

## FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



To: Chairs of Boards of Governors and principals/leaders of statutory primary, post-primary, special schools and other educational settings

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Dear Chair and Principal/Leader,

### **SUBJECT: GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS ON PUPIL USE OF PERSONAL MOBILE PHONES AND OTHER SIMILAR DEVICES DURING THE SCHOOL DAY AND POTENTIAL PILOT PROGRAMME OF INHIBITING DEVICES**

Today, my department published the attached guidance, which recommends that pupils do not use their personal mobile phones, or other similar devices, during the school day in post primary education settings and that these devices should not in normal circumstances be brought into primary schools.

I feel it is important to issue this specifically focused guidance to address the distraction and disruption these devices can cause in the classroom. The guidance also recognises the increasing concerns regarding the detrimental impact of mobile phone use on children's development, the risks of inappropriate use, online safety, bullying and many other concerns which are drawn out in research.

This is why we should be working together to restrict the personal use of mobile phones and other similar devices, by pupils, throughout the school day – not only during lessons but during lunchtimes and recreational times as well.

Circular 2024/14 – Guidance for Schools on Pupil Use of Mobile Phones During the School Day [Circular 2024/14 - Guidance for Schools on Pupils' Personal Use of Mobile Phones and other Similar Devices During the School Day](#) sets out Department of Education advice on developing/reviewing policies on pupils' use of personal mobile devices, outlining various options for consideration, including exceptional circumstances and pupils in years 13 and 14.

### **PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

As set out in DE Circular 2024/14, at primary age, the majority of children attend school locally and will be collected by parents/carers or walk/cycle a short distance from home, so safety concerns around lack of access to mobile phones when travelling will be limited. There are also wider concerns that primary-aged children should not have access to mobile devices as evidence indicates that they are not emotionally ready to navigate the complexities of mobile devices and the digital world.

The department therefore recommends that primary schools adopt a policy of no mobile phones on the school premises (with exceptional circumstances permitted on a case-by-case basis).

## **POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

In a post-primary environment, where many pupils may travel significant distances to school by public transport and parents/carers may be concerned that they have access to a mobile phone in the event of an emergency whilst travelling, schools may wish to consider a variety of different approaches to restricting mobile phone use during the school day. A variety of suggested approaches which schools may wish to adopt are outlined in the guidance.

When reviewing their current approach to mobile phone use, schools should consider the needs of the whole school community in determining measures to be taken to prohibit pupil use of mobile phones during the school day.

## **DUTY OF BOARD OF GOVERNORS AND PRINCIPALS/LEADERS**

Boards of Governors have a statutory duty, under Article 17 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, to safeguard and promote the welfare of their pupils and to determine the measures to be taken at the school with a view to protecting pupils from abuse. Under Articles 3-6 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, Boards of Governors must make, and keep under review, **consulting with the principal, the registered pupils and their parents/carers, and to consider any guidance given by the Department**, a written statement of 'general principles' about positive pupil behaviour, which the principal will have regard to in their duty in determining school rules and behaviour policies, which they must also consult with pupils and parents on.

**In light of this guidance, I am asking all Boards of Governors and principals/leaders to take the time during the autumn term 2024-25 to review their current approach/policies in relation to pupils' use of their personal mobile devices in school.**

Principals/leaders, in conjunction with Boards of Governors, should develop and implement an approach to pupils' use of personal mobile devices that best suits their school context and phase of education. Engaging with the whole school community, including staff, children and parents in policy development is the most effective means of ensuring engagement with, and commitment to, the policy on mobile devices.

Existing guidance under [DE Circular 2016/26: Effective Educational Uses of Mobile Digital Devices](#), which includes reference to the use of personal devices, is currently under review and updated guidance on this will issue in due course. Any approach taken by schools to restrict the personal use of mobile devices should not prevent schools from promoting the effective use of electronic devices and embracing opportunities that the evolution of technology to support education can bring. Most schools will have availed of investment in ICT equipment in recent years and should have the equipment necessary to support their educational needs in this area. The existing guidance covers safe and responsible use of mobile technology and I am also taking this opportunity to remind you of your responsibility to ensure school owned devices have an appropriate filtering system in place, which is available through C2K, to reduce the risk of pupils accessing inappropriate content, social media sites etc.

## **SUPPORTING PUPILS**

It is appreciated that the removal of access to personal mobile phones may be a challenge for some of our children and young people. In order for you to support your pupils and help them

to understand the risks regarding excessive use of mobile devices and the benefits of having a break from their phones during the school day, school staff will want to familiarise themselves with some of the evidence and concerns noted in the guidance, and to use resources provided in the Safer schools App [Home - Safer Schools NI](#), funded by my Department, and/or the Safeguarding Board's Online Safety Hub [SBNI Online Safety Hub](#) that I wrote to schools in April about and asked to be shared with parents and children. CCEA has also produced Digital Resources for primary age children which are available on their website [Learning resources/digital life and work](#)

In consulting with parents and children it is important they understand the benefits of this approach and how the decision taken on any agreed revision to your school policies will be in the best interest of the children, based on the evidence presented.

## **PILOT OF MOBILE INHIBITING DEVICES**

The department appreciates that many schools will already have policies in place on this matter. We are keen to learn from and harness the experiences of schools regarding the issue of pupil use of personal mobile devices. The department will soon issue a short survey to schools to find out more about the various approaches being used in relation to pupils' personal mobile phone use.

One approach that could be considered is the use of mobile inhibiting devices. These devices are generally pocket-sized fabric pouches with a magnetic latch that is sealed at the beginning of the school day and opened using a special unlocking base. Such products are being increasingly used internationally. The department intends to pilot the use of such devices in a small number of post primary schools in order to evaluate their effectiveness. As part of the forthcoming survey there will be an opportunity for schools to volunteer to be considered to take part in this pilot to test mobile inhibiting devices.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Givan', with a horizontal line underneath the name.

**Paul Givan MLA**  
**Minister of Education**