

# **PE2106/F: Prohibit mobile phone use in Scottish schools**

## **Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) written submission, 31 October 2024**

The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), the country's largest teaching union, representing almost 65,000 members across all sectors of Education and at all career levels, welcomes the opportunity to comment on PE2106: Prohibit mobile phone use in Scottish schools.

The Petition calls 'on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to update guidance on mobile phones in schools to require all schools to prohibit the use of mobile phones during the school day, including at interval and lunchtime'.

### **Misuse of Mobile Phones and Devices in Schools**

The EIS understands the concerns highlighted by the Petitioner in the background information accompanying the Petition. The misuse of mobile phones and other mobile devices in schools is a serious issue, and one that has grown steadily in recent years.

The abusive use of mobile phones was identified as one of 'the serious disruptive behaviours' in the Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research 2023 (BISSR). The misuse of such devices to abuse or bully pupils or staff is absolutely unacceptable. The impact on learning and teaching, and on the health and wellbeing of students and staff, of mobile device abuse can be devastating and must be tackled quickly and decisively wherever and whenever it arises.

Misuse can also impact on low level disruption. Following a 2021 AGM resolution, the EIS conducted a survey to assess, inter alia, the relationship between mobile phone misuse and low-level disruption. A large proportion of respondents – almost 44% - said that tablets and mobile phones contribute to a lot of low-level disruption in classes, such as students being distracted and using them for purposes unrelated to learning during lessons.

This was confirmed in the 2023 BISSR report, which highlighted using or looking at mobile phones inappropriately as one of the top three contributors to low level disruptive behaviour.

In response to the BISSR report, the Scottish Government's 'Guidance on Mobile Phones in Scotland's Schools' was updated on 15th August 2024. The guidance had been developed in partnership with COSLA and with members of the Scottish Advisory Group for Relationships and Behaviour in Schools (SAGRABIS), of which the EIS is a member. The guidance and its impact will be kept under review by SAGRABIS.

## **Sound Educational Rationale**

The EIS has no policy to support a national ban of mobile phone use in schools but is clear that any use of mobile phones in schools should be based on a sound educational rationale, informed by teacher professional judgement with due regard to equity.

Many young people, living in the poorest households, may not have access to a Smart phone, data or internet access and even if a device is supplied by the school/local authority, it cannot be assumed that the family income will stretch to keeping the device fully charged and internet connected.

The reality is that the use of personal mobile devices has increased in schools due to the paucity of digital devices and lack of investment in the IT infrastructure of schools. Implementation of the national guidance should therefore be accompanied by investment of necessary resources to ensure the adequacy of schools' digital infrastructure and that pupils who may not have access to Smart phones or data are not disadvantaged.

Recent reports have referenced the impact that excessive screen time can have on children and young people's learning, especially their reading skills and this must be taken into account when determining local policies on the use of any screen-based devices, including phones.

The EIS is also clear that education is fundamentally based on relationships formed and built through human interaction and would wish to see priority given to human-centred learning, rather than to 'digital by default' approaches as might otherwise be the temptation because of the ready availability of digital devices and the various capacities that they offer. Young people should be well connected to other human beings cognitively, socially and emotionally rather than being focused far too often on their mobile phones.

## **Developing Guidance in an Empowered School Context**

Some media reports on the introduction of the updated Scottish Government guidance have erroneously, in our view, suggested that the decision to ban mobile phone use in school rests with the Headteacher. In an Empowered school context, this is incorrect.

Most schools across the country will already have their own guidance in place and the EIS would expect, in the context of Empowerment, that schools, parents, teachers and school staff, trade unions and pupils would all be involved in the development of policy – to agree what the appropriate use of mobile phones should be for their particular school.

The national guidance reinforces this approach stating:

'Where restrictions on mobile phones in schools are being considered, it is important to ensure that pupils, school staff, parents and carers and the wider school community are fully consulted in relation to the agreed approach on the limitations of mobile phone use in schools.'

In some cases, the outcome of collegiate dialogue might be to adopt a ban on the use of mobile phones, with the implications for schools, including resources, factored in. In other cases, restrictions may be placed on when mobile phones can be used during the school day. As we have highlighted, any agreement reached must be underpinned by sound educational rationale, informed by teacher professional judgement and underpinned by principles of equity and inclusion.

This collegiate approach to developing guidance ought to provide clarity for all in terms of the appropriate use of mobile phones in the school context and increase the potential success of implementation by ensuring the buy-in of all in the school community.

We hope this information is helpful and would be happy to provide further information if required.