Does the evidence support a school ban on smartphones?

The Government has advised schools to restrict the use of smartphones by students. This seems to be supported by the current evidence which suggests that restrictions of phone use can benefit student performance. But calls to ban smartphones in schools are unhelpful and prevent a more nuanced conversation to be had and further evidence to be collected around the benefits and risks of this technology to children, argue **Miriam Rahali**, **Beeban Kidron** *and* **Sonia Livingstone** *as a result of a newly published* [report.](#)

Sonia Livingstone will be giving a talk entitled [Is the internet good for children?](#) *on November 27 at the Sheikh Zayed Theatre, LSE.*

As the new academic year gets underway there is, again, considerable attention to the role of [smartphones](#) in schools. The UK government's 2024 [guidance](#) encourages schools to restrict student use of phones during the school day, and many [schools](#) are following suit.

Seen through the lens of the [media](#), school smartphone "bans" may seem the obvious policy to address the concerns of parents and school leaders about the impact of digital technology on education. But what is their purpose, and do they work?

> Recognising that school smartphone policies vary in detail, our forthcoming report concludes that restrictions do benefit learning, particularly for those students who struggle most.

A recent UK [study](#) suggests that outright bans are rare. Schools are concerned at the resources needed to put them into practice (with 97 per cent of UK [children](#) already owning a phone by the age of 12). Bans also sit uncomfortably with the national [EdTech Strategy](#) to harness the benefits of technology for learning.

Recognising that school smartphone policies vary in detail, our forthcoming report concludes that restrictions do benefit learning, particularly for those students who struggle most. Further, when mapped against current school gradings as awarded by Ofsted, the schools' regulator, an informal selection of schools rated "Outstanding" were more likely to impose smartphone restrictions, while schools that "Require Improvement" seemed to rely on advising students that smartphones should not be used, seen or heard during the school day. This adds nuance to the findings of a recent evidence review and echoes earlier and widely cited findings by LSE on the impact of restricting smartphone use in schools on academic outcomes.

> Talk of "bans" closes down the deeper conversations society needs to have about the best interest of children in a digital age and lets the profit-hungry tech sector off the hook.

As we argue in the report, talk of "bans" closes down the deeper conversations society needs to have about the best interests of children in a digital age and lets the profit-hungry tech sector off the hook. Rather than restricting children's activities, we should be demanding firmer action from government and regulators, so that children can benefit safely from the digital world. And this at a time when AI is becoming embedded in every

area of public and private life. So how should schools respond?

An international dilemma

Debates over smartphones in schools are raging in many countries. Globally, one in seven countries have already introduced laws, policies, strategies or guidelines that mandate or advise public schools to limit or prohibit student smartphone use during the school day, notably in Central and Southern Asia, North Africa and Western Asia.

Percentage of countries taking measures to ban smartphones in schools
(UNESCO, 2023)

Percentage of countries taking measures to ban smartphones in schools by law
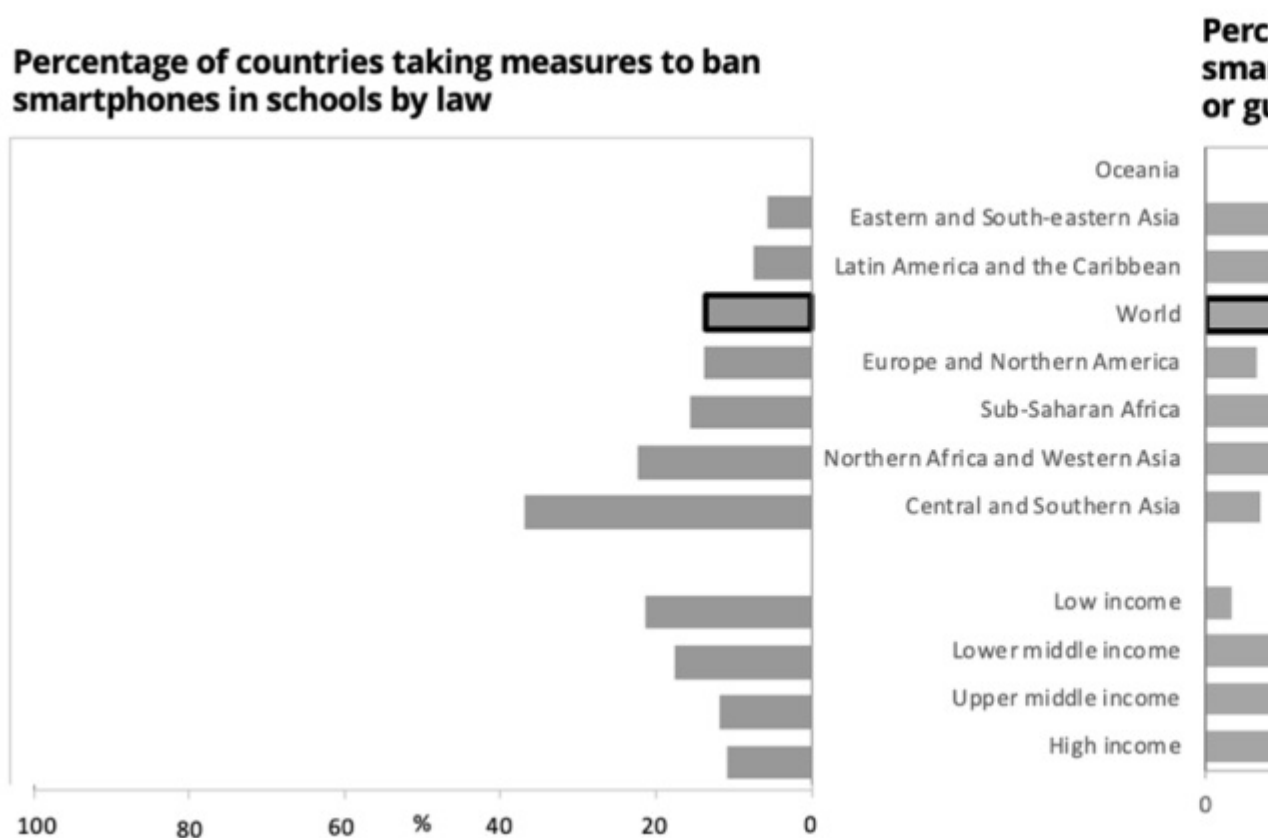
Such policies are responding in part to public demand. Parents are understandably confused by the apparently conflicting calls for tech savvy children to participate in a technological future and what they see as problematic impacts on wellbeing, learning,

social and personal relationships. Teachers are [frustrated](#) by the failure to protect children from the risky-by-design apps that interrupt sleep, lessons and social cohesion, and by what they see as parents' unwillingness to ensure their children observe age limits, bedtimes or rules about phones in bedrooms. Children are clear that, though they are excited about what the digital world can offer, meeting and learning [in person](#) is preferable; but social pressures, exacerbated by algorithmic demands means that unless everyone is "off" they cannot be "off".

> Policies for using smartphones in (and out of) class for educational purposes can also bring academic benefits, where they are carefully incorporated into the curriculum and supported by educators.

Our review of the most up-to-date international evidence regarding the efficacy of smartphone policies that restrict use at school suggests that:

- Remarkably few studies have examined the effects of school smartphone policies on students' academic performance or other outcomes.
- Several studies show moderate benefits for students' academic performance when smartphone use is restricted, especially for less advantaged children. However, the [results](#) are mixed, with methods being contested and some studies showing no or even [contrary](#). With so few studies the evidence is not sufficiently nuanced to say which policies works best for the student body as a whole, or for children of different ages.
- Policies for using smartphones in (and out of) class for educational purposes can also bring [academic benefits](#), where they are carefully incorporated into the curriculum and supported by educators. Arguably this can and should be possible even if use of personal devices is restricted, now that school-provided laptops or tablets for learning increasingly take precedence over "bring your own device" policies.
- Many teachers, parents and students favour restrictions on school smartphone access and use at school, to support learning and reduce distraction. "Phone-free" schools need to set out the purpose and context of the policies so that devices can support medical needs or learning and so individuals with good reason to [access](#) their phones have flexibility built in.

> School smartphone policies will likely be more effective when the views of

students, teachers, parents and school leaders have been heard and the policy formulated with them rather than over their heads.

What should be done?

To build on the available findings, and to understand what "good" looks like for teachers, parents and children, we conclude with some questions and suggestions:

- **Identify the problem** Do students have difficulties with concentration, learning, mental health or social relationships because of smartphone use or misuse? Would greater limits on student access to their phones at school bring likely benefits to all or specific segments of the student population?
- **Find the right words** Schools need a clear lexicon to talk about devices, genres of products and services, criteria for learning outcomes and levels of restriction/use that better reflect the complexity of the student experience at school.
- **Develop a holistic approach** Smartphone policies should be underpinned by a digital literacy curriculum that encompasses privacy, safety, genre, learning outcomes and monitoring, and embedded in wider EdTech policies to bridge school and home use.
- **Be inclusive** Children have diverse needs and [cultural circumstances](). Policies should address whether (some) children need access to their smartphone during the school day, for reasons of health, disability, caring responsibilities or other needs.
- **Consult the school community** Children's voices are heard in some research and policy development, yet not sufficiently. School smartphone policies will likely be more effective when the views of students, teachers, parents and school leaders have been heard and the policy formulated with them rather than over their heads.

It makes sense that restricting personal devices at school gives respite from the intense demands built into digital products and for children's attention, allowing a needed space for learning, particularly for those already struggling. However, a greater emphasis on gathering robust evidence on the outcomes of different approaches, and ensuring that parents, teacher and crucially children are part of the journey is much needed.

This blog draws on the [Digital Futures for Children]() centre's international [report]() to be

published on 30 September 2024. This joint LSE and 5Rights centre facilitates research for a rights-respecting digital world for children. It supports an international evidence base for advocacy, facilitates dialogue between academics and policymakers, and amplifies children's voices within a child rights framework. We welcome feedback and engagement with our work.

All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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