

**Subject:**

**Circular Number:** 2024/14

Guidance for Schools on Pupils' Personal Use of Mobile Phones and other Similar Devices During the School Day

**Date of Issue:**

3 September 2024

**Target Audience:**

- Principals and Boards of Governors of all grant-aided schools
- Management Committees of all voluntary providers
- Education Authority
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education
- Controlled Schools' Support Council
- Proprietors of Independent Schools
- Governing Bodies Association of Voluntary Grammar Schools in Northern Ireland
- Comhairle na Gaelscoláiochta
- General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland
- Teachers' Unions
- EOTAS Centres
- Middletown Centre for Autism
- Catholic Schools' Trustee Service

**Governor Awareness:**

Essential

**Status of Contents:**

Guidance for schools

**Expiry Date:**

None

**DE Website:**

[Department of Education](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk)

**Summary of Contents:**

This circular provides advice and guidance on pupils' personal use of mobile phones and other similar devices during the school day.

**Enquiries:**

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## **Purpose of Circular**

1. The purpose of this circular is to provide support and guidance to schools on the issue of pupils' personal use of mobile phones and other similar devices during the school day. It is not intended to be used to inhibit the wider use of technology in schools to support learning.
2. Schools will already have their own policies and procedures in place on the use of mobile phones and this is legally a matter for individual Boards of Governors and principals. This guidance aims to provide advice and support to schools to ensure there is a greater consistency in approach and that this is informed by emerging evidence.
3. Many primary schools have taken steps to ban the use of mobile phones in schools and a significant number of post-primary schools have also significantly restricted their use during the school day. This circular endorses this approach.
4. **As set out in this Guidance, the Department advises that the personal use of pupil 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.**
5. There is significant and growing evidence of the positive impact of such an approach, which has been implemented in a significant number of countries. Both the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (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.

## **Mobile phones and learning**

6. There are increasing concerns regarding the impact of mobile phones on children and young people's development. A number of studies have raised issues about

the wider impact of phones on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

7. Key issues associated with significant phone use by children and adolescents include social deprivation, sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation and addiction. A number of recent findings are listed below:

- 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.
- 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 ([Age of First Smartphone/Tablet and Mental Wellbeing Outcomes](#)).
- OECD's most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (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.

8. 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. This reinforces the need for programmes in education that promote digital proficiency and the responsible use of technology.
9. There are risks associated with children and young people bringing their own personal mobile devices into schools. There is significant 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 as well as staff. Such behaviour is unacceptable in any context. 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.
10. There is also growing evidence to indicate that restricting the use of mobile phones during the school day can have a positive impact on academic engagement and achievement. A number of studies are listed for consideration at the end of this circular.
11. Research has found correlations between mobile phone restriction 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. Overall, the academic evidence of the positive impact of prohibited use is increasing.
12. However, it is evident that the effectiveness of these approaches relies more on the enforcement of the policy rather than its mere existence.
13. UNESCO's 2023 Global Education Monitoring Report, *Technology in education: a tool on whose terms?* advises that "some education technology can improve some types of learning in some contexts" but "it should focus on learning outcomes" and that "mere proximity to a mobile device was found to distract students and to have a negative impact on learning". In other words, even if a pupil switches their phone

off, puts it in their bag and places that bag under their desk, the knowledge that their phone is close by still has the power to distract them. One study had found that it could take students up to 20 minutes to refocus on what they were learning after engaging in a non-academic activity.

14. Similarly, the OECD has reflected that the use of smartphones and other digital devices for leisure during the school day (at break or lunch time) can be a learning distraction. Digital distraction is not merely an inconvenience; it appears to have a tangible association with learning outcomes, according to the PISA. Students who report being distracted by peers using digital devices in some, most or every maths class score significantly lower in maths tests, equivalent to three-quarters of a year's worth of education. The amount of time spent on digital devices for leisure at school also seems to correlate with a significant drop in maths scores. The OECD highlights that one action that has demonstrable impact on outcomes is a ban on smartphones at school. The PISA data suggest that such bans can be effective, although as highlighted above - effectiveness depends on enforcement.

## **Legal Position**

15. The Board of Governors has a legal duty, under Article 17 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, to safeguard and promote the welfare of registered pupils at the school when the pupils are on school premises or in the lawful control or charge of a member of school staff.

16. Policies and procedures on pupils' use of personal mobile devices within schools falls within the wider legal responsibilities of Boards of Governors and principals in relation to pupil behaviour and discipline (Articles 3-6 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998). This duty requires Boards of Governors to make, and keep under review (**consulting with the principal, the registered pupils and the parents of those pupils and to consider any guidance given by the Department**) a written statement of 'general principles' about positive pupil behaviour, which the principal will have regard to in **their** duty in determining school rules and behaviour policies, **which they must also consult with pupils and parents on.**

17. The principal is responsible for determining measures which the school will take to:

- promote self-discipline and proper regard for authority among pupils;
- encourage good behaviour, respect for others and prevent all forms of bullying among pupils;
- secure an acceptable standard of pupil behaviour; and
- regulate the conduct of pupils.

18. A school's policy on restricting the use of mobile phones can be included within the school's wider behaviour policies or as a standalone document.

19. The Department's [Safeguarding and Child Protection in Schools - A Guide for Schools](#) advises that all school policies should be inclusive of mobile learning. The guidance emphasises that online safety and mobile learning policies should also be integrated into existing safeguarding, behaviour, code of practice and anti-bullying policies.

20. As set out in both DE Child Protection and Safeguarding Guidance for schools and DE Circular [2016/27 Online Safety](#) (currently under review), online safety policies should incorporate agreements on the acceptable use of personal mobile technology.

### **Approaches to restricting the use of mobile phones in schools**

21. School leaders, in conjunction with Boards of Governors, should develop and implement an approach to pupils' use of personal mobile phones and other similar devices that best suits their school context and phase of education.

**22. The Department recommends that in light of the evidence presented above, Boards of Governors and principals/leaders should take steps to restrict the use of mobile phones and other similar devices for pupils' personal use throughout the school day, including during lunch and recreational periods.**

23. There is a range of different approaches that can be taken to restrict a pupil's personal use in schools. Each approach has both benefits and weaknesses. It is recognised that enforcement is not straightforward, and no option guarantees complete compliance.

24. There is a need to balance the removal of distraction with the potential use of mobile technology to support teaching and learning. It is also important to educate children and young people on how to use technology effectively, appropriately and safely, given its use within the workplace, its potential impact on other people and that most phone use occurs outside the school day. This is covered further in paragraphs 33-39.

25. Some key example approaches are provided below with a table summarising the positives and potential issues associated with each approach provided at **Appendix I** of the guidance. Of course, all approaches rely on effective delivery.

a) **No pupils' personal mobile devices on the school premises** – A school may decide that no mobile phones or other similar devices should be brought to school by its pupils. This policy provides a very simple boundary which is straightforward to enforce as any mobile phone found at school would be in breach of the policy.

This type of approach is most suitable for primary school aged children and is the Department's recommended approach for primary schools (with exceptional circumstances permitted on a case-by-case basis).

At this age, the majority of children attend school locally and will be collected by parents or walk/cycle a short distance home so safety concerns around lack of access to mobile phones when travelling will be limited. There are also wider concerns that children of this age should not have access to mobile devices.

Such an approach is less likely to be practical in a post-primary environment where many pupils may travel significant distances to school by public transport

and parents/carers may be concerned that they have access to a mobile device in the event of an emergency whilst travelling and to support safety.

- b) **Pupils' personal mobile devices handed in on arrival** – A school may decide that its pupils require access to their mobile devices before and after school, but they do not want pupils to have access to these throughout the school day. On entry to the school, if a pupil chooses to bring a personal mobile device to school, they must hand in their device to school staff, and these are then collected at the end of the school day. Such an approach creates a clear, enforceable boundary. It is recognised, however, that given the operational logistics and concerns regarding liability and burden on school staff, it may not be feasible for every school.
- c) **Pupils' personal mobile devices kept in secure location** – Schools may consider an approach where personal mobile devices are placed in pupils' lockers, or similar secure storage. If personal mobile devices are brought to the school, at the start of the school day they should be put straight into lockers or similar secure storage and not be accessed by the pupil until the end of the day. Such an approach relies upon a high level of pupil compliance and enforcement can be problematic as phones remain accessible to pupils. However, as with option a, the boundary is clear, and any mobile device found to be on a pupil during school hours would be in breach of the policy.
- d) **Never used, seen or heard** – Some schools may choose to adopt a policy where pupils keep possession of their personal mobile devices, however, they are never used, seen or heard during school hours, including during lunch and recreational periods. Schools will often stipulate that the mobile device is switched off at the bottom of the school bag; confiscation may be an immediate consequence otherwise. Schools will note the limitations to this approach highlighted by UNESCO. Such an approach also relies upon a high level of pupil compliance and enforcement can be problematic as phones remain in pupils' possession.

e) **Use of Phone Free Solutions** - A further possible approach is the use of pouches which restrict mobile phone use. These are generally pocket-sized fabric pouches with a magnetic latch that is sealed at the beginning of the school day and opened using a special unlocking base. Pupils retain possession of their phones within the magnetically sealed pouch and cannot use them until the phone is released from the pouch at the end of the school day. This approach reduces the logistical issues associated with storage by school as phones remain in pupils' possession. It may also support effective enforcement.

Such products are being increasingly used internationally. Schools will note that there has not been an independent system level evaluation of such devices and there is not a clear evidence base in regard to overall effectiveness. The costs of such devices may also be prohibitive for schools.

### **Exceptional Circumstances**

26. Schools will of course wish to ensure a bespoke and tailored approach dependent on the particular needs of their schools and individual pupils, for example those with medical conditions or Special Educational Needs. Notably, pupils with diabetes may need access to their phone to monitor glucose levels.
27. Schools will also be mindful that there may be safeguarding reasons which require pupils to have access to their phones and pupils who are young carers are also likely to require access to their phone.
28. There may be other exceptional circumstances where schools should consider making adaptations to their policy for specific pupils. This guidance does not provide an exhaustive list of exceptional circumstances and schools should assess each case on its own merits.
29. Schools should also consider whether pupils in the years 13 and 14 may be permitted access to their mobile devices at certain times and locations reflecting this period of education as one of increased independence and responsibility.

Such an approach should not, unintentionally, undermine the school's policy on the use of mobile phones for other pupils.

## **Consultation**

30. Engaging the whole school community including staff, children and young people and parents in policy development is the most effective means of ensuring engagement with, and commitment to, the policy on mobile devices.

31. School mobile device policies should be regularly reviewed to ensure the commitment of new staff, children and young people and parents to the policy; to evaluate effectiveness and to take account of new developments in technology. As noted previously in relation to pupil behaviour and discipline (Articles 3-6 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998), places a duty on Boards of Governors to make, and keep under review, **consulting with the principal, the registered pupils and the parents of those pupils and to consider any guidance given by the Department**, a written statement of 'general principles' about positive pupil behaviour, which the principal will have regard to in their duty in determining school rules and behaviour policies, **on which they must also consult with pupils and parents.**

## **Review of Current Policies**

32. **In light of this guidance, all Boards of Governors and principals/leaders are asked to take the time during autumn term 2024-25 to review their current approach/policies to pupils' personal mobile device use in schools.** Key issues that should be considered and are likely to form part of a school's policy approach include:

- Clear guidance regarding any restrictions on personal mobile device use within school grounds during the school day, at social events associated with the school, and on school outings.

- Agreed consequences and sanctions for breaches of the school policy on pupils' personal mobile devices, including clear procedures for confiscation and return of mobile devices
- Integration of the policy with each school's existing policies as appropriate, e.g. online safety, behaviour and anti-bullying policies.
- Clear protocols on reporting of breaches within the school, and the support available in school for staff and for children and young people who are the subject of harassment using mobile phones.
- Consideration of situations where mobile devices may be used by children and young people with particular needs, or those in years 13 and 14.
- Clearly stated responsibility/liability for personal mobile devices in terms of loss, theft or breakage.
- The range of ways that the policy will be shared with children and young people, parents and staff, for example in the school prospectus, parental correspondence or school website.

### **Safe and Responsible Use of Mobile Technology**

33. As with many aspects of life, children and young people need to be educated on the safe and responsible use of mobile technology. This is an area in which evidence is being updated rapidly. There are increasing concerns from educators, parents and wider society around the impact of mobile phone use on young people's development. The Department will, over the coming months, consider the wider use of mobile technology for educational purposes and update current circulars on this matter, such as DE Circular 2016/26 Effective Educational Uses of Mobile Digital Devices and DE Circular 2016/27: Online Safety.

34. As highlighted above, we know that online bullying using smartphones often happens outside school hours. Children can be exposed to violence and sexual content. There are concerns that smartphone use among primary school children increases the risk of cyberbullying and also reduces the number of hours they sleep at night. Evidence indicates that children of primary school age are not emotionally ready to navigate the complexities of mobile devices and the digital world.

35. Schools have been provided with details of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) Online Safety Hub [Online Safety Hub - Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland](#), for staff, parents and pupils (all ages) to be aware of, as well as access to the Safer Schools App [Home - Safer Schools NI](#), currently funded by the Department. CCEA has also produced Digital Resources for primary age children which are available on their website [Digital for Life and Work](#).

### **Technology to Support Teaching and Learning**

36. As stated, this circular is intended to focus on the pupils' personal use of mobile devices within the school environment rather than in any way prohibit or inhibit the wider use of technology in schools to support learning. Schools are best placed to determine how technology more broadly can effectively support learning and teaching for their pupils.

37. Many schools have invested in technology such as tablets, iPads or laptops to support learning and teaching. Such devices should be protected by the C2k filtering service as set out in [Circular 2011/22 - Internet safety](#). This ensures pupils using these devices do not have access to inappropriate online materials, including social media, and schools will have implemented acceptable use policies.

38. A key consideration for schools is the pedagogical rationale for how technology will improve learning. Clearly, such technology can have an important role in supporting learning and has a wide range of potential benefits including the digitisation of textbooks and class notes, submission of homework; communication through a range of platforms, such as google classroom, which allow personalised feedback; creation and distribution of pre-recorded online lessons; supporting

retrieval practice through access to quizzing; and showcasing of pupils' work. Digital devices were crucial in supporting remote learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

39. The Education Endowment Foundation has produced helpful guidance designed to support senior leaders and teachers to make better informed decisions around technology based on the best available evidence. It includes a number of practical examples of technology being used in ways which support improved teaching (e.g. by increasing the accuracy of teacher assessment) or improve pupil learning (e.g. by increasing the quality and quantity of pupil practice). [Using Digital Technology to Improve Learning](#)

## **Next Steps**

40. The Department wants to learn from and harness the experiences of schools in regard to the issue of pupils' personal mobile devices. We will, therefore, compile a range of case studies around schools' approaches to their use, which will provide additional support and examples for schools.

## **Other Relevant DE Guidance**

DE Circular 2011/22 Internet Safety

[2011/22 - Internet safety](#)

DE Circular 2013/25 eSafety Guidance

[2013/25 - eSafety guidance](#)

DE Circular 2016/26 Effective Educational Uses of Mobile Digital Devices (currently under review)

[2016/26 Effective Educational Uses of Mobile Digital Devices](#)

DE Circular 2016/27 Online Safety (currently under review)

[2016/27 Online Safety](#)

DE Safeguarding and Child Protection Guidance

[Safeguarding and Child Protection in Schools - A Guide for Schools](#)

## **Additional Research and Information**

Links to a range of relevant information and studies, which schools may find useful are included below. Given there is much debate on this topic, research should be read in the appropriate context and applied in relation to pupils' personal use of their mobile devices during school hours.

[Students, digital devices and success](#)

[Technology in education: A tool on whose term?](#)

[Smartphones in school? Only when they clearly support learning](#)

[The Case for a Smartphone Ban in Schools](#)

[Smartphone Bans, Student Outcomes and Mental Health](#)

## Appendix I

### Positives and Potential Issues of Different Approaches to Mobile Phone Restriction

Option	Positives	Potential Issues
<b>No pupils' personal mobile devices on the school premises</b>	<p>Clear boundary and relatively straightforward to enforce – any phone found is in breach of school policy.</p> <p>Total break from personal mobile devices within the school environment.</p> <p>All pupils are the same – no difference between students in the type of phone they own or whether they are permitted by parents. This may help limit peer pressure.</p> <p>Helps significantly reduce the issue of potential misuse of phones during the school day.</p> <p>Potentially supports effective enforcement more than either the not seen or heard policy or placing devices in lockers.</p>	<p>Safety considerations for children travelling to and from school.</p> <p>There will always need to be exceptions – for example, for medical use.</p> <p>Not able to stay in touch with parents/carers or make contact in event of emergency or need during school day (can contact school office).</p> <p>No potential to use mobile devices for educational purposes within school.</p> <p>Some pupils may disobey/continue to carry concealed phones.</p> <p>Impact on services such a Text-a-Nurse, mental health Apps and Safer Schools Apps.</p>
<b>Schools collect devices at beginning of school day</b>	<p>Clear boundary and relatively straightforward to enforce – any phone found is in breach of school policy.</p> <p>Total break from personal mobile devices within the school environment.</p> <p>Pupils have their phones for travelling to and from school.</p> <p>Helps significantly reduce the issue of potential misuse of phones during the school day.</p> <p>Potentially supports effective enforcement more than either the not seen or heard policy or placing devices in lockers.</p>	<p>Storage.</p> <p>Timescales, operational logistics and burden on school staff.</p> <p>Liability issues in regard to phone damage.</p> <p>Parents unable to contact children directly during the school day (can contact school office).</p> <p>There will always need to be exceptions for example for medical use.</p> <p>Not able to use mobile device to stay in touch with parents/carers or make contact in event of</p>

Option	Positives	Potential Issues
		<p>emergency or need during school day (can contact school office).</p> <p>No potential to use mobile devices for educational purposes within school.</p> <p>Some pupils may disobey/continue to carry concealed phones.</p>
<b>Devices to be placed in lockers at beginning of school day and not removed.</b>	<p>Relatively clear boundary – any phone found in pupils' possession away from lockers is in breach of school policy.</p> <p>Total break from personal mobile devices within the school environment.</p> <p>Pupils have their phones for travelling to and from school.</p> <p>May help reduce the issue of potential misuse of phones during the school day.</p>	<p>Not all schools have lockers.</p> <p>Enforcement can be problematic as pupils can remove from lockers and use particularly in areas such as lockers and toilets.</p> <p>Relies on a high degree of pupil compliance.</p> <p>No potential to use mobile devices for educational purposes within school.</p> <p>Some pupils may disobey/continue to carry concealed phones.</p>
<b>'Never seen, never heard'</b>	<p>Potentially allows mobile devices to be used for educational purposes within school when authorised by teachers.</p> <p>Create clear expectations around mobile phone use in school.</p> <p>Pupils have their phones for travelling to and from school.</p> <p>May help reduce the issue of potential misuse of phones during the school day.</p> <p>No administrative, storage or liability burden for schools.</p>	<p>Boundary is less clear and straightforward than in other approaches.</p> <p>Enforcement can be problematic as phones remain in pupils' possession.</p> <p>Relies on a high degree of pupil compliance.</p> <p>Some studies have found that mere proximity to a mobile device was found to distract students and to have a negative impact on learning. In other words, even if a pupil switches their phone off, puts it in their bag and places that bag under</p>

<b>Option</b>	<b>Positives</b>	<b>Potential Issues</b>
<b>Mobile inhibiting devices</b>	<p>Potentially allows mobile devices to be used for educational purposes within school when authorised by teachers.</p> <p>Removes liability and logistical issues associated with storage by school as phones remain in pupils' possession.</p> <p>Potentially supports effective enforcement more than simple not seen or heard policy or placing devices in lockers as more difficult for pupils to access phones.</p> <p>Helps significantly reduce the issue of potential misuse of phones during the school day.</p> <p>Pupils have their phones for travelling to and from school.</p>	<p>their desk, the knowledge that their phone is close by still has the power to distract them</p> <p>Cost for schools/parents.</p> <p>Can be circumvented by pupils</p> <p>Some pupils may disobey/continue to carry concealed phones.</p> <p>Not able to use mobile device to stay in touch with parents/carers or make contact in event of emergency or need during school day (can contact school office).</p>