

## Foul Winds Lashing Cell-Phones

### Japanese Schools Moving to Bar Them

By Isao ADACHI

Something unusual is unfolding in the Japanese cellular-phone market that has expanded at a red-hot pace. Coupled with market saturation, a switch to a new system of cell-phone sales that has added to the cost of replacing handsets with new models led to a decrease of as much as 20% in handset shipments in 2008. Furthermore, some Japanese primary and junior high schools, horrified at the sight of boys and girls victimized in bullying and crime apparently connected to the omnipresent device, began at the end of 2008 to bar students from bringing cell-phones with them amid concerns their use is running out of control. The move against juveniles, a demographic group spending heavily on cell-phones, will hit the youth segment of the market and deal an additional blow to the phone industry. It is also expected to trigger a heated debate on the possible impact of the personal communication tool on children.

Governor Toru Hashimoto of Osaka Prefecture was the first to declare a cell-phone ban at public schools. As much as 30% of the nation's primary school pupils and 60% of junior high school students own cell-phones, according to the Telecommunications Carriers Association. In Osaka, a task force set up by the prefectural government to study bullying and other wrongdoing related to cell-phones and the Internet reported in December 2008 that 50% of junior high school students and 90% of high school students owned cell-phones. Among Osaka's primary school children, cell-phone ownership had grown eightfold in five years, the report said.

The Osaka report also revealed excessive cell-phone use – more than three hours a day for one in every six first-year junior high school students and one in every three first-year high school students. Bullying, including slanderous notes in board messages, blogs and emails, was increasingly rampant, reportedly victimizing one in every six fourth-year primary school pupils and one in every three first-year junior high school students. As a corollary, the more time they spent with a cell-phone, the report said, the less time students spent on study and the more bullying they suffered.

Osaka's ban spread to other prefectures as the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology issued a directive in July 2008 instructing primary and junior high schools across the country to adopt regulations forbidding students, in principle, to bring cell-phones with them to school.

In fact, even before the ministry's directive was issued, a ban of the sort had been in place at most primary and junior high schools. However, schools have been unable to impose the ban strictly in the face of opposition from



Osaka Gov. Toru Hashimoto meets the press on Jan. 21, 2009, against the backdrop of stickers appealing for a ban on the use of cell-phones at public schools.

some parents who insist their children, coming home late at night from cram schools, should be able to carry cell-phones for their safety.

"Parents are not fully aware of the extent of misuse by children and subsequent exposure to dangers," says an official of Osaka Prefecture's education board, which has made a renewed request for a total ban. "We need to hammer out clear-cut regulations so we can help parents end children's excessive dependence on cell-phones. For that end, parents should find time to talk to children and find out what is going on."

The Osaka government, which conducted an email-based opinion poll of residents over the pros and cons of cell-phone control, said 80% replied that cell-phones were not a necessity for primary and junior high school students. Opposition was expressed by the remaining 20%, including working couples asking for a special exemption from a ban, claiming that cell-phones were the only means of keeping in touch with their children.

On the other hand, cell-phone companies are publicizing a series of safety measures they have taken, including web filtering that restricts access to malicious sites. "The advantage and disadvantage of owning a cell-phone varies from one person to another. It's not simple," says an embarrassed official of a major cell-phone operator. "We want to be a part of discussion to see what's proper for children."

The problem is that the impact of a personalized tool of communication on society and family has been largely left untouched. The shift from family phones to personal ones is in fact changing society in a big way, just as the invention of telephone changed society. The most symbolic incarnation of just such a change should be considered to have surfaced in the world of children. It is necessary to have the perception that this change calls for a sort of thought on what our society should look like, digging deeper than weighing the convenience and marketability of cell-phones.

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