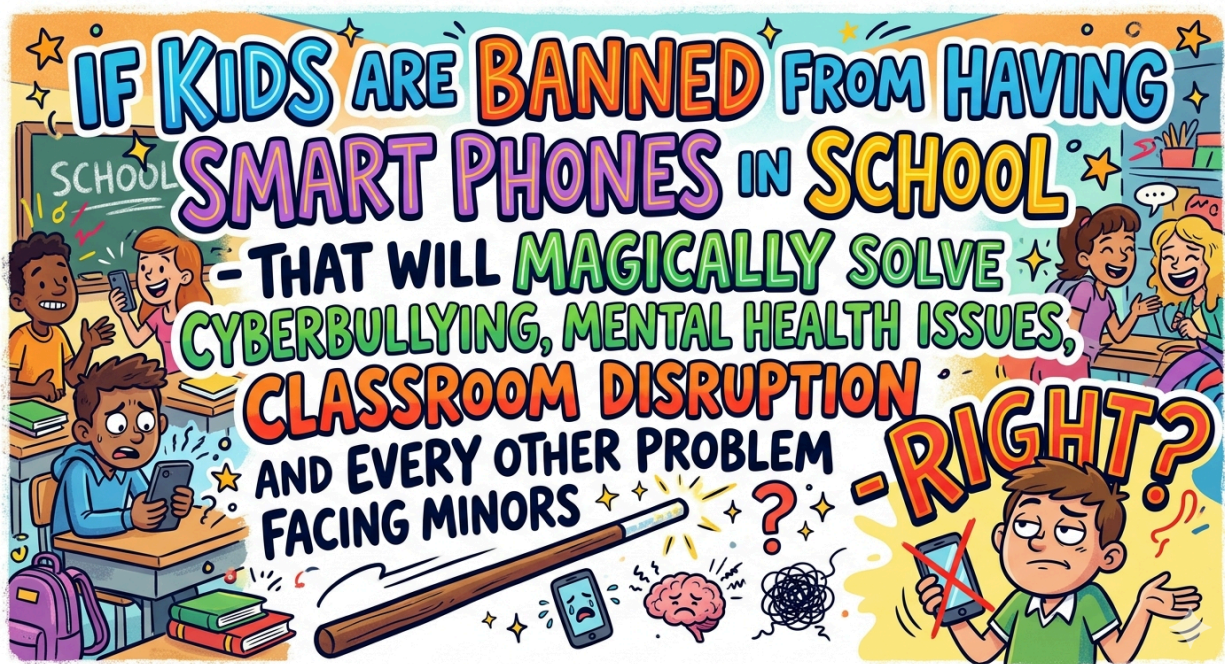




ONLINE SAFETY EXPERT GROUP



Author(s): Denton Howard & Andrea Cox are contributors to the Online Safety Expert Group (OSEG), which is an informal multistakeholder coalition of online safety experts and organisations from across Europe which has come together to try to ensure that online child safety legislation is practical, effective and respects the rights of parents and minors. See www.oseg.online



If kids are banned from having smart phones in school - that will magically solve cyberbullying, mental health issues, classroom disruption and every other problem facing minors - right?

Sadly, it's not that simple and we all need to roll our sleeves up and dig into the cause and effect of smart phones in school and that is the purpose of this brief observation document.

The issue of banning smart phones in school has come to the attention of many governments, with France, Italy, Greece, Hungary, Slovakia, the Netherlands and Finland among the countries that have introduced a range of regulations affecting the use of smart phones in school. Regulations like this are about supporting positive behaviour, concentration and providing a distraction free environment in school - which is a defined learning environment, with clear rules, supervision, expected behaviours and sanctions for non-compliance. While to many it may seem obvious that the use of smart phones in the classroom is something that is not normally acceptable, the reality in some school environments is that it is "normalised" and can be a major disruptive influence in a learning environment.

The Question

Should smart phone devices be in school at all? The root of this question relates to efforts to protect the education environment, mental health and well being of children through the limitation of the use of smart phones in schools. At the same time smart phones are part of the fabric of society and often children need them to coordinate the practicalities of daily life with their parents or care givers e.g. pick ups, drop offs, after school activities etc, but there appears to be general consensus that this need does not extend into the classroom, which should be a controlled learning environment.

The European Commission has published [results of research](#) which found that removing smart phones from the classroom environment led to fewer distractions, better interaction with

classmates and calmer classrooms. Also the mapping did not identify any meaningful positive reasons to incorporate smart phones in the classroom. While this research is not conclusive, if we use the lens of common sense, schools as educational institutions that are staffed by teaching professionals should be empowered to ensure that classrooms are free from external distraction including smart phone disruption.



While many different initiatives are considered and implemented to protect the learning environment, any steps face two major human behaviour challenges: 1) Compliance and 2) Usage displacement:

- **Compliance** relates to how effective measures are to remove phone usage from the classroom and this is ultimately down to students, parents, care givers, the school communities and the teaching professionals that run them. The challenges around compliance should not be understated or taken for granted as it is a major problem for some school communities. Equally the teaching community and parents need to set an example by “do as I do” rather than “do as I say”.
- **Usage displacement** relates to the shifting of phone usage from school hours to other times of the day and this is illustrated by a [University of Birmingham SMART study](#) of 30 UK secondary schools led by Prof Vicky Goodyear and Dr Amie Randhawa and published in the Lancet, which found that where in-school phone use was reduced, it did not result in measurable improvement in wellbeing, sleep, physical activity or educational attainment as students shifted their phone usage to other times of the day, away from the classroom.

Different countries have approached the issue of smart phones in schools in a variety of ways with responsibility often delegated to education authorities and even down to individual schools and two examples of this are:

- **Ireland:** To support a phone free learning environment, in 2025 the government provided funding to schools to provide students lockable phone pouches which block electronic signals and schools then stipulate phones must be stored during classes. This means that children can access their phones at specific times to allow communication without classroom disruption. This is underpinned by Department of Education national guidelines for all schools that phones should not be used in the classroom.
- **Slovakia:** The Ministry of Education introduced a regulation in 2025 limiting the use of mobile phones in primary schools banning smartphones for students up to 9 years of age and older students may use them only for educational purposes if permitted by a teacher. Schools have discretion to choose between a selection of approaches where students must: hand in their devices to the school OR they must be stored in a locker OR kept by the student in their bag powered off OR the school can decide to ban them entirely from the school premises.

Professional pan European research is needed: The reality of the situation is that there is no comprehensive data available to show what is happening in every EU state, if any of these steps have been actually implemented and has there been any impact. As a result, most claims about the benefits of measures banning smart phones in schools remain anecdotal rather than evidence based meaning we are relying on gut feeling or opinion, thus proper research is needed to measure what works and what does not.

The Answer

Should smart phone devices be in school at all? Schools and teachers need to be fully supported, resourced and empowered to control smart phone use in order to insulate the learning environment from external distractions for children during the school day, as a number of EU Member States already do. Equally students need to be included in the discussion, fully informed as to why devices are not permitted and shown the positive reasons for a limitation policy. Beyond the school gates parents and care givers need support to help them work with their children on the effective use of their time online via smart phone devices outside of school hours.

But before any definitive conclusions are made, we should ask an important question:

By removing smart phones from school are we addressing the real issues in our schools, or just managing a symptom of a wider society problem?

Conclusions

Smart phone device usage in schools reflects what is happening inside & outside of educational institutions so this is both a policy and an operational issue. It must also be considered that children spend only 5-6 hours out of 24 every day in school, so any measures around smart phone usage need to extend beyond the school gate.

Before changes are implemented, education and awareness-raising among parents and students should be the first step, only then should restrictions in schools follow. Parents and carers especially need to understand the issues and they need to lead by example otherwise, schools are left dealing with the consequences of patterns and behaviours formed outside the school.



Ultimately usage limitations set by schools make sense and should contribute to the protection of the learning environment from external distractions. To do this schools must be supported by resources, parents, learning professionals and educational authorities. All of these efforts should contribute to a positive learning environment for happier healthier children, but they form only a small element in the equation addressing the wider societal challenges of cyberbullying, poor mental wellbeing, classroom disruption and overuse of social media.

Co-authored by:

IMPART KNOWLEDGE CONSULTING	Mr. Denton Howard <i>Impart Knowledge Consulting</i>
digiQ	Ms. Andrea Cox <i>Digi Q (Slovakia)</i>

Contact point: Denton Howard info@oseg.online