Smartphone Bans: are they effective?

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Research Papers

Goodyear VA, Randhawa A, Adab P, et al. School phone policies and their association with mental wellbeing, phone use, and social media use (SMART Schools): a cross-sectional observational study. *Lancet Child Adolesc Health*. In press. **Böttger, T., & Zierer, K. (2024)**. *To Ban or Not to Ban? A Rapid Review on the Impact of Smartphone Bans in Schools on Social Well-Being and Academic Performance.* Education Sciences, 14(8), 906. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14080906

Overview

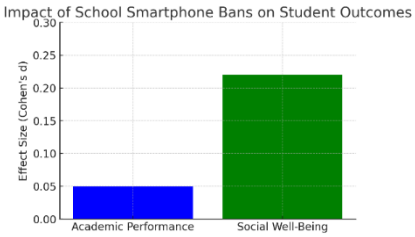
While we might assume a ban reduces distractions and improves learning, the evidence presents a more complex picture. The Bottger & Zierer (2024) **meta-analysis** did find that bans can have a **modest positive impact on social wellbeing** (reducing bullying and social conflict) but only **small and inconsistent effect on academic performance**. The Goodyear et al (2025) analysis found that bans reduce in-school phone use, but they do not necessarily lower overall smartphone consumption. This challenges the simple assumption that school bans bring big benefits.

Key Findings & Insights

In school phone use decreases, but overall use remains stable: while bans successfully reduce smartphone use during school hours, students do not necessarily compensate by increasing use outside school, nor does overall screen time significantly decline.

Mixed impact on academic performance: some studies found minor academic benefits (e.g., slightly improved test scores and grades), but overall, **the effect on learning outcomes is weak (d = 0.05, statistically insignificant)**.

Stronger effects on social wellbeing: the **most consistent benefit** of smartphone bans is a **moderate improvement in social interactions** (d = 0.22). Schools with bans report lower bullying rates, reduced social conflicts, & better engagement.



Policy assumptions do not always translate into real-world outcomes: banning phones in schools seems like an obvious way to improve focus & reduce distractions, yet students still find ways to use devices. Also, some experience anxiety when separated from their phones, which can **counteract** intended benefits.

A more nuanced approach may be needed: rather than outright bans, a balanced strategy that **combines restriction with digital literacy education** and **controlled smartphone use for learning purposes** could be more effective.

Measure	Change in Smartphone Use (Hours)	Statistical Significance
In-School Phone Use Reduction	-0.67	Significant
Total Daily Use Reduction	0	Not Significant

Methodology

An observational study of 30 secondary schools (categorised as restrictive or permissive) measuring smartphone use, mental wellbeing, and academic performance.

A meta-analysis of five quantitative studies assessing the effects of bans on social wellbeing and academic outcomes, including surveys, school policies, national test scores, and accelerometer-based activity tracking.

Conclusion

Smartphone bans in schools appear to **help improve social dynamics** but **do not consistently enhance academic performance**. While restrictions limit in-class distractions, they do not fundamentally change overall smartphone habits or guarantee better educational outcomes. Instead of blanket bans, policies should focus on **structured smartphone use, media literacy education, and clear guidelines** to ensure that technology supports, rather than hinders, student wellbeing and learning.