THE USE OF MOBILE PHONES IN SCHOOLS

A rapid evidence review

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Executive summary

This rapid evidence review brings together international research evidence on the impact of banning mobile phones and restrictive phone policies in schools. Identified studies were from high-income countries in Europe, Australasia, the UK and the United States. Collectively, the evidence explores if and how phone restrictions influenced academic outcomes, student wellbeing and mental health, behaviour and bullying, classroom practice, and policy implementation.

Across the identified literature, there is limited and inconsistent evidence that banning mobile phones leads to improved academic attainment. Large quasi-experimental studies, including national level analyses, show no significant improvement in test scores following the introduction of school phone bans. Some studies identify small improvements in classroom engagement or focus, but these changes do not reliably translate into sustained gains in academic performance. Where benefits were observed, they tended to be modest and appeared more pronounced for particular groups, such as lower-attaining or more disadvantaged students, rather than across student populations as a whole.

The relationship between banning and or restricting mobile phones and student wellbeing is complex. There was no overall improvement in mental wellbeing, anxiety or depression because of restrictive phone policies within the studies identified. Some studies suggested small reductions in psychological distress, particularly among specific sub-groups such as older adolescents or boys, but effect sizes were limited. At the same time, some studies highlighted unintended consequences, including increased anxiety among students who were uncomfortable being separated from their phones. Overall, the identified evidence suggests that policies banning phones alone are may not function as mental health interventions and most were considered alongside broader wellbeing and support strategies.

The identified evidence relating to behaviour, bullying and social interaction was mixed. While some studies reported improvements in face-to-face interaction and classroom focus following the removal of phones, there was no consistent evidence that bans reduce bullying or cyberbullying. In some contexts, bullying levels were similar in schools with and without bans, suggesting that wider social and environmental factors could be influential. Qualitative research with students showed

that many experienced positive changes in peer interaction and engagement, but also reported reduced autonomy, difficulties managing emotional distress, and concerns about limited access to parents during the school day.

Identified studies on research on implementation highlights that enforcing mobile phone restrictions could generate significant organisational and relational challenges. Teachers often reported that collecting and monitoring phones was time-consuming and could negatively affect student–teacher relationships, particularly when policies were applied inconsistently. Even in schools with strict restrictions, phones continued to be used for educational purposes, and other digital devices became alternative sources of distraction for some. Evidence suggests that structured approaches to implementation, including the use of storage systems, clear leadership, and advance consultation with students, staff and parents, were associated with higher levels of acceptance and smoother implementation.

Comparative studies of policy design indicate that full bans do not deliver clear advantages over partial or regulated approaches. Restrictive policies reliably reduced phone use during the school day, but they did not reduce overall screen or social media use. In some cases, stricter bans were associated with lower school belonging or weakened student–teacher relationships, particularly for certain groups. Across multiple studies, students, teachers and parents expressed stronger support for clear limits on classroom use, age-appropriate expectations, flexibility, and involvement in the development of school policies.

Taken together, the identified evidence base provides limited support for mobile phone bans as a standalone solution for improving learning, wellbeing or behaviour. Where positive improvements were identified, they were generally small, vary between groups, and depend heavily on how policies are designed and implemented. The research suggests that effective approaches move away from blanket bans towards clear, regulated and age-appropriate restrictions that are embedded within wider strategies for digital literacy, student wellbeing and positive school culture. Mobile phone policies are likely to have most impact when they are consistent, transparent, informed by local context, and developed collaboratively with school communities.

Rapid reviews, by their nature are not comprehensive, and as such, the findings should be treated with caution. For example, these included studies were mainly explorative and descriptive and were not specifically designed to measure the effects of banning or restricting use on a range of outcomes, such as academic attainment and psychological wellbeing.

Based on the evidence we have identified and reviewed, we have generated recommendations for policy makers, which are presented at the end of this report.

Background

Young people are among the most intensive and frequent users of smartphones [1]. There is increasing international concern about the potential negative psychological and physical health consequences associated with excessive engagement with digital technologies, particularly among children and adolescents [2]. As mobile phones have become increasingly embedded in school life over the past two decades, an increasing number of countries have implemented policies restricting or prohibiting their use in educational settings [3]. The United Nations has reported that approximately one quarter of countries, including France, Israel, and Turkey, as well as parts of Canada and Australia, have enacted legislation requiring public schools to prohibit mobile phone use during the school day [3]. In contrast, other countries, such as the UK, have adopted non-statutory guidance that recommends restricting phone use while allowing schools discretion over implementation [4]. Notably, even prior to the introduction of recent legislation and guidance, many schools had already implemented their own policies to limit student mobile phone use during the school day [3,4]. Restrictive school phone policies are based on assumptions that prohibiting phone use in schools will improve mental health and wellbeing, educational attainment, and reduce problematic use and levels of disruptive behaviour [4,5].

This rapid evidence review was conducted to find and synthesise published evidence on:

- use of smart mobile phones in schools - both primary and secondary
- high income countries only
- focussed on interventions to ban and/or reduce phone use during teaching time in schools
- published between 2020-2026

Methods

The design of this study is a rapid evidence review. Academic databases (PubMed, ERIC and MEDLINE) and Google Scholar were searched for relevant academic publications from 2020 until 15th January 2026. Different search strategies were employed across the databases and given the rapid nature of the review the search was comprehensive but not systematic. Search terms included: 'mobile phone', 'cell phone', 'smart phone' or 'mobile device' in combination with 'school', 'education', 'classroom' or 'teach'. Truncation and spelling variants were employed where appropriate and the searches included relevant subject headings, where available, alongside the keywords.

We also adopted 'forward-and-backward' citation checking to search the reference list of relevant papers and the papers that cited those relevant papers. Besides citation checking, we searched for relevant grey literature (i.e., reports published outside of traditional commercial publishing) in the Google search engine and Google Scholar. The eligibility criteria were articles published between 2020-2026 exploring the effectiveness of interventions employed to restrict phone use during teaching time in both primary and secondary schools in high-income countries, with an emphasis on secondary schools, and written in the English language.

We identified and summarised eleven peer-reviewed research articles and two reports.

The evidence was summarised into an Excel file under the following headings:

- Type of evidence
- Source of evidence (e.g. citation)
- Link to source of evidence
- Date(s) of intervention
- Place of intervention
- Population
- Age range
- Type of intervention/methodology
- Outcomes
- Conclusions

We identified and reviewed eleven peer-reviewed articles and two published reports. The studies reviewed include quasi-experimental evaluations, natural experiments, scoping and systematic reviews, cross-sectional surveys and qualitative research conducted across high-income countries in Europe, Australasia, the UK and the United States.

Evidence summarised from academic publication

- The impact of banning mobile phones in Swedish secondary schools [6].

Since 2006, Swedish teachers have had the authority to confiscate mobile phones. Kessel et al. (2020) implemented a difference in differences (DID; a quasi-experimental technique that measures the causal effect of some non-random intervention) strategy to investigate the impact of schools banning mobile phones on

the test scores of students aged 15-16 years. The researchers sampled from schools that operated in the school year 2016/2017 (n = 1423).

The effect of a mobile phone ban on test scores in Sweden seems to be very small. The researchers found no improvement in student performance in schools that introduced a mobile phone ban in Sweden. The policy guidance is therefore as follows: although a national ban is a low-cost policy, small or no learning gains are to be expected in Sweden and in countries with a similar school system.

Despite these findings, Sweden is implementing a nationwide mobile phone ban in primary and lower secondary schools (ages 7-16) starting in autumn 2026, requiring students to hand in devices at the start of the day for storage until dismissal.

- Complexities of Managing a Mobile Phone Ban in the Digitalized Schools' Classroom [7]*.*

This was a longitudinal qualitative study conducted between 2018-2019, with the aim of exploring the implementation of a teacher-initiated ban of students' mobile phones during secondary school classes in Sweden. Participants in the study consisted of eight certified teachers, with approximately fifty students aged between 16-19 years subjected to the ban.

Six themes emerged from the discussions:

• Motives and strategy for implementing the ban - To tackle disturbances and create a positive learning environment, the teachers devised a procedure to collect mobile phones at the beginning of each class and return them at the end of that class.

• Making exceptions - The analysis shows that implementing the ban turned out to be a challenge and was not done consistently across the teachers. The collection of devices was seen as challenging, time-consuming, stressful, and often involved conflict and negotiation.

• Students' responses to the implementation of the ban - initially most students complied with the ban but became less positive over time. Strategies to avoid handing in their mobile phones were used and phones were used surreptitiously.

• Relationships and trust - teachers expressed that upholding the ban affected relationships with teachers, particularly where the student resisted handing phones for collection.

• Mobile phones as a tool for learning - in 11 of the 13 team discussions revealed that, despite the ban, teachers continued to integrate students' mobiles into their teaching in various ways.

• Other occurring disturbances - the teachers noted that the school's laptops emerged as a source of distractions when mobile phones were not present.

The study outlines difficulties of implementing strict mobile phone policies that are consistent and efficient. Implementing a ban brings new organisational, pedagogical, and relational challenges that can be difficult for the individual teacher to handle in situ in the classroom.

- Evidence for and against banning mobile phones in schools: A scoping review [8].

Researchers at Queensland University of Technology, Australia conducted a scoping review covering original research studies which explored the impact of mobile phone use in school on academic outcomes, mental health and wellbeing, and cyberbullying in both primary and secondary schools. The review identified 22 studies conducted in 12 countries (Bermuda, China, Czech Republic, Ghana, Malawi, Norway, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, UK, USA).

The authors stated that despite the variability of findings, it seems that in some circumstances there were some negative, although small, impacts of mobile phone use on academic outcomes. This suggests that restrictions on mobile phones in schools might be beneficial for some students' academic achievement but make no difference to others.

While some studies reported that mobile phones had a negative impact on students' mental health, other studies reported students are likely to feel anxious if they are not able to check their phones regularly (referred to as 'nomophobia' (fear of 'no mobile phone')) and that such problem was particularly evident as schools re-opened after COVID-19. Two quasi-experimental investigations, nonetheless, reported no significant effects of mobile phone bans on student social wellbeing.

The evidence for banning mobile phones on the grounds of reducing cyberbullying was mixed. They conclude that considered collectively, removing mobile phones from schools is unlikely to have significant impact on cyberbullying.

The scoping review showed that there is limited robust evidence to support the mobile phone ban debate. There was also a lack of studies able to demonstrate cause and effect, such that many were either cross-sectional or qualitative designs, and over half of the identified studies were unpublished papers and therefore lack the rigour of the peer-review process.

Despite this, legislators in several countries have enacted, or are considering, legislation to ban or restrict mobile phones in schools. For example, from August 2023 all states and territories in Australia have enacted bans on mobile phone use in schools.

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- Smartphones at school: A mixed-methods analysis of educators' and students' perspectives on mobile phone use at school [9].

Gath et al. (2024) used a cross-sectional survey design to examine educator (n = 217) and student (n = 332; aged 7 years to 18 years; mean = 13.9 years, standard deviation = 2.0) perspectives on students' mobile phone use in New Zealand schools in 2023 through a mixed-methods approach. At the time of data collection, there were no government regulations in place regarding students' use of phones at school or in the classroom.

Of the 89 schools included in the study, the vast majority of schools allowed students to bring their phones to school with them, and nearly all of these schools had rules in place for student phone use. When educators and students were asked about mobile phone use rules in schools, the two most common types of regulations that both participant groups thought schools should put in place were (1) having phones locked away for the school day and (2) having allotted times of the day when phones could be used (such as during break times but not during class). Those who suggested that phones should be locked away for the entirety of the school day provided various suggestions for implementing this rule, including use of lockboxes in the classroom, handing phones in to the teacher each morning, or turning phones off and putting them away in the students' school bags. Fewer participants suggested a complete ban, whereby no phones are allowed at school at all. There was a recognition by some participants that the rules should be age-dependent, with stricter rules for younger students and more freedom for self-management in older students.

The authors proposed several recommendations based on the findings:

1. Policies related to student phone use should move away from the rhetoric of a complete "ban" to the regulation of mobile phone use during the school day.

2. All schools should implement transparent and enforceable regulations on student phone use during the school day as follows:

(a) Students should be allowed to bring their phones to school but have them locked away during the school day.

(b) The use of phones for specific educational purposes or at allotted times is allowed at the teachers' discretion.

3. Schools should provide contexts for students to develop digital device self-management skills, learn about the risks and opportunities of mobile phones, and develop the ability to critically evaluate online content.

- *"Phones off while school's on": Evaluating problematic phone use and the social, wellbeing, and academic effects of banning phones in schools* [10].

This natural experiment employed a 2 (phone ban: yes/no) x 2 (time: baseline, follow-up) repeated-measures design, chosen to align with the Department for Education of South Australia (DECD) 2023 mobile phone policy. The phone ban policy in South Australia requires all students' phones to be stored away in a bag or locker during school hours. Schools employed the Yondr© pouch, a magnetically locked bag, for restricting phone access.

The study involved surveying one group of schools (n=3) at the end of Term 2 (June), 2023, and then in early Term 3 (August), 2023, after they had implemented the ban. Students (n = 1282 at baseline; n = 1256 at follow-up) aged 12-18 years were recruited from five public secondary schools. Surveys measured the mobile phone ban's influence on students' problematic phone use, academic engagement, school belonging, and bullying.

There was no significant main effect on problematic phone use or psychological distress and life satisfaction. Academic engagement increased over time for the ban group but did not significantly change in the no ban group. However, there was no significant between-group difference in academic engagement at follow-up.

In terms of bullying, the ban group had higher bullying than the no ban condition. Furthermore, bullying decreased over time, but there was no significant difference between the ban and no ban groups.

Imposing access restrictions may not affect the underlying psychological mechanisms that drive problematic phone use. The results indicated that the ban and no ban schools either did not differ significantly, or there were minimal differences, in terms of problematic use of mobile phones, academic engagement, school belonging, and bullying. There was a small decline in bullying and problematic phone use over time in both school groups regardless of phone ban, suggesting the phone ban may not necessarily underlie these changes.

- *Psychological consequences of school mobile phone bans: Emulated trial of a natural experiment in South Australia* [11].

Baggio et al. (2025) conducted a secondary analysis of a natural experiment using an emulated trial framework to examine the impact of a mobile phone ban implemented in Australian schools in 2023 (King et al. 2024; see above). The exposure was a school-wide mobile phone ban (ban already implemented, ban not yet implemented). The secondary analysis included 1062 participants (mean age =

14 years). The primary outcome measure was psychological distress. Secondary outcome measures included positive and negative affect assessed by a mood scale.

The phone ban was associated with reduced psychological distress (small effect sizes). The effect of the ban was not significant for positive affect (happy, lively, proud, joyful, and cheerful), but the ban was associated with a significant decrease in negative affect (scared, able, afraid, and sad). Stratifying the analyses by age group, gender and deprivation suggested that the phone ban could benefit specific subgroups more than others. For instance, impacts of the phone ban were identified for adolescents over the age of 14, and boys.

The significant reduction in the psychological distress scale suggests that restricting phone use in schools may be beneficial. A significant reduction in psychological distress in relation to the mobile phone ban implies lower levels of depression and anxiety. However, the small effect sizes suggest that phone bans should be complemented by other interventions that target mobile phone use and mental health. Such complementary approaches could include digital literacy and e-safety education, mental health promotion programmes and strategies to promote positive social interactions during school hours.

- *Student perspectives on banning mobile phones in South Australian secondary schools: A large-scale qualitative analysis* [12].

This study was part of a larger research project involving evaluation of the 2023 South Australian school phone ban (King et al. 2024). This phase of the project employed qualitative methodology to examine students' perspectives on phones in schools and their personal views and experiences of the phone ban, including perspectives on the benefits and challenges related to phone bans in schools. A total of 1549 (752 females, 729 males, 62 other; aged 12-18 years (mean =14.4, SD =1.5 years)) students from five secondary schools in South Australia provided 7188 responses to open-ended survey questions.

Thematic analysis of 69,589 words identified five categories with 16 themes. In terms of undesired effects of the bans, students reported: (i) feeling less independent and trustworthy, (ii) losing access to digital learning tools, and (iii) difficulties in regulating emotional distress without phones. However, students also reported benefits in areas of: (i) face-to-face social interaction, (ii) personal health and safety, and (ii) classroom engagement. Some students expressed a desire for education on responsible phone use, as well as approaches to managing digital devices with flexibility and personal agency, as an alternative to banning phones outright.

The present study's findings highlight the complexities of the phone ban from the perspective of students and add to the currently limited number of evaluation studies.

Positively, many students reported that the ban had improved their academic engagement, peer interactions and friendships, and had multiple health and safety benefits. In this way, these data appear to provide support for the policy's main objectives. However, students also highlighted personal challenges related to the ban, including a reduced sense of autonomy, having less available communication with parents, and difficulties in managing emotions and well-being.

- Implementation of Social Media Initiative in 2 Middle Schools: "Be Focused. Be Present. Be Somebody" [13].

The 'Be Focused. Be Present. Be Somebody' program to restrict mobile phone was implemented in schools in Georgia, US August 1, 2024. The program involved students locking their phones and smartwatches in a Yondr pouch upon arrival to their first period class. At the end of the school day, teachers unlocked each pouch, which stayed at school. Exceptions were made for students with medical conditions that required technology to monitor health, such as diabetes.

Gazmararian et al. (2025) carried out pre- and post-program surveys with staff; parents were surveyed prior to the program; and students were surveyed annually (student n = 2050 in 6th-8th grades; typically aged 11-14 years).

Results of the staff survey post-implementation showed that phone and smartwatch use during class time dramatically declined. The most common problems were students expressing worries about their inability to contact parents from their devices and general resistance to providing their devices. Amongst staff the programme was perceived to lead to a notable increase in student focus, reduced distractions, and fewer behavioural issues, with many staff respondents also seeing improved engagement and less tardiness.

Parents considered that 'safety/safe/emergency' should be the highest priority regarding the impact of student mobile devices.

Comparing student surveys before/after implementation, amongst 7th grade students, there was an increase in respect from teachers (4%) and in productive classroom behaviours (13%). There was also an increase in rates of bullying on social networks (1–7%) and a decrease in adults to contact when they needed help (6%). For 8th grade students, there were similar increases in rates of productive classroom behaviours (22%) and bullying on social networks (3–10%), in addition to unique increases in feeling successful in school (12%) and adults to contact when they needed help (7%).

Preliminary feedback and data indicated that the program was well received with a notable positive impact on teachers and students. It was considered that the

thoughtful approach to obtain feedback of concerns during the planning stage as well as ongoing monitoring and solicitation of feedback from students, teachers, and parents was likely a critical component to ensure acceptability of the programme. Strong programme leadership and responding to early concerns were also seen as important.

- School phone policies and their association with mental wellbeing, phone use, and social media use (SMART Schools): a cross-sectional observational study [14].

The SMART Schools study conducted a cross-sectional observational study between 2022-2023 with adolescents (n = 1227; aged 12-15 years) from 30 English secondary schools, comprising 20 with restrictive (recreational phone use is not permitted) and 10 with permissive (recreational phone use is permitted) policies. The primary outcome measures were mental wellbeing (assessed using Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale [WEMWBS]). Secondary outcome measures included smartphone and social media time.

No evidence of a difference between groups was observed for mean WEMWBS mental wellbeing score when controlling for other variables. Regarding the mental health outcomes of anxiety and depression, there was no evidence of a significant difference between permissive and restrictive schools.

Students attending restrictive schools had significantly lower in school smartphone time and social media time compared to students in permissive schools. However, this reduced use in schools with restrictive phone policies did not manifest in differences in the overall time spent on phones and social media. Increases in smartphone and social media time were associated with reduced mental wellbeing on a weekday, on a weekend day, and across a week, although in-school phone and social media use was non-significant.

This study does not provide evidence to support the use of school policies that prohibit phone use during the school day in their current form, given that no differences were observed in mental, physical, and academic outcomes for adolescents attending schools that permit, versus restrict phone use. However, the negative associations found between increasing time spent on phones/social media and worsened mental health and wellbeing do provide evidence on the need to address phone and social media use in adolescents, and school policies should be developed as part a more holistic approach.

- Secondary school smartphone policies in England: a descriptive analysis of how schools rationalize, design, and implement restrictive and permissive phone policies [4].

This study provides a descriptive analysis of the content and implementation of smartphone policies across 30 secondary schools in England, comparing schools that do (permissive) or do not (restrictive) allow phone use during recreational time. School policy documents were collected, along with survey data from pupil (n = 1198; aged 12-13 years and 14-15 years), teacher (n = 53), and SLT (n = 30) participants between 2022-2023.

Pupils in permissive schools showed significantly lower agreement than pupils in restrictive schools, that most teachers understand the school phone rules. However, pupils in permissive schools showed significantly higher agreement than pupils in restrictive schools, that most pupils support the school phone rules, and that most pupils follow the school phone rules. When students were consulted on the school phone policy rules, they indicated a preference for rules around the use of phones within the classroom to prevent them from becoming a distraction to learning.

Teachers/Senior Leadership Team (SLT) in restrictive schools showed significantly higher agreement than those in permissive schools, that most pupils understand the school phone rules. Furthermore, teachers/SLT in restrictive schools showed significantly higher agreement than those in permissive schools that most teachers support, and ensure the pupils follow the school phone rules.

Evidence from this study suggests that rather than simply prohibiting phone use during the school day, the challenge for schools is to develop more balanced and collaborative approaches to phone use, and that resemble a middle ground between a blanket ban and unstructured use. Overall, people tend to be more supportive of rules if they have been involved in designing them. Furthermore, it is important to contextualize policies in the needs of the local context.

Disconnect To Reconnect: How Variations between Types of Smartphone Bans Influence Students' Well-being and Social Connectedness in Dutch Secondary Education [15].

The researchers explored to what extent the type of smartphone ban (i.e., partial versus full) in Dutch secondary schools influenced problematic social media use and screentime, well-being, social connectedness at school, bullying at school, and cyberbullying; and whether these associations were moderated by sex.

Students (678 boys, 687 girls, and 33 students who preferred not to disclose their sex at birth; mean age = 16.2 years) from 27 secondary schools completed a digital survey. Additionally, another survey regarding several school policies was filled out by one school employee (i.e., rector, vice-rector, teacher, school psychologist, etc.).

Overall, the study finds that full smartphone bans offer no clear advantages over partial bans in reducing problematic social media use, improving student well-being, or decreasing bullying and cyberbullying. Across multiple outcomes, students in fully restricted schools showed similar levels of social media use, well-being, and peer relationships to those in partially restricted schools. Notably, stricter bans were associated with lower school belonging among girls and reduced student–teacher connectedness for both boys and girls, suggesting that full bans may introduce unintended social costs without delivering substantial additional benefits compared to more moderate restrictions.

Evidence summarised from reports

- Disconnect: the case for a smartphone ban in schools [16]*.*

The think tank 'Policy Exchange' distributed a 'Freedom of Information' request survey to a random sample of 800 UK schools in 2023 asking about their mobile phone policy and the number of mobile phone confiscations in the Autumn Term 2023. Also, a subset of secondary schools in England were investigated on any correlation between the type of ban and school performance. Of the 800 requests, 177 primary and 230 secondary schools responded, including 12 primary and 24 secondary schools in Scotland.

Across the UK, 84% of primary schools had 'Effective bans' (phones not permitted on school grounds; phones removed at start of school day). For secondary schools, 11% had an 'Effective ban', 52% had a 'Ban with phone present' (phone use not permitted, but students can retain phones) and 36% had a 'Partial ban' (phones used for educational purposes and during breaks). No schools had 'No ban'.

In Scotland, no schools had an 'Effective ban', 88% had a 'Ban with phone present' and 8% were categorised as having a 'Partial ban'. No schools had 'no ban'. The response rate for this question for Scotland was 24 out of 50 total responses.

In England, secondary schools with an 'Effective ban' had 26 confiscations, schools with 'Banned but phone present' had 159 confiscations, and 'Partial ban' schools had 141 confiscations. In Scotland, there were 10 confiscations in 'Partial ban' schools, with only 4 schools answering this question.

Secondary schools in England with an 'Effective ban' had only a marginally higher score than schools with other policies, a difference that was not statistically significant.

The report recommends that school leaders should implement effective bans on mobile phones, and that this should involve phones being handed in or stored in

lockers, Yondr pouches, or equivalent, at the beginning of each day, or alternatively banned from site.

- Smartphone policies in schools: what does the evidence say? [17]*.*

The Digital Futures for Children centre conducted a scoping review - a 'review of reviews' - on the efficacy of school smartphone policies, with most of the research identified in the report concerning secondary school students.

School smartphone policies vary considerably in content and implementation, and "few, if any" schools have implemented outright bans.

Several studies show benefits for students' academic performance when smartphone use is restricted, especially for less advantaged children or children whose performance is suboptimal. However, the results are mixed, with methods being contested and some studies showing no benefits or even harmful effects.

Many teachers, parents and students favour restrictions on school smartphone access and use at school. Smartphone policies should be underpinned by a digital literacy curriculum that encompasses privacy, safety, genre, learning outcomes and monitoring, and embedded in wider policies to bridge school and home use. Policies will likely be more effective when the views of students, teachers, parents and school leaders have been considered.

Limitations

There are several limitations in this report that should be noted. In particular, the rapid turnaround from initiation of the report to production meant that a systematic and rigorous review could not be developed. Therefore, this is a rapid review, and by their nature reviews of this type are not systematic and comprehensive. This limits the reliability of the review and the capacity to generalise the findings to other settings.

The search was limited to high-income countries and English-language studies since 2020. Again, this narrowed the search but was seen as pragmatic given the time constraints. The included evidence-base (11 peer-reviewed articles and 2 reports) is relatively small and diverse. Different national contexts are included and the terminology used across the studies varies, with, for example, the term 'ban' covering policies that fell short of a complete ban.

The included studies were not assessed on quality, and a range of different research designs, populations, sample sizes and outcomes were included. Several studies

relied on self-reporting to measure outcomes and across the studies short follow-up periods were used to measure behavioural outcomes. The different outcomes within and across studies included academic achievement, pupil engagement and social interactions, bullying and cyberbullying, and mental health and wellbeing issues. This diversity of measures within different contexts and using different definitions makes drawing overall conclusions difficult. As Rahali et al. [17] concluded it is "difficult to systematically review the evidence in any meaningful way". There is a clear need for further, more rigorous research to be conducted to inform policy.

Recommendations

These recommendations should be interpreted within the context of the limitations outlined above.

1. *Replace Blanket "Bans" with Regulated, Purpose-led UseLed Use-Led Use*

Schools could consider moving away from framing mobile phone policies as absolute bans and instead propose adopting clear, **feasible regulations** that limit phone use during the school day while allowing phones on site (e.g. stored in lockers or pouches).

2. *Enable School-led, Co-designed PoliciesLed, CoDesigned Policies-Led, Co-Designed Policies*

Policymakers should consider granting schools the **autonomy to design phone policies collaboratively with students, staff, and parents**. Co-design enhances legitimacy, acceptability, and compliance, particularly given the importance of phones to students' autonomy and sense of agency. Co-design enhances legitimacy, acceptability, and compliance, particularly given the importance of phones to students' autonomy and sense of agency. -design enhances legitimacy, acceptability, and compliance, particularly given the importance of phones to students' autonomy and sense of agency.

3. *Embed Phone Restrictions within a Wider Digital Wellbeing Framework*

Mobile phone policies could be embedded within **broader approaches to digital wellbeing**, including digital literacy, e-safety education, mental health promotion, and positive social interaction strategies. Restrictions may be effective when paired with education and support, such as safety education, mental health promotion, and positive social interaction strategies. Restrictions are most effective when paired with education and support. -safety education, mental health promotion, and positive social interaction strategies. Restrictions are most effective when paired with education and support.

4. *Support Student Responsibility, Autonomy, and Individual Needs*

Policies could support the development of **self-management and responsible device use**, providing opportunities for students to demonstrate responsible behaviour. Additional support could be considered for students who rely on phones for medical purposes, emotional regulation or social connection, and discreet parent-student communication.

5. *Implement Gradually, and Base Decisions on Evidence*

Changes to phone policies should be **introduced gradually**, supported by leadership and clear communication. Those implementing phone policies should have regard for emerging evidence when reviewing and evaluating policies.

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