

Mobile phones in the classroom

A plea for guidelines rather than law

Not only in the Netherlands, but also elsewhere in the world, policymakers struggle with the question of whether the advantages of mobile phones in the classroom still outweigh the disadvantages. A renewed debate on this topic is justified. The algorithms of recent popular platforms like TikTok are shockingly successful at capturing attention. And Snapchat's functions (streaks and Snapmap) more than ever keep young people glued to the screen. It is not surprising that their screen time sometimes amounts to nine, 10 and sometimes even to 14 hours a day.

The Dutch Minister Dennis Wiersma (Primary and Secondary Education) announced earlier this month that he would no longer rule out a legal ban on telephones in the classroom. Ideally, policy on this should be based on scientific evidence. But this evidence is not unequivocal. There are [studies](#) that have compared the academic performance of young people in cities or regions that have and do not have a phone ban at school. For example, researchers in Great Britain and Spain report [a small positive effect](#) of the ban, while researchers in Sweden find no effect.

Effects of Smartphones

More research has been done into the effect of general smartphone and social media use, so inside and outside the school: A [meta-analysis](#) (a summary of 39 studies) shows a small negative relationship between telephone use and school performance. But a [recent study](#) of 12,000 Austrian young people found no connection whatsoever between social media use and their intelligence, spelling skills, and vocabulary.

All studies on the effects of smartphone and social media use on school performance are based on aggregated results among large groups of young people. No attention is paid to the strong individual differences in their sensitivity to the effects of that use. In [our studies at the University of Amsterdam](#), we do pay attention to such individual differences and our studies show that the well-being of most young people does not change due to their social media use, and that it even has a beneficial effect on some. However, about 10 percent of young people do experience damage from their social media use. Based on our findings, I expect that the school performance of a small group of young people will also deteriorate due to their smartphone and social media use inside and outside the classroom.

Screens have moved closer to our bodies. First they were on our desk, then they moved to our bag and then to our pocket. No wonder then that many young people admit that the phone distracts them from other tasks, including those for school. Some young people protect themselves, for example by turning off notifications. But more generally, they

need their parents and teachers to develop self-control, also when it comes to their phone use.

Clear rules

Teens' self-control develops mainly through setting clear rules, for example no telephone during meals, not before sleeping, and not in class. Such rules are best established early, before a habit has developed, because then behavior is much more difficult to unlearn. Early is, for example, when purchasing the telephone or at the start of the school year.

Smartphone use is closely linked to the educational vision in many schools. And in the Netherlands, we have freedom of education, laid down in Article 23 of the Constitution. For that reason alone, a general ban on telephones within schools will be difficult. Polls from 2018 by the Association for Christian Education Verus, included in the [newspaper Trouw](#), showed that a large majority of schools were against a national ban, in the past years, more schools seem to consider a phone ban in the classrooms.

Conversations with parent councils

Some schools are already starting to profile themselves around phone use with the new school year in sight. But there are still many questions. For example, should there be a difference between primary and secondary education? And between the lower and higher classes of secondary schools? How will discussions take place with school boards, participation councils, and parent councils? These are important questions that every school must seek to answer.

Young people differ, parents differ, and schools differ, also in their opinion of the telephone in the classroom. Such differences need to be acknowledged. Many schools would be helped with guidelines from the government. Guidelines are more flexible than laws, can be adapted more quickly, and offers scope for customization. Flexibility, adaptation, and customization are more important than laws in a world where what is new quickly becomes old.