



Why a Blanket Smartphone Ban in UK Schools Is Unlikely to Work Without Careful Planning – ‘To Bag or Not to Bag’

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Having spent the past 17 years visiting schools across the UK delivering Online Safety workshops, I have witnessed first-hand the rapid evolution of technology, device usage, and young people’s digital behaviours. Schools today operate in a very different digital landscape to that of even five years ago.

At present, one issue dominates conversations with school leaders, staff, and parents alike:

Should smartphones be banned in schools?

Closely followed by: **Should social media be banned for under-16s?**

These are complex questions, and they deserve careful, evidence-informed consideration rather than quick or reactionary solutions.

Smartphones in Schools: A Question of Understanding, Not Just Control

To be clear, I have always understood that in most schools’ **students are not permitted to use smartphones during the school day without permission**. This is not a new concept. What *is* new is the growing push towards **complete, blanket bans**, often without sufficient consideration of the practical, educational, and safeguarding implications.

I am a firm believer that students must be supported to develop **online competence, resilience, and self-regulation**. This does not begin with prohibition alone. It begins with **understanding** — particularly adults and schools understanding the digital lives of young people.

When schools introduce a total ban without fully considering the consequences, they risk oversimplifying a highly nuanced issue.

Every device is different. Every student is different. Every school community is different.

A Case Study: When the Problem Doesn’t Match the Solution

Recently, I spoke with the Headteacher of a well-known UK independent school. Parents had been informed that the school would soon introduce **Faraday-style pouches**, requiring students to lock their smartphones away on arrival and unlock them at the end of the day — a significant financial investment, reportedly exceeding **£50,000**.

I asked a straightforward question:

“Are you experiencing issues with truancy, cyberbullying, or declining GCSE and A-level results?”

The response was telling.

“No,” the Head explained. “In fact, this has been our strongest academic year to date.”



This raises an important question: **if outcomes are already positive, what problem is the ban actually solving?** And at what cost — financial, educational, and relational?

The Challenges of a Blanket Smartphone Ban

In theory, banning smartphones may sound simple. In practice, implementation is anything but.

Schools must consider:

- **Students with medical needs** who rely on smartphone apps
- **Students with safeguarding or care-related needs**
- **SEND students** who use devices as support tools
- **Post-16 students**, where independence and preparation for adult life are key expectations
- **Alternative devices**, such as tablets, smartwatches, or wearable technology
- **Travel considerations**, including school buses and journeys to and from school

A universal ban often creates **more complexity**, not less. Enforcement becomes inconsistent, exemptions multiply, and staff are placed in difficult positions that can undermine relationships with students and families.

Policy, Not Prohibition, Is the Sustainable Solution

This is why I remain a strong advocate for **robust, well-designed smartphone policies**, rather than blanket bans.

Effective policies should be:

- **Clear and comprehensive**, covering permitted and prohibited use
- **Context-specific**, recognising differences between state and independent schools
- **Fair and enforceable**, with realistic expectations
- **Safeguarding-led**, not punishment-driven
- **Supported by meaningful consequences** that are proportionate and workable

Crucially, policies must be **understood and accepted** by students, staff, and parents alike. Without shared understanding and buy-in, even the strictest rules will fail.

The effectiveness of smartphone policies likely depends on implementation, school culture, and complementary work with families and digital literacy.

Final Reflection

The debate around smartphones in schools is not about being *for* or *against* technology. It is about **how schools prepare young people to live safely, responsibly, and confidently in a digital world**. A complete ban, introduced without careful planning, risks addressing symptoms rather than causes. Thoughtful policy, consistent implementation, education, and ongoing dialogue remain the most effective tools schools have at their disposal.

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