

# Written Ministerial Statement

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## Department of Education

### PUBLICATION OF GUIDANCE ON USE OF PUPIL MOBILE PHONES IN SCHOOLS

*Published at 10.00 am on Tuesday 3 September 2024.*

**Mr Givan (The Minister of Education):**

#### Introduction

Today, my department has published specific guidance for schools on the use of personal mobile phones and other similar devices. The guidance recommends that pupils do not use their mobile phones during the school day and that phones should not in normal circumstances be brought into primary schools.

The key aspects of the guidance are as follows:

- The personal use of mobile phones and other similar devices should be restricted during the school day for the vast majority of pupils. This includes during lunch and recreational periods.
- Pupil's personal mobile phones should not in normal circumstances be brought into primary schools.
- There are a range of potential approaches to restricting the use of mobile phones in schools.
- It is important to consult with the whole school community and regularly review mobile phone policy.
- There will be individual circumstances – medical, SEN and safeguarding - which may require a different approach.
- Schools will wish to consider key practical issues that are likely to form part of their policy approach on mobile phone use.

Schools have been asked to review their policies on mobile phone use in light of the new guidance during the autumn term.

Many countries across the world are increasingly taking steps to limit phone use at school, including both England and the Republic of Ireland, as well as many European countries.

The new guidance will ensure schools in Northern Ireland are fully aware of the latest evidence on phone use in schools and have practical advice around the benefits and issues with different approaches to limiting phone use. This will enable school leaders, in conjunction with Boards of Governors, to develop and implement an approach to the use of mobile phones that best suits their school context and phase of education.

There are a range of different approaches that can be taken to restricting mobile phone use in schools. These include mobile phones being handed in on arrival; phones being placed in a secure location such as lockers, a 'Never Seen, Never heard' approach, or the use of phone free solutions.

Each approach has both benefits and challenges, and it is recognised that enforcement is not always straightforward

## Mobile phones and learning

There are growing concerns about the impact of mobile phones on children and young people's development, including being exposed to violence and sexual content, online bullying, lack of sleep and the impact on their social skills.

A number of recent findings in regard to phone use both within and beyond school are detailed below.

- The National Behaviour Survey (2021-2022) found that 29% of secondary school pupils (rising to 40% for key stage 4 pupils) reported mobile phones being used without permission in most of their lessons.
- Data from Office of National Statistics (2020) suggests that one in five children (19%) aged 10-15 experienced at least one type of bullying behaviour online, and out of them, around three quarters (72%) said they experienced at least some of it at school or during school time.
- Research by Ofcom has found that older children in the UK are more likely to be bullied on a screen than in person.
- A global study of nearly 30,000 young adults found a link between the age a child received their first smartphone and their mental health in young adulthood ([Sapient-Labs-Age-of-First-Smartphone-and-Mental-Wellbeing-Outcomes.pdf \(sapientlabs.org\)](#)).
- OECD's most recent PISA 2022 findings have indicated that 45% of students across OECD countries feel anxious if their phones are not near them.
- "[Growing Up Online](#)" by the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement presented evidence that many children and young people are spending much greater amounts of time online ((as much as seven hours per day during weekends and holidays and four hours or more on a school day).). The impact of this high usage, as reported by the young people and confirmed by their teachers, was a growing trend for pupils to come in to school "wrecked" or "in a complete state" or with their "heads down... sleeping" in class.
- A report from the Children's Commissioner published in 2023 indicates that nearly a third of young people will have viewed pornography by age 11.

Many of the concerns associated with phone use occur outside school premises beyond the school day and are a wider societal issue which require cross-cutting consideration. They often, however, impact on relationships and behaviour within schools.

There are risks associated with children and young people bringing their own personal mobile devices into schools. There is potential for misuse, both in terms of low-level disruption in classes and more serious misuse such as bullying and harassment of children and young people and staff. Such inappropriate use of this technology can also detract from their appropriate use in learning and can involve teaching staff, children and young people, and parents in investigations which can cause significant disruption to the school and wider community.

There is also growing evidence to indicate that the restriction of mobile phone use during the school day can have a positive impact on academic engagement and achievement. Research has found correlations between mobile phone prohibition in schools and a range of positive outcomes, including reduced bullying, an overall reduction in social media usage, increased healthy play, reduced distraction and improved academic attainment.

Both UNESCO and the OECD have recognised that the use of digital devices such as mobile phones for leisure during the school day can negatively impact students' academic performance. Both highlight that effective enforcement is key to the success of policies inhibiting phone use.

My Department's guidance sets out the latest research findings in regard to mobile phone use and recommends that pupils do not use their mobile phones during the school day, including at break and lunch.

### **Pilot Scheme**

There are examples of schools in both England and Republic of Ireland that have introduced phone free solutions or mobile inhibiting devices. Such devices are usually a pocket-sized fabric pouch with a magnetic latch that is sealed at the beginning of the school day and opened using a special unlocking base.

This approach reduces the logistical issues associated with storage by schools as phones remain in pupils' possession. It may also support effective enforcement more than simple not seen or heard policy or placing devices in lockers as it is more difficult for pupils to access phones during lessons.

Today, I am setting out plans to launch a small pilot to evaluate the use of such devices in Northern Ireland schools. This will allow for systematic evaluation and case studies to be compiled. The pilot will focus on post-primary schools and will initially be for a maximum of ten schools.

My Department will invite expressions of interest from schools over the next number of weeks and I would encourage schools across Northern Ireland to apply. This will be an excellent opportunity to trial such devices in a range of different school communities.

### **The Safe and Effective Use of Technology**

Children and young people live in a digital world and need to learn to use technology safely and responsibly. Our schools have a key role in supporting our children to become digital citizens and digital workers of the future and in enabling them to have the knowledge and skills to access technology and to use it safely, keeping themselves, their personal information and their money safe. This is extremely important is essential part of the school curriculum.

Technology when used well can also play a valuable role in supporting learning. It has a range of potential benefits particularly for older children including digital textbooks and class notes, submission of homework, allowing feedback on pupils' work and allowing access to pre-recorded online lessons. Many schools have invested in technology such as tablets, iPads or laptops to support learning and teaching. Such devices will often have restrictions on internet or other applications.

Today's guidance recognises the essential role of technology in society but aims to support our children to get the most from their school day. It is our job as adults to keep our children safe; guide them in using technology appropriately and to support them to become happy and well-rounded individuals.

Many parents - those with post-primary children particularly - will wish their children to have access to mobiles for safety reasons travelling to and from school. This is recognised in the guidance which highlights that travel is an important consideration.

### **Conclusion**

My Department is proceeding with an evidence-based approach to support schools around the use of pupil mobile phones. The publication of clear and practical guidance for schools on this issue is a hugely important step forward.

During the autumn term, my department plans to take the following key actions:

- survey all schools on their current approaches to mobile phone use and their effectiveness;

- roll out a pilot scheme to evaluate the use of mobile free solutions; and
- commission case studies on effective practice in Northern Ireland schools

The use of mobile phones in schools is an important issue for us to consider as a society. By working together as government, schools and parents we can ensure our children have the very best opportunities to fulfil their potential. This guidance on the use of phones in schools will hopefully support effective practice in our classrooms. Helping children to better concentrate, engage and learn and to enjoy break and lunch playing, having fun, playing sports and socialising with their friends.