

One Size Does Not Fit All

A report on phone bans in schools
and children's rights with the
OCO Youth Advisory Panel

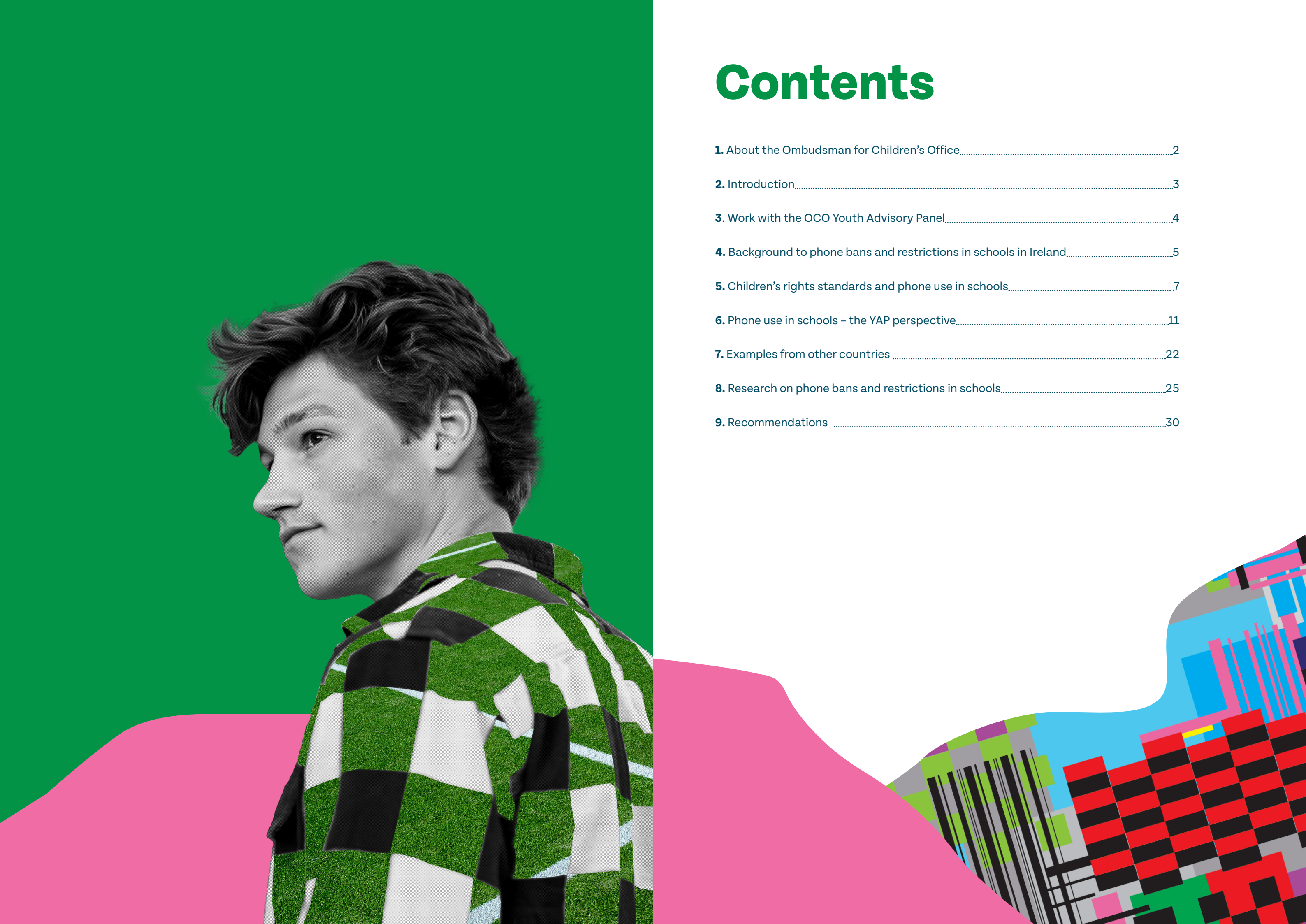
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ombudsman
do leanaí
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1. About the Ombudsman for Children's Office

The Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) is an independent statutory body, which was established in 2004 under the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002 (2002 Act).

Under the 2002 Act, as amended, the Ombudsman for Children has two core statutory functions:

- to promote the rights and welfare of children up to the age of 18 years; and
- to investigate complaints made by or on behalf of a child concerning the administrative actions of public bodies, which have had, or may have had, an adverse effect on the child.

The Ombudsman for Children reports directly to the Oireachtas in relation to the exercise of the OCO's statutory functions.

As part of fulfilling the function to promote the rights and welfare of children under section 7 of the 2002 Act, the Ombudsman for Children is required to:

- establish structures to consult regularly with children;
- highlight issues relating to the rights and welfare of children that are of concern to children;
- advise government ministers on the development and co-ordination of policy relating to children and on any matter relating to the rights and welfare of children; and
- encourage public bodies to develop policies, practices and procedures that are designed to promote the rights and welfare of children.

In line with section 7 of the 2002 Act, the OCO established its Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) in 2020. The YAP works closely with the OCO to inform our work and to ensure children's voices are heard and considered on issues affecting them.

2. Introduction

Phones are a part of young people's lives. CyberSafeKids reported in 2024 that 97% of children aged 12 to 14 years old and 49% of children aged 8 to 12 in Ireland have a smartphone.¹

In 2024, the Irish Government announced that there would be a ban on phones in schools² and funding was allocated for phone pouches as part of Budget 2025.³ These decisions have taken place against a backdrop of measures adopted by some countries to ban phones in schools and to prohibit access to social media more generally by children under a certain age.⁴

The desire to protect children by way of a ban is understandable and comes from the legitimate concerns of parents, schools and policymakers about the impact that social media has on children. The OCO is concerned that children's rights, including those rights enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), have not been considered by decision makers in the discourse around banning phones in schools in Ireland. However, by focusing solely on the protection of children from harm, decision-makers are ignoring the range of other rights that children are entitled to under the UNCRC. We are particularly concerned that children and young people have not been included, as is their right, in the conversations

around, and development of, proposals to ban phones in schools. The absence of any discussion of children's rights is all the more surprising given the abundance of international guidance on a children's rights approach to the digital environment,⁵ as well as the numerous calls by Irish and international experts for a nuanced, evidence-based and rights-respecting approach to the matter.⁶

In light of this, the OCO decided to consult and collaborate with our YAP to hear what young people have to say and to fill a gap left by decision-makers in this area. Through this work, we have co-created digital content with the YAP outlining their views for policymakers and schools. This can be viewed at www.oco.ie. We have also produced this report in collaboration with our YAP to outline the children's rights standards relevant to phone bans in schools, the YAP's views, examples from other countries, and international and national research.

The Department of Education and Youth (the Department) published guidance on restricting and banning phones in schools in June 2025. This report will provide an example for policymakers and schools of how to take a child rights-based approach as they begin to implement the Department's guidance from 2025 onwards.

3. Work with the OCO Youth Advisory Panel

29 members of the OCO Youth Advisory Panel aged between 13 and 17 were involved in this participatory process. YAP members represented a diverse range of schools across the country, coming from counties including Dublin, Wicklow, Leitrim, Mayo, Galway, Wexford, Cork, Limerick, Donegal, Cavan and Offaly. During the recruitment process, efforts are made to ensure that the YAP represents a diversity of backgrounds too, though no YAP member is ever expected to share anything about their personal background, or to speak on behalf of any particular demographic.

Their views were captured through a series of youth-friendly consultations, led by the OCO Participation and Rights Education Team, grounded in best practice in child and youth participation. In February 2025, views were gathered on the following:

- 1. The children’s rights engaged when it comes to using a phone in school.
- 2. How bans or restrictions on the use of phones in schools impact on children’s rights.
- 3. Their own experiences of phone use, bans and restrictions in schools.
- 4. How rules on phone use should be developed in their schools.
- 5. What outcomes and output should come from this work.

Following these discussions, the OCO Participation and Rights Education Team analysed the findings and developed key messages. These key messages were then shared with the YAP and further developed in terms of both content and child-friendly language. The YAP, alongside the OCO team, also developed 5 final recommendations for policymakers and schools.

From there, discussions were facilitated around how the YAP wanted to communicate their key messages and recommendations. Across April to July, the YAP voted for the development of digital content that could be shared on social media and meetings were dedicated to the development of this content. This content was youth-led in terms of creation and production, and it is the core output that the YAP wished to develop in order to communicate their views with policymakers, schools, parents, children themselves, and any other stakeholder interested in and affected by this work. This content was informed by the YAP’s lived experiences of smartphone policies in their schools across the country, as well as their key messages and recommendations.

Lastly, the YAP fed into the structure of this final report. Findings from the consultation are reflected throughout the report, as well as their final key messages and recommendations.

4. Background to phone bans and restrictions in schools in Ireland

In May 2018, the Minister for Education issued Circular 0038/2018 requesting schools to consult with the school community regarding the use of smartphones and other technologies.⁷

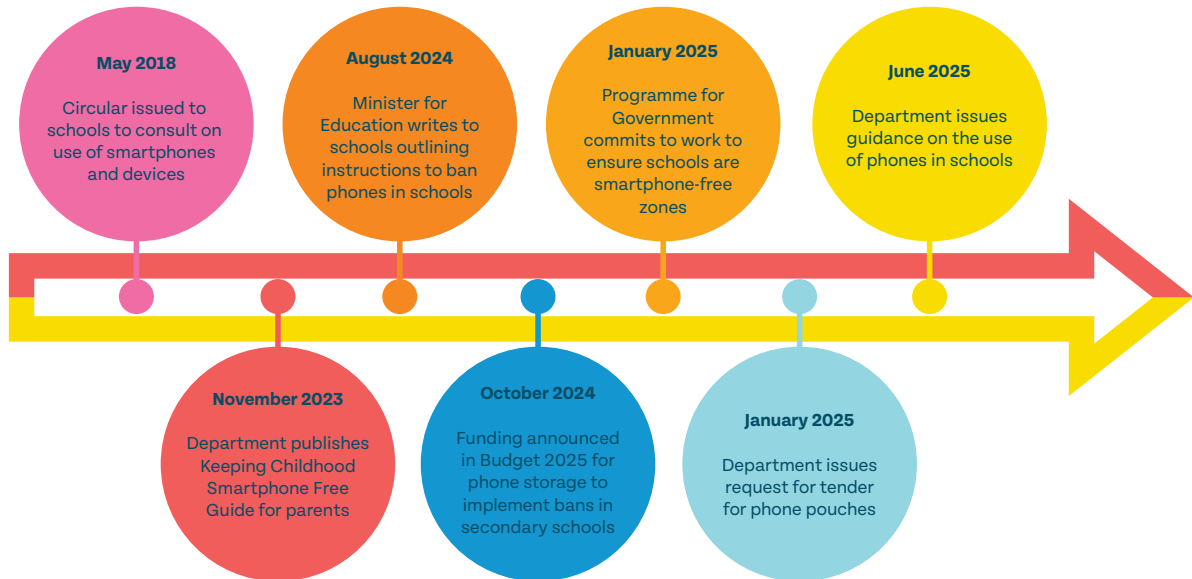
In November 2023, the Department of Education launched Keeping Childhood Smartphone Free, a guide for parents of primary school children to support their children’s online safety by creating a voluntary agreement on the use of smartphones and other devices.⁸ The guide, which does not apply to phones that do not have internet connectivity, includes guidance on consulting with children and parents, and includes examples for the content of a voluntary agreement, such as specifying times when smartphones are allowed to be used and when they are not, and allowing smartphones to be used for educational purposes only.

In August 2024, the Minister for Education issued a letter to schools outlining the Department’s instructions on banning the use of phones in schools.⁹ This letter stated that schools should consult with students and parents when developing their policy to ban phones and also

acknowledged that allowances would need to be made for children who need access to their phones for specific reasons, such as students with diabetes who have a blood sugar monitor linked to their phone.

Following this, in October 2024, the Minister for Education announced the allocation of funding in Budget 2025 for phone pouches to support implementation of the ban in post-primary schools.¹⁰ The Department stated that the funding was intended to support positive wellbeing among students, helping them to disconnect, learn, and make friends without the distractions that can arise from the use of phones. The announcement was met with criticism from opposition parties,¹¹ the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO),¹² the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI),¹³ and the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI),¹⁴ and local authorities.¹⁵ The Irish Second Level Student’s Union (ISSU) also criticised the decision, stating that:

- There was a lack of engagement with students.
- The plans are not feasible and would add another responsibility on the system to police phone usage.



- No consultation has been made with relevant stakeholders on the proposals.
- Phones are often used during the school day for educational reasons.¹⁶

The Programme for Government published on 15 January 2025 stated that the Government will: “Work with school leaders to ensure schools are smartphone-free zones to protect student wellbeing and learning.”¹⁷

On 20 January 2025, the Department published a call for tenders for the provision of secure phone pouches for students in post-primary schools, with an estimated value of €7.3 million, a contract duration of 24 months and a deadline of 26 February 2025 for receipt of tenders.¹⁸ In June 2025, RTÉ reported that the tender had been cancelled, following advice from the Chief State Solicitor’s Office.¹⁹ The Minister for Education stated that a new tender process would commence shortly with a view to establish a procurement mechanism for schools in autumn 2025.²⁰

On 13 June 2025, the Department issued new guidance by way of circulars on phone use in primary and secondary schools.²¹ Circular 0044/2025 requires all recognised primary schools to ban the use of and access to personal phones by pupils.²² Circular 0045/2025 requires all recognised post-primary schools to restrict the use of and access to personal phones by

students.²³ The circulars recognise that schools are already managing the use of phones, but state that schools are expected to formalise and implement a policy to prohibit fully (in the case of primary schools) and restrict (in the case of post-primary schools) the use of personal phones during the school day, including during breaks and at lunchtime. The circulars state that the policy is intended to support schools in improving the learning environment by reducing distraction, reducing cyberbullying risks and access to inappropriate content, and increasing traditional social interactions at break times. It is not clear from the guidance if children and other stakeholders were consulted as part of the development of the guidance. It notes that research will inform policy in this area but only refers to two reports; it does not refer to the research on smartphone policy published by Dublin City University (DCU) and funded by the Department.

The Minister for Education and Youth reported on 17 July 2025 that 380 post-primary schools had applied for funding to date.²⁴

5. Children’s rights standards and phone use in schools

The UNCRC offers a children’s rights framework that must be adopted by decision-makers, be it at government or school level, when establishing rules on the use of phones in schools.

A child rights-based approach requires a shift away from paternalistic approaches that view children as victims needing protection from harm to an approach that respects children as holders of a range of civil, political, social and economic rights, with decisions made *in collaboration with* children, rather than *about* them.²⁵

This is best achieved through the further realisation of all rights children have under the UNCRC, including the general principles of the UNCRC, and adopting the general measures of implementation of children’s rights. This section sets out the children’s rights standards and guidance that apply to phone use in schools.

General measures of implementation

Article 4 of the UNCRC requires States to take all necessary measures to implement children’s rights. The Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) has developed guidance on the ‘general measures of implementation’ that are necessary to comply with Article 4 of the UNCRC.²⁶ In relation to phone bans in schools, these measures include:

- A phone use policy that is grounded in and guided by children’s rights standards and guidance and that is informed by the best, rigorous and most up-to-date evidence;²⁷
- Building the capacity of schools to comply with children’s rights standards when developing and implementing rules on phones;
- Assessing the impact of phone use rules on children’s rights through conducting a child rights impact assessment (CRIA) before rules are adopted;²⁸

- Undertaking a child rights impact evaluation (CRIA) to evaluate how a decision has affected children after the decision has been made and implemented.²⁹
- Gathering and analysing data on the implementation of rules on phone use and their effectiveness.

General principles

Four of the rights contained in the UNCRC are known as general principles. These rights are considered vital to realising all other children’s rights in the UNCRC and should serve as a guide for determining the measures needed to guarantee children’s rights in relation to phone use in schools.³⁰

1. Non-discrimination (Article 2)

The right to non-discrimination requires States to take special measures to diminish or eliminate conditions that cause discrimination and to identify children who require such special measures to realise their rights.³¹ The Committee notes that policies banning access to digital devices that have a discriminatory impact on children with disabilities should be removed.³²

2. Best interests (Article 3)

Every child has a right to have their best interests taken into account as a primary consideration in all matters that affect them. This requires government departments, public bodies, and decision-makers to systematically consider how children’s rights are affected by their decisions and actions.³³

3. Life, survival and development (Article 6)

The State is obliged to ensure the survival and development of the child to the maximum extent possible. The State is required to interpret development in its broadest sense as a holistic concept that embraces the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral, psychological and social development and should aim to achieve the optimal

development for all children.³⁴ Opportunities provided by the digital environment play an increasingly crucial role in children's development.³⁵ This principle requires States to identify and address risks that children face in different contexts.

4. Children's views (Article 12)

Article 12 of the UNCRC recognises children's right to express their views and have their views given due weight when decisions are being made about issues that affect them. This right must be understood as a process, and not an individual one-off event.³⁶ This process must be child-friendly, voluntary, inclusive, and include provision of information to children on their right to express their views and how the participation will take place. Importantly, the right not only requires children's views to be heard, but also that their views be taken seriously, that children are informed about how their views were considered and that they are involved in reviews and evaluations of outcomes.

The Committee states that respect for children's right to be heard is fundamental to the realisation of the right to education.³⁷ The Committee also states that the State has a duty to involve all children, listen to their views, and give them due weight, when developing legislation, policies or other measures that affect children in relation to the digital environment.³⁸ Children's views must be taken into account both in schools and in all aspects of education policy, including that relating to the digital environment.

Evolving capacities of children

The concept of the evolving capacities of the child under Article 5 of the UNCRC recognises that all children have rights, regardless of their age, and that they are entitled to an increasing level of responsibility, agency, and autonomy in the exercise of those rights as they grow and mature. Evolving capacities represents the balance contained in the UNCRC between recognising children as active agents entitled to be listened to, respected and granted increasing autonomy, and protecting children in accordance with their maturity.³⁹ Guidance and research on minimum ages and

children's rights state that setting minimum ages for digital media use are a blunt and ineffective means of protecting children and their rights.⁴⁰ Strict bans or restrictions may limit the agency of children already equipped with the necessary maturity and skills to manage their phone use, while failing to protect those children who do not, even if those children have met the required age. If minimum ages are used, the guidance states that they must be in line with all children's rights set out under the UNCRC and avoid a one-size-fits-all approach.

Government departments and public bodies should therefore be guided by the fact that the risks and opportunities associated with children's engagement with digital technologies change depending on their age and stage of development and that policies and practices concerning phones should respond to each child's needs and act as an enabler for children's gradual acquisition of competencies, understanding and agency in the exercise of their rights.⁴¹

Civil rights and freedoms

Children's rights standards highlight how digital technology supports the realisation of children's right to freedom of expression under Article 13 of the UNCRC.⁴² This right requires States to educate children about how to exercise their right to freedom of expression in the digital environment while respecting the rights and dignity of others.

The State has a duty to respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion under Article 14 of the UNCRC in the digital environment and to respect children's right to practice their own religion under Article 30.⁴³

In line with children's right to freedom of association under Article 15 of the UNCRC, the Committee notes that the digital environment can enable children to form their social, religious, cultural, ethnic, sexual and political identities and to participate in associated communities and in public spaces for deliberation, cultural exchange, social cohesion and diversity.⁴⁴

Children's rights guidance emphasises the unique opportunity presented by the digital environment for children to realise their right to access information under Articles 13 and 17 of the UNCRC.⁴⁵ International guidance states that

school filtering systems, content controls and other safety-oriented technologies should not be used to restrict children's access to information in the digital environment and should only be used to prevent the flow of harmful material to children.⁴⁶

Article 16 of the UNCRC recognises children's right to be free from arbitrary or unlawful interference with their privacy and correspondence. It requires States to advise parents and the public on the importance of this right and about the practices that can respect this right, while keeping them safe.⁴⁷

Protection from harm

Children have the right to be protected from all forms of violence, exploitation and abuse in the digital environment in line with Articles 19, 34 and 36 of the UNCRC.

International children's rights guidance notes how the digital environment opens new ways to perpetrate violence against children and set out the range of measures that States and business enterprises should take to protect children from such violence. However, no mention of banning social media or technologies, including phones, is made by the Committee or the Council of Europe. Instead, they emphasise the need for the establishment and enforcement of robust regulation of business enterprises and advertising, age verification, policies to address cyberbullying, harassment, incitement to hatred and violence in the digital environment, and awareness-raising and education programmes for children, parents and teachers. They state that any safety and protective measures should be implemented in accordance with children's evolving capacities and their best interests and should not unduly restrict the exercise of other rights, such as their right to privacy or to information.⁴⁸

Health and welfare

Digital technologies can present risks for children's right to the highest attainable standard of health under Article 24 of the UNCRC. However, digital technologies can also facilitate access to health services and information and offer opportunities to improve children's health and wellbeing, when balanced

with their need for rest, exercise and interaction with peers, families and communities.⁴⁹ International children's rights guidance recommends that States should develop guidance for children, parents, caregivers and educators on the importance of a healthy balance of digital and non-digital activities and sufficient rest.

Education and play

Article 28 of the UNCRC recognises children's right to education, which Article 29 states should be directed to the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential, and the preparation of the child for a responsible life in a free society. International children's rights guidance recommends that States should actively invest in and promote the opportunities offered by the digital environment to realise children's right to education. The Committee states that use of digital technologies in schools can enable and enhance children's access to education, and strengthen engagement between the teacher and learners.⁵⁰

The Council of Europe notes that "it is important that the knowledge and resources of the digital environment are available to all children in a way that is inclusive and takes into account children's evolving capacities and the particular circumstances of children in vulnerable situations."⁵¹ The Committee and Council of Europe emphasise the need for digital literacy to be made a core part of the curriculum throughout all school years, which develops children's competencies to use technologies and to understand the risks and opportunities of the digital environment.⁵²

They also recommend training for teachers on safeguards relating to the digital environment as well as digital literacy education for parents.⁵³ Though guidance does not directly address the use of phones in schools, the Committee makes recommendations that should be heeded by the Department and schools, including that:

- States parties should invest equitably in technological infrastructure in schools and other learning settings, ensuring the availability and affordability of a sufficient

number of computers;

- States parties should ensure that the use of digital technologies does not undermine in-person education and is justified for educational purposes; and
- States parties should develop evidence-based policies, standards and guidelines for schools and other relevant bodies responsible for procuring and using educational technologies and materials to enhance the provision of valuable educational benefits. Standards for digital educational technologies should ensure that the use of those technologies is ethical and appropriate for educational purposes and does not expose children to violence, discrimination, misuse of their personal data, commercial exploitation or other infringements of their rights.⁵⁴

The Committee notes that the digital environment promotes children's right to play, rest, culture and artistic activities under Article 31 of the UNCRC, which is essential for their well-being and development.⁵⁵ Digital forms of culture, recreation and play can facilitate children's social skills, learning, expression, creative activities, such as music and art, a sense of belonging and a shared culture.

6. Phone use in schools – the YAP perspective

This section sets out the views shared by the YAP during youth-friendly consultations which took place in April 2025. We asked the YAP to tell us about their experience of phone rules in their schools, how the rules were developed, the positive and negative impacts of these rules, as well as the extent to which they felt they received adequate education on how to use phones safely and responsibly.

We also asked them to think about how phone rules positively and negatively affect the rights that children have under the UNCRC. Lastly, we asked the YAP to share their views on what they think rules on phones in schools should look like and how they should be developed.

A number of key takeaways have been identified by the YAP.

Key YAP takeaways

- **Bans impact our rights:** We know phones can have negative impacts on our rights, but there's more to it than that. Phones also help us to get some of our rights. For example, we use different apps for healthcare, translation and even for school itself. Phone bans don't think about both sides of the story and could have just as bad an impact on our rights.
- **Inconsistent approaches across Ireland:** The national guidelines let schools decide how to implement and enforce restrictions. This means the rules and how well they are enforced are different in each school. In some of our schools, the rules aren't that strict. In others, students are being unfairly punished and paying money to get their phones back.

"Rules not being regulated can lead to schools creating rules being completely unfair."

"It seems decisions are often made on the spur of the moment! It's quite strange that there isn't a national set of rules."

- **Our right to have a say:** Adults are not asking us our opinions when making these rules, even though we have the right to have our voices heard. This means they don't understand the different impacts that rules can have in our lives. They are also not showing us any evidence to help us understand why phone bans are the right solution.

"Young people basically don't get a say in the decisions made about THEIR school life."

"Children's voices need to be heard!"

Evolving capacities of children: Younger children are less mature and may be more likely to feel the negative sides of phone use. Children in primary schools might not need their phones as much as secondary school students, especially older teenagers. Adults should consider these differences when making rules.

- **Do bans even work?** Lots of young people are finding ways around bans. When we're not included in making rules around phones, we stop trusting and start to resent those who make decisions that impact us. This makes us more likely to break the rules.

"Phone pouches brought in can be opened very easily with a hit off a hard surface - eg: A wall, or some students buy their own heavy duty magnet to open it themselves."

"Phone pouches get lost easier and people can mix them up."

- **We live in a digital world:** Our schools are using technology for education and in today's world, we want to develop digital skills for our future. But when schools rely on technology for learning, they must have the resources to do so. Right now, when phones are taken away, there aren't enough devices in our schools to fill the gap, and this impacts our learning!

"Although one may argue the use of laptops, phones are the most accessible and not every young person/school can afford laptops."

- **Getting to the root of things:** Young people in Ireland are facing lots of challenges and phone bans don't do enough to solve these issues. To solve problems like (cyber)bullying, online safety and engagement with school, we need more creative responses that will actually meet our needs. We'd like to see stronger anti-bullying policies, education around equality and respect, digital literacy lessons, and more investment in schools and health services. Most of all, we want to be included in conversations around solutions that are supposed to support us.

YAP views on current phone rules in their schools

We identified a number of common themes that arose during the YAP's discussions about their experience of current phone rules.

There are inconsistent approaches being taken in schools to rules on phones, to the development of these rules and to their enforcement. Even within schools, there were varied experiences.

Some YAP members said that their schools had outright bans, some said that their school had written policies around "acceptable use" that parents and students must agree to at the beginning of the year, and others said that it was up to the individual teacher to set the rules. Some YAP members said that the rules had not yet changed but they noticed a recent shift towards stricter rules.

Some YAP members said that their schools have phone pouches in place, while others do not use pouches but are required to keep their phones in a box in each classroom, their locker or their schoolbag.

"We need to use for research or projects in school but we are not allowed laptops or other technology are not always available to do this."

Some schools had different rules for different age groups. One YAP member noted that first to third years are not permitted to have a phone in their school, while students in transition year, fifth and sixth year are allowed to have their phone with the teacher's permission.

The YAP also noted inconsistencies across their schools in the costs incurred where students lost or broke a pouch, where pouches were used by their school, and in the fines charged if a phone was confiscated. Costs cited by YAP members ranged from €20 to €35 for breakage or loss of a phone pouch. Some YAP members reported that their school charged their parents to have the student's phone returned. In these cases, the YAP members stated that it was not clear how the school uses the money obtained from such charges. The YAP members were conscious of the impact that such varying charges may have on children in low-income families.

Enforcement of school phone rules and exemptions vary across schools

The YAP members reported varied experiences of their school's approach to enforcement of rules. The YAP's discussions demonstrated that there are inconsistencies with the way teachers are enforcing rules, even in schools where outright bans exist.

One of the YAP members observed that their teachers were stricter in applying the rules in the school corridors "only because they know the vice-principals are watching them!"

Some YAP members said that their school carried out phone checks, which they felt was a breach of their right to privacy under Article 16 of the UNCRC. They noted that phones contain lots of private and personal information, including private chats with friends, which they were not comfortable with teachers potentially being able to see if their phones are taken from them.

In some of the YAP members' schools where bans and pouches were used, there was leniency in certain cases with teacher's permission, for example:

- emergencies;
- for translation purposes in language classes or Gaelscoileanna;
- for taking photographs of schoolwork.

In one school, YAP members reported teachers were even more laid back: students could use their phones if finished their work or step out of the classroom to take calls if a parent phones or if it's an emergency.

Members of the YAP identified many reasons for which a phone may be needed during the school day. The YAP noted that phones are important for children's enjoyment of their right to freedom of religion under Article 14 of the UNCRC, as they support students to engage in religious practices at school. They use phones "for prayers or praying with others, information on the direction to face for prayers, reminders on the phone".

The YAP also identified many advantages that phones can bring to their right to the highest attainable standard of health in school, in line with Article 24 of the UNCRC. The YAP described the multitude of uses that phones have in relation to managing and supporting their health. Apps were used to monitor glucose levels and menstruation cycles, while search engines were used to find medical information. The value of online services was also mentioned. Live chat or textlines, like Childline or SpunOut's Text About It service, support young people's mental health round the clock and provide reliable advice. Contacting parents in relation to health emergencies or anxiety was also identified as important. One YAP member stated, "A person with anxiety may get help from using their phones – they're being denied the ability to contact their parents when they are anxious and get reassurance from parents." They also noted that not all children have the same needs – one child's requirement to access to a phone for health reasons may be different to others.

One rule for children and another rule for adults

Some YAP members expressed frustration about teachers relying on phones themselves during school hours, where phone bans were in place for the students.

“One teacher screams at you for having a phone, while other teachers are scrolling.”

The responses by schools to breaches of the rules put in place have practical, and in some cases adverse, impacts for students in their day to day lives beyond the school environment

The way in which schools responded to students who used their phones during class also varied. YAP members reported various punishments such as confiscation of the phone, detention, isolation,⁵⁶ and suspension for use of a phone against the school’s rules. In some member’s schools, detention after school was automatically applied if a student was seen with their phone out, while in another member’s school, it was a case of 3 strikes and you are out, where repeated breaches of the rules resulted in detention. They noted that this has an impact on their right to education.

Some of the YAP members noted that, when their school confiscates a student’s phone, the students are being denied access to their phone for long periods, extending beyond school hours. Again, the YAP reported variations in how schools applied rules on the confiscation of phones:

- parents have to come in to have phones returned;
- in one case, phones taken on Friday could not be collected until Monday;
- in others, the phone is taken for between 3-5 days;
- in one case, a confiscated phone kept over the weekend followed by a storm left a student without access for several days.

The YAP members expressed concern about the impact of these measures on their access to aspects of their private lives such as their work rotas and to other devices they owned via 2-factor authentication. They were also concerned that these measures impacted the ability of parents to be able to track their location and keep them safe via the phone. The YAP also observed that, in the case of forgotten PE gear, lunch, money or other school materials, phones are important for contacting parents, paying or again, using school apps. One YAP member stated, “Sometimes I forget my PE clothes at home, or forget lunch or money for the canteen and a phone can help to pay ... or get money through my phone from my parents, as well as accessing the online app that is used in the canteen in school.” They felt that rigid bans don’t give enough flexibility to accommodate unpredictability and emergencies in young people’s lives, and for contact to be kept with families where needed, especially where school services don’t fill the gap. The YAP noted that alternatives like the phones at school receptions were not always appropriate, practical or accessible for contacting their parents or emergency services.

The YAP also felt that they didn’t always have the opportunity to express their views in the case where their phone was confiscated. They felt that teachers didn’t consider their opinions.

“This is not right, for privacy, your belongings.”

There are mixed views on the effectiveness of phone rules, with evidence that students will find ways to get around a ban

While some YAP members found phone pouches effective, others disagreed, regarding them as “overcomplicated” and a “waste of money”.

Many students are finding creative ways to get around bans, including the use of fake phones, putting classmates’ phones in a box to bring their own phone to the bathroom, pretending they don’t have a phone at all, hiding phones in jackets, etc. One young person described how the less restrictive policy that their school had before a ban worked better, with the new ban leading to more students trying to break the rules and a breakdown in trust between students and teachers.

There was a sense that, even with bans on phones, further technology will emerge that schools will have to adapt to.

“Something will replace phones.”

Rules on phones are out of step with the approach schools take to digital learning

The YAP saw their phones as an important tool in fulfilling their right to access information under Articles 13 and 17 of the UNCRC and to education under Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC. The YAP spoke about how phones can assist in carrying out schoolwork and “getting informed”, as education becomes more digitised. They mentioned multiple uses for phones in this regard, including for;

- conducting research for class projects,
- studying,
- accessing exam preparation apps,
- accessing school apps,

- translation in language classes,
- as a calculator,
- as a hotspot to enable other ICT equipment such as laptops to access an internet connection where signal is poor,
- in the place of ICT equipment where school resources didn’t allow for its provision,
- as a means of reducing the heavy load of books to be taken home due to availability online, and
- building skills in a world that depends on phone technology in so many areas.

Phones were used to learn during classes for specific subjects, like in Civil, Social and Political Education, where phones were used to develop critical media literacy skills. They said that phones provide an opportunity for young people to access a wide variety of sources of information, allowing students to discover differing perspectives, which is particularly useful for research in school. They also noted that phones are important for learning “how to distinguish between real and fake news”. The YAP were aware that not all information accessible through phones is accurate or reliable, with one member giving the example of using Wikipedia for research. They recalled the importance of their phone in continuing education during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The YAP members recognised that having opportunities to improve their ICT skills was important, as phones and other technology are a part of life. YAP members wanted “engaging” technology to be used more in the classroom but referenced wider issues and inconsistencies with the digitisation of learning. Members observed the contradiction in schools encouraging the use of emails or apps for school purposes, including sending students updates, yet taking away their phones.

“Don’t tell me to rely on my phone but then not let me use it”.

Members also pointed out that not every student has access to alternative technology, like iPads or laptops, due to resourcing issues and that they need to use their phones in school as a result. They observed that a ban may impact disproportionately on students who do not have access to other technology in situations where a school relies on families to source their own technology in order to participate in digital-based education in school.

The YAP noted that some schools provide access to ICT equipment other than phones including laptops or tablets, while others do not. Even where ICT equipment is available, some of the YAP members said that their schools have limited numbers of laptops, which are often unavailable when they are needed and have to be booked by teachers in advance. They noted that not all schools would be able to afford a laptop for each student. Some members found that alternative options available in schools were “impractical”, “heavy” and “less secure”. Members also recounted instances where a poor Wi-Fi connection in their school meant that students needed to use their hotspot to access the internet for school tasks.

Students are not receiving adequate media literacy education, including about how to use phones safely and appropriately

The YAP members identified a lack of preventive approaches taken in their schools to support students to act responsibly when it comes to use of phones.

When asked about their experiences of learning how to use phones appropriately in school, the YAP provided mixed responses. The YAP noted that the standard of education on the digital environment and technology was “not great”. Some YAP members said they did not receive education on digital skills or stated that the skills classes were “Microsoft based and boring”. Other students said they did receive media literacy classes, but these were only for students who did coding classes. Some YAP members spoke about learning about using phones primarily from experience or from parents or siblings.

Students feel that there are wider, more pressing issues that schools and society should focus on

One YAP member suggested that there are many factors beyond phones that can explain student disengagement and distraction, including the content of lessons, teaching methods, issues outside the classroom and illness or tiredness.

“Our school has a huge problem with attendance. Not helped by the fact that the school are cracking down so much. We have other issues in life besides a ban. All of our schoolwork is online anyway, so kids don’t bother going to class. We have much worse problems than phones.”

The YAP felt that there were more important issues to be examined by schools and the government. This included pre-existing issues in schools, which are exacerbated by phone use and for which they felt bans were an inappropriate solution, particularly bullying. The YAP noted that bans are not an adequate solution for the underlying risks that children face online.

“If one of the rationales for banning phones is about bullying and protecting children, you need better anti-bullying rules then”.

The YAP were concerned by the focus of wider public discourse on “threatening images of tech” and “overdramatic” portrayals of phones as “destroying society”, rather than thinking about how these problems could be solved, as well as how we adapt to inevitable advancement, e.g. Artificial Intelligence (AI).

The YAP were aware of the flaws and benefits of phones and technology more generally but stressed that they could also be educational if used correctly.

“Acting like it’s a threat when instead it’s something we could adapt to”

“Adults assume the worst when really they need to find the balance”

“Technology is part of the future, it should be part of our education”

Students are not given a say in how rules on phones are made in schools

The YAP expressed frustration as to how rules were made in each of their schools.

Most of the YAP members reported that they were not involved in the school’s development of rules on phones. The few YAP members who were involved felt that their participation was “performative” and their opinions were “not implemented”.

Young people felt that their parents and teachers weren’t well enough informed to make rules: “We can’t even have our phones in our pocket. Our SPHE teacher said we would get damaged from the radiation.” One YAP member said that the teachers and parents’ association

made the decision to ban phones, while another member said that “older religious staff” were involved in the decision.

“I have no idea where the rules come from”

The YAP also argued that bans could lead to resentment of policymakers and were anxious about trends of growing distrust in institutions and governments around the world, such as the USA. They stated that the government is “preaching participation” but not following through. The YAP felt that decisions were being made without proper research and that decision-makers were “Spending taxpayer money without evidence”.

“Whoever is making the rules is uninformed”

“There is a lack of diversity in terms of what voices are heard in these decisions”

YAP views on developing rules on phone use in schools

Having discussed their rights in the context of phones and phone policies in schools, we asked the YAP for their views on how phone rules should be made in schools and what these rules could look like.

Total bans on phones in schools

When asked whether phones should be subject to a total ban in schools, there was unanimous agreement among all YAP members that there should not be a total ban of phones in schools.

The YAP understood the reasons behind banning phones in the classroom. The YAP agreed that phones have the potential to distract students in class, encourage cheating and negatively impact their education.

“Focus on education can be lost. It can be a distraction.”

However, the YAP felt that total bans were “extreme” and “unrealistic”. The YAP again referenced the numerous reasons why students may need their phone on their person to realise their rights and felt that a ban arbitrarily restricts the wide range of children’s rights under the UNCRC.

“There shouldn’t be a total ban”

“I feel like a ban is too much”

“Taking it away from them completely is a bit extreme”

Some YAP members made the point that implementing and enforcing a ban or restrictions would be a disproportionate investment of time and resources. They believed that it would take up teachers’ time to question students about the reasons for which they have a phone and what is on it.

Waste of money and time to reform it”

Many mentioned that bans don’t actually work in practice, they are difficult to enforce, and students will find a way around them. They believed that building respect and trust around phone use would be more effective.

“We can get around service blockers with free VPNs”

The YAP were very open to alternatives to managing phone use in school that would better balance all of their rights. One YAP member felt that, while outright bans are irrational, we still don’t fully understand the negative implications of phone use, so there is value in taking a cautious approach.

Bans on phones at certain times in schools

The YAP agreed on the benefits of having rules on phone use during class.

“This would all work if people had common sense: don’t use it in class, just use it at break”

“It’s not gonna kill you not going on your phone”

However, the YAP believe that young people should be able to use their phones at certain times throughout the school day, for example at break or lunch time. They said that phones can be particularly useful during free classes in the music room or library, where they are more likely to need technology to support learning or practicing hobbies.

“I use it to look at my timetable. If we use a piece of paper, we will lose it 3 days after the start of the year”

“People who don’t talk to anyone, or don’t have many friends, might use their phone and taking it away from them takes away from that. They might be listening to music at lunchtime. They should be allowed to”

Some young people felt that having set times was still too rigid, especially in the case of emergencies.

“You can’t time an emergency!”

Banning children under a certain age from having a phone

There were varying opinions among YAP members aged 13 to 17 on banning phones for children under a certain age.

Though we didn’t consult with children of primary school age, the YAP expressed the view that smartphones are too harmful for younger children of primary school age, noting that younger children could become easily addicted to their phones, that phones can impact the development of social skills and that they can become desensitised to harmful content.

Some felt more basic phones that do not have internet or application capabilities, or “blockia” phones, would be sufficient for children in primary school, which would allow them to contact people but wouldn’t provide access to social media.

The YAP expressed concern that the Department has introduced a requirement to ban phones in

primary schools without first consulting children of that age and their families.

“I had a Nokia brick until first year”

Others said it was up to the individual parents to decide whether younger children should have phones. At the same time, a YAP member observed that children may feel like they’re missing out if they have restrictions put in place by their parents and that parents and children should work this out together. Some members recommended that parents should be supported to manage usage through content restrictions and age settings, although these “only work when used properly”.

“It’s for parents to decide, not the government”

The question of maturity came up, with some members suggesting that younger secondary school students were more likely to take advantage of less restrictive rules, although others said it didn’t make a difference whether it was a student in junior or senior cycle.

“Students are spending time in the bathroom on their phones in primary schools”

“Take it away from first years! Many first years are blasting music on their phones and laptops!”

Some members noted that, though the risks of using phones are there for older children too, they are more likely to have developed skills to deal with the risks and to know when to ask for help.

Nonetheless, many members agreed that it was very dependent on the circumstances and needs of the child, and much like with teenagers, adults making these decisions had to consider the benefits of phones for securing children’s safety and other rights. One member expressed the view that it is not right to set an age at which to ban phones because all children are different – they believed that it should be more nuanced than an outright ban.

Students having a say on rules about phones

All YAP members agreed that all students should be involved in developing rules on phones in their schools. The YAP felt that rules were introduced unilaterally by their teachers, principals and the Minister for Education. The YAP expressed concern not only about rules being introduced without consultation, but also that the rationale behind such rules is rarely explained to students.

“We were not involved in developing rules. We were just told them at the start of the year and expected to follow them.”

“It’s like a dictatorship!”

Reasons to support this approach included it being “more fair”, it providing “more diverse options”, and recognition that “you should have an opinion on what affects your life” in line with the UNCRC. In addition to upholding the rights of children to have their views heard, involving children can bring many benefits. The YAP noted that rules built on consultation and compromise may be more likely to be effective and create more trust in teachers and the government. It can assist schools and policymakers to understand student priorities and experiences when it comes to using their phone in school, ensuring more evidence-based policies on phone use are adopted.

Young people also indicated that structures in their schools were not well set up to support having their voice heard on this issue, or others. Many felt that student councils were powerless, that they were consulted in a tokenistic way that “looks good” for the school. It was mentioned that student councils can sometimes be used to “rubber stamp” teachers’ decisions to give an impression of student participation. Student councils are often cited by schools and policymakers as the space for students to have a say, however the YAP discussions show that more diverse ways of consulting with students can be developed and implemented in schools to ensure that every student is heard.

“If I was in first year on a student council and a second year was talking and talking, you would be sat there listening and just saying ‘that’s great’, you wouldn’t be talking.”

The YAP therefore suggested there should be a variety of ways in which to engage students when developing rules on phones in schools, including anonymous surveys. Some members agreed that teachers could have the final say but that they should be guided by a “student statement” on the issue.

Parents having a say on rules about phones

The involvement of parents also came up in the YAP’s discussions. Some YAP members were wary of their parents being involved, as they have less experience of the education system today, particularly the benefits of technology, and their responses could be “over the top”. Others felt that they should have a role, as parents also have to deal with the repercussions of their child(ren)’s phone use, but they should have a lesser role in the development of rules than students and their teachers.

“Parents are not the ones in the classroom. They are not aware of the impacts.”

7. Examples from other countries

We conducted a review of the approach taken in some other countries on the use of phones in schools. The table below sets out a summary of the information gathered.

Country	Policy on bans	Exemptions	Evidence children’s rights were considered	Evidence that children were consulted
England	Mandatory ban Guidance issued February 2024 ⁵⁷	Yes – non-exhaustive list includes children with disabilities or medical conditions and 16 and 17 years olds	No	No. Policy does not require schools to consult with children
Scotland	Schools decide whether or not to apply a ban Guidance issued August 2024 ⁵⁸	Yes - non-exhaustive list includes children with medical conditions, disabilities or additional support needs, anxiety, young carers	Yes ⁵⁹	No. Policy requires schools to consult children
Wales	No ban. Up to individual schools. ⁶⁰	N/A	Yes ⁶¹	Children were consulted by Parliament ahead of its decision to recommend against a ban ⁶²
Northern Ireland	Ban recommended but not mandatory Guidance issued September 2024 ⁶³	Yes – non-exhaustive list includes children with disabilities or children with medical conditions, 16 and 17 years olds, young carers	No	No. Policy requires schools to consult children
The Netherlands	Mandatory ban since January 2024 ⁶⁴ Guidance issued in 2024 ⁶⁵	Yes - non-exhaustive list includes children with disabilities or children with medical conditions	No	No. Policy requires schools to consult children
France	Mandatory ban up to age 15 introduced by law in 2018 ⁶⁶	Yes – for learning, children with disabilities or children with a medical condition	No	No
Finland	Mandatory ban introduced by law in April 2025 ⁶⁷	Yes – for learning, children with disabilities or children with a medical condition	No	No
Estonia	No ban. Up to individual schools.	N/A	N/A	No consultation with children in deciding against a ban. Plan to require schools to develop rules in collaboration with students

Country	Policy on bans	Exemptions	Evidence children’s rights were considered	Evidence that children were consulted
Australia	Mandatory ban in all states ⁶⁸	Depends on each state – examples include for children with disabilities, children with a medical condition, translation, young carers	No	Differs among states. New South Wales (NSW) consulted with students prior to ban. Queensland, NSW and South Australia require schools to consult with students along with the wider school community
Canada	Restrictions in several provinces introduced/ updated in 2024 ⁶⁹	Depends on each province – examples include for learning, children with disabilities or children with a medical condition	No	Depends on province. For example, Ontario and Alberta consulted with students as part of wider consultations on education. ⁷⁰ Ontario requires schools to consult with students

Elements examined

Children’s rights considerations

Most of the laws and policies that we examined do not make specific reference to children’s rights considerations.

The non-statutory guidance in place in Scotland offers examples of some child rights-based elements. The guidance was informed by a CRIA.⁷¹ The policy also requires decisions on the use of phones in schools to be informed by the full range of relevant rights under the UNCRC and the best interests of the child. However, the Scottish government did not consult children directly on the development of the policy or as part of the CRIA.

Children’s views

As with children’s rights considerations more generally, there was little evidence available to demonstrate that countries consulted with children or took their perspectives into account when deciding whether to introduce a ban.

Some of the Canadian provinces referred to consultations with children and other stakeholders to inform the adoption of rules on phone use in schools. In contrast, following consultations with students, teachers and parents, the Welsh Parliament Petitions Committee found that there was not enough evidence to call for a uniform ban on smartphones in schools.⁷²

While most did not appear to have consulted with children in the development of national or state-level policies on phone use, many of the policies examined require schools to take students views into account when developing their policies on phone use. This includes Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Netherlands, some Australian states and some Canadian provinces. Plans to require schools to be smartphone free in Denmark will also require collaboration with students.⁷³

Evolving capacities

Certain policies have taken an approach that allows schools to be flexible and to adapt rules to the age and maturity of children, reflecting the evolving capacities of children. For example, the guidance in England and Northern Ireland recommends that schools consider whether pupils in the final two years of secondary school (from 16 to 18 years) should be permitted access at certain and limited times and locations, reflecting a period of increased independence and responsibility. Guidance in Western Australia prohibits younger students from having phones on them in school, while older students are permitted to have their phone with them but turned off and not seen or heard.⁷⁴

Exemptions

Similar to the guidance provided by the Department,⁷⁵ guidance in the different countries reviewed allow for exemptions for certain reasons. All countries included

exemptions for educational reasons, medical reasons and children with disabilities. Some countries also included exemptions for translation purposes or for young carers.

Review and evaluation

Only some of the national or state-level policies state that they are to be reviewed. England and all Australian states and territories include reference to the policy being subject to future review.

Many of the countries have requirements in national policy or guidance for school-level policies to be reviewed or evaluated. The Scottish and Northern Irish guidance requires schools to regularly review their phone use policies to ensure the commitment of new staff, pupils and parents, to take account the experience of implementation and new developments in technology, and evaluate effectiveness.⁷⁶ The Netherlands guidance requires schools to evaluate their policies as to their effectiveness, information on the experiences of the policy and to address any challenges arising.⁷⁷ The Department of Education in the Australian state of Victoria recommends that schools review their policies on phone use every 3 to 4 years, including where new issues arise or where the school community views elements of a policy as contentious.⁷⁸ The reviews must focus on the effectiveness of the school's policy in meeting the objectives of the state policy. It also encourages schools to collect data to help measure success in achieving objectives..

Countries that do not have a ban or restrictions in place or that have rescinded bans in the past

Some countries intend to introduce bans in the future. In Denmark, a Wellbeing Commission made recommendations that legislation should be introduced that requires all primary schools, after-school care and leisure centres for children in primary school, to be smartphone free, with the ban covering smartphones, smartwatches and private tablets.⁷⁹ It also recommends that legislation require secondary schools to have a screen policy and that such policies should be drawn up in close collaboration with students. On foot of this, the Minister of Children and Education announced plans to introduce legislation to ban phones from schools.⁸⁰

Some countries such as Canada had bans in place for some time, later rescinded them and have reintroduced bans again in more recent years. The province of Ontario introduced a requirement for phones to be turned off and stored away in schools in 2007. This was subsequently rescinded due to concerns that students that did not have laptops could not access the internet for education purposes.⁸¹ Restrictions were later re-introduced in 2019 and, similar to other Canadian provinces, updated in 2024.⁸² Interestingly, not only do the rules require students to put phones away during class time (or the whole school day in the case of primary school students), but they also require all members of the school community to comply with phone restrictions.

Other countries like Wales and Estonia do not have bans in place. In response to a Public Petition to ban the use of phones in schools, the Welsh Parliament Petitions Committee found that there was not enough evidence to call for a uniform ban on smartphones in schools.⁸³ This Committee met with students, teachers and parents and concluded that the relationship between children and phones and between smartphones in school and smartphones outside of school is complex and that the growing body of evidence does not support a move to a uniform ban on phones in all schools. The report calls on the Welsh government to follow the evidence and to share best practice, as more data and research becomes available. In Estonia, instead of a national ban, the Ministry of Education plans to issue guidelines for schools on regulating the use of phones.⁸⁴

8. Research on phone bans and restrictions in schools

One of the key messages from the YAP discussions was that students have not been shown evidence of the effectiveness of phone bans or why they're being proposed. The OCO has conducted a review of available international and Irish research by academia and non-governmental organisations to determine whether bans are supported by evidence.

This section outlines research that examines the impact of phone bans in schools and research that outlines the views of experts in children's rights, education and digital technology on the issue.

International research

Evidence of impact

A limited number of studies that have been conducted on the effectiveness of bans show mixed results across countries. For example, while studies in England and Spain found banning phones in school lessons had a positive impact on students' performance as well as a reduction in bullying in the latter,⁸⁵ a study in Sweden found no impact of bans on student performance.⁸⁶

A study in England found no evidence of a difference in health and education outcomes between students who attend schools that restrict and permit phone use and students that do not, concluding that there is no evidence that restrictive school policies are associated with overall phone and social media use or better mental wellbeing in adolescents.⁸⁷ The study did observe that increased time spent on phones/social media is significantly associated with worsened outcomes for mental health, physical activity and educational attainment and highlighted that this shows the need to address phone and social media use in adolescents generally, with school policies developed as part of a more holistic approach to tackling the negative mental and wellbeing outcomes of phone and social media use.

Similarly, research in Australia found no significant differences between schools that implemented a ban and those that did not on variables including problematic phone use, academic engagement, school belonging and bullying.⁸⁸

A scoping review of evidence on phone bans by researchers at Queensland University, Australia notes that international evidence to support the banning of phones in schools is weak, limited and inconclusive.⁸⁹ The review notes that the "impetus for phone policy changes are often championed by politicians responding to community concerns". Though it notes that "there are some negative, although small, impacts of mobile phone use on academic outcomes, ... the integration of mobile phones into classrooms as learning tools, coupled with education around responsible use, might reverse any negative impacts of mobile phone use." They highlighted that more rigorous studies are needed to determine the potential benefits and/or negative effects of phone bans on student outcomes – academic, mental health and wellbeing, and cyberbullying – and that, in the meantime, policymakers and schools should emphasise the importance of teaching critical digital literacy and responsible device use in schools.

Research published in the British Medical Journal in March 2025 states that, despite positive anecdotal evidence, there is no evidence to establish the types of bans that are effective and what works best for children of different ages.⁹⁰ It states that, while technology-free moments and spaces are important for children because increased time spent on phones and social media is generally linked with worse physical, mental, and educational outcomes, "approaches that focus on simply restricting access to devices can undermine children's rights to technology design and education that will help them thrive as adults in today's world." It calls for a rights respecting approach that is underpinned by age-appropriate design, regulation of technology and social media companies and education on healthy smartphone and social media use.

Research in China has examined the impact on student academic performance of phone use in classrooms.⁹¹ It found that banning phones from the classroom improved performance compared with allowing phone use without guidance. However, academic performance increased even further when teachers guided students to use phones to aid learning, particularly among low-performing and male students. The study suggests that allowing phone use in classrooms to aid learning with guidance from teachers can improve student performance.

As with policy in this area, research has overlooked the views of children themselves on phone bans and their impact. Research conducted in Australia in 2023 set out to gather the perspectives of secondary school students on bans.⁹² The students reported benefits of bans including on academic performance, peer social interaction, personal safety and general well-being, but they also felt that bans negatively affected their sense of trustworthiness and autonomy and reduced opportunities to develop competencies in practicing responsible phone use. The research offered the following policy feedback based on student views: a gradual rollout of changes rather than abrupt change may be more positively received; involve students in decision-making; device use is important to students' sense of autonomy; bans should be complemented by education on responsible phone use; give students opportunities to demonstrate active responsible phone use; and policies should support discreet phone communication between students and parents.

Wider commentary on bans

UNESCO published a report in 2023 on technology in education.⁹³ This report is referenced in the Department's guidelines on bans and restrictions in schools. Contrary to media coverage.⁹⁴ UNESCO does not call for a ban on smartphones in schools. The report states that technology should only be used in schools where integrating technology improves learning and doesn't worsen student well-being⁹⁵ It noted a distinction must be made between basic phones that are not internet enabled and smartphones, with studies on impacts focusing on the latter. The study notes positively that:

- Mobile learning devices can complement education in certain settings.

- Smartphones can support access to education for children with disabilities through accessibility features such as built-in screen readers, voice control, immersive readers, word prediction and text-to-speech/speech-to-text tools, etc.
- Smartphones provided access to education during the Covid pandemic.

However, it also notes that ICT use, including phones, carries a risk of increasing distraction and lowering student engagement. It states that working with technology in schools, and the accompanying risks, may require something more than banning:

- “First, policies should be clear on what is and is not permitted in schools. Students cannot be punished if there is no clarity or transparency on their required behaviour. Decisions in these areas need conversations supported by sound evidence and involve all those with a stake in students' learning.
- Second, there should be clarity on the role these new technologies play in learning and on their responsible use by and within schools.
- Third, students need to learn the risks and opportunities that come with technology, develop critical skills, and understand to live with and without technology. Shielding students from new and innovative technology can put them at a disadvantage. It is important to look at these issues with an eye on the future and be ready to adjust and adapt as the world changes.”

A report on smartphone policies in schools by Digital Futures for Children, the London School of Economics and Political Science, and 5Rights Foundation, finds that there is a need for more research on bans, more accurate use of language and greater sophistication in how the problem is analysed.⁹⁶ It states that “talk of ‘bans’ closes down the deeper conversations society needs to have about the best interests of children in a digital age and lets the profit-hungry tech sector off the hook. It remains the case the devices are configured in ways that support the commercial interests of the products and services that they carry. It is a society-wide duty to do more to prevent the design and deployment of services that are deliberately designed to distract. Rather than restricting children's activities, we should be demanding

firmer action from government and regulators, so that children can benefit safely from the digital world, especially at a time when AI is becoming embedded into every area of public and private life.”

The research, which uniquely examines the issue from a children's rights perspective, sets out evidence-based and child rights-respecting suggestions for policymakers and educators, and suggests that robust before-and-after evaluations are required to underpin effective government policies, where policy change is planned:

- **Identify the problem.** Do students have difficulties with concentration, learning, behaviour, mental health or social relationships because of smartphone use or misuse? Would greater limits on student access to their phones at school bring likely benefits to all or specific segments of the student population?
- **Find the right words.** Schools need a clear lexicon to talk about devices, genres of products and services, criteria for learning outcomes and levels of restriction/use that better reflect the complexity of the student experience at school.
- **Develop a holistic approach.** Smartphone policies should be underpinned by a digital literacy curriculum that encompasses privacy, safety, genre, learning outcomes and monitoring, and embedded in wider EdTech policies to bridge school and home use.
- **Be inclusive.** Children have diverse needs and cultural circumstances. Policies should address whether (some) children need access to their smartphone during the school day, for reasons of health, disability, caring responsibilities, or other needs.
- **Consult the school community.** Children's voices are heard in some research and policy development, yet not sufficiently. School smartphone policies will likely be more effective when the views of students, teachers, parents and school leaders have been heard and policies formulated with them rather than over their heads.
- **Recognise limitations.** Enforcing restrictions is not a one-size-fits-all solution. It is a cost-effective method that may help address and alleviate more immediate anxieties around

smartphone use (for specific segments of the population). However, it is worth questioning whether this is being done at the expense of providing every child with a personalised education, tailored to their individual needs.

- **Encourage an annual review.** In a rapidly changing digital landscape, school policies should be regularly assessed and revised to not only meet the evolving needs and interests of the students, but also prepare them for the demands of today and tomorrow.

The recommendations made in research on phone bans in schools mirror the response by children's rights experts to wider proposals to ban children's access to social media. For example, over 140 children's rights experts criticised proposals to ban children aged 16 and under from social media in Australia,⁹⁷ stating that a ban is too blunt an instrument to effectively address the risks to children posed by social media.⁹⁸ The House of Commons Select Committee on youth violence and social media has opposed similar proposals for a social media ban in the UK, stating it would do little to make social media websites safer for young people.⁹⁹ Experts suggest that more nuanced approaches to regulation are needed beyond age restrictions and blanket exclusion, with bans placing the burden of companies' harmful business practices on young people instead of the companies themselves.¹⁰⁰

Lundy and Stalford observe that debates about bans have one striking feature: “the almost total absence of any children's rights arguments and children's voices”.¹⁰¹ Children's rights experts share this concern, noting that “states tend to prioritize problem-focused interventions or services, focused on protection, rather than creating a supportive environment to develop the physical, psychological, spiritual, cognitive, cultural, and economic capacities that can help children's self-determination”.¹⁰² They argue that “preventing adolescents from accessing the online environment should not be the answer to avoid risks”¹⁰³ and “protecting adolescents from harm should not be used as an excuse to deny adolescents their emerging autonomy.”¹⁰⁴ They instead call for holistic strategies that strike “a balance between enabling children's participation and protecting them from the risks that may arise”.¹⁰⁵

Irish research

Research in Ireland has made similar recommendations.

Evidence of impact

In June 2025, the first qualitative study on the impact of phone bans in schools in Ireland was published by the DCU Anti-Bullying Centre. Funded by the Department of Education, the research examined the effectiveness of bans on smartphones.¹⁰⁶ The study, which involved a review of international literature and qualitative research with students about their experience and understanding of smartphone bans in schools, echoes many of the OCO YAP's views and the OCO's review of research. DCU's research presented a number of key findings, including:

- International research suggests that smartphone bans have little or no impact on education, cyberbullying and wellbeing among students.
- Children and adolescents have access to many types of devices both in school and at home.
- Students' voices have not been included in decision-making on smartphone restrictions/bans within schools and they want to have a say in decisions on this issue and other aspects of their school lives.
- Some students reported that teachers cause distractions to the learning environment with their phone use.
- Students are concerned that smartphone bans may inhibit students from learning resilience and skills for life beyond school.
- The stricter the phone ban the more students look for ways to subvert it.
- Students indicated that they were aware of different types of harmful content online but tended to minimise risks, claiming that they felt able to self-regulate this content, ask for help, and trusted social media providers.
- There are more pressing issues for students than smartphone use in schools that students were concerned about, such as school facilities and health concerns.¹⁰⁷

It recommended that policy on smartphone use should be evidence-based, digital citizenship education should be a compulsory subject in school, students should have a say in decisions about smartphone use in schools and evaluation of policies in this area, a national awareness campaign should be rolled out and there should be appropriate regulation of social media companies. Researchers at the DCU Anti-Bullying Centre have noted that positive supervision of internet use, rather than a restrictive approach, may be more efficient, with restrictive approaches having the potential to:

- keep adolescents from developing their own self-regulation strategies, which may lead to an increased desire to perform the forbidden behaviour;
- disregard children's online rights like seeking and receiving information from media;
- isolate children from their friends outside of school;
- restrict access to families in the case of an emergency; and
- exclude them from potentially useful resources, especially children that may be dependent on translation or interpretation services, such as migrants and deaf or hard of hearing young people.¹⁰⁸

DCU Anti-Bullying Centre researchers also note that while a phone ban provides a clear-cut solution, it simplifies the complex reasons why students become distracted in school.¹⁰⁹ They state policymakers face a critical decision: impose restrictions or develop the skills students need for responsible technology use. They state that, "By embracing strategies that incorporate digital technologies thoughtfully, students can be supported to build resilience and develop the skills needed to navigate the complexities of both the online and offline worlds. Thus, the challenge for policymakers is to move beyond the allure of easy answers and to invest in a more comprehensive approach, one that integrates technology thoughtfully into the classroom. This could yield better results for students in both their academic and personal lives."

Wider commentary on bans

No other qualitative or quantitative research on the impact of bans has been undertaken in Ireland. Other research on education and online safety has commented on bans. Research in the area of education points out that the narrow focus on banning phones in schools misses the point, bans don't have a meaningful effect on exposure to inappropriate content or online bullying, and that the merits or otherwise of digital technologies in schools and classrooms are far more complex than the debates suggest.¹¹⁰ Though research has found that delaying access to phones until late childhood or entry into second-level may be warranted, or closer monitoring/restrictions on their use advisable,¹¹¹ Irish research has stated that bans are "reactionary at best and draconian at worst."¹¹² It notes that blanket bans may not be helpful as they do not consider the benefits of supervised classroom use according to a typical blended learning approach, such as using phones for specific research tasks in supervised contexts. It advocates for a constructive, balanced digital citizenship approach that invests in education-based initiatives that empower young people and their families to navigate the digital world safely and that includes the student voice before decisions of this nature are made.¹¹³

CyberSafeKids similarly note that the concept of banning smartphones as a solution to the problems children face online is misleading. It states that we need to prepare children for when they do start to engage online, whatever smart device they may be using.¹¹⁴ CyberSafeKids note that there is no silver bullet solution; it will take a range of measures and the involvement of stakeholders across society. Its recommendations instead include making age verification mandatory, making online safety and digital literacy the 4th pillar of the education system and not a peripheral subject, and developing national awareness campaigns, including promoting smartphone-free environments in schools.

9. Recommendations

The YAP has identified five overarching recommendations to guide policymakers and schools to consider children's rights and listen to what they have to say. Within each of the YAP's five recommendations, we have broken down the actions that policymakers and schools can take to ensure that our call is answered.

YAP Recommendations

- 1.** Do not introduce blanket bans in schools. Consider the impact on children's rights, particularly the right to have a say, as well as the diversity of individual schools and students when rules around phones are being designed.
- 2.** Invest more in resources for digital education and improving schools, instead of phone pouches.
- 3.** Carry out more research and communicate this research in a child-friendly way to young people, so they understand the evidence behind decisions that are being made.
- 4.** Design different approaches to phone rules depending on the age and maturity levels of children.
- 5.** Increase support, education and awareness for parents, teachers and other adults to better understand technology and better support students through the challenges they are facing.

Recommendation 1:

Do not introduce blanket phone bans in schools. Consider the impact on children's rights, particularly the right to have a say, as well as the diversity of individual schools and students when rules around phones are being designed.

As the Department and schools begin to roll out the new guidelines, the OCO and YAP are calling for a child rights-based approach to be taken to phone bans and restrictions in schools.

Blanket bans

The YAP were unanimous when they said that blanket bans on phones are not the right way to go. They believed that alternative means of managing phone use in school should be identified that would better balance all of their rights. International and national research echo this; the evidence does not support bans as they are not effective and overlook children's rights.

Consider children's rights

The Department's guidance does not elaborate on the children's rights standards, if any, that the Department considered when they were being developed. It also stops short of outlining how schools can consider children's rights when implementing restrictions or bans on phones, including, for example, when consulting children and when deciding on which restrictions and exemptions to apply. The Scottish non-statutory guidance provides an example of how guidance for schools can take into account relevant rights under the UNCRC. Plenty of guidance is also at the disposal of the Department and schools on considering children's rights in phone rules, including the CRIA toolkit developed by the Children's Rights Alliance in conjunction with the Department of Children, Disability and Equality,¹¹⁵ as well as CRIA recommendations and resources published by the OCO¹¹⁶ and the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children.¹¹⁷

Children's views

The Department had already made the decision to introduce bans and restrictions in schools in 2024 before the DCU research that consulted with children was concluded.¹¹⁸ It is therefore unclear whether students' perspectives were considered before the decision to introduce bans was made. It is also not clear how student's views obtained during the DCU research informed the development of the Department's guidelines published in June 2025. Furthermore, from what the YAP have told us, children have not been consulted across the board in schools when rules on phones were developed. This is despite the assistance available to the Department and schools through the Department's own Student Participation Unit, Hub na nÓg as well as OCO guidelines for public bodies on engaging children in decision-making.¹¹⁹ The absence of children's voices in national and school-level processes is a breach of each child's right to have their views heard and given due weight in all matters concerning them. These findings confirm observations in research that shows there is much room for improvement in providing for active and meaningful involvement of children in decision-making in the Irish education system, including as regards use of technology.¹²⁰

It is welcome that the guidance published by the Department in June 2025 requires schools to consult with the school community when designing rules on phone use. However, students are not only members of the school community, like their teachers, parents and principals, but as the Department and schools know well, students are at the centre of their school community. As children, they also have a right under international law to be heard. It is important to note that this right does not apply to adults; it is solely a right vested in children, by virtue of the unequal power given to children in decisions and policymaking about their lives. It is disappointing that the guidance lacks the emphasis required by the State's obligation under Article 12 of the UNCRC on the need to provide ongoing child-friendly opportunities for engagement with pupils and students in the rule-making process, as well as in the implementation

and evaluation of any agreed rules. This does not mean prioritising children's views in any decisions made, but it does mean giving extra attention to providing opportunities for all children in the school, separate and in addition to consulting with the wider school community, so that decisions are child-centred and rights-compliant.

Recommendation 1.1: A blanket ban on phones should not be introduced in schools as they are a disproportionate interference with children's rights.

Recommendation 1.2: The Minister for Education and Youth, Department of Education and Youth and schools should take a child rights-based approach to policies, guidance and rules on phones in schools.

Recommendation 1.3: The Minister, Department and schools should conduct a Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) before developing, implementing and updating policies, guidance and rules on phones in schools. As the Department has already published guidance, the Department should conduct a CRIA ahead of any future revisions to the guidance.

Recommendation 1.4: The Department should provide more detailed guidance for schools to ensure the consistent application of exemptions across the country and to ensure that children are not adversely affected by bans or restrictions.

Recommendation 1.5: The Department and schools must involve children on an ongoing basis throughout the development, implementation and evaluation of rules on phone use. This must include a wide range of children and be conducted in a variety of accessible, child-friendly formats. The Department and schools must inform children about the final decisions made and how their views were considered. A focus on transparency and consultation with ensure greater compliance with the rules.

Recommendation 1.6: The Department must support schools to involve and consult children in their implementation of the guidance, including by providing guidance on participatory approaches to policy development and evaluation. Guidance for schools must reflect pupil and student involvement as a right held by children and as a duty held by schools.



Recommendation 2:

Invest more in resources for digital education and improving schools, instead of phone pouches.

The YAP demonstrate that they are capable of carefully considering the complexities of rules around phones, which contrasts with the sweeping and simplistic nature of proposals to ban phones and social media that do not appear to have fully considered the range of rights involved. Children's rights standards and research on phone bans echo the YAP emphasising that we must move beyond talk of bans and adopt a more holistic, evidence-based and creative approach to addressing the problems that phone use creates and often exacerbates, both in schools and beyond the school gates. They demand an approach that supports children to competently and confidently navigate the digital world, that addresses root causes of challenges in education and that require greater action from governments, regulators and companies.

Recommendation 2.1: The Department and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) must provide for a mandatory, standalone digital literacy programme throughout the primary and secondary school curriculum, which should include opportunities for development of skills in self-regulating responsible phone use.

Recommendation 2.2: The Department must provide sufficient resources for the improvement of schools' digital infrastructure to bridge the digital divide between schools and students and enable equitable access to technology for students in all schools. The cost of digital technologies must not fall on families as it amplifies inequalities and exacerbates the digital divide.

Recommendation 2.3: The government must strengthen the regulation of online service providers, adopt a child rights-based regulatory approach and robustly enforce obligations placed on private providers.

Recommendation 3:

Carry out more research and communicate this research in a child-friendly way to young people, so they understand the evidence behind decisions that are being made.

The extent to which research and evidence, including the DCU research, has informed the Department's development of guidance to ban and restrict phone use in schools is unclear. The Department's commitment in the guidance issued to schools that research will continue to inform Department policy and resources in this area is welcome. However, the guidance does not address the matter of reviewing and evaluating the impact of restrictions and bans in schools, including measures to identify any challenges in implementation and to mitigate any adverse impacts on children that may arise. While there is some good practice in how other countries have approached phone use in schools, we have not identified any individual country that has fully adopted a child rights-based approach to their policies and guidance. However, we believe that the various aspects of good practice identified in this report should be considered and used by the Department and schools when developing policies and guidance in this area. For example, in many of the other countries examined, schools are required to carry out reviews and evaluations of policies and to gather data to measure outcomes, while some countries also specify that national policies will be subject to future review.

Recommendation 3.1: The Department and schools must make evidence-based decisions on phone bans and restrictions and must conduct research prior to, throughout, and following the implementation of any restrictions and bans.

Recommendation 3.2: The Department should review the implementation of its guidance in June 2026 using a CRIA Framework to evaluate the effectiveness of the measures adopted and to identify any adverse impacts on children and their rights.

Recommendation 3.3: The Department and schools must inform children about the outcome of research and how research has informed decisions about phone use in a way in which they can understand.

Recommendation 4:

Design different approaches to phone rules depending on the age and maturity levels of children.

The YAP expressed concern that a blanket ban is being mandated for primary school children, without consideration given to children's different capacities in this regard. Both in the primary and post-primary guidance, there is no distinction between students of different ages within these individual documents. While applying rules on phone use in schools based on school class or year is a simple way to implement such rules, simple solutions do not always reflect the best interests of children and blanket limits serve to disregard the varying levels of age, maturity and evolving capacities of the children involved. In contrast, guidance in England and Northern Ireland provides an example that allows schools to be flexible and to adapt rules to the age and maturity of children in secondary school. It is unclear as to what consideration was given by the Department, if any, to providing for different rules for children of different ages and maturity in line with their evolving capacities under Article 5 of the UNCRC.

Recommendation 4.1: The Department and schools must have regard to the evolving capacities principle when deciding on and designing rules for phone use in schools and should allow rules to be adapted according to the age and maturity of children.

Recommendation 5:

Increase support, education and awareness for parents, teachers and other adults to better understand technology and better support students through the challenges they are facing.

The YAP, children's rights guidance and research on phone use all point to the need for awareness-raising and education for parents and teachers so that the adults in children's lives can provide appropriate support and guidance on how children can use technology safely and responsibly. The YAP's calls for the inclusion of education on the digital environment in the core school curriculum go hand in hand with the need for mandatory teacher training on digital technology. The fact that some of the YAP members noted that they learned about phone use primarily from parents and family members also pointed to the need for greater awareness-raising and educational measures aimed at parents. Webwise has developed advice and resources for parents and teachers supporting children online, while Coimisiún na Meán and the Data Protection Commission have published advice for parents on online safety and data protection respectively.

Recommendation 5.1: Teacher training should include mandatory digital training to equip them with the skills necessary to deliver digital literacy as a core part of the curriculum and to encourage safe and responsible phone use.

Recommendation 5.2: The government should build on existing guidance and develop resources, that are free and easy to access for parents on how to support their child to engage in safe and responsible phone use in line with children's evolving capacities.



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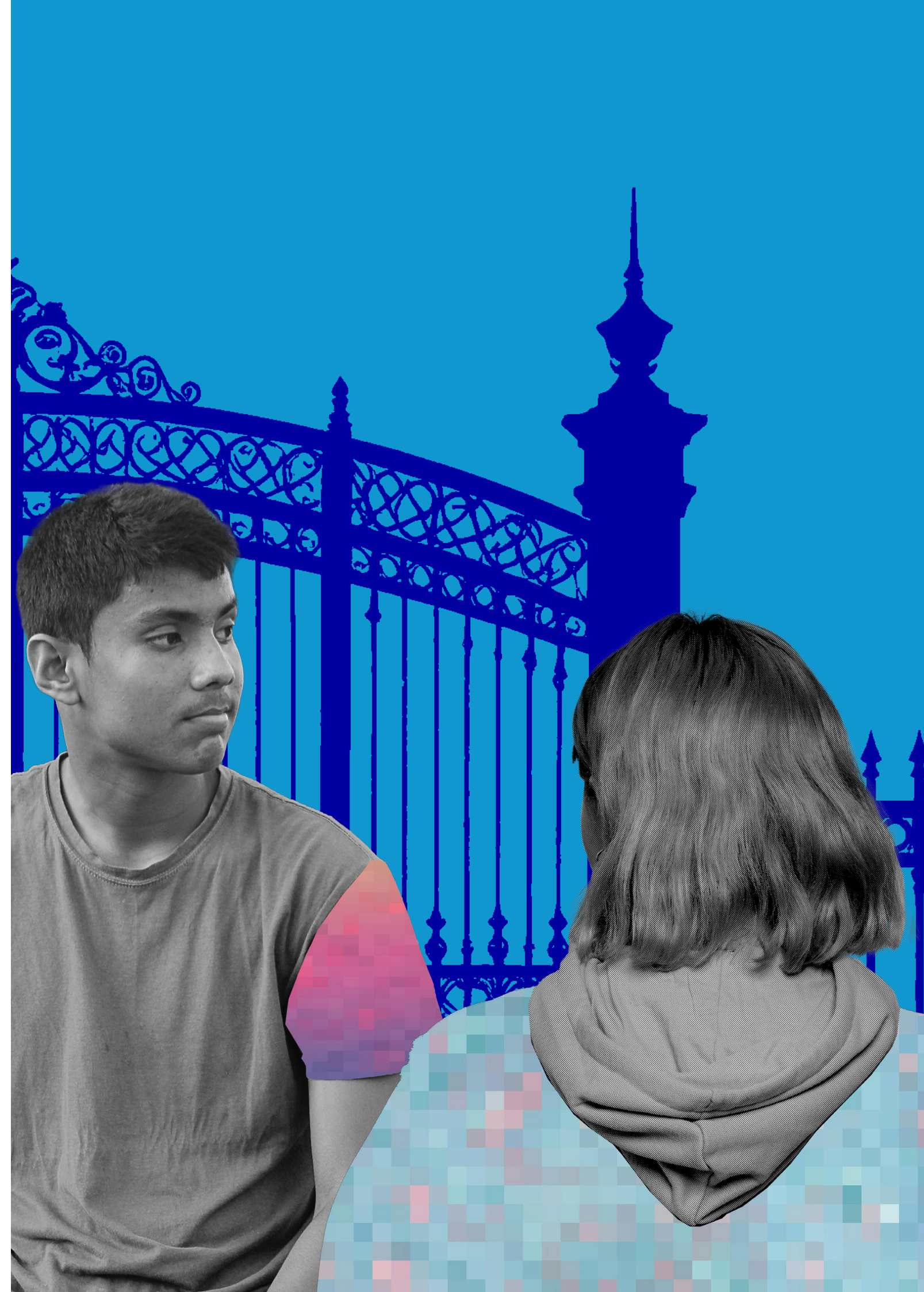
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