word choice)?

5. Write one to three sentences that “sum up” the details you underlined.

6. What is the issue presented in this article? (Write the issue in the form of a question.)

7. What might be another side to this issue?

8. How does this article relate to the first one you read?