

The case for phone-free schools

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Summary of the findings

- 1. There is considerable evidence that mobile phone use in schools harms student attainment.** A study by the LSE Centre for Economic Performance found that a mobile phone ban in school has a material effect on the chances of a student achieving good GCSEs. The most benefit goes to those with low prior attainment.
- 2. While the vast majority of schools have some restrictions in place, there is little consistency and many schools do not have strict policies.** It is thought that almost every school has some kind of restriction on mobile phone use on school premises. However, there is no incentive for these to be enforced and data suggests wide variation in compliance.
- 3. Parents, teachers and the general public are supportive of restriction on mobile phone use in the classroom.** A new poll for Onward finds that 65% of people are in favour of a ban on mobile phones in schools. Previous polling shows that 59% of parents are also in favour. Recent teacher engagement suggests that a strong majority of teachers are similarly opposed to phones in the classroom.
- 4. A number of other countries have recently passed restrictions on mobile phone use in schools.** New South Wales in Australia plans to ban phones in primary schools later this year, following in the footsteps of France in 2018 and Israel in 2016.

In 2001, a survey of 91 schools in London, Birmingham, Leicester and Manchester revealed that not a single one imposed restrictions on mobile phones on the premises. By 2012, the ubiquity of mobile phone use, especially amongst young people, meant that 98% of the same schools had a policy in place to limit their use. Within a generation, mobile phone ownership has exploded.

The effect of mobile phones in school is the subject of increasing political and educational debate. In the UK, not only do many schools now impose some kind of restriction, but policymakers increasingly argue for further action. The current Schools Minister, Health Secretary, Education Secretary and Her Majesty's Chief Inspector for Schools have all argued that phones use in school should be curbed. This follows an international trend, with France, Australia and Israel all acting in recent years.

It also draws upon a limited but growing evidence base, most notably from the London School of Economics' Centre for Economic Performance, which finds that a ban on mobile phone use in the classroom is linked to lower levels of disruption, reduced behavioural concerns and has a significant beneficial impact on children's educational progress and attainment.

Yet, in the UK, action has so far been relatively limited. We rightly have a system of school autonomy that allows decisions to be taken by head teachers who are accountable to the children and parents. This should not change.

This paper therefore sets out a series of reforms that retain headteacher autonomy but nonetheless strongly encourage schools to take stricter action on mobile phone use - to benefit children's learning, reduce teacher workload, and prevent poor behaviour.

The effect of mobile phones on learning

There is growing evidence that mobile phone use impacts students' learning. In a major study in 2015, academics for the London School of Economics Centre for Economic Performance found that "mobile phones can be a source of great disruption in workplaces and classrooms, as they provide individuals with access to texting, games, social media and the Internet". Measuring the examination results of 91 schools operating a range of restrictions on mobile phone use between 2001 and 2012, the study found that following a ban on phone use, student test scores improve by 6.41 percent of a standard deviation and students at schools with strict bans were 2% more likely to gain A*-C in five GCSEs.¹

This effect was most pronounced for students with the lowest prior attainment. Students who performed in the lowest quartile for achievement previously gained an average 14.23 per cent of a standard deviation, more than double the improvement seen amongst all children. Students in the top quartile are unaffected by the phone ban. This suggests that the students most at risk from unrestrictive mobile phone policies are those with the greatest educational need. Overall, the study found that pupils in schools that ban mobile phones see an increase in test scores equivalent to extending the school week by one hour every week or increasing the school year by five days.²

These findings have been mirrored by other studies from around the world. In 2014, Stephanie Dietz and Christopher Henrich of Georgia State University found in an experimental study that college students who received a text message during a simulated lecture scored significantly lower numbers of correct responses in a subsequent test.³ In 2017, a study by Daniel Pulliam at Western Kentucky University found that an increase in student mobile phone use in classrooms was associated with a decrease in academic performance, and that 87% of teachers reported being distracted by students using their phones.⁴

In 2018, the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee explored the impact of screen time on young people's health. The committee heard from several schools that told MPs about the "avalanche of pressure" from social media in secondary school and the harmful effects of cyberbullying. The committee recommended that the 'What Works Centre for Education' evaluates the different approaches to handling smartphone use in schools so as to provide a basis for making evidence-based guidance available to both primary and secondary schools.

The variation of policies in England and Wales

England and Wales have a decentralised school system with high levels of autonomy and discretion for headteachers and school governing bodies. As a result, there are no national rules governing the use of mobile phones in school and no accurate database of school policies on or how strictly those policies are enforced. In November, the Children's Commissioner Anne Longfield told MPs that "every school has a different policy, some have 'keep it in your bag if you can', some are quite hands off, some say there should be no phones in schools."⁵

The Department for Education has recently said it estimates that 95% of schools in England control the use of phones in some way. However, the study conducted by the LSE found that while 98% of the schools it surveyed had implemented a ban of some kind by the end of that period, there was wide variation in the type and enforcement of that ban. In total, 34% of the schools they surveyed had low compliance bans, measured on the headteachers' own view of how well the policy was adhered to by students.⁶

The views of teachers, parents and the public

The limited evidence we have suggests there is strong support from teachers for a ban on mobile phones in school. In his 2017 survey of teachers in the United States, Daniel Pulliam observed that 87% of teachers found mobile phone use by students a distraction during lessons.

In 2018, Teacher Tapp, a new instant polling app, surveyed that 70% of teachers agreed with the statement “I don’t think students should be able to use mobile phones in lessons”, with 47% of respondents saying they strongly agree.⁷ A separate poll conducted in September 2018 found that while 61% of teachers thought mobile phones were a necessity for 15-year-olds, against 39% who thought it was a luxury, just 3% of teachers thought that a mobile phone was a necessity for a 10-year-old, compared to 91% who thought it was a luxury.

Polling finds a similar level of sympathy amongst parents and the wider public. In September 2018, a poll for Internet Matters found that despite 72% of children in Year 7 having a smartphone, nearly 6 in 10 parents (59%) said they think pupils should not be allowed to carry their mobiles around school. In the study, only 1 in 10 (9%) parents said phones should be permitted in lessons, 1 in 4 (27%) at break time and 1 in 3 parents (34%) over lunch time.⁸ In December 2018, Onward polled 10,000 people in a nationally representative sample. We asked respondents: “some people argue that Government should ban the use of mobile phones in school to help children concentrate and improve behaviour. To what extent would you support or oppose this policy?”.

In total, 65% of respondents said they agreed with the policy, compared to 26% of people who responded with some level of disagreement. 28% of people signalling the highest level of agreement.⁹ Every age group aside from 18-24s supported a ban on mobile phones. Geographically, people in London were much less likely to support a ban than people who lived elsewhere, and those on the edge of towns or in the countryside were more likely to support a ban than those living in urban centres.

The international context

Increasingly, other developed countries are implementing restrictions on mobile phones in schools in order to protect students’ attainment and concentration. In 2006, Michael Bloomberg, the-then Mayor of New York City, implemented a ban on mobile phones in schools across the city’s 1.1 million student schools district, on the grounds that mobile phone use was a distraction to students and teachers. In 2015, his successor Bill de Blasio the ban, shortly followed by other jurisdictions, including Barbados.¹⁰

Other countries, however, have moved in the opposite direction. In 2017, the Israel Ministry of Education banned the use of mobile phones for both teachers and staff during the school day.¹¹ In 2018, President Macron of France implemented a nationwide ban of mobile phones in French schools for pupils up to the age of 15 years old.¹² In September 2019, primary schools in New South Wales will ban the use of mobile phones during the school day.¹³

Policy options for England and Wales

There is widespread support for taking some action on mobile phone use in schools in England and Wales. In recent months, leading politicians and officials including the Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, the Health Secretary, Matthew Hancock and Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector for Schools, Amanda Spielman, have all called on headteachers to restrict the use of mobile phones in the classroom or on school premises.¹⁴

However, as policymakers acknowledge, the decision as to whether to ban phones in schools is largely a matter for individual headteachers and school governing bodies, given the high levels of autonomy and freedom devolved to school level in England and Wales. This creates a tension between the clear political will of politicians and inspectors and the autonomy of decision-making. Ministers are rightly reluctant to override local autonomy through centralised decision-making.

This paper therefore considers a different approach to achieve the benefits of a ban on mobile phones in schools without the Government unilaterally imposing a restriction on every headteacher’s freedom to decide what is best for their school. This proposal has three component parts:

Recommendation 1: Schools should implement a phone-free policy for students during school hours. We have worked with Parents & Teachers for Excellence to create a kitemark to accredit schools that do this.

There is longstanding evidence of the success of accreditation schemes in driving positive behaviours. Successful examples include the Government-sponsored Investors in People kitemark, which recognises work to improve recruitment and progression practices in business. In education, there are numerous schemes that exist for schools, including the Stonewall School Champions and UN Rights Respecting School initiatives.

We have worked with Parents & Teachers for Excellence to create a simple kitemark scheme for schools who adopt a phone-free approach. This is a voluntary registration for schools and other educational institutions that adopt and reinforce a policy containing two simple criteria:

- For Year 11 students or below, mobile phones are not to be used, seen, or heard at any point anywhere on the school site;
- Breaches of this rule, without expressed permission in exceptional circumstances, would be sanctioned in line with the school's usual disciplinary procedures.

These criteria should be consistently enforced by all staff, and parents asked to support the policy when it is introduced or when their children join the school. While sanctions will vary from school to school, we further recommend that confiscated phones should be held for a meaningful period of time to be effective at changing pupil behaviour. The case studies in this paper emphasise the benefits of such policies.

Recommendation 2: Ofsted should incorporate specific reference to mobile phone use into its new inspection framework.

In October 2018, the Chief Inspector of Ofsted announced major changes to the Education Inspection Framework to deliver greater focus on how schools are achieving their results, and whether they are offering a curriculum that is broad, rich and deep. The inspection framework also split the previous judgement for personal development, behaviour and welfare into two separate categories of Behaviour and Attitudes and Personal Development, rightly recognising the difference between behaviour and pupils' personal welfare. However there is currently no reference to mobile phone use despite evidence that it harms pupils' attainment. Ofsted should take into account mobile phone policies in their inspections under the new framework, and note in final inspection reports when there are examples of particularly good or bad practice on the issue.

Recommendation 3: The Department for Education should update its Behaviour and Discipline in Schools guidance to include detail on good practice for mobile phone policies.

Section 89 (1) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 places a responsibility on headteachers to promote good behaviour, self-discipline and respect; prevent bullying; ensure that pupils complete assigned work and otherwise regulate the conduct of pupils.¹⁵ The guidance was last updated in January 2016 and contains no reference at all to mobile phones or social media.¹⁶ Given the rapid growth in the ownership and use of mobile phones by children and young people and the growing evidence base about its harmful impact on students' achievement at school, we believe that Ministers should update the guidance to strongly encourage schools to adopt positive restrictions on mobile phones during the school day.

Case studies

Queen Elizabeth Academy

Queen Elizabeth Academy is a non-selective Secondary school in Mansfield. It was re-brokered to The Diverse Academies Learning Partnership in 2016 after decades of underperformance, and has yet to receive an Ofsted judgement in its current academised form.

The new leadership team at QEA did not ban mobile phones at first, feeling that there were higher-priority

issues to focus on. However, after nearly two years of seeing the damage that they were causing to learning in the classroom, a decision was made in Easter 2018 to ban mobiles from being seen, with a punishment of confiscation; pupils can then collect the phone from reception at the end of the day. Principal Helena Brothwell credits this as one of the key landmarks in the ongoing journey to improve the school, stating that it has improved attentiveness, reduced cyberbullying, and improved social interactions around the school, to the point where even many pupils support – or at least understand – the policy. Parents have been wholly supportive, and she estimates that around four phones are confiscated each week.

Michaela Community School

Michaela Community School was created by the headteacher Katharine Birbalsingh in 2014 in an old office block in West London. In 2017 it achieved an ‘Outstanding’ rating by Ofsted.

If a pupil’s mobile phone is seen or heard anywhere in the school grounds it will be confiscated immediately and if a second phone is found on the person, this will also be confiscated. Confiscated phones will normally be returned at the end of the term or half term in which they were confiscated. If the confiscation takes place within two weeks of the school holiday, the phone will be confiscated until the next school holiday. If the pupil hesitates “even slightly” in giving over their mobile phone, they are placed in detention.

Magna Academy

Formerly Ashdown Technology College, Magna was converted into an Academy in September 2013. It achieved an ‘Outstanding’ rating by Ofsted in 2018.

Magna’s mobile phone policy is slightly different from both QEA and Michaela. Students are advised not to bring mobile phones into the Academy. If they are brought in they must be switched off and stored securely in the student’s bag. If it is found in use or stored on the student’s person, for example in their jacket or trouser pocket, it will be confiscated immediately and kept at the Academy for 7 school days. Parents or carers will then be contacted to come and collect the phone. The phone will not be returned to the student. Students bring their phones into the Academy at their own risk.

Outwood Grange Academy Trust

Outwood Grange is an academy trust based in the north of England, predominantly in Yorkshire. At the time of writing the trust has thirty-one schools on its books, and has made a point of taking over schools in difficult circumstances.

Outwood have one mobile phone policy that is consistent across the whole trust. When they take over a school the trust literally paint a line at the school gates, after which no mobile phones can be seen or heard. If a phone is seen outside of a pupil’s bag – regardless of whether it is switched on or not – it is confiscated. The school will only return the phone to a parent/guardian, not a pupil, meaning that the parent/guardian has to come in and physically collect it themselves. CEO Martyn Oliver has said that the policy usually causes issues for the first couple of days the trust has the school, and that after that everyone understands and respects the policy.

Endnotes

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3. Computers in Human Behaviour (2014), Vol. 36, Issue. C, '[Texting as a distraction to learning in college students](#)', by Stephanie Dietz and Christopher Henrich, Georgia State University.
4. Daniel Pulliam, Effect of student classroom cell phone usage on teachers, Western Kentucky University, May 2017, iv
5. Science and Technology Committee (2018), Evidence from Anne Longfield, 13 November, Q572
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7. Teacher Tapp (2018), '[What teachers tapped this week #39](#)', July 2018
8. Internet Matters (2018), '[Back to school campaign](#)
9. Onward (Forthcoming), Poll by Hanbury Strategy. Fieldwork conducted in December 2018.
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11. Ministry of Education (2017), '[Use of teaching staff on cellular phones](#)', 4 April 2017.
12. Guardian (2018), '[French school students to be banned from using mobile phones](#)', 7 June 2018.
13. Guardian (2018), '[Mobile phones to be banned in NSW public primary schools](#)', 13 December 2018.
14. The Times (2019), '[Ban phones in schools](#)', 2 February 2019; The Daily Telegraph (2018), '[Exclusive: Teachers should ban mobile phones in classrooms](#)', says minister', 19 June 2018; BBC (2018), '[Ofsted chief inspector backs ban on phones in schools](#)', 21 June 2018.
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16. Department for Education (2016), 'Behaviour and discipline in schools. Advice for headteachers and school staff'.