

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



Department of
Education

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Dear Parent/Guardian,

SUBJECT: GUIDANCE ON THE USE OF MOBILE PHONES IN SCHOOLS AND EOTAS CENTRES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

As we move into a new academic year, I am writing to inform you that the Department of Education has published updated [guidance on the use of mobile phones in schools and Education Otherwise Than At School \(EOTAS\) centres in Northern Ireland](#). The guidance sets out the Department's clear expectation that all schools and EOTAS centres should be mobile phone-free environments by default, with access to personal mobile phones and other similar devices during the school day permitted only in exceptional circumstances.

I know that this is an issue that many parents care deeply about. Over recent years, parents across Northern Ireland have raised concerns with schools, governors and the Department about the impact that mobile phones are having on children and young people's learning, wellbeing and safety. I would like to thank parents for continuing to engage constructively on this important issue and for the support many have shown in promoting healthier and safer approaches to technology use both at home and in school.

The updated guidance reflects a growing body of national and international evidence about the impact of unrestricted access to mobile phones during the school day. It has also been informed by findings from the [Department's Mobile Phone-Free Schools Pilot](#), associated evaluation activity, engagement with schools and stakeholders, and a survey of schools and EOTAS settings across Northern Ireland. Collectively, this evidence points towards the benefits of school environments where pupils can focus on learning, build positive relationships and engage fully in school life free from unnecessary digital distraction.

The Department's position is straightforward. Pupils should not have access to personal mobile phones, smartphones, smartwatches or other internet-enabled devices during the school day. This applies during lessons, break and lunchtime and while pupils remain under the school's supervision. Any exceptions should be limited, clearly justified and regularly reviewed. These may include circumstances relating to medical needs, special educational needs, disabilities, safeguarding requirements or other agreed exceptional circumstances.

This guidance has been developed because of increasing evidence that unrestricted mobile phone use can negatively affect concentration, learning, behaviour, social interaction and wellbeing. Schools have also highlighted concerns about cyberbullying, online conflict, inappropriate content, filming or photographing without consent and the disruption that can occur when issues arising online spill into the school day. At the same time, evidence suggests that reducing access to mobile phones during the school day can help create calmer, safer and more focused learning environments.

Importantly, this guidance is not about preventing children and young people from learning how to use technology. Digital technology has an important role to play in education, employment and everyday life. Our schools will continue to use technology to support teaching and learning, including school-owned devices, digital learning platforms and other educational technologies where these improve outcomes for pupils. The guidance distinguishes between the educational use of technology and pupils' personal access to smartphones and similar devices during the school day.

I also recognise that many parents, particularly those of post-primary pupils, want their child to be able to contact home while travelling to and from school. The guidance recognises these concerns and does not prescribe a single approach for every school. Responsibility for individual school policies remains with Boards of Governors and school leaders, who will consider what arrangements are most appropriate for their school community while ensuring that a mobile phone-free environment remains the default position. Schools may also make appropriate arrangements for pupils with specific medical, educational, disability or safeguarding needs.

As schools review and update their policies, I would encourage parents to engage positively with their school and support efforts to establish clear and consistent expectations. Experience from schools that have successfully introduced stronger restrictions shows that the greatest benefits are achieved when schools, parents and pupils work together and share a common understanding of the reasons for the policy. I also encourage parents to continue discussing the safe and responsible use of technology with their children. Restricting access to phones during the school day is only one part of the wider support that children need to navigate the online world safely. Schools will continue to play a key role in developing digital skills, online safety awareness and responsible digital citizenship.

[The Safer Schools NI App and the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland Online Safety Hub](#) provide a range of practical information and resources for parents and families and may be helpful in supporting conversations at home about screen time, social media and online safety.

These are important issues for all of us. By working together, parents, schools and the Department can help ensure that children and young people benefit from technology while also being protected from its risks. Most importantly, we can create environments that support learning, wellbeing, positive relationships and the best possible outcomes for every child.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Paul Givan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "P" and a stylized "G".

Paul Givan MLA
Minister of Education