

Submission to the NSW Minister for Education's review into the non-educational use of mobile devices in NSW schools

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We are responding to the request for submissions on the topic of non-educational use of mobile devices in schools by the NSW Minister for Education. We have research expertise across young persons' use of mobile media, young person's use of gaming and games technology, and social and cultural impacts of technology use. As educators, we are also personally aware of the impacts of mobile media in the classroom. To date, we have collectively authored 21 peer-reviewed academic research outputs, and a further three white papers across these fields. We have a combined fifteen years of teaching experience at the tertiary level in a field where we have directly observed the introduction of these technologies into both educational and workplace settings.

We understand the request for submissions to be guided by a set of mixed interests, for which there is an implied single solution. We read these interests to be dominated by a desire to reduce cyberbullying and improve educational outcomes for young Australians. Both of these are admirable goals, but there are complexities around how these goals might be realized that we believe could have unintended negative consequences. We also believe that the problem is misaligned with the proposed policy solution. The problem, such as it exists, is not that students have access to mobile devices, but that their use of these devices is misaligned with good personal and societal outcomes. Our core belief is that mobile digital technology is important to young persons for their socialization and their education, even when engaged in 'non-educational' use. Providing skills that enable students to reflect on their use of technology will improve these outcomes, rather than deferring them to other points in their lives.

We have structured our submission around six recommendations. These recommendations are followed by a set of evidence-based statements and observations that frame our thinking. Our observations are then followed by our specific summative justifications for each recommendation. The document is concluded with a list of research resources.

Recommendations

1. Non-educational technology use should be permitted;
2. Education: research suggests that digital citizenship education will mitigate proposed issues more effectively than a technology ban;
3. Modulated access: alternating days of digital use and digital detox periodic breaks be introduced as an alternative to any bans;
4. Technical interventions: require all internet access to be routed through institutional WiFi;
5. Graduated access controls: greater access as students become closer to entering the workplace; and,✓
6. Exceptionalism as standard practice.

Observations

This section comprises a set of general observations that shape our thinking and can direct parties to further research on the topic.

Social inclusion and equality of access to our collective digital future is no longer a case of the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’, but rather a broader question about whether people can access the internet on their own terms in a self-empowering way. Children and young people have their use and access shaped by adults, and it is misguided to think that the best way to help students integrate into a technologically-empowered workplace would be to block their access to these tools.

Warschauer, M. (2004). *Technology and social inclusion: Rethinking the digital divide*. MIT press.

We see better civic outcomes in young people when they use media in moderated social settings than when they use devices without supervision. Leaving students to message or communicate outside of school is going to mean that they will be less likely to be guided in reflecting on or reconsidering their engagement. Consistency and structure are critical to this, and not all parents will always be able to provide a stable structure appropriate to these skills. We also need to consider that teachers will be in a better position to provide a structured, evidence-based program for aiding students in their use of digital media.

Top, N. (2016). Socio-Demographic Differences in Parental Monitoring of Children in Late Childhood and Adolescents’ Screen-Based Media Use, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 60(2), 195-212, DOI: 10.1080/08838151.2016.1164168

Schools-based education can and should play a critical role in mitigating the risks associated with young people’s technology use. Research demonstrates that schools can reduce the risks of cyberbullying and foster

positive digital practices among students both through direct education programs and through encouraging positive school cultures. We can reduce negative behaviours by establishing clear policies and procedures within schools for dealing with instances of bullying and harassment. We can also do this by ensuring schools have frequent conversations with students about why cyberbullying, and bullying behaviours more generally, are not acceptable. There is broad support among students and parents alike for schools to take a more active approach in education and policy around cyberbullying and online safety.

Chen, L., Ho, S. S., & Lwin, M. O. (2017). A meta-analysis of factors predicting cyberbullying perpetration and victimization: From the social cognitive and media effects approach. *new media & society*, 19(8), 1194-1213.

Hinduja S and Patchin JW (2013). Social influences on cyberbullying behaviors among middle and high school students. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 42(5), 711–722.

Norton Online Family Report (2012) Available at: <http://sg.norton.com/cybercrimereport/promo>

Patchin JW and Hinduja S (2012) School-based efforts to prevent cyberbullying. *The Prevention Researcher* 19(3), 7–9.

Pew Research Center, September 2018, “A Majority of Teens Have Experienced Some Form of Cyberbullying” Available at: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/09/27/a-majority-of-teens-have-experienced-some-form-of-cyberbullying/>

Shin, W., & Lwin, M. O. (2017). How does “talking about the Internet with others” affect teenagers’ experience of online risks? The role of active mediation by parents, peers, and school teachers. *New Media & Society*, 19(7), 1109-1126.

Research has demonstrated that the guidance young people receive from parents about technology use is often limited. Parents commonly underestimate the negative implications of their children’s technology use. Parents also tend to be able to provide less guidance and education as children grow older. Consequently, schools play an essential role in helping children, and especially teenagers, to critically reflect on their technology use and foster healthy, safe practices.

Byrne, S., Katz, S. J., Lee, T., Linz, D., & McIlrath, M. (2014). Peers, predators, and porn: Predicting parental underestimation of children's risky online experiences. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19(2), 215-231.

Shin, W. (2015). Parental socialization of children’s Internet use: A qualitative approach. *New media & society*, 17(5), 649-665.

Valkenburg PM, Piotrowski JT, Hermanns J, et al. (2013). Developing and validating the perceived parental media mediation scale: a self-determination perspective. *Human Communication Research* 39(4), 445–469.

Bans will affect marginalised students more. For some students in marginalised Socioeconomic Status brackets or for those students who are already isolated within their peer groups, formal educational settings may be the most reliable places to access the internet. Communities with low socioeconomic status will include people who do not have stable access to internet infrastructure. These groups will also include people who cannot routinely prioritise the costs of internet access as a part of a household budget or may have their access shaped by the hours of business for local support spaces, such as libraries or family support NGOs. Internet access is a part of social inclusion. It is increasingly necessary to have mobile technology in order to partake in discussions that happen in our newspapers, community message boards, religious and cultural groups, sports groups, reading clubs and other civic spaces.

Darling-Hammond, L., Zielesinski, M. B., & Goldman, S. (2014). Using technology to support at-risk students' learning. *Alliance for Excellent Education*. Available at: <https://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/UsingTechnology.pdf>

The poorer a child's family is, the more likely they are to rely on mobile devices to socialise. Accordingly, children from more well-equipped homes will be less affected by bans or restrictions on mobile devices, and may already have other digital technologies at home. We think that it would be a mistake to read this as a suggestion that children perform better as a result of reduced digital technology. Rather, children who are supported with less wealth are going to be more reliant on digital technology to gain experiences that would otherwise necessitate travel, newspaper subscriptions, easy access to personal or public libraries, or access to other technology.

Anderson, M. and Jiang, J. (2018) Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018 *Pew Internet Research*. Available at: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>

Mobile communication is increasingly an essential aspect of daily life. It has become taken-for-granted as a means of communication and coordination in a wide range of everyday activities. The reliance on digital media is going to be experienced more by older children as much as it is the case for adults: mobile devices have become a central means of coordinating and organising family life. For older teenagers, mobile devices are also a necessary means of mitigating the challenges of managing fragmented schedules resulting from casual and precarious employment.

Ling, R. (2012). *Take for Grantedness: The embedding of mobile communication into society*. MIT Press.

Ling, R., & Lai, C. H. (2016). Microcoordination 2.0: Social coordination in the age of smartphones and messaging apps. *Journal of Communication*, 66(5), 834-856.

Ling, R., & Yttri, B. (2002). Hyper-coordination via mobile phones in Norway. In: Katz and Aakhus (eds) *Perpetual contact: mobile communication, private space, public performance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK

Woodman, D. (2012). Life out of synch: How new patterns of further education and the rise of precarious employment are reshaping young people's relationships. *Sociology*, 46(6), 1074-1090.

The scope of this review appears to be motivated by two key concerns: the issue of on-site online bullying at schools, and declining student performances as measured by international standards such as the Programme for International Student Assessment. There appears to be a range of secondary, less defined, concerns pertaining to the mental health of students, harms they might encounter online, sexting, and issues relating to social media.

Viewing mobile devices as the key driver of these issues is tempting as it appears to provide a clear culprit and straightforward solution. However, it is important not to reduce these complex issues down to a single dimension. The role of mobile devices in children's lives is undoubtedly worthy of detailed consideration, but blaming technology alone for these various, complex issues is reductive and will do little to address them adequately.

Livingstone, S. (2018). iGen: why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy—and completely unprepared for adulthood. *Journal of Children and Media* (12), 118-123.

Digital citizenship education should focus on training students in two key areas: respectful online behaviour and online civic engagement. Research suggests that young people who have a good understanding of these practices are less likely to perpetrate online harassment and more likely to engage in helpful bystander behaviours. Training in respectful online conduct could involve teaching students how to manage disagreements in online spaces, how to understand the perspectives of other people they engage with online, and how to engage in positive bystander actions. Training in civic engagement could involve teaching students how to participate in online activities that produce social benefits such as political participation or sharing skills and interests with a community.

Jones, L. M., & Mitchell, K. J. (2016). Defining and measuring youth digital citizenship. *New media & society*, 18(9), 2063-2079.

Justifications

1. Non-educational technology use should be permitted.

The implicit solution to the various issues motivating this review would appear to be banning the non-educational use of mobile devices during school hours. We strongly recommend that non-educational use of mobile media be permitted, and that collective bans or limitations of mobile devices are not introduced. This recommendation is drawn from our research into mobile media use and also informs several of our other recommendations.

We do not believe that a ban on non-educational technology use will reduce cyberbullying. Banning devices during school hours will merely displace bullying to other periods of time, rather than actively minimizing the risks that students face. It is also likely that, for some students, banning devices during school will displace bullying to times when they are unlikely to be surrounded by supportive peers or have adequate support from adults.

Banning mobile devices is also unlikely to prevent students from bringing such devices to school or from using them during school hours. Students can conceal mobile devices relatively quickly and are often adept at clandestine use. Students will also have strong motivations to flout bans: mobile devices are central to young people's social worlds and the coordination of their everyday actions. Instigating comprehensive bans of mobile devices would also limit their use as educational tools. Substantial research has indicated that mobile devices can be valuable tools within the classroom. Anything less than a complete ban would create an issue of policing and policy adherence by staff, students, and schools. It is unclear how any prohibitions could be reliably enforced for personal mobile phones, and would place an undue burden on teachers who already sacrifice substantial education time to policing behaviour.

Lastly, banning the use of mobile devices in schools would seem to preclude much needed conversations about what healthy and constructive technology use looks like. Regardless of whether bans are implemented, mobile devices and associated technologies will be central to students' lives – both while they are children and as they grow into adults. It is important that schools signal that healthy technology use is possible and encourage students to develop positive technology practices. As such, we now turn to our second recommendation which addresses the role of education in mitigating technology related risks.

2. Education: research suggests that digital citizenship education will mitigate proposed issues more effectively than a technology ban.

Digital media is increasingly important to the development of civic duties and social connectedness. The 'problem' of students being distracted or bullied via these devices is not due to their possession of these devices – at least these problems do not disappear simply because students do not have access to these devices for part of their day. Rather the problem is a lack of sufficient education in digital citizenship.

‘Digital citizenship’ refers to the capacity for individuals to use digital technologies to interact proactively within a democratic society in a manner that establishes both self-empowerment and self-direction, as well as a respectful relationship to the diverse peoples of the country. The idea has a history in academic thought that is about a decade old. Education in digital citizenship entails cultivating participation and inclusion in society via technical means; lowering the technical barriers to entry; and cultivating a digital literacy around tools, meaning, and respect. Education in digital citizenship would contribute to the development of students’ self-reflection of their own media use and enable them to employ these skills as adults.

The NSW was an early mover in this area and has implemented some digital citizenship education resources; indeed, the NSW Government already provides a Digital Citizenship portal for students and parents. Unfortunately, the main NSW portal (Wittman, 2012) is significantly out-of-date and minimalist in content.

We encourage the NSW government to reconsider any drastic changes to allowing young persons to learn and develop their digital social selves within school environments, at least until the new national Digital Technologies Curriculum has been established. Otherwise, children and young persons in NSW will find themselves falling behind on their inclusion in modern society.

3. Modulated access: alternating days of digital use and digital detox periodic breaks be introduced as an alternative to any bans

Related to our above recommendation that digital citizenship education be delivered through schools, we suggest that students are given periodic breaks from digital technology use. In environments that are conducive to it, students should be given predictable and structured rhythmic breaks from digital media. For example, schools could designate days of the week when non-educational use of digital devices is permitted during school hours and days when it is not permitted. We would like to emphasise that a clear schedule should be established so that expectations for non-use are predictable and easy for students to accommodate. Exceptions should also be liberally granted, as per our sixth recommendation.

Our intention here is not to provide a direct solution to the many concerns that have motivated this review – for instance, instigating periodic breaks from digital technology is unlikely to directly reduce bullying or improve student performance. Rather, we recommend this action as part of a broader educational approach that will help address problems relating to digital media use by fostering student’s understanding of and critical engagement with their own media practices. We argue that regular breaks would help students foster positive habits around online and offline behavior.

4. Technical interventions: require all internet access to be routed through institutional Wi-Fi.

While bans would be inadvisable, we recognise that free-access to the open internet is a problem for information control for children. Requiring all communications to be routed through school-controlled Wi-Fi systems would be ideal for managing appropriate access is maintained. It is strongly advised that any communications that are monitored through Wi-Fi systems that can be monitored by school IT services.

5. Graduated access controls: greater access as students become closer to entering the workplace

As students age, there will be increased needs and responsibilities placed on them socially, by their families, and by their emerging extra-curricular relationships. These needs and responsibilities will, in many cases, require students to be available via mobile communication.

Whether we like it or not, mobile communication is now deeply taken-for-granted as a means of coordinating everyday life. As older students adopt adult responsibilities, such as part-time work, the assumption that they can be contacted at short notice via mobile phones will increase. Indeed, studies have shown that a range of forces, including the increases in precarious employment, can make teenagers lives particularly difficult to coordinate.

We recommend that any limitations placed on students' use of mobile media should take this into account by providing greater allowances to older students. If greater allowances are not provided, we expect older students will be especially likely to flout restrictions in order to maintain extra-curricular obligations.

6. Exceptionalism as standard practice

It should be recognised that there will be frequent instances in which students require access to a personal mobile device. Examples of such situations include students who use mobile applications to manage medical conditions such as diabetes, and students who have personal circumstances that require them to be contactable at short notice, such as having an ailing family member. Students with learning difficulties may also use mobile applications to support their learning. It is also worth noting that parents often want their children to carry a mobile phone for use in emergencies and to help in coordinating family life. Lastly, students may use mobile devices to access support services and may wish to do this during school hours if they are not comfortable with or able to access these services while at home.

It is likely that these needs will only increase into the future. Smartphones, despite being ubiquitous, are still relatively new so it is likely that they will come to play other important roles in the daily lives of some students as other technologies and services are developed.

With these points in mind, we recommend that if mobile phone use is restricted in any way, exceptions are liberally granted and that it is clearly communicated to parents and students that exceptions are welcomed. Reasons for needing a mobile phone may, in some cases, be delicate so it is important that school policies and cultures make it easy for students who need to carry a mobile phone to do so without fear of retribution or inquiry from staff who are unaware of their situation.

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