

School Principals



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Digital Dilemma: The Case for Mobile Phone Restrictions in Schools

In today's digital era, the widespread use of mobile phones by teenagers presents challenges, affecting their mental health, academic achievement, and social development. Since beginning my career, mobile phones have transitioned from luxury items to potentially problematic devices in young people's hands. Don't get me wrong, I am no technology hater or fearmonger. I have personally fully embraced every new tech at hand and make daily use of my own mobile phone and online connection. Having seen firsthand the negative impacts, I have also seen many ways that technology has served young people in positive ways we could never have imagined.

As I start my third year as Principal of Wangaratta High School, I continue to advocate for stringent mobile phone restrictions during school hours, building on my experience in both international and independent schools. We've diligently enforced a policy that exceeds the Department of Education's ban, emphasising the importance of a phone-free learning environment for student well-being and academic focus. Its widespread use and mixed support from the community, parents, and carers complicate policy enforcement, crucial for student learning and wellbeing. I seize this moment to advocate broadly for a uniform understanding that mobile phones disrupt student learning and wellbeing during school hours.

The relationship between mobile phone use and wellbeing, particularly among adolescents and young adults, has been a focal point of recent research and informs our determination in this area. Studies have consistently shown a correlation between excessive smartphone use and various mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and impaired cognitive function. Studies point to difficulties in cognitive-emotion regulation, impulsivity, addiction to social networking, and changes in the brain's grey matter volume. We now know that the mere presence of a smartphone

reduces our brainpower, even though we feel they're giving our full attention and focus to the task at hand. The use of mobile phones in bullying and inciting violence adds even more urgency and importance that they are excluded from the school day.

Prolonged mobile phone (think of an idle teen over summer or a weekend) use has been directly associated with depressive symptoms among adolescents, indicating a clear link between mobile phone use and mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and stress.

As a parent or carer, I know that you will have struggled with the issue at times, and this informs our determination to be consistent and persistent in ensuring that the school day is mobile phone-free. If you haven't yet provided your child with a phone, I recommend holding off as long as possible to allow for the requisite maturity. I can assure you that 16 and 17-year-olds are doing very well and do not own a phone.

The core elements of our policy are as follows: phone use is strictly prohibited during the school day. Exemptions are granted to specific circumstances, such as for remote health monitoring or when seen by the teacher as an appropriate way to support learning. Students have been carefully and repeatedly briefed on expectations, and phones are confiscated if used. We only return phones to parents and carers and encourage parents and carers to leave the phone overnight at school in safe storage to ensure an appropriate 'cost' for non-adherence to expectations. For the policy to be effective, we need the persistent and consistent support of parents and carers. The school can pass messages and arrange contact for any matters during the day, so there is no need for phone calls to home and back – one of the most common excuses provided.

You can access our policy and additional parent/carer resources at whs.vic.edu.au/mobilephones