Australian Secondary Principals' Association

Mobile Phones and Personal electronic device use in schools – Department of Education Discussion paper response

Submission Date: 9th June 2023.

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Focus questions for consideration include:

- Should the use of devices for non-school purposes during school hours be restricted at a system level? Or at a school level?
- What restrictions do you consider appropriate for primary school students? For secondary school students?
- For older students, should devices be restricted throughout the day? Or permitted during breaks, such as recess and lunch?
- When using restrictions, should devices be removed from the student's possession? In a locked pouch? Or turned off or on airplane mode in a student's bag?

Should the use of devices for non-school purposes during school hours be restricted at a system level? Or at a school level?

Restrictions at the system level support consistent practices in school settings. This supports equity in student outcomes (low SES schools/communities and indigenous communities), and reduces potential for conflict between schools and their communities. Such restrictions are more likely to assure governmental duty of care responsibility to ensure safe and age-appropriate service delivery. There should be policy scoping guidance and avenues for principals to seek exemptions to the restrictions, where appropriate controls can be demonstrated.

What restrictions do you consider appropriate for primary school students? For secondary school students?

The priorities for schools are learning progress as prescribed by the Australian Curriculum, and the wellbeing of students. If it cannot be established that access to mobile phones and personal devices during school hours is essential to achieving those priorities, there is no reason to differentiate restrictions for any phase of schooling. Differentiated approaches might also be difficult to implement in schools that cater for both phases, such as a P-12 setting.

In secondary school settings, it is appropriate to restrict all mobile phone use unless:

- Used for medical purposes, such as blood glucose monitoring
- Used for learning applications with explicit teacher authorisation where no reasonable alternative is available, such as making multimedia content in Arts subjects.

Secondary students, particularly in years 7-9 are less biologically equipped to resist the addictive properties of phones than adults, are increasingly influenced by peer relationships, are more likely to engage in risky and non-compliant behaviours. They are more likely to have increasingly unregulated access to phones and the internet for the first time as parents allow more freedoms and agency. It is important that students at this early formative stage of adolescence are given the opportunity to develop healthy habits for learning, physical health, and social interaction as the foundation for further growth and development. Restrictions on phone use during school hours offers a quarantined window for healthy growth and development through adolescence.

For older students, should devices be restricted throughout the day? Or permitted during breaks, such as recess and lunch?

The risk of allowing access during breaks is that student use of devices is not monitored to the same extent, and negative social behaviours are more likely to occur, such as bullying via messaging and social media apps, or setting up fights to film as online content. Student learning and school operation can also be disrupted by unrestricted contact with others outside the school, for example where an aggressive parent arrives at school at the texted invitation of their child.

Students are also more likely to participate in other forms of social interaction, physical activity, and healthy pursuits such as arts and cultural activities, clubs and community engagement when access to phones is restricted. Some relaxation may be appropriate in years 11 and 12, with controls in place.

When using restrictions, should devices be removed from the student's possession? In a locked pouch? Or turned off or on airplane mode in a student's bag?

A restrictive policy is easier to implement if students retain possession of their phones, or where another consistent classroom management approach can be assured. Many families and their students rely on having phones for safety and contact during transit to and from school, and some may be anxious when they don't have control over a valuable possession. It is important to also consider the impact on teachers and school administrations in managing the day-to-day implementation of a restrictive policy. Introduction of a locked pouch program may be useful to change the culture in a school that has not had restrictions, where other measures might be appropriate when establishing a new school, or once broader acceptance of restrictions is established. It is difficult to monitor and maintain a policy that only requires phones be turned off or in bags on silent. It is too easy for students to be non-compliant in these cases, often without the knowledge of the supervising adults.

Teaching students responsible use, and the importance of students engaging with technology.

Using devices and technology is essential in the contemporary world, and for the future.

There are very few applications suitable for educational use on phones that cannot be accessed via other means such as laptops and other computing devices that can be more suitably managed by teachers and schools. This would mean all schools should be provisioned to support this, to ensure equity.

Any proposal for new curriculum to support students to learn and develop the skills for appropriate phone use must be measured against the impact it will have on already crowded and complex expectations for teachers and schools. Especially when most of the teaching workforce has not been trained to manage or implement such an expectation.

Parents and carers make the decision to allow students access to such devices, and the responsibility to regulate and teach the use of such technology should primarily rest with them.