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## Mobile phone restrictions in UK schools, one year on

*Miriam Rahali, Beeban Kidron and Sonia Livingstone revisit their [Digital Futures for Children report](#) to ask whether the [government guidance](#) on smartphones at school has brought significant benefits.*

One year ago today, the UK Government issued [guidance](#) to schools to restrict student use of phones on their premises. By the start of the new academic year in September, huge strides had been made – a wide survey reported a total of [zero](#) schools having no restrictions, and [many](#) reported that they had instituted policies to phase out student access to smartphones at school.

### The gateway ban?

The discussion about the type of phone restriction at school has catalysed more calls for [bans](#), [whether of social media](#) for kids or even to facilitate a ‘smartphone free’ childhood. Given that many children are spending [6 hours a day](#) (or more) on social media, this issue deserves critical scholarly and media attention. However, the result has been confusing and many questions still remain:

- **Who:** Should this be all children or just (pre)teens?
- **What:** Does this mean banning devices or specific apps?
- **Where:** If it means both school and home, what happens to posting homework or online banking?
- **When:** During lessons, at break, before bedtime, or all the time?
- **Why:** To improve academic performance, or sociability and concentration, or mental health, or freedom from commercial exploitation?

[As we argued](#) in our original report, talk of “bans” closes down the deeper conversations that society needs to have about the best interest of children in a digital age. Complex interconnected debates get fewer headlines and may alienate those looking for a ‘silver bullet’ solution – yet

serious attention to the importance of **tech regulation, international cooperation, media and digital literacy, teacher perspectives, parent perspectives, children's own views**, and the **nature of social science evidence** – may get us quicker to some answers.

## What have we learned about restricting smartphones at school?

Our report recommended restrictions at school to prevent distraction, give children a break, and keep aggressive commercial practices out of school. It did not preclude children from using tech for learning, health or other valued purposes.

In the last year, the number of initiatives has multiplied – in **Canada, Brazil**, several **European countries**, and elsewhere. Yet **a recent study** of smartphone policies in England reported that:



*There is no evidence that restrictive school policies are associated with overall phone and social media use or better mental wellbeing in adolescents.*



While the authors have been **critiqued** for overstating the significance of the findings, they do offer more carefully crafted explanations of the associations between smartphone use and harm; hence, they conclude that school smartphone policies *alone* don't reduce the harm. As **teachers reported to us**, it may be that adverse consequences to wellbeing result from the much greater use of smartphones *outside* school, whether linked to bullying, or loss of sleep, or self-esteem.

Indeed, many factors can affect school performance, and it is practical to consider both in-school and outside use in tandem. However, our focus has been on what is specifically within the power of teachers and administrators to manage within the school day.

What do the numbers show? Are kids benefitting from smartphone restrictions? **Provisional data reported** from 629,275 Key Stage 4 pupils suggests that in 2023-2024, small gains were made in English and Maths, and EBacc entries, by comparison with the previous year. However, there could be many reasons for this, as research is yet to examine.

The language of 'bans' continues to oversimplify actual school practices, for there is considerable variation across schools in how smartphone policies are defined, applied and enforced, for

example, whether phones are permitted, or only with the permission of school leaders; if they must be stored in a **lockable phone pouch**; or if they're allowed at breaks. One of the more popular methods for restricting smartphone access and use at school comes in the form of a locker pouch. A **survey** administered to teachers and administrators whose students used a pouch to secure their smartphones during the school day found that:

- 68% saw an improvement in academic performance
- 84% saw an improvement in student engagement in the classroom
- 72% saw an improvement in student behaviour
- 86% saw a positive impact on safety and wellness

Such results are promising. But, with experimentation in school smartphone policies in the UK and around the world, along with continued **debates over methodology** and **the interpretation of findings**, it is vital that independent research gathers the data and compares the outcomes in different contexts. Going forward, resources for longitudinal studies may help researchers better contextualise the results and interpret the data in a more meaningful way.

## What's next?

This post was motivated in part by our own **recommendation** to school administrators: encourage an annual review. In a rapidly changing digital landscape, policies should be regularly assessed and revised to meet the evolving needs and interests of today's children and young people.

On 22 January 2025, Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson **outlined the measures** to equip schools for the digital age by using technology to improve learning outcomes, support teachers and staff, and ensure access to equal opportunities. In her address, she notes that more than **two-thirds** of school leaders agree that EdTech has helped children achieve more in the classroom. She retains hope "For a brighter future for our children – delivered by a digital revolution in education." While we remain concerned about the commercialization of children's time at school by **making their data available to commercial companies with insufficient protections**, we retain hope that the government's **curriculum review** will enhance **media and digital education**.

Next week (24 Feb 2025), parliament will debate **the petition** that introduces 16 as the minimum age for children to access social media (... and, somewhat ironically – for young stakeholders – it can be viewed on the **UK Parliament YouTube channel**).

As with the debate on smartphones at school, **high-handed bans** are unlikely to satisfactorily protect children or enable them to make informed decisions about their digital lives. Whether as educators, parents, regulators or businesses, we have a collective responsibility for children. We need to shift the culture – at home, at school, and among peer groups – so that children can better

navigate and, indeed, flourish within the digital environment. And for that, Government needs to commit to building the digital world children deserve.

*This post gives the views of the authors and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

### **About the author**

#### **Miriam Rahali**

Dr. Miriam Rahali is a Visiting Fellow in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. Her research focuses on the intersection of children and media, with a specific interest in advertising, consumer behaviour, digital literacy, and skills development. Dr. Rahali has more than three years of teaching experience at the Undergraduate and Master's level, and has lectured at Columbia, Cambridge, and LSE. She is a Fellow of the UK Higher Education Academy.

#### **Beeban Kidron**

Beeban Kidron is a leading voice on children's rights in the digital environment and a global authority on digital regulation and accountability. She has played a determinative role in establishing standards for online safety and privacy across the world. Baroness Kidron sits as a crossbench peer in the UK's House of Lords. She is an advisor to the Institute for Ethics in AI, University of Oxford, a Commissioner on the UN Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, expert advisor to the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence, and Founder and Chair of 5Rights Foundation. She is a visiting Professor of Practice at LSE where she Chairs the research centre, Digital Futures for Children, led by Professor Sonia Livingstone and a Fellow in the Department of Computer Science at the University of Oxford. Before being appointed to the Lords she was an award-winning film director and co-founder of the charity Filmclub (now Into Film).

Sonia Livingstone OBE is Professor of Social Psychology in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. Taking a comparative, critical and contextual approach, her research examines how the changing conditions of mediation are reshaping everyday practices and possibilities for action. She has published twenty books on media audiences, media literacy and media regulation, with a particular focus on the opportunities and risks of digital media use in the everyday lives of children and young people.

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