

in brief...

Phone home: should mobiles be banned in schools?

Should teenagers be allowed to use their mobile phones at school? **Louis-Philippe Beland** and **Richard Murphy** look at the impact of bans on pupils' academic achievement in four cities in England.



Mobile phones can have a negative impact on pupils' educational outcomes

Low-achieving and low-income pupils gain the most from a ban on mobile phones at school

Teenagers depend on their mobile phones for keeping in touch with friends and trends on social media, but should they be allowed to have them in school? Some advocate a complete ban because of the potential for distraction, while others promote the use of phones as a teaching tool in the classroom. While views remain divided, some schools are starting to allow restricted use of mobile phones. Earlier this year, for example, Bill de Blasio, the mayor of New York City, lifted a 10-year-ban on phones on school premises, arguing that revoking the ban would lead to reduced inequality.

Our research examines the impact of mobile phone bans on pupils' academic achievement in subsequent years. We surveyed schools in Birmingham, Leicester, London and Manchester about their mobile phone policies since 2001 and combined it with results data from externally marked national exams.

Schools in England have complete autonomy regarding their mobile phone policy, which has resulted in large differences in timing of the introduction of bans. In 2001, none of the surveyed schools had a ban in place; by 2007, half of them had bans; and by 2012, 98% of schools did not allow phones on the premises (or required them to be handed in at the beginning of the day).

This variation facilitated our study. We used the differences in implementation dates across schools, comparing the changes in pupils' test scores within and across schools before and after a ban. In addition, we drew on administrative data to give us information on pupil characteristics, such as gender, eligibility for free school meals, special education needs status and prior educational attainment. This allowed us to calculate the impact on pupils from each of these groups.

Our research shows that not only does pupil achievement improve as a result of a ban, but also that low-achieving and low-income pupils gain the most. The impact of banning phones for these pupils is equivalent to an additional hour a week in school or to increasing the school year by five days. This suggests that Mayor de Blasio's stated intention of reducing inequalities by lifting the ban may have the exact opposite result, harming the lowest achieving and lowest income pupils the most.

We also find that the bans have a greater impact on special education needs pupils and those eligible for free school meals. But banning mobile phones has no discernible effect on high achievers. Examining the impact of the phone ban on the achievement of 14 year olds, we find no significant effect in either direction. This could be due to relatively low phone use among this age group.

Technological advancements are commonly viewed as increasing productivity. Modern technology is increasingly used in the classroom with the goal of engaging pupils and improving performance. But our review of previous research in this area suggests that the unstructured use of technology in the classroom has negligible to negative impacts on pupil achievement. Mobile phones are an example of the drawbacks of technological progress because they can lead to pupils becoming distracted by gaining access to texting, games, social media and the internet.

Our work on the positive effect of restricting mobile phones on school premises complements our review of existing research evaluating technological innovations in the classroom. We find that pupils in schools that ban mobile phones see an increase in test scores equivalent to extending the school week by one hour. In comparison with extending teaching time, the financial resources required to implement a phone ban would be substantially lower. Of course, our findings do not discount the possibility that mobile phones (and other forms of technology) could be useful in schools if their use is properly structured, but their presence should not be ignored.

This article summarises 'Ill Communication: Technology, Distraction and Student Performance' by Louis-Philippe Beland and Richard Murphy, CEP Discussion Paper No. 1350 (<http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1350.pdf>).

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