



Do not disturb:

Review of removing cell phones from New Zealand's classrooms





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Executive summary

To support greater student engagement and achievement, from the beginning of Term 2, 2024, school boards and kura were required to ensure that students do not use cell phones during the school day. This report reviews the implementation of the 'Phones Away for the Day' policy and assesses its impact. The findings are encouraging – removing cell phones has led to increased focus, improved academic outcomes, and a reduction in bullying. This summary outlines the reasons behind these results and highlights further opportunities for strengthening the policy's impact.

Why does cell phone use in classrooms matter?

Managing student cell phone use in schools has the potential to significantly enhance both academic achievement and wellbeing. Restricting phone use during school hours can lead to improved concentration, better behaviour, and higher levels of achievement. It also helps mitigate risks associated with excessive social media use, exposure to harmful content, and cyberbullying. In response to these concerns, many jurisdictions – including New Zealand – have introduced policies to limit or completely ban student phone use during school hours.

What requirements have been put in place?

Known as 'Phones Away for the Day', the Government policy prohibits student use of cell phones during the school day from April 2024. This requirement applies to all students enrolled in state and state-integrated schools, with some exceptions.

Key Findings

Our review led to 21 key findings across four areas.

Area 1: How well is 'Phones Away for the Day' being put in place?

Finding 1: Encouragingly, nearly all schools have a 'Phones Away for the Day' rule.

- We consistently heard from board members, school leaders, teachers, students, and parents and whānau that rules had been put in place at their schools.
- Over half (54 percent) of secondary schools have made changes to their rules compared to just five percent of primary^a schools.

^a Full primary and intermediate schools.

Finding 2: Nearly all schools have rules prohibiting phone use at school at all times of the day, but there are large variations in when and where teachers enforce the rules.

- Over nine in ten (94 percent) schools ban phone use during the day and most (95 percent) have the same rules across year levels.
- Enforcement happens in class but not so much between classes – 57 percent of teachers report they aren't strictly enforcing the rules during scheduled breaks (e.g. morning tea), and 61 percent report they aren't when students move between classes.

Finding 3: What 'Phones Away for the Day' looks like is very different between primary and secondary schools. Secondary schools let students keep their phones with them more, and monitor and enforce less. Primary schools store students' phones more and enforce more.

- Most secondary schools let students keep their phones – eight in ten (80 percent) do, compared to about one in seven (15 percent) primary schools.
- Almost two-thirds (64 percent) of primary schools store students' phones compared to just six percent of secondary schools. Primary school leaders told us that it was relatively easy for them to deal with collecting any student phones because they have smaller school rolls and fewer students with phones. This also meant that they could monitor student phone use more easily and respond to any issues promptly.
- Secondary teachers are also less strict – during scheduled break times, only four in ten (40 percent) secondary teachers monitor phone use, compared to nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of primary teachers.

Finding 4: Both primary and secondary schools in low socio-economic communities^b are less strict in enforcing the rules, but in primary they store student phones more.

- In primary, more schools in low socio-economic communities collect student phones – 86 percent do so compared to 60 percent in schools in higher socio-economic communities.
- But enforcement is weaker across schools in lower socio-economic communities – for example 52 percent enforce phone rules during scheduled breaks, compared to 64 percent in schools in higher socio-economic communities. This may be due to limited resources, stronger reliance on phones for family connection, or a focus on maintaining relationships over strict rule compliance.

^b Socio-economic level is defined by the Ministry of Education's Equity Index (EQI) – Schools in high socio-economic communities are the schools with fewer barriers. Schools in low socio-economic communities are the schools with more barriers. For more information see the Technical Appendix.

Finding 5: When students break the phone rules, schools most commonly confiscate student phones and notify parents.

- Over six in ten (64 percent) schools immediately confiscate phones when they are used inappropriately and over half (58 percent) notify parents when students break the phone use rules.
- Secondary schools are twice as likely to give warnings before they confiscate phones (33 percent) compared to primary schools (16 percent).
- Leaders, teachers, and students often described having a series of stepped consequences such as warnings, confiscation of the phone, then detention (in secondary schools), followed by stand-downs for persistent rule-breaking.

Finding 6: While most secondary schools allow phone exemptions for health, disability, and learning needs, some students may not be getting the support they need. A quarter of schools do not offer exemptions for learning support reasons, and over a quarter of teachers are unaware of their school's exemption policies.

- Regulations require schools to provide phone exemptions for disabled students and students with health and learning support needs. We heard from board members across all school types that they typically delegate decisions about the use of student exemptions to their principals in practice.
- Most secondary schools allow health exemptions (93 percent) and for disabled students (84 percent), but a quarter (26 percent) do not offer exemptions for students with specific learning needs.
- Even where exemptions are available, over a quarter (26 percent) of teachers are unaware of their school's exemption policies or which students they apply to. We also heard that the variety of exemptions can be difficult to manage, especially in large settings where tracking exemptions can be difficult.

Area 2: How compliant are students?

Finding 7: Only around half of secondary students consistently follow their school's phone rules. Compliance is also lower in schools in lower socio-economic communities, and during breaks and in unsupervised areas.

- Over nine in ten (93 percent) Year 7-8 students follow their school's phone rules, but compliance drops as students get older, with six in ten (60 percent) Year 9-11 students and just under four in ten (37 percent) Year 12-13 students following the rules. Overall, just over half (53 percent) of secondary students (year 9-13) say they never use their phone in class.
- Over one in three students still use their phone during lunch or morning tea breaks (38 percent), in bathrooms or other out-of-sight places (36 percent), or at break times during class (34 percent).
- Compliance is also lower in schools in low socio-economic communities. This may be linked to lower enforcement of the rules in schools in low socio-economic communities, or because more of these students break the rules to stay connected with their family.

Finding 8: The top reason students break the rules is to stay connected with their family – especially older students and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

- Staying connected with family is the most common reason students break the rules – over half (54 percent) of rule-breakers say this is why they do it.
- This behaviour is more prevalent in schools in lower socio-economic communities, where 57 percent of rule-breakers cite staying connected with family as their reason, compared to 46 percent in schools in higher socio-economic communities.
- Older students who break the rules are more likely to do so to stay connected with family: over six in ten (64 percent) of Year 12-13 students who break the rules do so, compared to just two in ten (41 percent) of Year 7-8 students who break the rules.

Finding 9: Students also break the rules to connect with friends, for learning, or because they personally oppose the rules.

- Just under four in ten (37 percent) students who do not always comply with phone rules say it's because they want to connect with friends, and a similar number (34 percent) say it's because they need to have their phone for learning.
- Three in ten (30 percent) students who use their phone at school break the rules because they reject the rules as unfair or disagree with them. This reasoning increases with age and is more common among students in schools in lower socio-economic communities.

Finding 10: Parent support matters – when parents resist phone rules, students are more likely to break them.

- Most primary (89 percent) and secondary (86 percent) teachers say parent support helps them implement phone rules.
- However, in schools where parent resistance is a problem, secondary students are almost half as likely (0.6 times) to follow the rules.
- We heard that while some parents and whānau understand prohibiting phone use can reduce distractions, other parents expect to be able to reach their children, even during class time. This contact with family contributes to rule-breaking.

Area 3: What is the impact of 'Phones Away for the Day'?

Finding 11: There is encouraging evidence that secondary students are more focused on learning as a result of prohibiting phone use at school.

- Around eight in ten secondary leaders (83 percent) and teachers (79 percent) report prohibiting phone use at school has improved their students' ability to focus on schoolwork.
- We heard that the policy has supported some students in developing stronger connections with their teachers and building more effective learning habits.

Finding 12: Importantly, secondary teachers report achievement has improved since phone rules were put in place.

- The increased ability to focus in class appears to have contributed to learning, with around six in ten secondary teachers (61 percent) and leaders (58 percent) reporting student achievement has improved.

Finding 13: Behaviour and bullying have improved, meaning teachers can spend more time teaching.

- Over three-quarters of secondary teachers (77 percent) and leaders (78 percent) also say restricting cell phone use has improved student behaviour in the classroom. Over two-thirds (69 percent) of secondary leaders say that bullying has decreased. This means that teachers can spend more time on teaching and learning.
- Teachers, leaders, and board members also told us they have seen improvements in social interactions with the absence of phones during breaks.

Finding 14: Encouragingly, more secondary schools in lower socio-economic communities have improved outcomes.

- Even though students in schools in low socio-economic communities comply less with the rules, they have seen bigger shifts in their outcomes than their peers in high socio-economic communities.
- Almost seven in ten (69 percent) leaders in secondary schools in low socio-economic communities said achievement improved, compared to four in ten (42 percent) in high socio-economic communities. The same trend showed up in bullying (80 percent of schools in low socio-economic communities compared to 44 percent in high socio-economic communities), and students' mental health (83 percent in schools in low socio-economic communities compared to 56 percent in high socio-economic communities).
- The bigger gains could be because, according to PISA data, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds experience greater distractions from digital devices, and therefore have more room for improvement when those distractions are reduced or better managed.

Finding 15: Pacific students benefit the most. But students who are disabled or have learning needs^c experience some negative effects.

- Pacific students report greater improvements across behaviour, attendance, focus, achievement, bullying, and mental health. ERO's recent report on attitudes to attendance¹ found that Pacific students have shown some of the most positive attitudes towards being present and focused in school, and that this increased between 2022 and 2025.
- In contrast, students that identify as disabled or having learning needs report worse outcomes – around a quarter reported worse experiences in areas like mental health (28 percent), bullying (24 percent), and focus on schoolwork (23 percent). This may be linked to the finding that not all schools offer exemptions for these students, and teachers are not always aware of the exemption rules or who they apply to.

^c Students were asked the question "Are you disabled or do you have learning needs?" in the survey. Therefore, these students are grouped together in our analysis.

Finding 16: Six in ten (59 percent) parents have not changed how they communicate with their child while at school, and some remain worried about not being able to connect with their child during the day.

- Worryingly, almost six in ten (59 percent) parents and whānau report they have not adjusted how they communicate with their child while at school, which aligns with how many parents are still messaging their child during the day.
- Still, nearly a third of all parents and whānau (29 percent) remain concerned about not being able to contact their child during the day. Parents expressed that they were concerned because they were unable to provide support to students when issues arose at school.

Area 4: What works and what gets in the way of 'Phones Away for the Day'?

Finding 17: Clear, consistent rules and strong, consistent enforcement drives compliance.

- Primary students^d are more than twice as likely (2.2 times) to be compliant when rules are consistent across year levels.
- When rules are consistently enforced within a school, compliance increases. Secondary teachers and leaders are twice as likely (2.0 times) to say students follow the rules consistently when rules are enforced to a great extent.
- Secondary teachers and leaders are over one and a half times more likely (1.6 times) to report a high level of student compliance when students understand the purpose of the rules.

Finding 18: When secondary teachers support and enforce phone rules, outcomes improve.

- Secondary schools with teacher support, as reported by teachers and leaders, are more than twice as likely (2.2 times) to see improved focus in the classroom, and over one and a half times as likely (1.7 times) to see improved achievement.
- Strong teacher enforcement is also key to improving student outcomes – student behaviour in the classroom (1.8 times) and bullying (1.9 times) are more likely to improve. Consistency of enforcement across teachers within the same school is also a key factor in student compliance.

Finding 19: Tougher consequences like parent notification and confiscating phones increases compliance.

- Parent notification increases the likelihood (1.5 times) of secondary students' compliance.
- Confiscating phones means schools are around twice as likely to report that behaviour (2.0 times), focus (2.1 times) and achievement (1.9 times) have improved.

^d Primary and intermediate students in Years 7 and 8.

Finding 20: Simply telling students to put phones away reduces compliance.

- A softer approach to rule-breaking appears to be less effective for senior students and can make it worse. Regardless of other consequences used, simply telling Year 12-13 students to put phones away halves (0.5 times) their compliance.
- We heard how some students wilfully rebel against the rule, just because they were told to follow it. Whereas, ensuring students understand the rules makes a difference and was reported as helpful in implementing the rules by nine out of ten (87 percent) primary schools and almost eight out of ten (78 percent) secondary schools.

Finding 21: Implementing phone rules is easier now there is a law, but challenges like student and parent resistance, wearable devices, and inconsistent exemption use remain in secondary schools.

- In both primary and secondary schools, leaders, teachers, and key informants told us that the law has helped schools enforce phone rules, even if they already had phone rules, because it helped them respond to parent and student concerns and resistance.
- However, we heard that barriers still exist. Most secondary teachers say that the difficulty in having to monitor students and enforce the rules at all times (72 percent), student resistance (60 percent), and wearable devices (50 percent) make it difficult to implement phone rules. Three in ten (31 percent) secondary teachers say parent resistance is also a barrier.
- There is also inconsistent understanding of rules, particularly around exemptions. One in six (16 percent) secondary teachers find the exemption criteria to be a barrier to implementing the rules.

Recommendations

ERO used these findings and key lessons learned to make four recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Keep the 'Phones Away for the Day' requirement – it is making a difference.

ERO finds that the 'Phones Away for the Day' policy is making a positive difference to student wellbeing and learning. To maintain this momentum:

- The legal requirement that schools stop students from using or accessing mobile phones while attending school should continue.
- The Ministry of Education should continue to support schools to comply with the 'Phones Away for the Day' policy.
- ERO should continue to monitor implementation and compliance as part of its regular review processes.
- Schools should ensure that teachers clearly understand the school's rules around phone use, including any exemptions, and are confident in supporting and enforcing them.

Recommendation 2: Increase compliance of secondary students by sharing with schools the approaches that work most.

ERO's findings indicate that compliance with the policy is less consistent in secondary schools. To improve implementation:

- Secondary schools should continue to use consequences to enforce 'Phones Away for the Day' and ensure high compliance across year levels and times of day.
- The Ministry of Education and ERO should provide practical support by sharing effective approaches and strategies that have led to high compliance in other schools.
- Parents should support schools by not contacting their children on cell phones during school hours.

Recommendation 3: Increase parents' awareness of the benefits of removing cell phones (and other digital distractions) and how they can help.

ERO finds that increasing parent support can further support the success of the policy. To build stronger partnerships:

- The Ministry of Education and ERO should increase visibility of the benefits of removing digital distractions, including impacts on wellbeing and learning.
- Schools should actively engage parents to help them understand the benefits of removing cell phones, how they can support it at home, and provide alternative ways for parents to communicate with their child during the day.

Recommendation 4: Consider further action to remove other digital distractions and reduce the potential harm of social media at school – learning from the experience of other countries.

ERO's review suggests that broader digital distractions, including social media, continue to impact student wellbeing and learning. To address this:

- The Government should consider expanding the 'Phones Away for the Day' policy to include other forms of digital distractions such as smartwatches.
- Consider ways to further reduce digital distractions by limiting or removing student access to social media during school hours.



About this report

This report is about how well the 'Phones Away for the Day' policy has been implemented in schools and its impact on student outcomes. It examines what is working well, identifies barriers to success, and outlines additional actions that could help achieve the policy's intended goals – improved student achievement and engagement.

The Education Review Office (ERO) has a key role in implementing change to school rules around student use of cell phones. ERO is responsible for monitoring schools' student cell phone policies and compliance with the Government's 'Phones Away for the Day' mandate. 'Phones Away for the Day' requires that schools and kura prohibit student use of cell phones during the school day. This change is intended to increase engagement and achievement, by reducing distractions and improving social interactions.

As part of our National Review work programme, ERO in partnership with the Ministry of Education committed to review how well 'Phones Away for the Day' had been implemented and any impacts on students. In Term 2, 'Phones Away for the Day' had been in place for one year.

What we looked at

ERO is working in partnership with the Ministry of Education (the Ministry) to evaluate changes to the curriculum in schools. We are reviewing 'Phones Away for the Day' as part of a multi-year work programme of National Reviews.

We wanted to review the quality of implementation, and impact, of 'Phones Away for the Day', and we wanted to support schools to enact 'Phones Away for the Day' well, by identifying where more support is needed, and sharing examples of success. We also wanted to identify areas for improvement, so that we can realise the intended impact of improved student achievement and engagement.

To do this, we looked at four key questions:

- 1) How well is 'Phones Away for the Day' being put in place?
- 2) How compliant are students?
- 3) What is the impact of 'Phones Away for the Day'?
- 4) What works and what gets in the way of 'Phones Away for the Day'?

Where we looked

For this report, we collected data in Term 2, 2025. We looked at English medium state schools and Years 7 and above. We collected responses from students, parents and whānau of students, teachers and school leaders^e, and school boards. We also spoke with a range of experts and used other evidence and research to support our findings.

The findings of our review are evidenced by a range of data and analysis from:

Action	Who
Over 10,700 survey responses from:	→ 277 board members → 383 school leaders → 1,573 teachers → 3,691 students → 4,833 parents and whānau
Interviews and focus groups with over 65 participants:	→ including school leaders, board members, teachers, students, parents and whānau, key informants, and experts
Data and evidence from:	→ 910 ERO school Board Assurance Statements (BAS) → insights from ERO’s reviews of schools → a review of the international and New Zealand literature

^e In some schools, leaders are principals or deputy principals. Throughout the report, we simply refer to them as ‘leaders’.

Report structure

This report has seven parts.

- **Part 1** sets out **why cell phone use in classrooms matter** and covers key issues associated with cell phone use and how it impacts New Zealand students.
- **Part 2** sets out **what requirements have been put in place** and details the 'Phones Away for the Day' mandate, as well as how New Zealand's policy around cell phones in schools compares to those in other countries.
- **Part 3** covers what we found for **how well 'Phones Away for the Day' is being put in place**, including how many schools have rules in place and how much change was required.
- **Part 4** covers what we found about **how compliant students are** with the new rules and includes reasons why students are not complying.
- **Part 5** covers what we found about **what the impact is of 'Phones Away for the Day'**, including impacts for different groups of students and on teaching.
- **Part 6** covers what we found about **what works and what gets in the way of 'Phones Away for the Day'**, highlighting the actions which have a biggest impact and what supports are required.
- **Part 7** provides the **lessons learned** through this review and our **recommendations** to inform future change, as well as providing an overview of our key findings.



Part 1: Why does cell phone use in classrooms matter?

Cell phone use can have a big impact on our students. New Zealand is one of many countries working to limit cell phone use in schools in order to improve concentration, behaviour, and achievement, and to reduce harm associated with overuse of social media, exposure to dangerous content, and cyberbullying. Increasingly, the risks associated with excessive phone use in young people are being recognised nationally and internationally.

This part sets out:

- 1) What the key issues are with student phone use in schools
- 2) How phones affect New Zealand students
- 3) Why managing student phone use matters.

What are the key issues with student phone use in schools?

Limiting cell phone use in school can help limit harm and improve outcomes. Globally, there is an increasing recognition of the harm that student phone use in schools can cause. Student cell phones are often linked to behaviour incidents, from pupils being distracted by phone use during class to their link to bullying incidents over social media.² There is increasing evidence of the harm that social media can have on young people, which is often accessed via phones. There are also indications that limiting devices such as cell phones in schools can have positive impacts on student achievement and wellbeing.

The growing recognition of these issues has resulted in many calling for phone use to be limited during school hours. UNESCO has previously called for limits on cell phone use in classrooms.³ UNESCO argue that smartphones should only be used in class if they are supporting student learning outcomes.⁴ Many jurisdictions have moved to limit or completely ban student phone use during school hours, including New Zealand.^f

Impacts on student concentration and achievement

There is increasing evidence that simply having a phone nearby can reduce attention and performance in cognitive tasks.⁵ Studies have shown that just having a phone nearby can reduce 'working memory' capacity.⁶ Working memory is critical for learning, as it is needed to take in new information, which means it is critical for student success.

^f A comparison of different countries' position on phone use in schools is covered in Part 2 of this report.

On average across OECD countries, students are less likely to report getting distracted using digital devices when the use of cell phones on school premises is banned.⁷ As well as impacting on the students directly, there are indirect impacts from phone use in the classroom. Over half (59 percent) of students across the OECD said they were distracted by *other students* using digital devices, including cell phones, in at least some maths lessons.⁸

There is also increased recognition of the benefits that removing phones from schools can have on achievement. In 2015, the Centre for Economic Performance in the UK investigated the effects of mobile phone bans in schools and found that pupils performed better in high-stakes exams following a phone ban, with improvements particularly seen from the lowest-attaining pupils.⁹

A recent meta-analysis that included 29 studies looking at smartphone use and its effect on academic performance found that student 'smartphone addiction' has a negative impact on academic performance.¹⁰ The authors found that there was no significant difference due to age or educational level, suggesting that the impact is similar for all age groups.

Wellbeing and harm from social media

Social media can have a big impact on our young people. More than half of teens in the United States of America (USA) report that they spend too much time on their phones, and a similar proportion report taking steps to reduce their phone use.¹¹ We know there are similar issues in New Zealand, with a 2019 study finding that social media and technology use was identified as one of the four biggest problems facing young people today.¹²

Children and adolescents' mental health can be impacted by time spent online. Phones are used by New Zealand students aged 12-17 to go online, more frequently than other digital devices. Students aged 9-11 years more frequently go online using a laptop, notebook, or tablet.¹³ More than nine in ten (93 percent) 15-17-year-olds accessed the internet using a cell phone at least once a week, as well as eight in ten (79 percent) 12-14-year-olds and almost half (48 percent) of 9-11-year-olds.¹⁴ Higher rates of screentime for adolescents have been found to be associated with symptoms of anxiety and depression.¹⁵

A 2019 survey of New Zealand young people (aged 13-18) found that 94 percent of those who owned a phone used social media.¹⁶ Four in ten (42 percent) of those teens started using social media before the age of 13; the vast majority of them (89 percent) were on social media before the age of 16.¹⁷ These numbers are consistent with those reported in the USA.¹⁸ Young people spent an average of more than four hours each day on social media, with two in ten (22 percent) meeting the criteria for problematic social media use. More than half (58 percent) of those surveyed said that they were on social media 'too much'.¹⁹

Adolescents are at especially high risk of harm from social media due to their ongoing brain development.²⁰ The studied harms of social media exposure in teens include everything from sleep disruption²¹ to depression,²² anxiety,²³ and psychological distress.²⁴ Social media exposure is also associated with disordered eating²⁵ and low self-esteem.²⁶

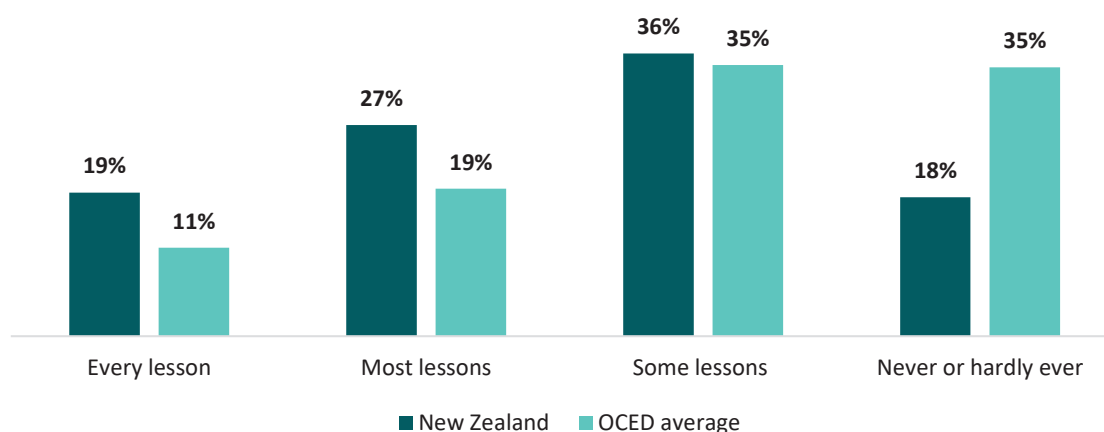
How do phones affect New Zealand students?

Cell phone ownership among young people in New Zealand is high. Almost all (96.6 percent) 15-year-olds in New Zealand have their own phone.²⁷ This has increased significantly over the last two decades. Even if they do not own their own cell phone, students' access to digital devices (including cell phones) has increased. In 2019, nearly all (97 percent) secondary school students had access to a smartphone, laptop, computer, or tablet in their spare time.²⁸ The percentage was slightly higher in schools in higher socio-economic communities, compared to schools in lower socio-economic communities.

Distraction due to digital devices such as cell phones is a problem in classrooms around the world but is a particular problem in New Zealand. The 2022 PISA results showed New Zealand to be ranked fifth in the world for students being distracted by digital devices in maths classes.

In New Zealand, four in five students (80 percent) reported being distracted by other students in maths.²⁹ On average across OECD countries, nearly one-third of 15-year-old students (30 percent) said they were often distracted by digital devices, including cell phones, during *every or most* of their maths lessons.³⁰ In New Zealand, this was notably higher, with almost half (46 percent) of students distracted by digital devices during *every or most* of their maths lessons in 2022.³¹

Figure 1: *Students distracted by using digital devices in maths lessons*



Why does managing student phone use matter?

Managing student phone use can help New Zealand tackle some of the big problems facing our students. In particular, it can help improve achievement and behaviour, and reduce the risk of harm from social media.

New Zealand students are not achieving at the level they should be

Our student achievement is a matter for concern. International studies show that New Zealand student achievement has been steadily declining over time and that many students are failing to meet minimum standards in reading and maths.

While limiting cell phone use is not a solution to improving student achievement on its own, it can play an important role in reducing distractions and creating a more focused learning environment. Policies such as smartphone bans can help mitigate distractions, alongside effective enforcement and other strategies.³²

Managing cell phone use can support better achievement by reducing distractions in the classroom. Cell phone use can also impact the ability to concentrate and learn, so removing these potential obstacles can have an impact.

Classroom behaviour is an issue in New Zealand schools

Classroom behaviour impacts the learning of all students. ERO's previous research found that behaviour is a major problem in New Zealand schools, and it is worse than other countries.³³ New Zealand was lowest among the OECD countries for behaviour in maths classes and in the bottom quarter of PISA countries for behaviour in English classes.³⁴ ERO's report found that over half of teachers report that all types of behaviour had become worse (over the preceding two years), with a greater number of students displaying challenging behaviour.

Behaviour significantly damages student learning and achievement. Almost half (47 percent) of teachers spend 40-50 minutes a day or more responding to challenging behaviour, which limits the time available to teach.³⁵ International evidence links behaviour and achievement, finding students in the most well-behaved maths classes scored significantly higher than all other students, and students in the worst-behaved classes scored the lowest.³⁶

Use of digital devices is often associated with behaviour incidents in the classroom.³⁷ Limiting their use can directly reduce behaviour incidents, as well as reducing disruptions or distractions which can cause issues in the classroom. For students, better behaviour in classrooms means less disruptions, allowing them to focus on learning.

Social media harm can have a big impact on our students

Cell phones are a key avenue for accessing social media and as such increase the risk of exposing our young people to social media related harm. The potential harms of student use of social media generally come from one of two pathways – excessive use and content exposure.³⁸ Students recognize the dangers of social media, with nearly half (49 percent) of young people believing social media is a key issue of their generation.³⁹

Cell phones contribute to the near constant engagement with social media platforms.⁴⁰ Overuse of social media can not only cause distraction from learning, but can also cause reductions and disruptions of healthy behaviours such as sleep.⁴¹ It is also being increasingly recognised that social media overuse can cause addiction-like changes in the brain.⁴²

Content exposure is a key pathway for students to experience harm as a result of social media use.⁴³ The dangers of content range from exposure to advertising from unhealthy industries, such as tobacco and alcohol,⁴⁴ pornography and violence,⁴⁵ and cyberbullying.⁴⁶ According to a 2022 report from Te Mana Whakaatu Classification Office, Māori and Pacific students are at heightened risk for exposure to cyberbullying and other forms of unwanted online communication.⁴⁷

We are also seeing an increase in young people being exposed to misinformation and even violent extremist material online. Young people can be particularly vulnerable to these risks.⁴⁸

While there are many proposed protections for students engaging with social media platforms, limiting access to cell phones may also limit students' exposure to the potential harms of social media overconsumption.

Conclusion

Managing cell phones has the potential to have a big impact on our students' achievement and wellbeing. Limiting cell phone use in schools can improve concentration, behaviour, and achievement, and reduce harm associated with overuse of social media, exposure to dangerous content, and cyberbullying. As a response to these issues, many jurisdictions have moved to limit or completely ban student phone use during school hours, including New Zealand.





Part 2: What requirements have been put in place?

As part of its broader efforts to lift student achievement, the Government introduced the 'Phones Away for the Day' mandate in 2024. This chapter sets out who is responsible for making these changes, and how New Zealand's cell phone policy compares to other countries.

What we looked at

We looked at the national requirements regarding use of cell phones in schools, particularly the 'Phones Away for the Day' mandate, and what the roles are for enforcing these requirements.

This part sets out:

- 1) What changes have been made to using cell phones in schools
- 2) Who is responsible for making the changes
- 3) What schools get to determine
- 4) How this compares to other jurisdictions' requirements.

What changes have been made to using cell phones in schools?

In January 2024, the Government introduced rules requiring school boards to prohibit students from using or accessing mobile phones while they are attending school.⁴⁹ These rules needed to be in place by the end of April 2024. This mandate is known as 'Phones Away for the Day'.

The changes mean that all New Zealand state and state-integrated schools, and kura must have rules in place restricting student cell phone use during school time, with some exceptions.^g The policy applies across all parts of the school day, including class time, breaks, and off-site activities such as field trips or external courses. It applies to student cell phones only, and doesn't include other devices such as laptops, tablets, or smart watches, and only applies to students at the school.

^g Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu (Te Kura) is exempt from this requirement.

The 'Phones Away for the Day' rules were introduced to reduce distractions, improve student focus, and foster positive social connections during the school day. The expectation was that removing cell phones from the learning environment supports higher levels of engagement and achievement, while also making classroom management easier for teachers.

Exemptions

The rules acknowledge that there are some students and some activities where phones are needed or are useful for. To reduce any unintended consequences, the rules require school boards to allow exemptions for students to use or access a phone for:

- health reasons
- a disability or learning support need
- a specific educational task or purpose, as determined by a registered teacher
- special circumstances (for example, if the student is a teenage parent), as determined by a school principal.

Who is responsible for making the changes?

Responsibility for implementing the 'Phones Away for the Day' rules is shared across the education system. The **Ministry of Education (the Ministry)** sets the legislative requirements, including the 'Phones Away for the Day' mandate. They are responsible for supporting schools to meet these requirements. Schools are supported by Ministry staff to make the appropriate adjustments to their procedures so they can meet the regulations.

School boards are responsible for establishing and implementing rules within their schools that prohibit students from using or accessing mobile phones while they are at school. They must also ensure the prohibition does not apply to students who need to use or access a phone (via exemptions).

School leaders manage the day-to-day implementation, monitoring, and enforcement of the rules. **Teachers** ensure the policy is enacted in classrooms and across the school day-to-day.

ERO monitors compliance with the mandate through Board Assurance Statements (BAS), school policies, and documentation such as handbooks and rules. Where non-compliance is identified, ERO works with schools to support improvement. ERO reports identify non-compliance and notes if the school has addressed, taken steps to address, or not yet addressed any non-compliance before a report is confirmed.

What do schools get to determine?

While the requirement to ensure students are not using cell phones during the school day is mandatory, each school has some flexibility on how they implement this. This includes developing a process for how the requirements are enforced in practice.

School boards must consult with their community on any new rules they are putting in place, including for compulsory changes such as the 'Phones Away for the Day' mandate.

The Ministry works with schools to confirm rules are in place prohibiting the use of cell phones by students and supports implementation for those that require assistance. The Ministry also provides guidance to schools on what they should consider when making rules around student phone use.⁵⁰

How and where phones are kept

Each school must make decisions about how and where student phones will be stored during the school day. This looks different between schools, with some schools requiring that phones are kept in the student's school bag, in a lockable pouch, or in a secure location, such as a locked cupboard.

Consequences for students

Schools can decide what consequences students might face if they breach the rules. The Ministry advises that a school's usual behaviour management approach is likely to be appropriate, rather than introducing specific disciplinary actions for students. For many schools, this is just another rule to follow, such as rules about uniform use.

Exemptions

Each school must have their own process for managing the exemptions specified within the regulations and deciding how and when they apply. Schools are not required to record the use of exemptions. Schools can decide how to monitor exemptions in a way that supports management of their rules.

How does this compare to other jurisdictions’ requirements?

New Zealand’s cell phone ban is comparable to policies in OECD countries like Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and Singapore. While some jurisdictions have introduced full or partial bans on cell phone use in schools, others have taken the approach of issuing guidelines but leaving it to schools to define the precise policies on usage in class.

Table 1: *How ‘Phones Away for the Day’ compares to policies in other countries*

Country	Cell phones in schools policy
New Zealand	In New Zealand, the restriction on the use of cell phones by students is mandated by the Government. Schools are responsible for implementing the rules, and compliance is monitored by the country’s independent education evaluation agency, the Education Review Office. Students must not use phones during the school day, including during breaks and off-site activities. Exceptions can be granted in special cases like health reasons or for certain learning activities.
Australia	All states and territories in Australia now have mandated phone bans to reduce distractions and improve learning. The first state to adopt a cell phone ban was Victoria in 2020⁵¹ where students’ phones must be switched off and stored securely during school hours. States like New South Wales and South Australia have similar policies.⁵² From 2027, Victoria has committed to limiting screen time in primary school classrooms to 90 minutes a day, with stronger limits in place for Year 1 and 2 students.⁵³
UK	The UK Government does not enforce a blanket ban on cell phones in schools, but in 2024 it released guidance encouraging schools to prohibit phone use throughout the school day (including during breaks and lunchtimes) to reduce distractions and support student wellbeing.⁵⁴ Most schools in England already have restrictions in place. A 2025 survey found that over 90 percent of secondary schools either ban or limit phone use.⁵⁵

Country	Cell phones in schools policy
Singapore	Singapore doesn't have a blanket ban on cell phones in schools. Instead, they offer guidance for schools on how to develop rules to regulate the use of mobile devices.⁵⁶ Many schools have developed their own policies to regulate their use.⁵⁷ Typically, students are allowed to use their phones to contact their parents, but they must be stored away from them during lessons (i.e. in a dedicated cell phone locker). Some schools may allow their use at specific times like between classes or during lunch, while others might ban them entirely.
Other jurisdictions	New Zealand's cell phones in schools' policy also shares similarities with policies in other jurisdictions. → France was one of the first countries to introduce a blanket ban on cell phones in schools.⁵⁸ In 2018, they banned all children in middle schools (ages 11 to 15 in France) from using phones in schools. This replaced an existing rule that restricted cell phone use during lessons. → As of 2025, 31 US states have also implemented full or partial bans on students using cell phones in school.⁵⁹ → Denmark, Finland, and Sweden are also looking to implement nation-wide cell phone bans in schools.⁶⁰

Conclusion

The Government prohibited student use of cell phones during the school day from Term 2 2024. This requirement applies to all students enrolled in state and state-integrated schools, and kura, with some exceptions.

The 'Phones Away for the Day' policy aims to minimise distractions, enhance student engagement, and encourage positive social interaction during school hours. Responsibility for implementing the mandate is shared across the education sector, and schools can implement the mandate with some level of flexibility. The requirement to have cell phones away during the school day is increasingly being seen in other jurisdictions, with comparable policies seen in OECD countries like Australia, the UK, and Singapore.



Part 3: How well is 'Phones Away for the Day' being put in place?

This chapter sets out how many schools have implemented the 'Phones Away for the Day' rule – how much of a change this was for schools, how schools put their rules in place, what exceptions are made, and how schools monitor and enforce these rules. We found that while nearly all schools have rules in place, what they look like in practice, and how they are enforced, varies.

What we looked at

To realise the benefits of the 'Phones Away for the Day' policy, schools must comply with the law. Understanding how many schools comply, the extent to their rules align with the law and its intentions, and how consistently those rules schools are enforced helps us assess how well the 'Phones Away for the Day' has been implemented in schools.

This chapter sets out:

- 1) How many schools have implemented a 'Phones Away for the Day' policy
- 2) How much of a change the new policy was for schools
- 3) How schools put the new policy in place, including what exemptions schools make and for whom
- 4) How schools monitor and enforce these rules.

What we found

Encouragingly, nearly all schools have a 'Phones Away for the Day' rule.

We consistently heard from board members, school leaders, teachers, students, and parents and whānau that rules had been put in place at their schools.

Over half (54 percent) of secondary schools have made changes compared to just five percent of primary schools.

Nearly all schools have rules prohibiting phone use at school at all times of the day, but there are large variations in when and where teachers enforce the rules.

Over nine in ten (94 percent) schools ban phone use during the day and most (95 percent) have the same rules across year levels.

Enforcement happens in class but not so much between classes – 57 percent of teachers report they aren't strictly enforcing the rules during scheduled breaks (e.g. morning tea), and 61 percent report they aren't when students move between classes.

What 'Phones Away for the Day' looks like is very different between primary and secondary schools. Secondary schools let students keep their phones with them more, and monitor and enforce less. Primary schools store students' phones more and enforce more.

Most secondary schools let students keep their phones – four in five (80 percent) do, compared to about one in seven (15 percent) primary schools.

Almost two-thirds (64 percent) of primary schools store students' phones compared to just six percent of secondary schools. Primary school leaders told us that it was relatively easy for them to deal with collecting any student phones because they have smaller school rolls and fewer students with phones. This also meant that they could monitor student phone use more easily and respond to any issues promptly.

Secondary teachers are also less strict – during scheduled break times, only four in ten (40 percent) secondary teachers monitor phone use, compared to nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of primary teachers.

Both primary and secondary schools in low socio-economic communities are less strict in enforcing the rules, but in primary they store student phones more.

In primary, more schools in low socio-economic communities collect student phones – 86 percent do so compared to 60 percent of schools in higher socio-economic communities.

But enforcement is weaker across schools in lower socio-economic communities – for example 52 percent enforce phone rules during scheduled breaks, compared to 64 percent of schools in higher socio-economic communities. This may be due to limited resources, stronger reliance on phones for family connection, or a focus on maintaining relationships over strict rule compliance.

When students break the phone rules, schools most commonly confiscate student phones and notify parents.

Over six in ten (64 percent) schools immediately confiscate phones when they are used inappropriately and over half (58 percent) notify parents when students break the phone use rules. Secondary schools are twice as likely to give warnings before they confiscate phones (33 percent) compared to primary schools (16 percent).

Leaders, teachers, and students often described having a series of stepped consequences such as warnings, confiscation of the phone, then detention (in secondary schools), followed by stand-downs for persistent rule-breaking.

While most secondary schools allow phone exemptions for health, disability, and learning needs, some students may not be getting the support they need. A quarter of schools do not offer exemptions for learning support reasons, and over a quarter of teachers are unaware of their school's exemption policies.

Regulations require schools to provide phone exemptions for disabled students and students with health and learning support needs. We heard from board members across all school types that they typically delegate decisions about the use of student exemptions to their principals in practice.

Most secondary schools allow health exemptions (93 percent) and for disabled students (84 percent), but a quarter (26 percent) do not offer exemptions for students with specific learning needs.

Even where exemptions are available, over a quarter (26 percent) of teachers are unaware of their school's exemption policies.

These findings are set out in more detail below.

How many schools have a 'Phones Away for the Day' policy?

Nearly all schools have a 'Phones Away for the Day' rule.

Nearly all (99 percent) school leaders report having a 'Phones Away for the Day' rule in their school. We also consistently heard from board members, school leaders, teachers, students, and parents and whānau that rules had been put in place at their schools.

How much of a change was this for schools?

Most primary schools did not have to change their existing rules, but half of secondary schools did.

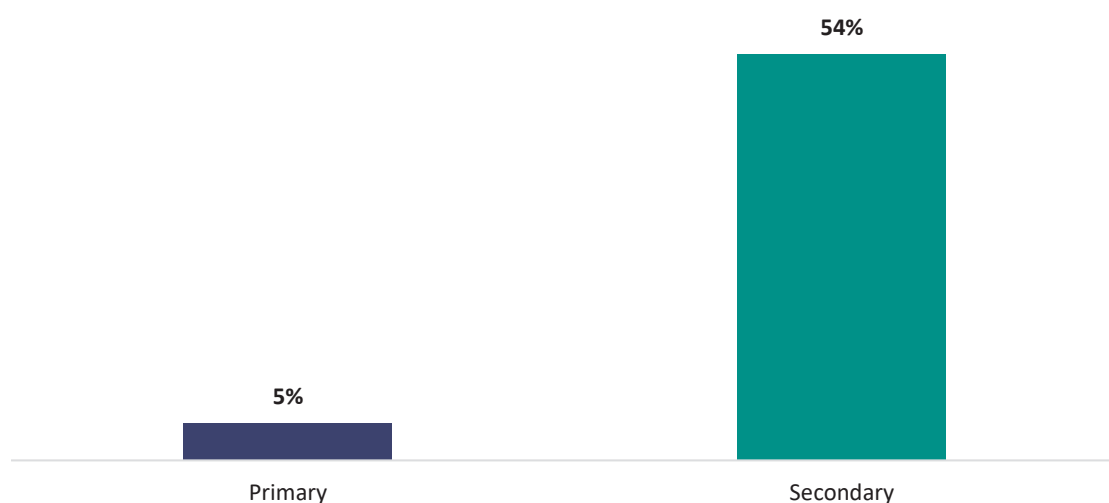
Nearly half of secondary (46 percent) and most primary schools (95 percent) had a 'Phones Away for the Day' rule before the policy was introduced. This means that for many, the amount of change in school rules and procedures was minimal because of the new policy.

“When the 'Phones Away for the Day' rule came in, we didn't have to change any of the procedures at all... we just highlighted to the staff the importance of children handing it in.”

INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL LEADER

The remaining half of secondary schools (54 percent) had to change their rules in response to policy, compared to just 5 percent of primary schools.

Figure 2: *Percentage of leaders reporting they had to change their school's rules*



School leaders told us that at the primary level, fewer students have cell phones, and more schools already had rules in place. Secondary schools experienced more change because they have more students with cell phones and greater variation in their rules and enforcement of the rules before the 'Phones Away for the Day' policy.

“As a primary school we have always had a no phone policy, all devices have always been made to be handed to the office and locked away safely until the end of the day.”

PRIMARY SCHOOL LEADER

Changing school rules was harder for some secondary schools than others. We heard that those with previously relaxed expectations about student phone use found it harder to introduce stricter rules. Some adopted a staggered approach, making their rules stricter over time.

“We had to implement ours in two stages... started with a real light touch... then upped our policy.”

BOARD MEMBER

We also heard that secondary students appreciated a 'phased implementation' of the policy, starting rules in Term 1 2024 before the policy was officially in place. This helped ease the transition by allowing students to slowly adjust to not having their cell phones during the school day.

“So starting from Term 1, they were quite lenient at first because they wanted us to settle into not using this device that you’ve had all this time, especially for senior students. And then from Term 2 and Term 3, if they saw a phone, it was instantly taken away.”

SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENT

How do schools put in place 'Phones Away for the Day'?

Use of phones

Nine in ten schools don't allow students to use their phones at any time during the day, including at breaks. This is a consistent rule for all schools' year levels.

Most (94 percent) schools prohibit students from using their phone at any time while at school, including during breaks such as morning tea and lunch.

A very small proportion of schools let students use their phone during break times such as lunch or morning tea. Reasons for doing this include students needing to purchase items at the canteen (using contactless payment) and to organise transport for the end of the school day. We heard that some schools allow students to use cell phones for these reasons, with a teacher present, before returning the phone to its appropriate 'away' location.

“Students can come to the office to use their phone (remaining in the office) and then hand it back in.”

LEADER

Almost all schools (95 percent) have consistent rules across year levels. Only a small number of schools make exceptions for senior students – three percent of school leaders allow them to have phones during study class, and two percent allow phone use outside of study classes. Just six percent of teachers say they let senior students use their phone in their study class. We heard from teachers that they let senior students use phones either for specific learning tasks or to take photographs of their work.

“Seniors [are allowed phones] if teacher needs phones for T&L [teaching and learning] (eg. photographing art in painting).”

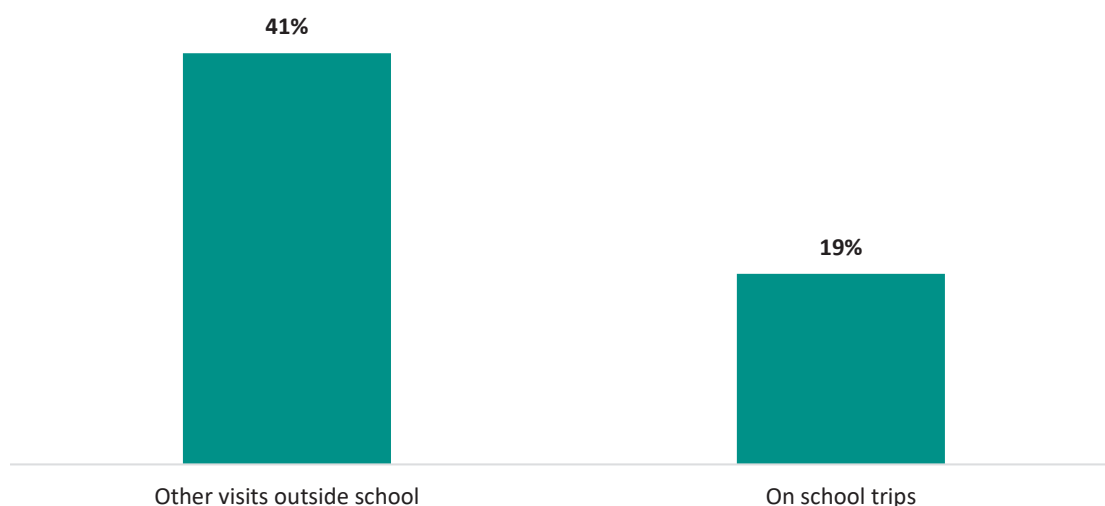
SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER

Nearly two in ten schools let students use phones on school trips and over four in ten on other off-site visits, sometimes for learning activities.

Guidance from the Ministry states that schools' 'Phones Away for the Day' rules must apply for students who are not on school grounds as part of a school programme, such as a school course or visit.⁶¹

However, there is a lot more variety in schools' rules about phone access when students are off-site for school trips or other learning activities (such as work experience or courses). Four in ten schools (41 percent) permit students to access their phones on visits outside school, while almost two in ten (19 percent) do so on school trips. Just over two in ten (21 percent) of board members said their policy does not extend to school trips.

Figure 3: *Percentage of leaders reporting they do not monitor and enforce rules, or the rules don't apply on school trips or other visits outside schools*



The 'Phones Away for the Day' policy allows students to use phones for an educational purpose if their teacher deems it necessary for their schoolwork, but this must be decided at the classroom level – not as a general school policy. Nonetheless, this was a primary reason we heard schools allow phone use during school trips and for learning activities such as taking photographs. However, we also heard that some teachers also let students use their phones for other reasons such as to listen to music while travelling.

“Long school trips, for example, travelling to [event] where allowing students to listen to music on the bus ride, be contacted when moving around Taupō in groups during a stopover and individually being able to contact whānau regarding arrival times back at kura is also useful. At the event phones are not allowed and students hand them over.”

TEACHER

In programmes involving external providers like polytechnics, where cell phones are used to record work, some secondary students are encouraged to self-manage their off-site phone use.

“...We also run a building program as well, in conjunction with the polytechnic. And they were very quick to say kids need to be able to use the cell phone. So again, we issued a blanket exemption, which is managed by the polytechnic tutor so that they can record their work. And I've actually been on site and seen the students doing this. And again, they're just self-managing. It's really well done...”

RURAL SECONDARY SCHOOL LEADER

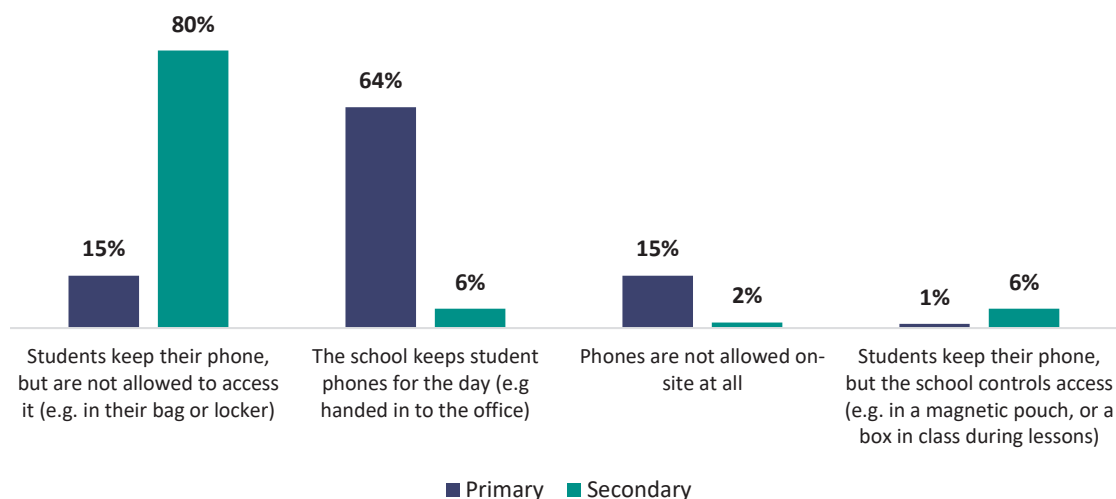
Access to phones

Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of primary schools store students' phones for the day while most (80 percent) secondary schools let them keep it.

Although most students are not allowed to use phones at school, storage rules vary, especially between primary and secondary schools. Eight in ten (80 percent) secondary schools allow students to keep their phones compared to about one in seven (15 percent) primary schools.

This means that most (85 percent) primary but about one-fifth (20 percent) of secondary schools require phones to be stored or left at home. These schools fall into three groups. The first group stores students' phones for them – nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of primary schools and 6 percent of secondary schools do this. About one in seven primary (15 percent) and 2 percent of secondary schools prohibit students from bringing phones to school at all. The remaining schools have a variety of approaches to manage phones access, including magnetic pouches and cell phone boxes or lockers in classrooms.

Figure 4: *Percentage of leaders reporting where students' phones should be during the school day, by school type*



“So being a primary school, we don’t allow them at all. We have a lock box that students are required to put their phones into in the morning when they arrive at school. And they can collect them at the end of the day.”

PRIMARY SCHOOL LEADER

Primary school leaders told us that it was relatively easy for them to deal with collecting any student cell phones because they have smaller school rolls and fewer students with phones. This also meant that they could monitor student phone use more easily and respond to any issues promptly.

“In a traditional intermediate or middle school setting, it’s a lot easier [than secondary schools] because the majority hand it in in the morning to [their] teacher, store it in a lockbox... it’s much easier to go, ‘it’s with your teacher in your classroom throughout the day.’ That’s easier to manage than kids moving between classes.”

INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL LEADER

Secondary school leaders, teachers, and boards, however, told us they were concerned about their liability for any student cell phones collected and stored by the school, or by individual teachers, and that is why they have students keep their phones. For large schools, these concerns were especially important, as well as the logistical challenge of collecting large numbers of student cell phones.

“We also didn’t want to take the phones off them and set them somewhere collectively because they thought we’d be liable for any damages.”

BOARD MEMBER

While a very small number (6 percent) of secondary schools use methods such as magnetic pouches to restrict access, in some cases this is only as a consequence for inappropriate phone use. The cost of magnetic pouches was also identified as a barrier.

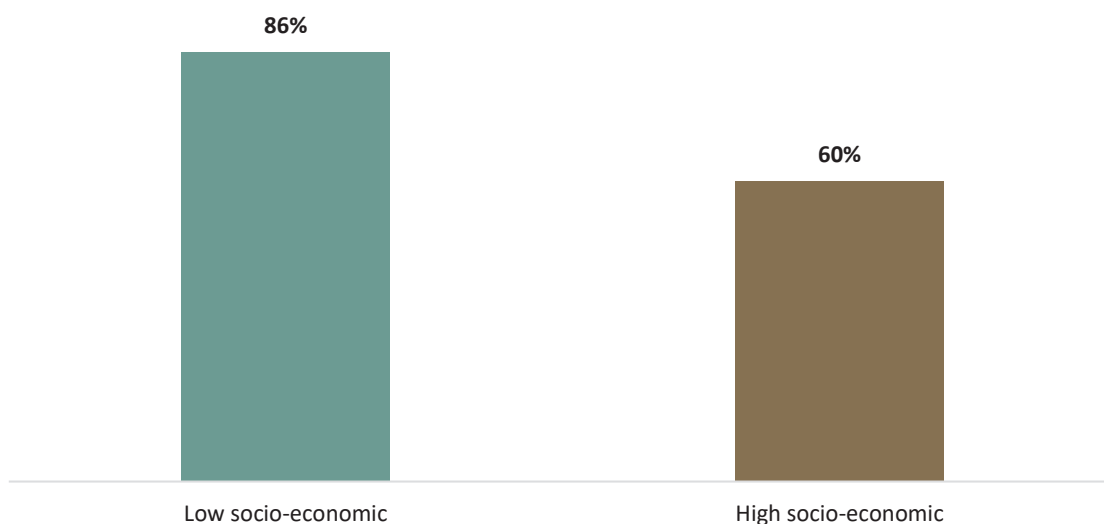
“We don’t do the pouches and all of that money making market [nonsense]. Because that’s just a disgrace. However, we make the kids take responsibility for what the rules are...”

SECONDARY SCHOOL LEADER

More schools in low socio-economic communities store student phones for the day.

A higher proportion of schools in lower socio-economic communities keep students’ phones for the day than schools in higher socio-economic communities. At the primary level, just under nine in ten (86 percent) schools in lower socio-economic communities collect phones, compared to six in ten (60 percent) in higher socio-economic communities. One in ten (9 percent) secondary schools in lower socio-economic communities collect students’ phones for the day, while none of the schools in higher socio-economic communities do.

Figure 5: *Percentage of primary school leaders reporting they store students’ phones for the day, by socio-economic status*



Exemptions

As outlined in Part 2, the 'Phones Away for the Day' legislation requires schools to allow exemptions for students who need phone access for health, disabilities, learning support needs, specific educational tasks, or other special circumstances.

We heard from board members across all school types that they typically delegate decisions about the use of student exemptions to their principals in practice.

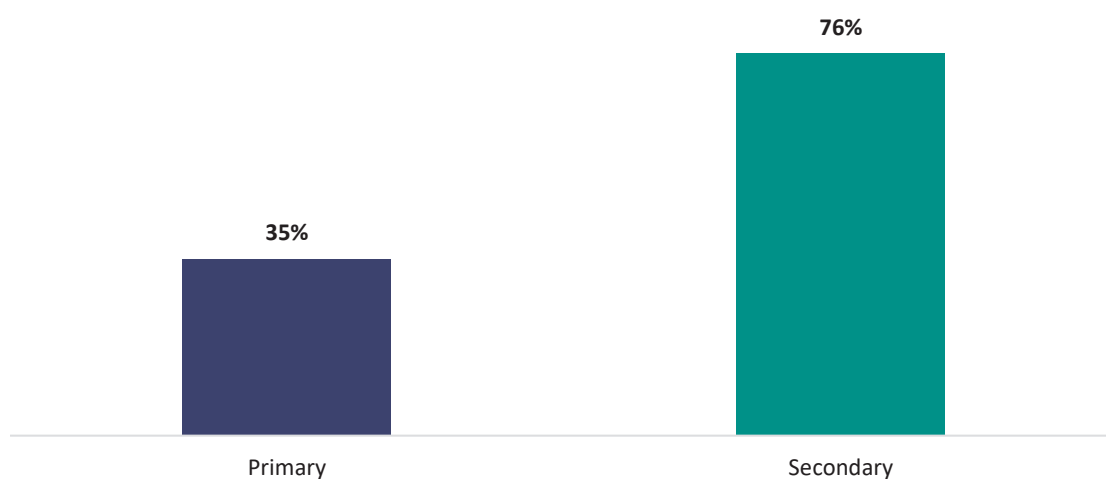
“In regards to exemptions, my thing would be, as we all know, as school boards, we hand over the day to day management of the school to our principal.”

BOARD MEMBER

Three quarters of secondary schools allow teachers to determine if students can use their phones for specific educational purposes, while just over a third of primary schools do so.

Over three-quarters (76 percent) of secondary schools permit teachers to allow phone use during class for specific educational purposes. In contrast, only 35 percent of primary schools provide this exemption, likely due to lower phone ownership among younger students.

Figure 6: *Percentage of leaders reporting they allow exemptions for specific educational purposes, by school type*



Leaders and teachers described a variety of allowed uses from translation support for English Language Learners to completing class activities, including where students did not have access to another device such as a laptop.

“With my ESOL students they are improving. Because majority of them are Pasifika student and some of them can’t afford...to buy a laptop which costs like maybe 800. That’s why they have phones, but they only use the phone for school.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER

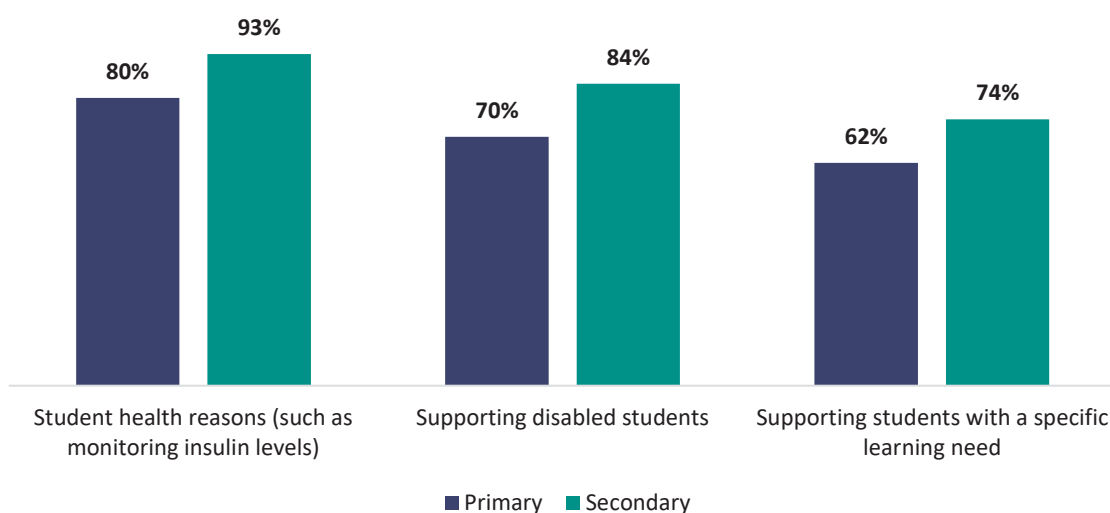
Most schools allow phone exemptions for students with health or disability-related needs but many teachers are not aware of their schools’ exemption rules or which students they apply to.

Most school leaders have exemptions in their ‘Phones Away for the Day’ rules for health, disability, and learning support reasons, as required by the legislation.

Secondary school leaders are more likely than primary school leaders to include these exemptions. Specifically, over nine in ten (93 percent) secondary schools report having exemptions for student health reasons (e.g., insulin monitoring), compared to eight in ten (80 percent) primary schools. Similarly, over eight in ten (84 percent) secondary schools supported phone use for students with disabilities compared to seven in ten (70 percent) primary schools, and over seven in ten (74 percent) for students with specific learning needs compared to over six in ten (62 percent) primary schools.

This means that over a quarter (26 percent) of secondary and almost two-fifths (38 percent) of primary schools do not offer exemptions for students with learning needs.

Figure 7: *Percentage of leaders reporting they allow exemptions for health, disability, or learning needs, by school type*



This is consistent with our previous findings that cell phone prevalence was greater in secondary schools. In these settings, students and teachers acknowledged that cell phones may sometimes be used as a digital tool if students do not have access to a laptop.

“...So the rule is still phones off, in a way, all day. However, because we have a socio-economic climate that is significantly disadvantaged, a lot of our kids will be permitted to use those phones in class because they need a calculator, and they don't have both...”

SECONDARY LEADER FROM LOW SOCIO-ECONOMIC SCHOOL

We also heard from secondary teachers that they allow cell phone use, with clear boundaries, to support learning. For instance, some teachers let students use cell phones as ‘focus tools’ for concentration, to listen to music or white noise.

“...Having headphones in and having sort of music playing or whatever they used to in terms of studying and being able to concentrate with the use of technology, means that actually not having that in class has become a little bit of a barrier for some of them to focus. So it's sort of an interesting thing. I've noticed a lot of them have told me that, oh, I can write better if I have my headphones in. And when you actually see it? It is happening. Like they put their headphones in and they're not being distracted...”

SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER

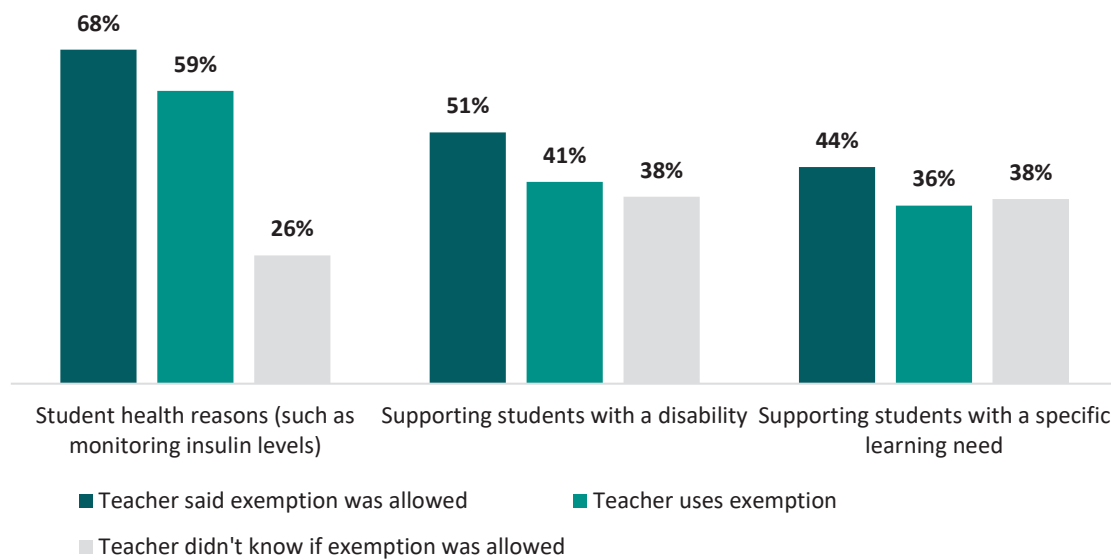
Even when exemptions for health, disability, or specific learning needs are in place, many teachers are not aware of them. Over one in four (26 percent) teachers don't know whether their school allows exemptions for health reasons, and nearly two in five (38 percent) are unaware of exemptions for disability or learning support. Similarly, board members are unsure of exemptions, with just under a quarter (23 percent) being unsure if exemptions for health reasons are allowed, and three in ten (30 percent) unsure of exemptions for disability or specific learning needs.

“I've seen teachers that fail to understand, even if the kids have been given the exemption... particularly for neurodiversity...”

BOARD MEMBER

When teachers are unaware of exemption rules, they may be less likely to permit phone use for students who are eligible. This lack of awareness is reflected in the data – just seven in ten (68 percent) say their school allows exemptions for health reasons, and six in ten (59 percent) teachers use it. Only half (51 percent) of teachers say exemptions exist for students with disabilities and a lower proportion (41 percent) use it. The exemption that teachers are least likely to say is allowed is for students’ learning needs – four in ten (44 percent) says it’s allowed and a little more than a third (36 percent) of teachers use it in their classroom.

Figure 8: *Percentage of teachers reporting each exemption was allowed, that they used it, and didn't know if was allowed*



We heard that the variety of exemptions can be difficult to manage, especially in large school settings where tracking exemptions can be difficult.

“It’s made it more difficult to teach a class of 30 students with different ones asking if they can use their phone for [an] educational purpose.”

TEACHER

As one leader of a large secondary school told us, when several students have exemptions for various purposes, including the use of headphones for helping with noise sensitivity or aiding concentration, it is difficult for teachers, especially relief teachers, to know which students do and do not have exemptions.

“...We have around about 90 students on our exemption list. Because that list is so large, it's really difficult for teachers to track who has the exemption and who doesn't... So you might get to know that if it's a regular class. But if there's a reliever in there or if the kids are moving between one venue and another on a large campus and a teacher walks past, it's difficult.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL LEADER

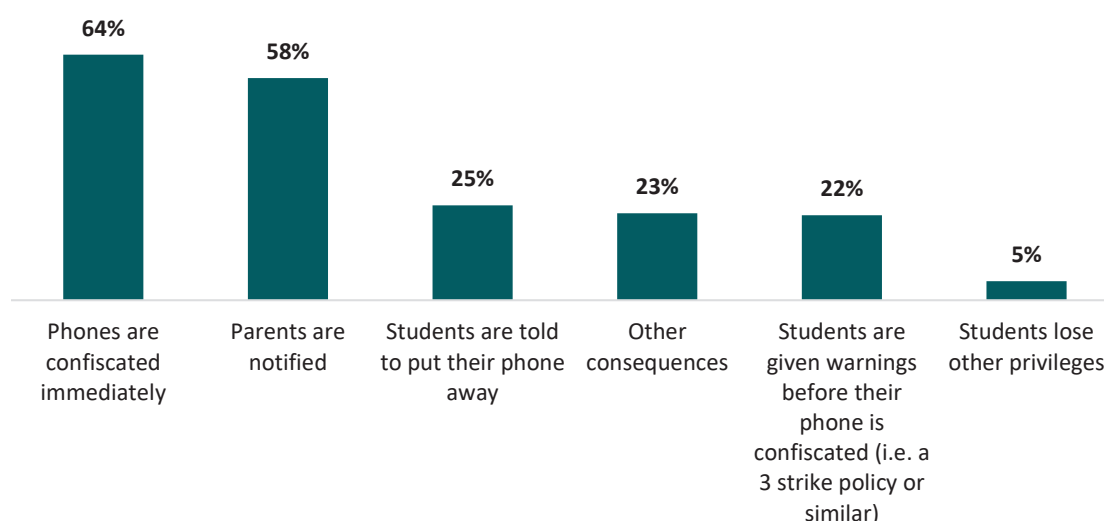


How do schools monitor and enforce their 'Phones Away for the Day' rules?

Almost two-thirds of schools immediately confiscate student phones when they break the rules; over half notify parents.

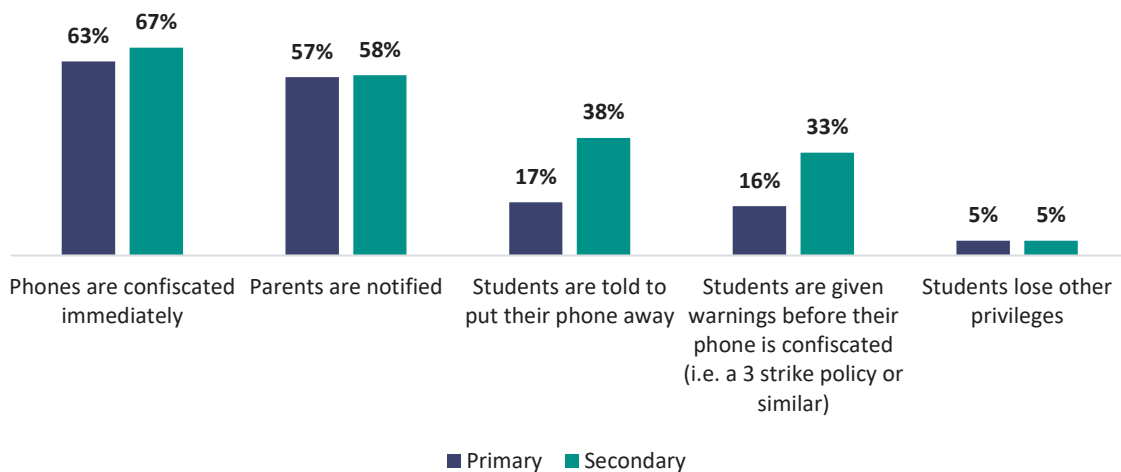
While nearly all schools meet the requirement to have a 'Phones Away for the Day' policy, not all students follow their school's rules. Schools use a variety of strategies to monitor and enforce their 'Phones Away for the Day' rules and often use multiple strategies. Almost two-thirds (64 percent) of schools immediately confiscate phones when they are used inappropriately and two in ten (22 percent) give students a warning prior to confiscation. Schools are legally allowed to take away any object that is deemed 'detrimental to learning', including phones.

Figure 9: *Percentage of leaders reporting how schools respond when students break phone rules*



Primary and secondary schools are about equally likely to notify parents, confiscate phones, or take away privileges in response to phone misuse. However, compared to primary schools, about twice as many secondary schools give warnings before confiscating phones (33 percent) or ask students to put their phones away (38 percent).

Figure 10: *Percentage of leaders reporting how schools respond when students break phone rules, by school type*



Most leaders, teachers, and students we spoke to described having a series of stepped consequences such as warnings, confiscation of the phone, then detention (in secondary schools), followed by stand-downs for persistent rule-breaking. Students told us that consequences were most effective when they were in steps (stepped consequence) – warning, confiscation, detention.

“We have a step system in place that escalates based on how many times a student has had their phone confiscated (warning – detentions – whānau meetings etc.).”

LEADER

“We have strikes, so parents are contacted on the 2nd or 3rd strike but not the first. Phone are confiscated immediately till the end of the day though on 1st and 2nd strike and then parents pick up phone on 3rd [strike]...”

STUDENT

Over half of primary (57 percent) and secondary schools (58 percent) also notify parents when students break the phone use rules, usually quite early in the process. School leaders and board members told us that notifying parents about students not following the rules was the most effective consequence for improving student compliance.

“Parents must drive to school to collect the phone (15km from town)... phones are not given back to students unless collected by a parent.”

LEADER

Both teachers and school leaders emphasised the importance of balancing enforcement and consequences with maintaining positive relationships with students. They noted that overly harsh approaches can often lead to student defiance rather than compliance. Students also told us that, in some cases, harsh enforcement could result in defiance.

“It can create a conflict... If you push the letter of the law and say, well, look, I saw that you were watching a movie and, you know, that's against the policy. You will have to judge very quickly whether it's worthwhile coming into a conflict situation or sacrificing your relationship with a student that you've built up over six months for the sake of an infringement.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER

Board members and school leaders in both primary and secondary schools also told us about the value of digital monitoring tools on their school networks. These tools can track student activity on devices connected to the school WiFi and flag inappropriate use.

“We run a [monitoring] program... So in the holidays I sometimes ring parents and say, did you know your child was looking at, because I can see what they're doing. So we monitor them continually on school devices. So which gives them, I suppose, a stable platform to work from. They know the boundaries that they're working in when they're on a school device, and on their own BYoD device.”

PRIMARY SCHOOL LEADER

Leaders and teachers in larger schools told us about the importance of having centralised systems and formalised processes for enforcement and recording multiple instances of phone use.

“...It gets centralized through to the office because trying to find your maths teacher, at the end of the day, who took your phone off in period two. It's a bit of a drama, but the office is always there at 3:15, and so the teacher has the responsibility to take the phone through any given day we might have...”

SECONDARY LEADER IN LARGE SCHOOL

While not restricted to small schools only, leaders and teachers in smaller schools told us about relying on personal relationships and teacher visibility to monitor student compliance.

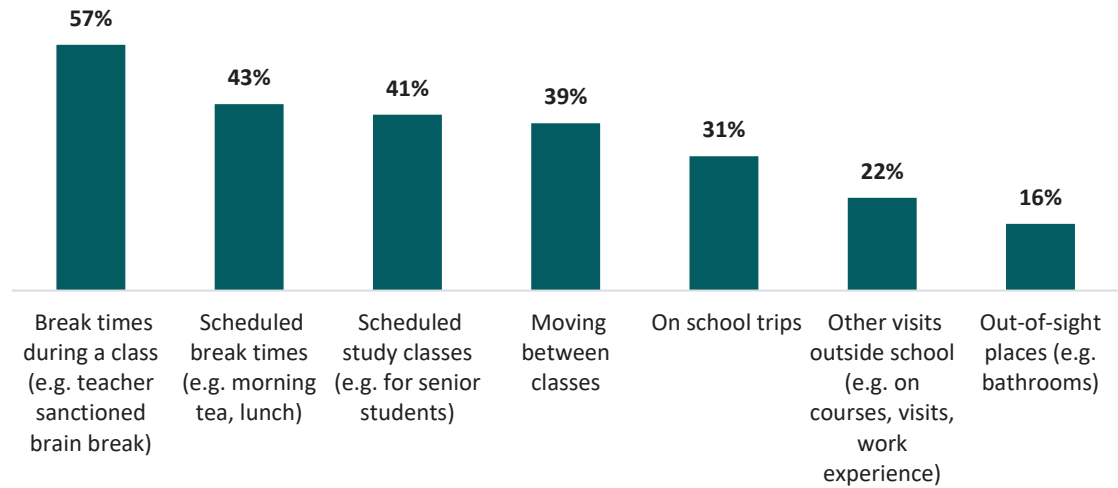
“Because we’re such a small school, I could currently tell you about the two children who are flouting our policy on the bus. The bus is our wasteland, just, you know, just that nether region where our bus driver drives the bus. There’s no teacher, no parent on the bus. But I could tell you exactly who it is and what they’re up to because of our size.”

PRIMARY LEADER IN SMALL SCHOOL

There are large variations in when and where teachers enforce the rules. While over half (57 percent) of teachers monitor during class time breaks, fewer monitor between classes, in out of sight places, or on school trips.

Another way schools differ in how they apply the ‘Phones Away for the Day’ rules is how much teachers say they enforce the rules. Enforcement differs across locations and times of day, leading to inconsistent experiences for students. While over half (57 percent) of teachers monitor and enforce phone rules ‘to a great extent’ during break times in class, fewer teachers monitor when students are moving between classes (39 percent), in out-of-sight places (16 percent), or off campus (31 percent on school trips, 22 percent on other off-site visits).

Figure 11: *Percentage of teachers reporting when and where they monitor and enforce phone rules ‘to a great extent’*



About a third of students say that teachers do not consistently enforce the ‘Phones Away for the Day’ rules during class time breaks (32 percent) or when students are moving between classes (35 percent). We heard from teachers, leaders, and students that variation in how strictly teachers enforce the rules can be confusing for students, and that they can exploit this variation to use their cell phones more.

“Like you’re not bringing your phone out in this class, right? But some kids like, take advantage of the nice teachers a little bit.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENT

We also heard that teachers’ confidence and skill in managing student behaviour plays a role – those less confident in classroom management are less likely to enforce the rules consistently.

“And it’s also class by class. You might go to class one, and that teacher is really relaxed and allows all phones out because they’ve chosen not to adhere. And then class two is really strict. And then class three is more relaxed. And so it’s that inconsistency.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER

In some cases, the variation in teacher enforcement is due to logistical challenges. For example, we heard that it is particularly challenging for schools to monitor and enforce cell phone rules during break times (e.g., morning tea, lunch), due to having many students being supervised by a small number of staff on duty.

“I’ve got over 100 teachers so it can be hard to ensure consistency. I’d say there’s real consistency **INSIDE** the classroom, but **OUTSIDE** the classroom there’s only 10 to 12 of my people on duty at any one time. You wanna fight battles you can win.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL LEADER

On the other hand, we heard some secondary teachers are concerned about the harm enforcing the cell phone restrictions may have on their relationships with students. They reported that they sometimes take a more lenient approach to preserve the teacher-student relationship.

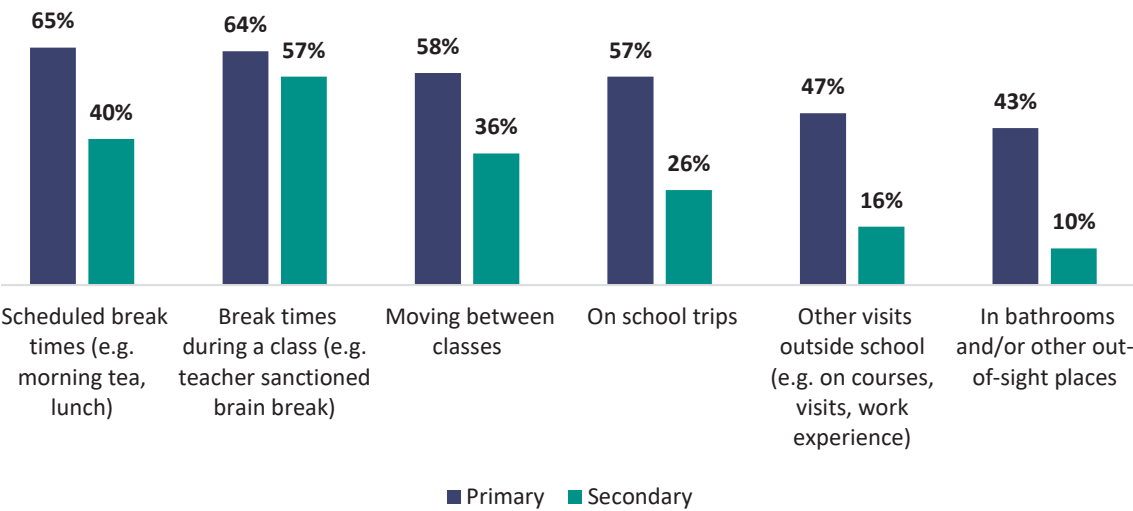
“Their reaction is so terrible that you can’t actually be a quality educator for them anymore because they don’t want anything to do with you once you take their phone.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER

Enforcement of phone rules is less in secondary schools than primary.

Secondary teachers are less strict than their primary colleagues, at all times of the day. While more than half of secondary teachers (57 percent) monitor phone use during class breaks, almost two-thirds (64 percent) of primary teachers do the same. During scheduled break times, only four in ten (40 percent) secondary teachers monitor phone use, compared to nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of primary teachers. One-third (36 percent) of secondary teachers monitor phone use while students move between classes, compared to almost two-thirds (58 percent) of primary teachers. On school trips, just over one in four (26 percent) secondary teachers monitor phone use, compared to just under six in ten (57 percent) primary teachers. On school trips, just over one in four (26 percent) secondary teachers monitor phone use, compared to just under six in ten (57 percent) primary teachers.

Figure 12: *Percentage of teachers reporting when and where they monitor and enforce phone rules ‘to a great extent’, by school type*



This is consistent with what we heard about the relative challenges present in secondary schools compared to primary schools, including the greater prevalence of cell phones, larger school rolls, students interacting with multiple teachers who may enforce the rules differently, and the potential for student resistance to enforcement.

“The logistics, first of all, of 1800 phones. When you take on that responsibility you’ve got to make sure you check it in properly and check it out. And that’s a big resource. So it’s simply not practical.”

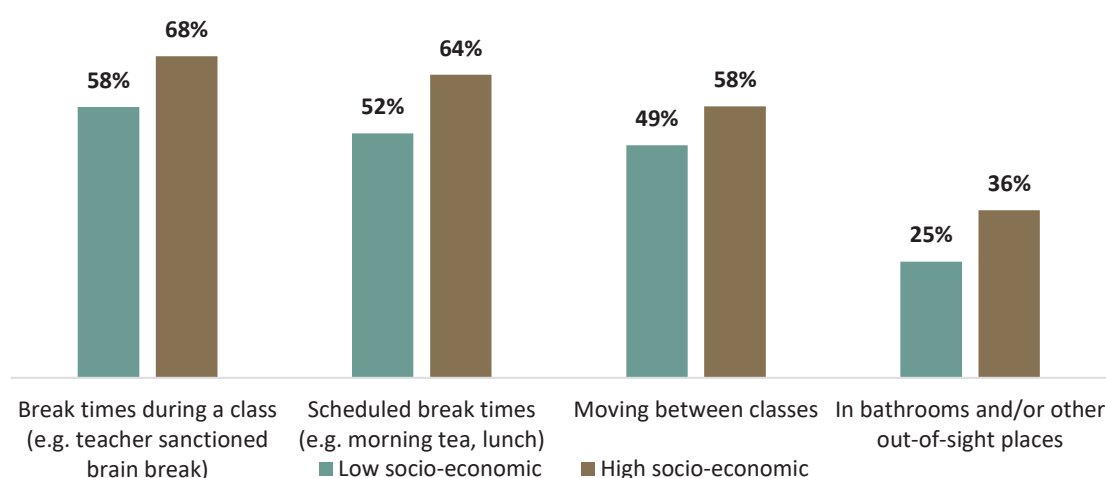
SECONDARY LEADER IN LARGE SCHOOL

Schools in lower socio-economic communities also enforce the rules less.

Schools in lower socio-economic communities are also less strict in their enforcement of cell phone restrictions during scheduled break times and between classes than those in more affluent communities. While nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of schools in higher socio-economic communities have strict enforcement of cell phone

restrictions during scheduled breaks, about half (52 percent) of schools in lower socio-economic communities do. Likewise, over half (58 percent) of schools in high socio-economic communities have strict enforcement while students are moving between classes, fewer (49 percent) schools in lower socio-economic communities have the same.

Figure 13: *Percentage of leaders reporting when and where they monitor and enforce phone rules 'to a great extent', by socio-economic status*



Schools in lower socio-economic communities may enforce cell phone rules less due to limited resources, stronger reliance on phones for family connection, or a focus on maintaining relationships over strict rule compliance. And as previously discussed, primary schools in these communities often collect students' cell phones for the day, reducing the need for active enforcement.

Conclusion

Following the Government's cell phone policy, nearly all schools now have a 'Phones Away for the Day' rule. Most schools now prohibit phone use during the day and across all year levels. This shows that nationwide mandates can successfully be implemented in all schools, across all school types.

The rules are in place across the country but there is significant amount of variation in how much the rules are enforced, including how and when consequences are enforced for breaking rules. Not all rules are followed by schools all the time – particularly regarding off-site learning and consistently applying exemptions. For new rules, exemptions, and consequences to be implemented successfully, it requires all teachers to understand and apply them.

We are seeing that nationwide mandates can change rules in schools across the country. However, there is variation in how the rules are operating in schools, particularly around enforcement and exemptions.



Part 4: How compliant are students?

‘Phones Away for the Day’ is intended to prevent students from accessing their phones during the school day. We are seeing some challenges in compliance, particularly with older students, that need to be addressed. This part sets out how well students are complying with the rules, when and where compliance differs, and why some students do not comply with the rules.

What we looked at

This chapter sets out:

- 1) How well students are complying with the rules
- 2) When and where compliance differs
- 3) Why some students do not comply with the rules.

What we found

Only around half of secondary students consistently follow their school’s phone rules. Compliance is also lower in lower socio-economic communities, and during breaks, and in unsupervised areas.

Overall, seven in ten (70 percent) students say they never use their phone during class. However, compliance drops as students get older – while over nine in ten (93 percent) Year 7-8 students follow their school’s phone rules, six in ten (60 percent) Year 9-11 students, and just under four in ten (37 percent) Year 12-13 students follow the rules. Overall, just over half (53 percent) of secondary students (year 9-13) say they never use their phone in class.

Compliance is also lower in schools in lower socio-economic communities, and during breaks, or in unsupervised areas. This may be linked to lower enforcement of the rules in these schools or because more of these students break the rules to stay connected with their family.

The top reason students break the rules is to stay connected with their family – especially older students and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Staying connected with family is the most common reason students break the rules – over half (54 percent) of rule-breakers say this is why they do it. This behaviour is more prevalent in schools in lower socio-economic communities, where 57 percent of rule-breakers cite staying connected with family as their reason, compared to 46 percent in higher socio-economic communities.

Older students who break the rules are more likely to do so to stay connected with family: over six in ten (64 percent) Year 12-13 students do so, compared to just two in ten (41 percent) Year 7-8 students.

Students also break the rules to connect with friends, for learning, or because they personally oppose the rules.

Just under two in five (37 percent) students who do not always comply with phone rules say it's because they want to connect with friends, and a similar number (34 percent) say it's because they need their phone for learning.

Three in ten (30 percent) of the students who use their phone at school break the rules because they reject the rules as unfair or disagree with them. This reasoning increases also with age and is more common in schools in lower socio-economic communities.

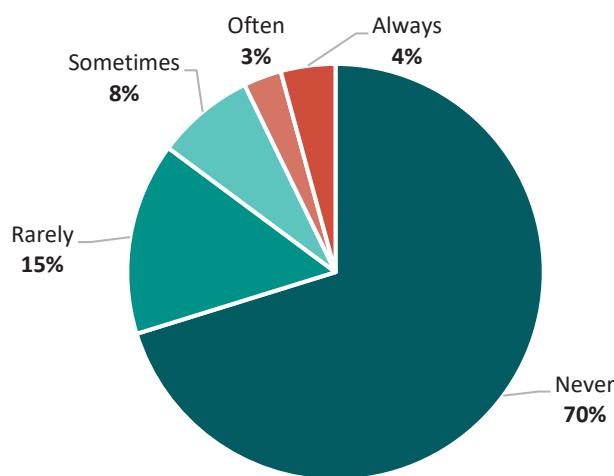
These findings are set out in more detail below.

How well are students complying with the rules?

More than seven in ten students comply with their school's rules.

Across both primary and secondary schools, seven in ten students (70 percent) say they never use their phone during class and fewer than one in ten (7 percent) do so often or always. The remaining two in ten (23 percent) students use their phone sometimes or rarely.

Figure 14: *Percentage of students who report they use their phone in class 'never', 'rarely', 'sometimes', 'often', and 'always'*

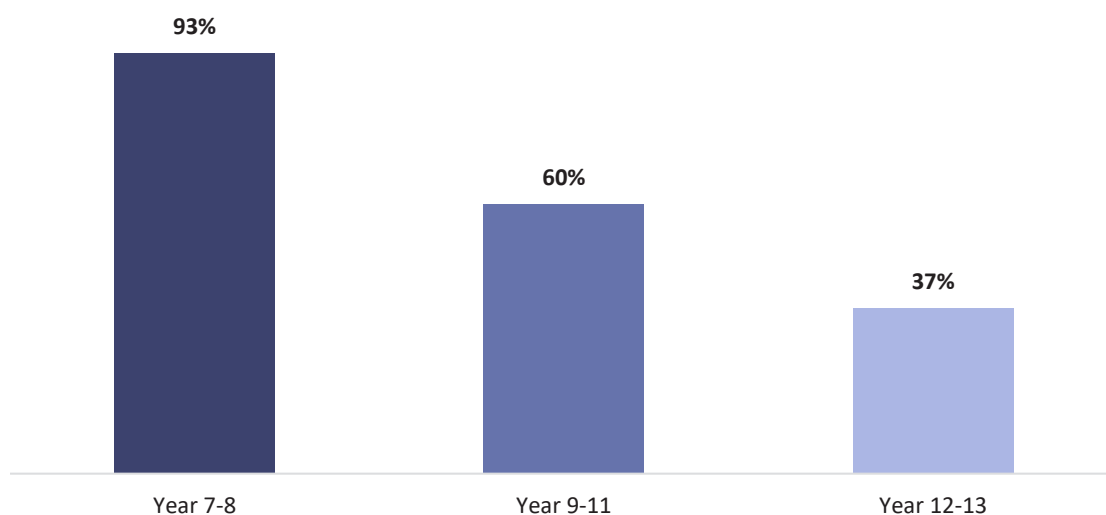


As described in Part 2, the 'Phones Away for the Day' policy does allow for schools to grant exemptions for students to use their cell phones during the day. Of the 30 percent of students who access their phone at least some of the time, many do for legitimate reasons – most commonly for teacher approved learning activities, a health need, or disability support. This means that more than 70 percent of students are following their school's rules around cell phone use.

Older students are the least compliant. Only around half of secondary students consistently follow the rules.

While most students do not use their phone during class, older students are less likely to follow these rules. Just over nine in ten (93 percent) Year 7-8 students say they never use their phone in class, compared to six in ten (60 percent) Year 9-11 students and just under four in ten (37 percent) Year 12-13 students. Overall, just over half (53 percent) of secondary students (year 9-13) say they never use their phone in class.

Figure 15: *Percentage of students who report they 'never' use their phone in class, by year level*

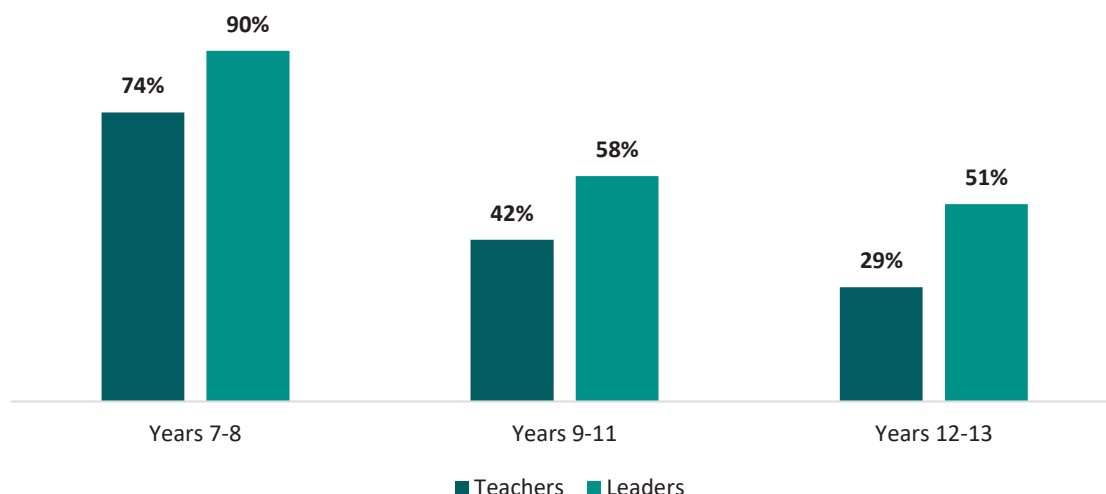


Parents of older students are also less likely to say their child always follows phone rules at school. While almost half (47 percent) of parents overall say that their child always follows their school's rules, this is true for eight in ten (83 percent) parents of Year 7-8 students, compared to just under four in ten (39 percent) parents of Year 9-11 students, and less than three in ten (28 percent) parents of Year 12-13 students.

This pattern is similar to what school leaders and teachers have observed, though interestingly, teachers report lower levels of student compliance than leaders. This difference may be because teachers are more directly involved in enforcing the rules or are witness to students' behaviour in the classroom more. More than seven in ten (74 percent) teachers say that all or almost all students in Years 7-8 follow the rules consistently, compared to nine in ten (90 percent) leaders. Just over four in ten (42 percent) teachers say that all or almost all students in Years 9-11 follow the rules consistently, compared to almost six in ten (58 percent) leaders.

The difference between teachers and leaders' views on compliance is the greatest for the oldest students. Just under three in ten (29 percent) teachers say that students in Years 12-13 follow the rules consistently, compared to just over half (51 percent) of leaders.

Figure 16: *Percentage of teachers and leaders who report that all or almost all students follow the school's rules about phones consistently*



In primary schools, where fewer students bring phones to school, leaders told us that managing compliance is more straightforward. Primary schools generally collect phones at the office or in a classroom lockbox, which staff said was manageable due to the smaller number of students. ‘Hand it in at the start of the day and collect it at the end of the day’ was a common approach, leaving little room for students to break the rules.

We spoke to a leader from a primary school with a strong values-based culture that supports high levels of student compliance. Students at this school are allowed to keep phones in their bags, and don’t use them during the day because the school culture made it clear that phones were for outside-of-school use. The leader described how trust and responsibility were central to their approach:

“So again, our culture is very strong. Part of that is honesty, reliability, trustworthiness... and we teach those values.”

PRIMARY SCHOOL LEADER

Older students told us that they often find covert ways to continue using their cell phones, especially if they feel the rules are unreasonable or poorly enforced. Students expressed that the presence of ‘rules’ means that some will automatically want to rebel, showing an increased desire to bring the ‘prohibited item’ to school as a form of resistance. They are also more sensitive to how rules are enforced and more likely to push back if they feel they’re being treated unfairly or being patronised.

“I think all teachers should apply the SAME rules for ALL students, it's extremely unfair at the moment. If the rules are going to be in place make them the same for every single student, not different rules for students with behavioural issues, that should not be a reason a student gets away with using their phone and I don't...”

STUDENT

At one secondary school, leaders, teachers, and students all described the same core rule: cell phones must be away during class. However, they had different views on how well it works in practice. Leaders felt the system was clear and mostly effective, though they acknowledged challenges managing enforcement across a large school. More teachers described inconsistency, noting that some staff enforced the rule strictly while others were more flexible to preserve relationships. Students were aware of these differences and said they adjusted their behaviour depending on the teacher or time of day.

“Students don't like rules around their phones. They try to beat the system all the time. They also get angry and sometimes aggressive when challenged to hand it in.”

TEACHER

We heard that schools with strong existing discipline systems and processes had more successful and consistent implementation. However, maintaining the rules and ensuring students continue to comply since they were introduced has been harder in schools with staffing challenges – such as high numbers of relievers or changes in leadership.

“...As soon as there is a relief teacher or a change of day structure (sports days etc) the phone rules are not implemented properly.”

BOARD MEMBER

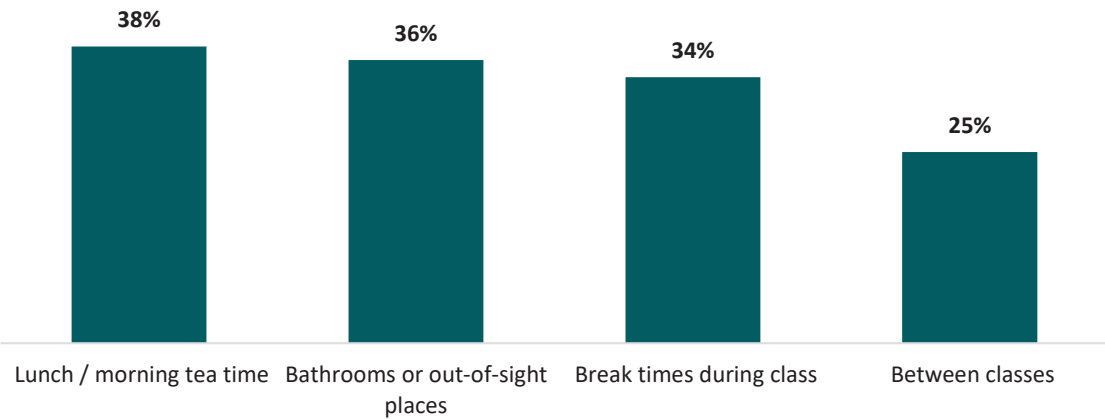
Compliance is lowest during breaks and in out-of-sight places.

Student compliance varies depending on the time of the school day and the location within the school. Most commonly, over one in three students still use their phone during lunch or morning tea breaks (38 percent), in bathrooms or other out-of-sight places (36 percent), or at break times during class (34 percent). One in four (25 percent) students use their phones between classes.

“The students are sneaky, they use their phones all the time, like in bathrooms and in class time, but the teachers never catch them.”

STUDENT

Figure 17: *Percentage of students who use their phone at different times and in different locations*



Non-compliance during breaks or between classes aligns with what was found in Part 3, where teachers were less strict about monitoring and enforcing rules during this time. Teachers also noted that when some phone use is allowed outside of class time, this lack of consistency means that students are more prone to break the rules.

“...Also students are free to use phones before class, between classes, and during any breaks; this behaviour blends into class time for some students.”

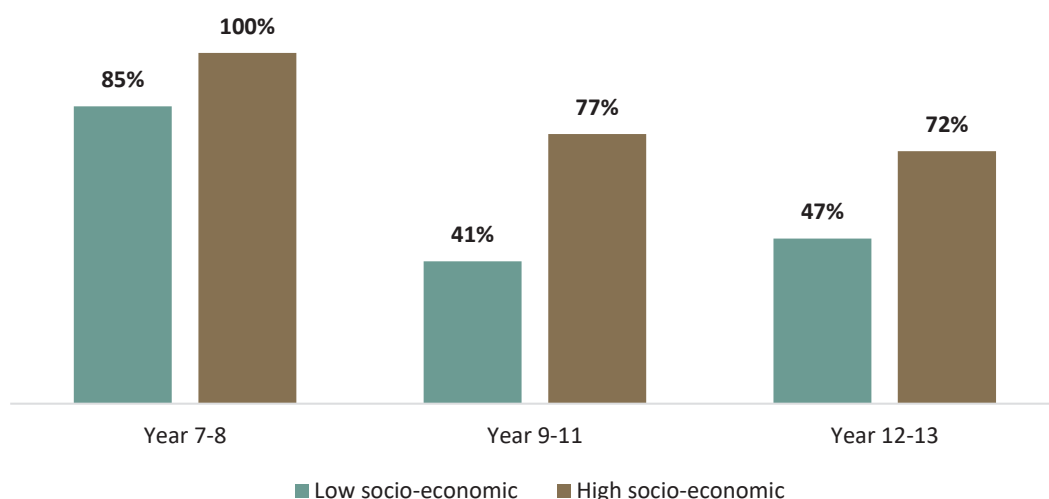
TEACHER

Students in schools in low socio-economic communities are less compliant.

According to leaders, schools in lower socio-economic communities deal with lower rates of compliance. In all (100 percent) schools in high socio-economic communities, 'all or almost all' Year 7-8 students consistently comply with cell phone rules. In more than three-quarters (77 percent) of these schools, 'all or almost all' Year 9-11 students do as well.

By comparison, in just over eight in ten (85 percent) schools in low socio-economic communities, 'all or almost all' of Year 7-8 students consistently follow cell phone rules, and less than half (41 percent) of Year 9-11 students consistently follow the rules.^h

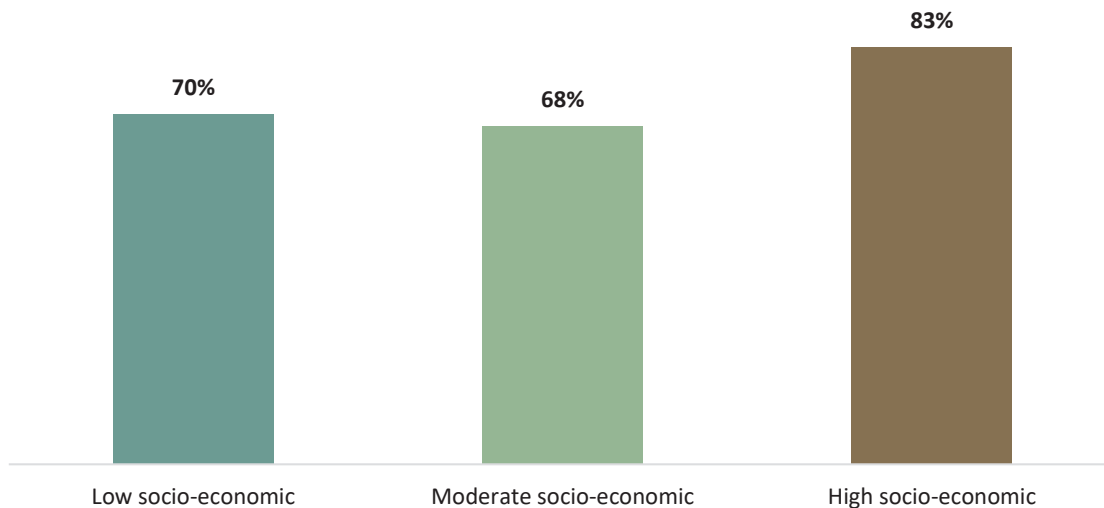
Figure 18: *Percentage of leaders who report 'all or almost all' of students consistently follow their phone rules, by socio-economic status*



Students in schools in low socio-economic communities also say they comply less with their schools' phone rules. Seven in ten (70 percent) students in schools in low socio-economic communities report never using their phones in class compared to more than eight in ten (83 percent) students in high socio-economic communities.

^h Compliance for year 12-13 students in schools with more barriers appears to also be lower (47 percent versus 72 percent). However, this difference is not statistically significant at the $p < .05$ ($p = .06$) level.

Figure 19: *Percentage of students who never use their phone in class, by socio-economic status*



Previous ERO reports have found that behaviour challenges are higher at schools in lower socio-economic communities.⁶² Students in these schools often face a greater number of challenges in their families and community, and are more likely to have experienced trauma and adversity. As discussed in the following section, a higher proportion of these students also report breaking the rules to stay connected with their family.

We also heard from students in lower socio-economic communities that where students may not have access to laptops or other devices for learning, a lack of access to cell phones can hinder learning for some students. We heard examples of students in schools in lower socio-economic communities relying on their cell phones for translation or calculators in class. These factors may contribute to their higher rates of non-compliance.

Why do students break the rules?

In this section we explore why students break the rules, as told by students. We asked them if it was to stay connected with friends and whānau, because they didn't agree with the rules, or for other reasons.

Students most commonly break the rules not for learning, but to stay connected with their friends and family. Senior students and those in schools in low socio-economic communities in particular want to stay connected.

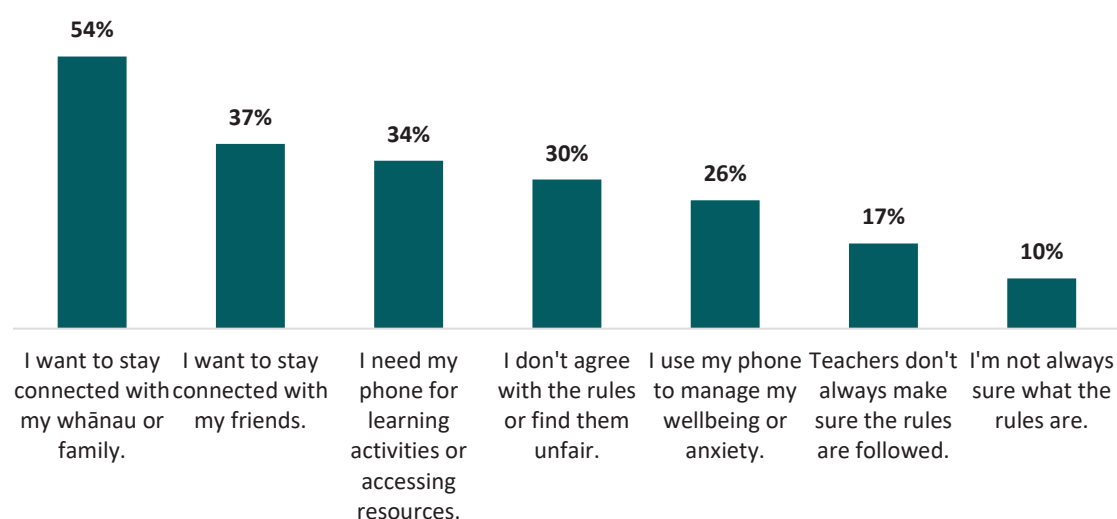
Staying connected to family is the most common reason students break the rules (54 percent). Just under four in ten students who break the rules do so to stay connected with their friends (37 percent).

“In case something happens, I always have my phone on me to contact my family, and also I think we could be able to go on our phones during break cause I find that unfair we can't cause some schools you can have a phone but not here. I think we should be able to have our phone at break [times] to contact family and friends.”

STUDENT



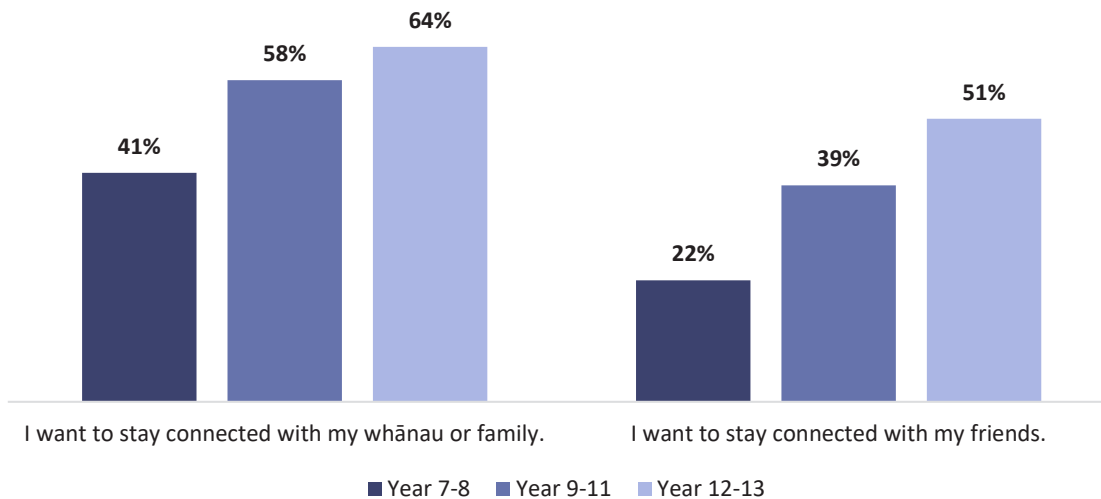
Figure 20: *Reasons why students who break the rules do not always comply*



Breaking phone rules to stay connected with friends or family is more common for older students. Over six in ten (64 percent) of the students in Years 12-13 who break the rules do so to stay connected with family, compared to almost six in ten (58 percent) of the Year 9-11 students and four in ten (41 percent) of the Year 7-8 students who break the rules. Just over five in ten (51 percent) of the students in Year 12-13 who break the rules do so to stay connected to their friends, compared to almost four in ten (39 percent) of the Year 9-11 students and just over two in ten (22 percent) of the Year 7-8 students who break the rules.

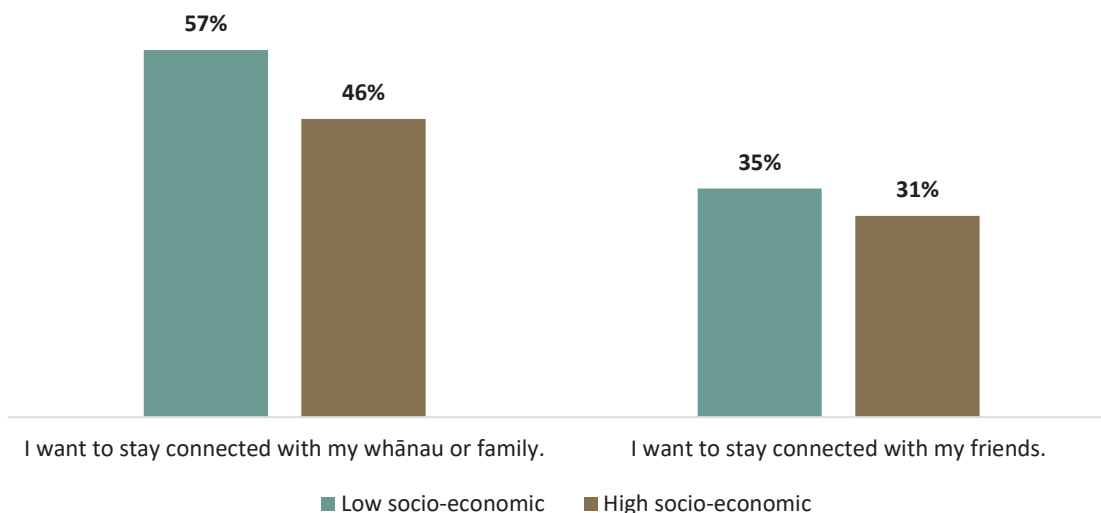
Most students told us that cell phones are generally not allowed during lunch or morning tea times. This poses challenges for students with difficulties in contacting friends because of the limitations on social media use.

Figure 21: *Percentage of students who break the rules because they want to stay connected with their family or friends, by year level*



More students in schools in lower socio-economic communities break rules to stay connected with their family (57 percent of those who break the rules) than those in higher socio-economic communities (46 percent of those who break the rules). A slightly higher proportion of students in schools in lower socio-economic communities also break rules to stay in contact with friends (35 percent of those who break the rules compared to 31 percent).

Figure 22: *Reasons why students who break the rules do not always comply, by socio-economic status*



Three in ten of the students who break the rules do so because they don't agree with it or find them unfair. More secondary students, and students in schools in low socio-economic communities, don't agree with the rules.

Three in ten (30 percent) of the students who break the rules do so because they don't agree with them, or think the rules are unfair. As will be discussed in Part 5, these students who break the rules and perceive them as unfair tend to report a decline in their schooling experience.

We heard from some students that it was unfair that teachers are still able to access and use their phones when students couldn't.

“Teachers use their phones right in front of us and when we use them we get them taken off instantly. Also I find it extremely unfair we can't use them during our break time.”

STUDENT

Students who break the rules also do so to manage their wellbeing or anxiety (26 percent), because teachers do not always make sure the rules are followed (17 percent), or because they are not certain what the rules are (10 percent).

“I sometimes use my phone to check the time or change what song I'm listening to, as listening to music helps with my anxiety which gets very bad.”

STUDENT

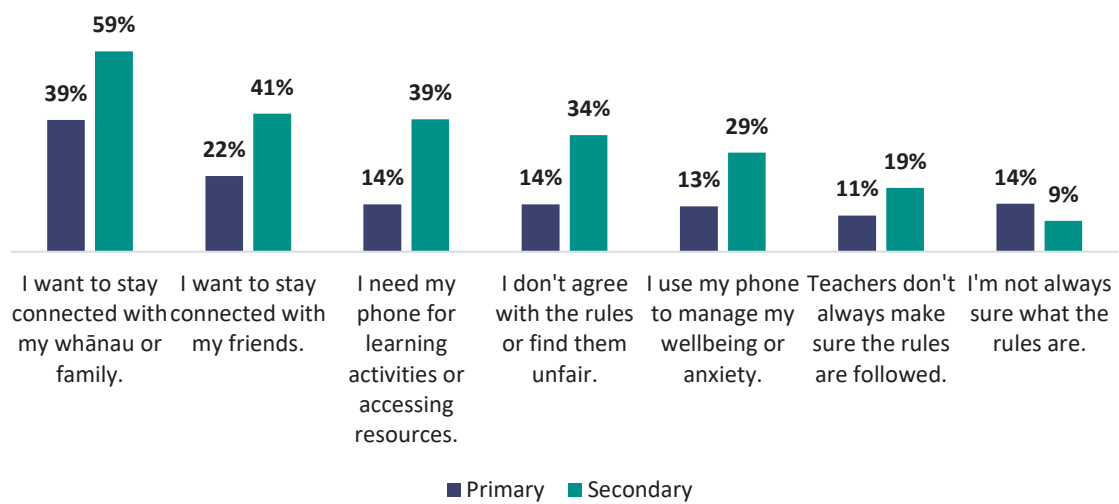
Students told us they use their phones for a broad range of reasons. Students commonly identified other reasons such as checking the time or their timetable, emergencies, boredom, playing games, listening to music, checking social media, sports, and work commitments.

“Need the phone to see where your friends are at breaks so not lonely and need it to see classes because you can lose the paper timetable really easily.”

STUDENT

More than twice as many secondary students (34 percent of those who break the rules) break the rules because they find them unfair, compared to primary school students (14 percent of those who break the rules). Secondary students are also more than twice as likely to break the phone rules to manage their wellbeing or anxiety (29 percent of those who break the rules) than primary students (13 percent of those who break the rules). However, more primary students (14 percent of those who break the rules) break the rules because they are not always sure what the rules are compared to secondary students (9 percent of those who break the rules).

Figure 23: *Reasons why students who break the rules do not always comply, by school type*



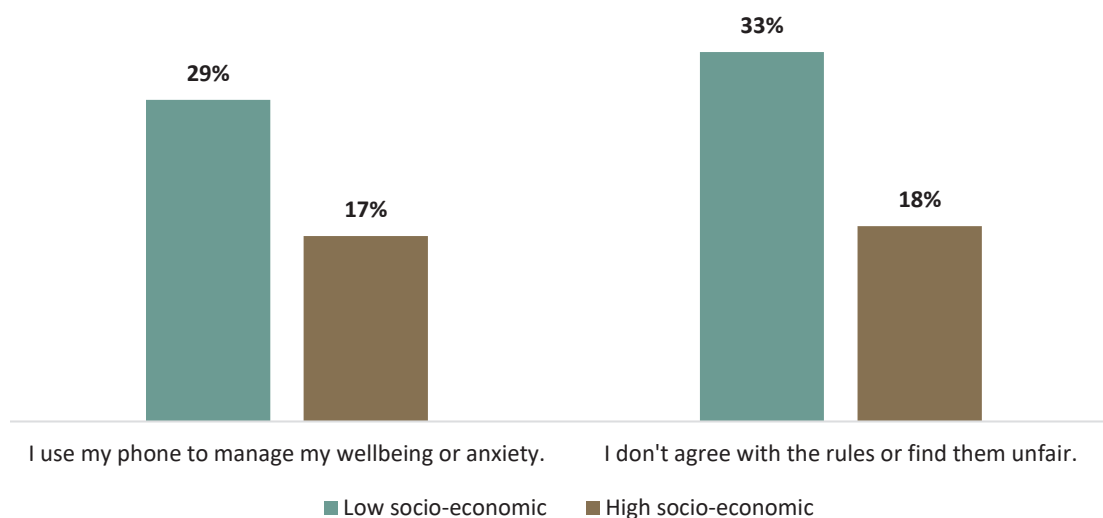
We heard from senior secondary school students that the restrictions on phone use make it hard for them to meet their responsibilities, including those outside of school. For those who are actively involved in extra-curricular activities, access to phones may be necessary for managing commitments and communication.

“My life doesn’t stop when I come to school... I’ve had to hide it and be sneaky about it just to check if everything’s okay...”

SENIOR SECONDARY STUDENT

More students in schools in lower socio-economic communities break the rules because they do not agree with them, as well as to use their phone to manage their wellbeing or anxiety. Of the students in schools in lower socio-economic communities that break the rules, more than three in ten (33 percent) do because they don’t agree with them or find them unfair, compared to just under two in ten (18 percent) of the students in schools in higher socio-economic communities that break the rules.

Figure 24: *Percentage of students reporting the main reasons they do not always comply with their school's phone rules, by socio-economic status*



Parent actions can undermine compliance, especially in secondary schools. Of the parents who say their child breaks the rules, almost six in ten say it is to connect with them.

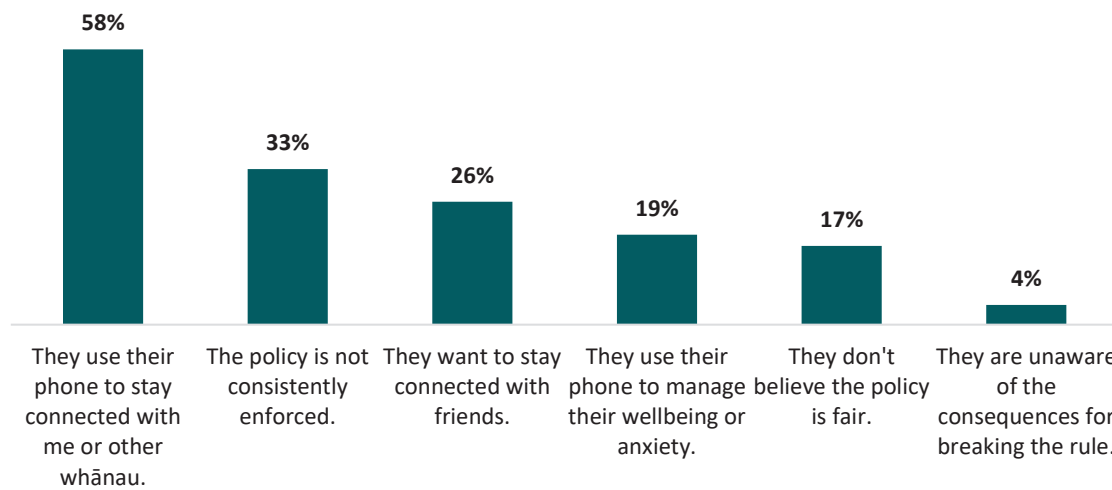
Most (89 percent) school leaders find parent support helpful in implementing the cell phone rules. However, parents' actions do not always help. Of the parents who are aware that their child is breaking the rules, nearly six in ten (58 percent) report it is to stay connected with them or other family.

“...Half the time you see a kid walking across school on their phone and they're like, ‘Oh, it's my mum.’”

SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER

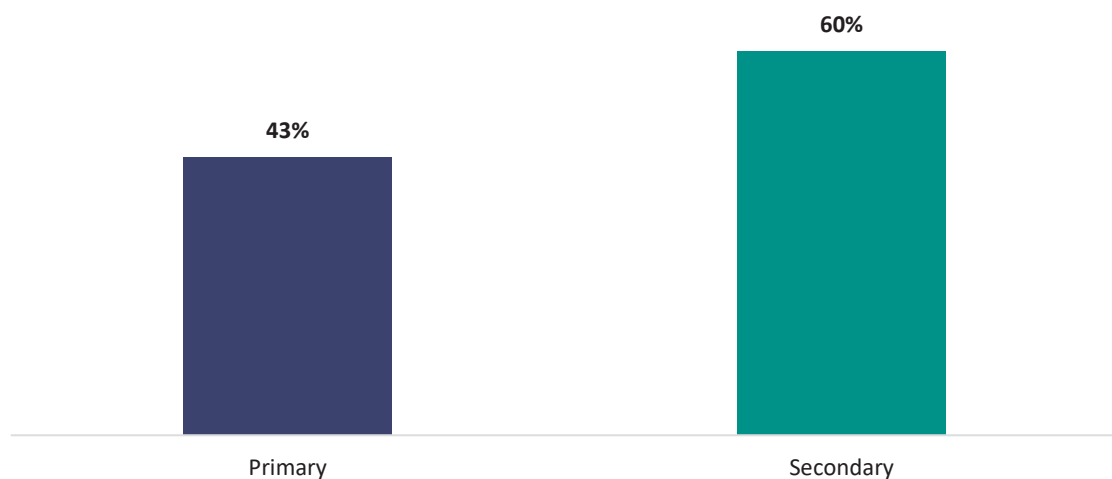
Other common reasons parents give for their child not always following the phone rules are that the policy isn't always consistently enforced (33 percent) and they want to stay connected with friends (26 percent). About two in ten parents say it's because their child use their phone to manage their wellbeing (19 percent) or because their child believes the policy is unfair (17 percent).

Figure 25: *Percent of parents reporting the main reasons their child does not always follow their school's phone rules*



There's a noticeable difference between primary and secondary schools in how many students use their phones to stay connected with family. According to parents, 43 percent of primary students who use their phones do so for this purpose, while in secondary schools, the figure rises to 60 percent.

Figure 26: *Percentage of parents reporting the reason their child does not always follow their school's phone rules is to stay connected with them or whānau, by school type*



Nearly three in ten (29 percent) parents are concerned about not being able to contact their child during the day. We heard that some parents are concerned about not being able support their child if an issue arises during school day, or about what might happen in the case of an emergency.

“Stressed child has to hide in toilets to make essential communication with parents.”

PARENT/WHĀNAU



We heard that while some parents understand prohibiting cell phone use can reduce distractions, other parents expect to be able to reach their children, even during class time.

“I feel like a burden to school staff if I need to make contact with my child from home. If afternoon plans change during the day or, if they left their wallet behind, can they manage without? Also, even if you do make contact with staff its not always guaranteed staff can get the message to your child as it depends on where your child is on campus.”

PARENT/WHĀNAU



Conclusion

Even though all schools have cell phone rules, there are challenges in students' compliance with the new rules, particularly in secondary schools. Only around half of secondary students comply all the time, and compliance is lower amongst senior secondary students and in schools in lower socio-economic communities.

We are also seeing that, if a student is breaking the rules, it is likely because their parents are in contact with them during school hours, particularly older students.

More work needs to be done to ensure that both parents and students understand and are complying with the new rules. Compliance is more difficult with older students, and additional mechanisms to ensure compliance are required (such as enforcement).



Part 5: What is the impact of 'Phones Away for the Day'?

We are already seeing positive impact as a result of 'Phones Away for the Day'. Promisingly, we are seeing improvement in student focus, achievement, and behaviour following the new rules. Some areas need additional focus to ensure this improvement continues. This part looks at the impact of 'Phones Away for the Day', and how it has impacted different groups of students, parents, and teachers.

What we looked at

This chapter sets out how 'Phones Away for the Day' has impacted:

- 1) Primary students
- 2) Secondary students
- 3) Different groups of students
- 4) Teachers
- 5) Parents and whānau.

What we found

There is encouraging evidence that secondary students are more focused on learning as a result of 'Phones Away for the Day'.

Around eight in ten secondary leaders (83 percent) and teachers (79 percent) report restricting cell phone use has improved their students' ability to focus on schoolwork. Fewer primary schools said focus in class had improved, as phones were used less in these settings.

Importantly, secondary teachers also report achievement has improved since phone rules were put in place.

The increased ability to focus in class appears to have contributed to learning, with around six in ten secondary teachers (61 percent) and leaders (58 percent) reporting student achievement has improved.

Behaviour and bullying have improved, meaning secondary teachers can spend more time teaching.

Over three-quarters of secondary teachers (77 percent) and leaders (78 percent) also say restricting cell phone use has improved student behaviour in the classroom. Over two-thirds of secondary leaders (69 percent) say that bullying has decreased. This means that teachers can spend more time on teaching and learning.

Encouragingly, more secondary schools in lower socio-economic communities have shown improved outcomes.

Even though students in schools in low socio-economic communities comply less with the rules, they have seen bigger shifts in their outcomes than their peers in schools in high socio-economic communities.

Almost seven in ten (69 percent) leaders in secondary schools in low socio-economic communities said achievement improved, compared to four in ten (42 percent) in high socio-economic communities. The same trend showed up in bullying (80 percent of schools in low socio-economic communities reported bullying had reduced, compared to 44 percent in high socio-economic communities), and students' mental health (83 percent of schools in low socio-economic communities reported improvement, compared to 56 percent).

The bigger gains could be because, according to PISA data, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds experience greater distractions from digital devices, and therefore have more room for improvement when those distractions are reduced or better managed.

Pacific students benefit the most. But students who are disabled or have learning needs experience some negative effects.

Pacific students report greater improvements across behaviour, attendance, focus, achievement, bullying, and mental health. ERO's recent report on attitudes to attendance found that Pacific students have shown some of the most positive attitudes towards being present and focused in school, and that this increased between 2022 and 2025.⁶³

In contrast, students who are disabled or have a learning need report worse outcomes – around a quarter reported declines in areas like mental health, bullying, and focus.

Six in ten (59 percent) parents have not changed how they communicate with their child while at school, and some remain worried about not being able to connect with their child during the day.

Almost six in ten (59 percent) parents report they have not adjusted how they communicate with their child while at school, which aligns with how many parents are still messaging their child during the day.

Still, nearly a third (31 percent) of secondary parents remain concerned about not being able to contact their child during the day. Parents expressed that they were concerned because they were unable to provide support to students when issues arose at school.

These findings are set out in more detail below.

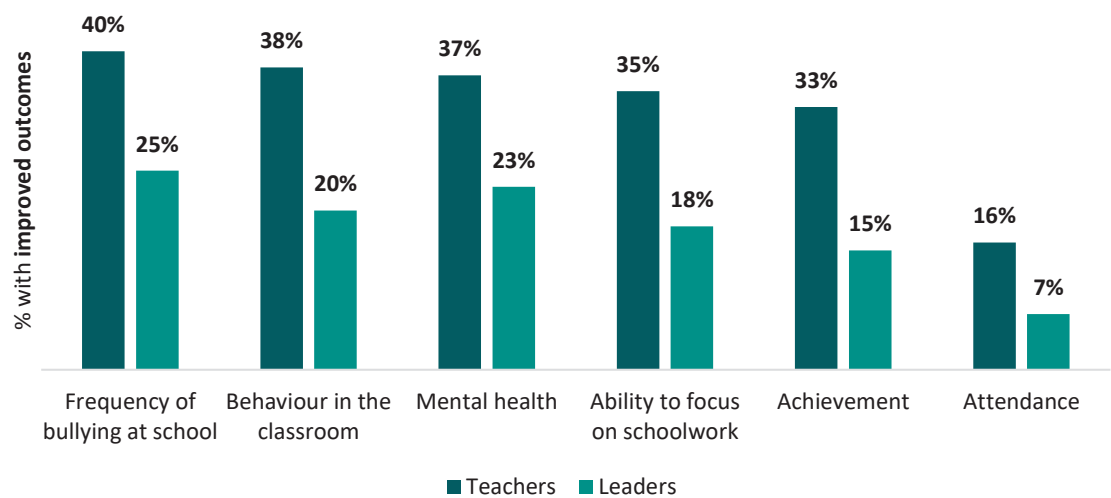
What has been the impact on primary students?

Over three in ten primary school teachers report improved achievement and four in ten report reduced bullying following the ‘Phones Away for the Day’ policy. But because more already had rules limiting phone use, the gains are more modest compared to secondary schools.

Compared to secondary schools, primary school leaders and teachers report less impact from restricting phone use in schools. As noted in Part 3, this is likely because fewer primary students own phones. Still, over three in ten teachers say student achievement (33 percent) and students’ ability to focus (35 percent) have improved.

Primary school leaders and teachers report that one of the most significant improvements from the phone rules has been a reduction in bullying, with four in ten (40 percent) teachers and one in four (25 percent) leaders saying bullying has decreased. Similar proportions of primary teachers say that student behaviour in the classroom (38 percent) and student mental health (37 percent) has also improved.

Figure 27: *Percentage of primary teachers and leaders who say restricting phone use at school has improved student outcomes*

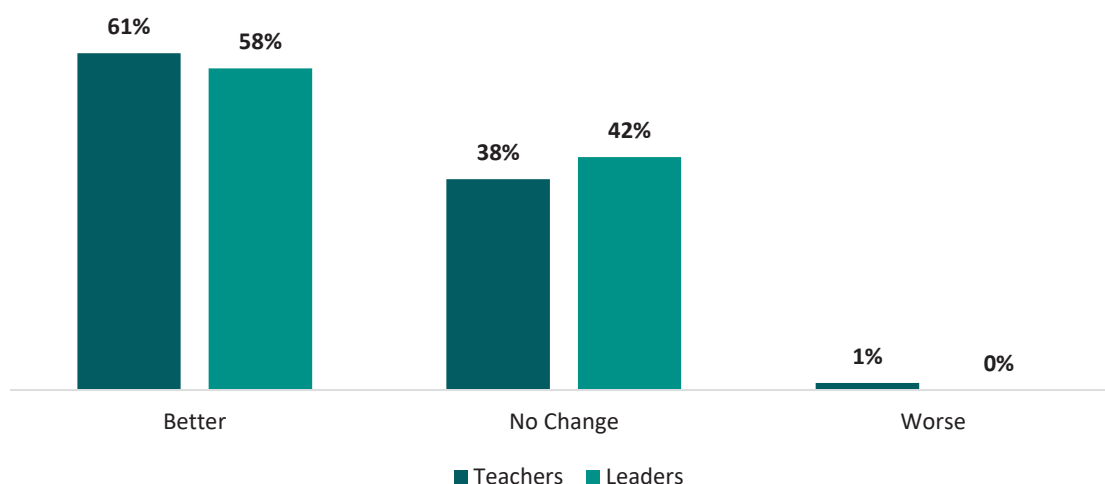


What has been the impact on secondary students?

Student achievement has improved in around six out of ten secondary schools because of ‘Phones Away for the Day’.

Around six in ten teachers (61 percent) and leaders (58 percent) say that cell phone restrictions have improved student achievement. This suggests that phone restrictions are contributing positively to learning outcomes for many students.

Figure 28: *Percentage of secondary teachers and leaders who say restricting phone use at school has improved, not changed, or worsened students' achievement*



We heard that the policy has supported some students in developing stronger connections with their teachers and building more effective learning habits. With reduced phone access, students are engaging more directly with teachers – asking questions and seeking clarification – rather than relying solely on online sources. This shift has helped deepen their understanding, making learning more relatable and tailored to their needs.

“I think I’ve gained a better understanding and like, a better connection with some teachers. I think I could speak for a lot of the students as well. Like a lot of the students who I used to see, that would just look up the answers to the question or what something means and not ask a question and understand it better, because Google can only explain so much... and a teacher can explain it in better words and shape it differently. A lot of these students are actually asking questions now, and asking questions that would help them better understand the concept in a way that Google can’t.”

SENIOR SECONDARY STUDENT

Parents, who are more removed from the day-to-day classroom, are about half as likely to say their child’s achievement has improved (26 percent), with almost all the rest (71 percent) saying the phone rules had no effect.

School board members and leaders noted they caution against attributing improvements in student achievement to the ‘Phones Away for the Day’ policy alone. They emphasised that it’s still early in the policy’s implementation, and other key factors – such as teaching quality and curriculum – also play a significant role in student learning.

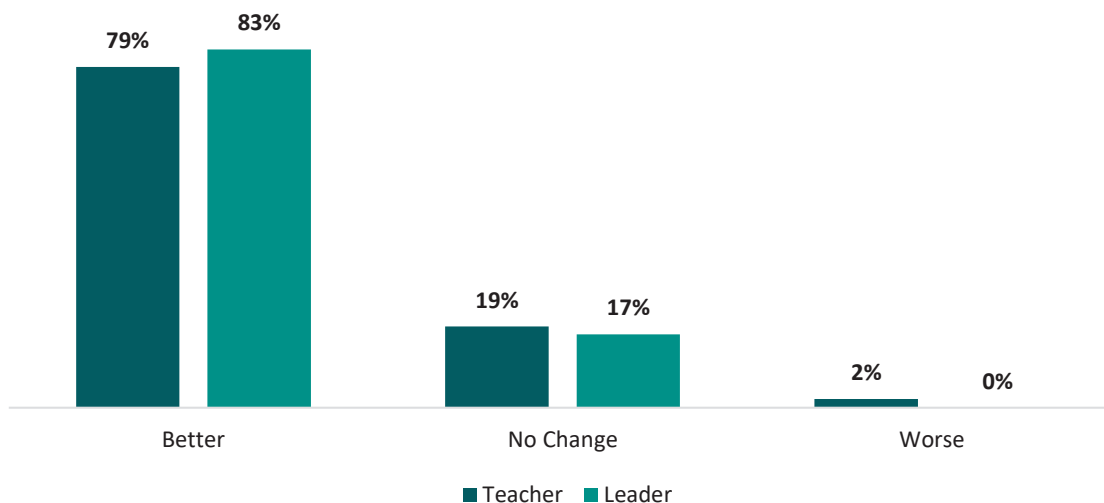
“So you’d have to say there’s not yet been a tangible link between significant improvement in achievement and a cell phone ban. I’d say it’s more about pedagogy and teachers [working hard] to get things right, than it is about phones.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL LEADER

Around eight in ten secondary teachers and leaders say that students’ focus in class has improved because of rules restricting phone use. This matters for achievement.

Nearly eight in ten (79 percent) secondary teachers say restricting cell phone use has improved their students’ ability to focus on schoolwork and just two in ten (19 percent) say there has been no change. Secondary leaders, too, noticed this change with over eight in ten (83 percent) agreeing that focus has improved. This is important for achievement because students who are focused in the lesson are more likely to remember and be able to apply what they have learned.

Figure 29: *Percentage of secondary teachers and leaders who say restricting phone use at school has improved, not changed, or worsened students’ ability to focus on schoolwork*



We heard that the policy has helped some students develop greater self-restraint and improved focus. Without access to their cell phones, many find themselves better able to prioritise and concentrate on schoolwork. Students also shared encouraging feedback, noting that the rule fostered a more focused classroom environment and reduced distractions – making it easier to stay engaged with learning tasks.

“I think so far [the rules are] positive. There’s no more of me looking at my phone in my pocket no more, neglecting my learning in the middle of classes.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENT

“...I love using my phone. It has everything on it. It’s efficient. But with this ban, it taught me some restraint and I would say that I am able to focus better because I can’t use it. I got to do my work now. It just taught me how to prioritise things better.”

SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENT

Among the few teachers and leaders who saw no change in student engagement or focus, they pointed to other sources of distraction beyond cell phones – such as smartwatches and laptops – which still allow students to stay connected with people outside the classroom. In addition, teachers also noted that students appear to have increasingly shorter attention spans, requiring them to teach in shorter blocks.

“They just use their laptops to message now instead of cell phone. Simply moved the problem.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER

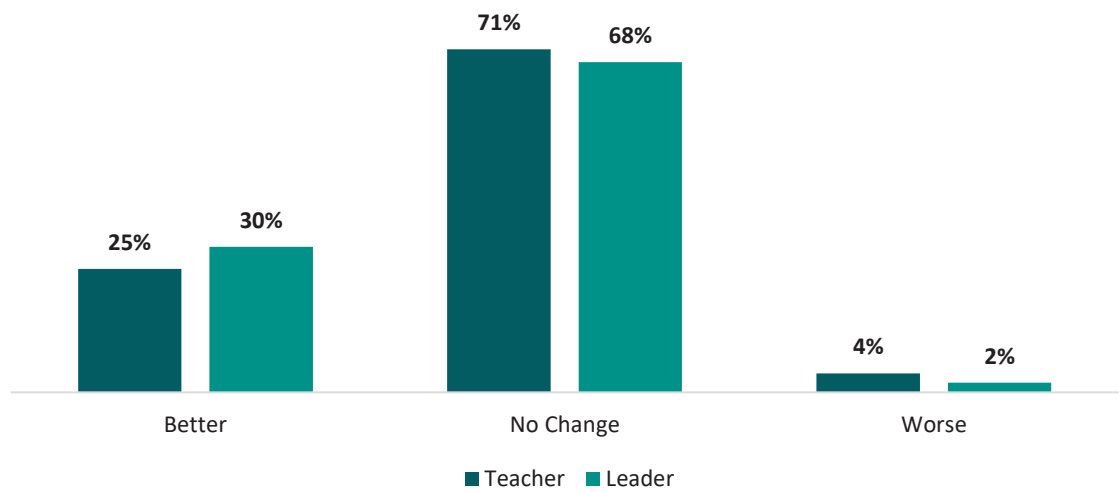
“[What makes it makes it difficult is...] the mirroring of phones to their computers. Computers/Laptops themselves can be a distraction. Most things they do on a phone can be done on their digital device.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL LEADER

Leaders report ‘Phones Away for the Day’ has increased attendance in three out of ten schools, while attendance has remained steady in most others.

While there was initial concern that the cell phone rules may hinder efforts to improve attendance and lead to students avoiding school more, our findings suggest otherwise for most schools. Three in ten (30 percent) secondary leaders and one in four (25 percent) secondary teachers say student attendance has improved because of the new phone rules, and very few teachers (4 percent) or leaders (2 percent) report attendance worsened.

Figure 30: *Percentage of secondary teachers and leaders who say ‘Phones Away for the Day’ has improved, not changed, or worsened students’ attendance*



For a small minority of students, the 'Phones Away for the Day' rule may have contributed to their truancy, as a form of protest or avoidance, or because of a lack alternative devices for learning.

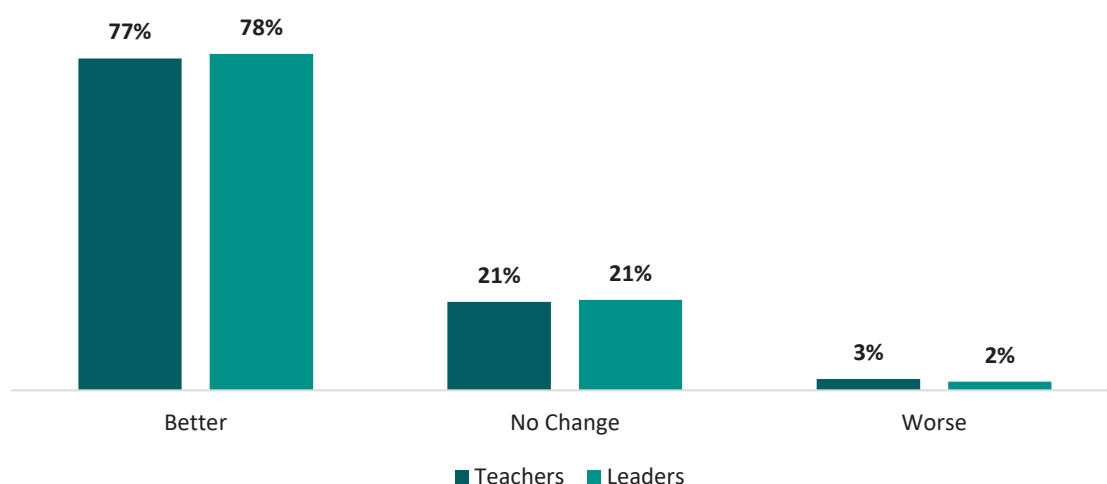
“I’ve been with some teachers where [they] can’t provide a device. They start a whole argument, how you’re not meant to be on your phone. So [other students] would rather just stay home and do their work than come to school and argue with their teacher to be able to do work.”

SENIOR SECONDARY STUDENT

Student behaviour in the classroom has improved in over three-quarters of secondary schools because of the cell phone rules. Teachers, leaders and board members say that students’ social interactions have also improved.

Over three-quarters of secondary teachers (77 percent) and leaders (78 percent) say restricting cell phone use has improved student behaviour in the classroom. Just two in ten (21 percent) secondary teachers and leaders say behaviour had not changed due to restricting cell phone use, and very few (three percent and two percent, respectively) said it had worsened.

Figure 31: *Percentage of secondary teachers and leaders who say restricting phone use at school has improved, not changed, or worsened student behaviour in the classroom*



Teachers, leaders, and board members all told us they have seen improvements in social interactions with the absence of phones during breaks. Teachers reported some improvements in social behaviour during breaks, with students more likely to engage in conversation, physical activity, and lunchtime sport instead of isolating on their phones.

“Lots more face-to-face conversation at break times.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL LEADER

“For a bulk of them who we would normally just see sitting against a wall on their phones, they’re actually out there talking and doing stuff. And even if it is our Year 11s and 12s, so they actually end up wrestling half the time. It’s still blowing off steam, which is more constructive than just standing there.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER

One secondary leader described the effort their school made to ensure that students had plenty of extracurricular activities to take part in during break times, to make them less likely to turn to their phones.

“One of the big things I did do is we spent a lot of money on making sure there was a lot of activities to do during break times and lunch times as well. Because obviously, without the cell phones, some of them don't have any idea what to do. So we increased the number of table tennis runs, table tennis tables and basketball hoops and, more activities, more things in the library, games and stuff for them to do... So that was to try and keep them busy... So we try to look at as many ways to keep the kids occupied and busy as well...”

SECONDARY SCHOOL LEADER

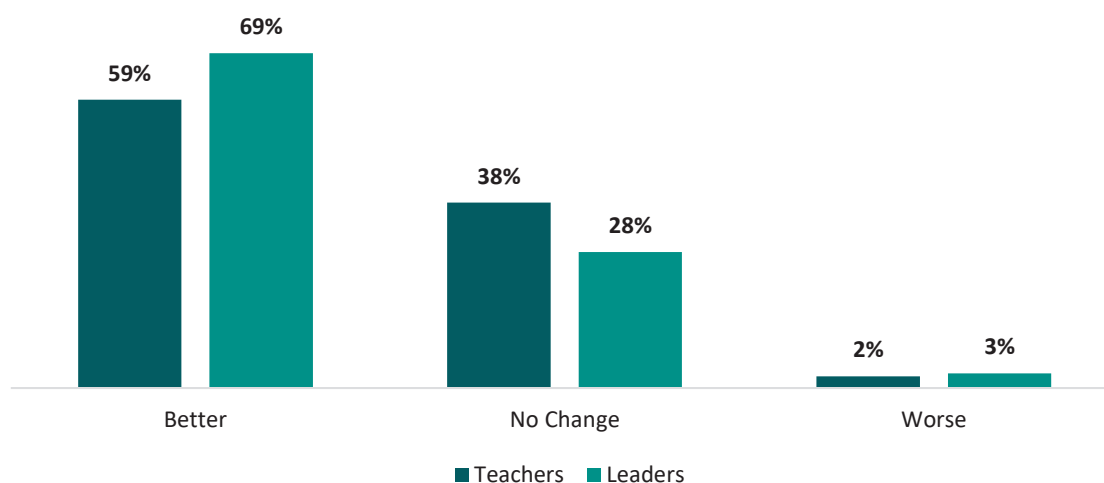
“We've got a lot more students playing ball in the courtyards. The sports fields are a lot more used now than they have been before.”

BOARD MEMBER (FROM A DIFFERENT SCHOOL)

Over two-thirds of secondary schools say that bullying has reduced because of phone restrictions.

Secondary schools have seen changes in student behaviours beyond the classroom. Over two-thirds (69 percent) of secondary leaders, who tend to have broader visibility of student misbehaviour, report the frequency of bullying at school has reduced because of restricting cell phone use. Just under three in ten (28 percent) say the amount of bullying hasn't changed and only three percent say bullying has gotten worse. Just under three in five (59 percent) teachers agree that bullying has reduced. This means that teachers can spend more time on teaching and learning.

Figure 32: *Percentage of secondary teachers and leaders who say restricting phone use at school reduced the frequency of bullying, had no change, or made the frequency of bullying worse*



Teachers told us that cell phone rules have reduced cyber-bullying during school hours, with students no longer able to film or record fights or other anti-social behaviour. This has led to an increase in positive social interactions and socialisation among students, contributing to positive behaviour during class time.

“No bullying via photos is good. More talking socially.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER

These views were echoed by school board members and leaders, who told us that limiting phone use during school hours has led to more face-to-face interaction, better peer engagement, and reduced bullying during school hours. They also told us that students seemed more socially present and communicative.

“This has been one of the best policies the school could have implemented. The cyber bullying was at an all-time high before the policy was put in place. Now students talk to each other, and our students play.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL LEADER

While some leaders said cyberbullying had dropped during school hours, others said they were still having to deal with incidents happening outside of school time. Leaders saw in-school cell phone rules as a protective factor, but not a cure-all, noting that bullying via social media would still occur outside school hours.

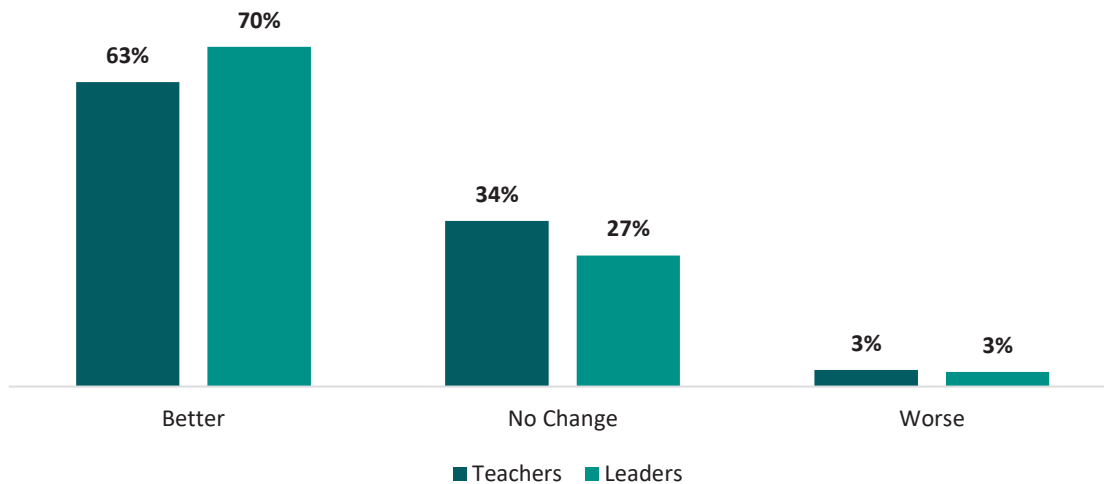
“We are concerned that the bullying just moves into leisure time at home. It's still going on. We still deal with fallouts but at least it can, in some circumstances, be a parent's responsibility. The fallout can still spill into school friendships.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL LEADER

Seven in ten secondary leaders say that students' mental health has improved.

Seven in ten (70 percent) secondary leaders and just over three in five (63 percent) secondary teachers report phone rules have had a positive impact on students' mental health. Slightly more than a quarter (27 percent) of secondary leaders and a third (34 percent) of secondary teachers say the phone rules made no difference, and just three percent say they made students' mental health worse. Secondary parents were less likely to say their child's mental health had improved because of the phone rules (25 percent) and most (68 percent) said it made no difference.

Figure 33: *Percentage of secondary teachers and leaders who say restricting phone use at school has improved, not changed, or worsened students' mental health at school*



Teachers told us how students' mental health has benefited from the increase in physical activity and lunchtime sport, compared to being isolated on their phones. Some students told us they felt better without constant exposure to social media.

Other students said they relied on phones for emotional regulation or to connect with their peers. Key informants, secondary leaders, and secondary students told us for those who experience anxiety or social isolation, phones can be seen as a source of safety.

“...I think the extremes have gotten worse. For example, the lonelier kids are getting lonelier. Especially students who don't connect to people in real life. They don't have that access to social media where that might be a safe space for them. And so now they're just kind of sitting in the corner on their laptop.”

SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENT

Another key concern was about students' digital habits outside school, particularly gaming and social media use affecting sleep and wellbeing.

“[We're] regularly hearing kids gaming till 11, 12 midnight, 1 in the morning.”

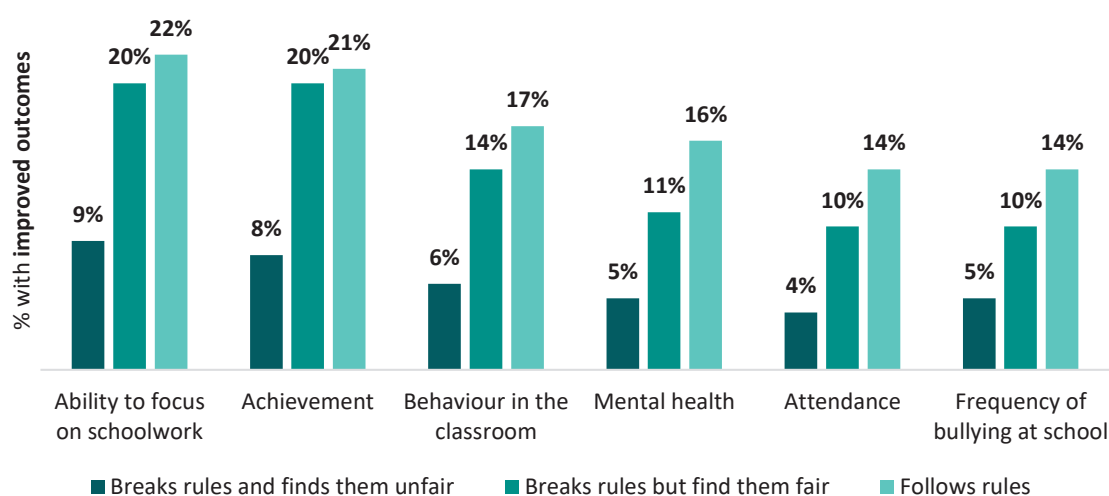
SECONDARY SCHOOL LEADER

Secondary students who follow the rules, or view them as fair, see greater positive impacts from restricting phone use.

When secondary students were asked about the impact of restricting phone use on their learning and well-being, most reported no impact or even negative effects. However, students' perceptions appear to be shaped by how consistently they follow the rules and whether they view the policy as fair.

Students who follow the 'Phones Away for the Day' rules tend to report more positive impacts on their schooling experience than those who don't. Among rule-following students, 22 percent said their ability to focus in class has improved, compared to just nine percent of students who break the rules and believe the policy is unfair. Even among those who break the rules, students who view the policy as fair tend to report greater improvements – suggesting that both behaviour and attitude towards the policy play a role in shaping outcomes.

Figure 34: *Percentage of students who say restricting phone use at school has improved their outcomes by whether the student follows the rules in class*



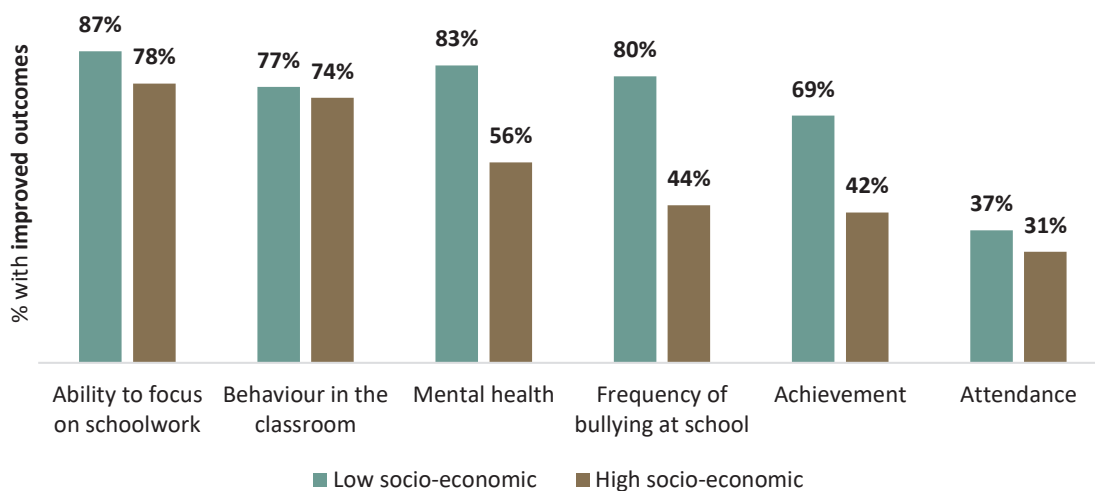
What have been the impacts for different groups of students?

Secondary schools in low socio-economic communities see bigger improvements in outcomes than schools in high socio-economic communities.

Student outcomes improved more in secondary schools in low socio-economic communities than in high ones. For example, almost seven in ten (69 percent) leaders in schools in low socio-economic communities say achievement improved, compared to four in ten (42 percent) of leaders in schools in high socio-economic communities.

Bullying (80 percent of schools in low socio-economic communities compared to 44 percent in high socio-economic communities), and students' mental health (83 percent compared to 56 percent) also improved more in schools in low socio-economic communities.

Figure 35: *Percentage of secondary leaders who say restricting phone use at school has improved student outcomes, by socio-economic status*



PISA 2022 found that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to be distracted by digital devices like cell phones during maths lessons – whether in every class, most classes, or some. While student compliance is weaker in schools in low socio-economic communities, the higher level of distraction may mean that there is greater room for improvement when those distractions are reduced or better managed.

ERO's recent report on how attitudes to attendance⁶⁴ are changing also found that students in low socio-economic communities have shown the greatest improvement in attitudes to attendance (between 2022 and 2025). This suggests that targeted efforts in these communities may be starting to shift behaviours.

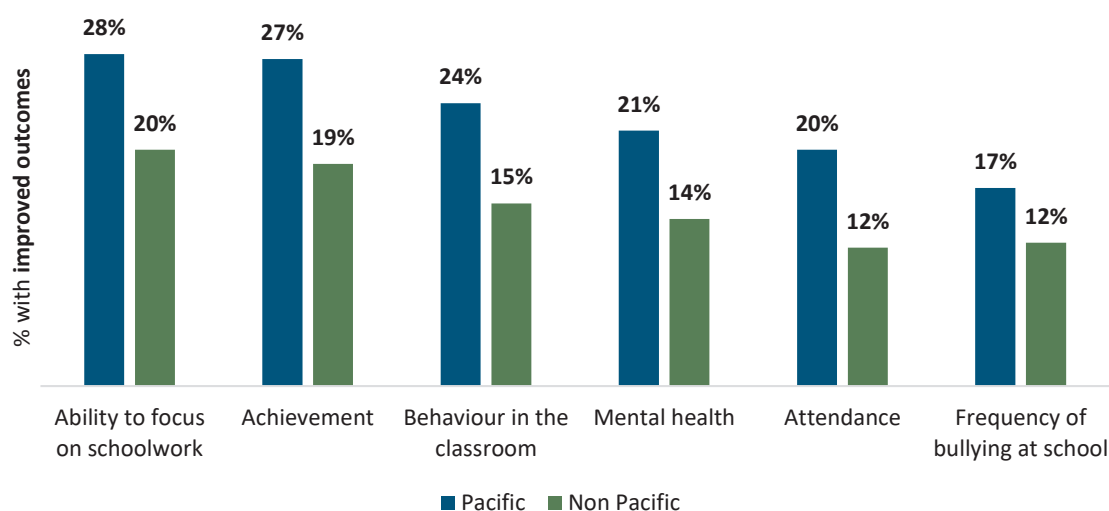
Pacific students report better outcomes than their peers, while disabled students or students with learning needs report worse outcomes.

More Pacific students have benefited from the 'Phones Away for the Day' rules than their peers. Compared to non-Pacific students, a greater proportion said their behaviour in the classroom, attendance, focus, achievement, experience with bullying, and mental health had all improved. For instance, over one-quarter said their achievement (27 percent) and ability to focus (28 percent) had improved compared to one-fifth of their peers (19 percent and 20 percent, respectively).

ERO's recent report on how attitudes to attendance are changing⁶⁵ found that Pacific students have shown some of the most positive attitudes towards school. This increased between 2022 and 2025, indicating they are increasingly engaging more positively with school and report a stronger commitment to staying present and focused in class.

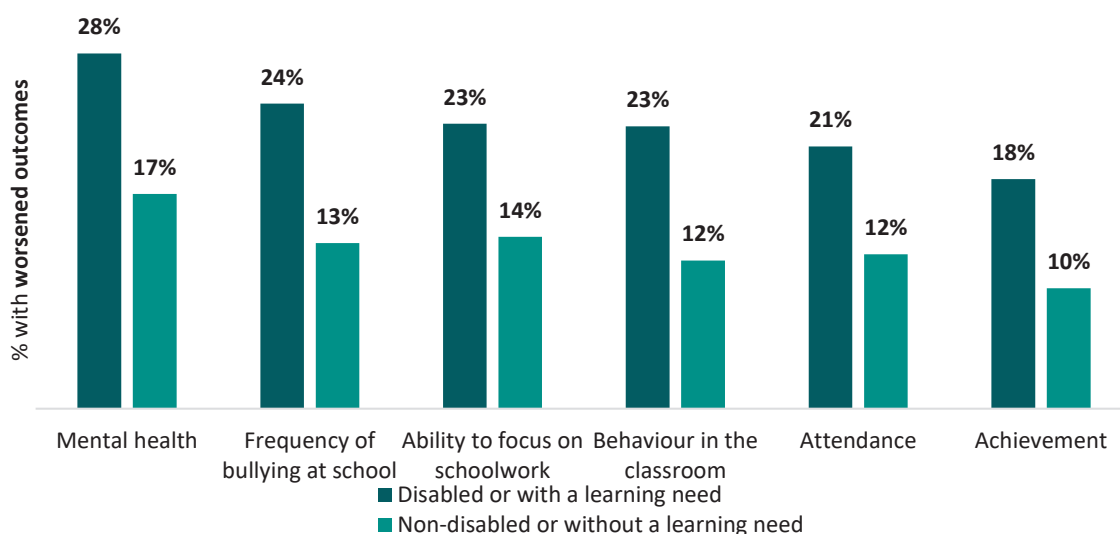
There were no other statistically significant differences across students of other ethnicities.

Figure 36: *Percentage of students who say restricting phone use at school has improved their outcomes, by Pacific identity*



Conversely, a higher number of students that identify as disabled or having learning needs had worse outcomes than their peers without disabilities or learning needs. Around a quarter said their outcomes had worsened because of the rules restricting cell phone use – including their mental health (28 percent), experience with bullying (24 percent), focus (23 percent), behaviour (23 percent), attendance (21 percent), and achievement (18 percent).

Figure 37: *Percentage of students who say restricting phone use at school has worsened student outcomes, by disability or learning need*



This aligns with findings from ERO's 2022 report on the experiences of disabled students⁶⁶ that almost a third (32 percent) of disabled learners do not feel supported to learn in a way that suits them. ERO also found that almost half (49 percent) of teachers lacked confidence in adapting the curriculum to make it responsive and meaningful for disabled students. As discussed in Part 3, inconsistent exemption practices across schools – particularly for health, disability, or learning needs – further compound these challenges. Some teachers were unaware of their school's exemption policies, or which students had them, potentially contributing to negative impacts on disabled students' focus and attendance.

“Due to disability being in the spectrum, my son needs his phone for anxiety support. And when he can't use the phone, his anxiety has flared up. This is a factor for his attendance to school. School does not help with this accommodation at all.”

PARENT/WHĀNAU

What has been the impact on teaching?

Secondary teachers benefit from fewer distractions, as students are more focused on learning in the classroom.

As mentioned in Part 1, in 2022 almost half of students were distracted by digital devices, including cell phones, in every or most of their maths lessons. With the introduction of 'Phones Away for the Day', this source of distraction has significantly decreased, making it easier for teachers to maintain students' attention and support learning. Around eight in ten secondary teachers (79 percent) and leaders (83 percent) say that students' focus in class has improved because of restricting cell phone use.

“Less time watching stuff on the internet and focusing more on my work.”

STUDENT

This shift has helped teachers create more productive learning environments, where time is spent more effectively on teaching and learning.

“...It allows students to be more focused and present, during class time and learning...”

BOARD MEMBER

Improved student behaviour means secondary teachers can spend more time teaching and less time managing discipline.

ERO's 2024 report 'Time to Focus: Behaviour in our Classrooms' found that when teachers spend a lot of time managing student behaviour, it takes away from their instruction time.⁶⁷ Distractions related to cell phones and other technology were key contributors to student misbehaviour. As previously covered, just over three-quarters of secondary teachers (77 percent) and leaders (78 percent) say restricting cell phone use has improved student behaviour in the classroom, meaning they can spend more time on teaching and learning.

Secondary schools have seen changes in student behaviours beyond the classroom. Over two in three school leaders report the rate of bullying at school has improved because of the new cell phone policies. Now, teachers can dedicate more time to teaching and learning rather than managing student behaviour.

“Reduced cyberbullying during school hours.”

TEACHER

TALIS 2024 found that maintaining discipline is a major source of stress for teachers and directly impacts their wellbeing and ability to meet lesson aims.⁶⁸ Reducing distractions – like those from phones – can therefore improve both teacher satisfaction and instructional effectiveness.

“As a board, we were thinking of our teachers' wellbeing... they've got a pretty hard job at the moment.”

BOARD MEMBER

The national ban has made it easier for teachers reduce distractions in the classroom.

Teachers consistently told us they welcome the 'Phones Away for the Day' policy, as it strengthens and legitimises their existing efforts to limit phone use and improve student focus. Before the mandate, many schools had local rules in place, but enforcement was often undermined by inconsistent support from parents or leadership. The national mandate also helps reduce conflict between teachers and students over phone use, and between schools and families over enforcement.

“We already had those expectations about phones being able to be used when teachers want them. But parents weren't backing us. I believe the mandate now helped us get the message across to parents. We already had our policy, I didn't have to change anything, but I just edited the policy and added a line – see the government mandate.”

LEADER

Teachers felt more confident enforcing rules with the backing of national policy and active school leadership who are accountable for implementing the rules. Teachers feel more supported and less isolated in their efforts, contributing to a more consistent and unified approach within and across schools.

“When you've got leadership not supporting it, you've got no chance.”

KEY INFORMANT

For the majority of teachers, the cell phone rule hasn't significantly changed how they teach but it has increased how much they can teach.

While two-thirds of primary teachers (67 percent) and over half of secondary teachers (55 percent) say the 'Phones Away for the Day' policy hasn't changed *how* they teach, many report it has changed *how much* they can teach. With fewer distractions, clearer expectations, and improved student behaviour, teachers are spending more time on instruction and less time managing phone-related issues.

“My teaching time has slightly improved because I'm not managing phone use in class.”

TEACHER

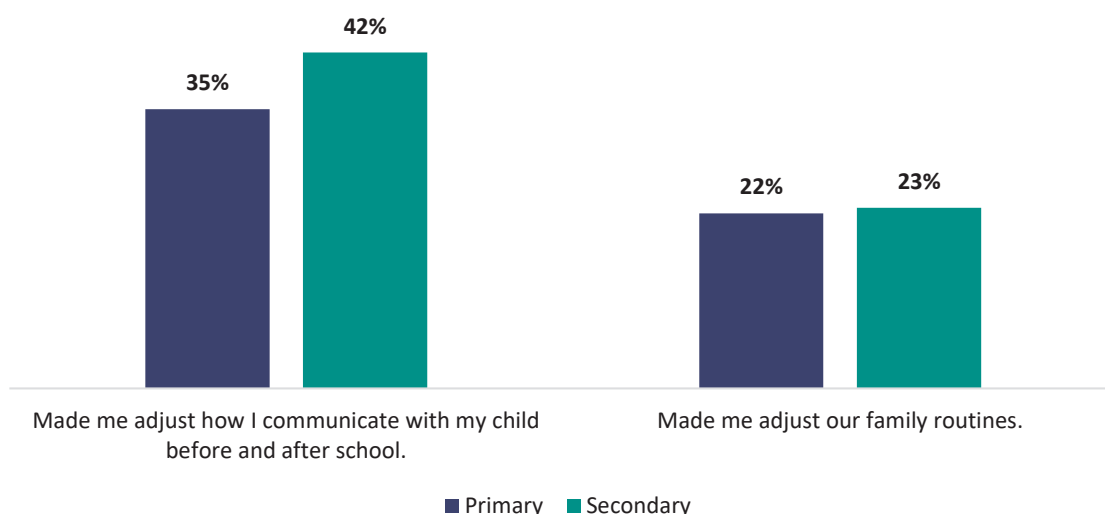
This shift is particularly valuable in secondary classrooms, where digital distractions were previously more prevalent.

What is the impact on parents?

Four in ten secondary parents have changed how they communicate with their child.

The impacts of restricting cell phone use extend beyond the classroom. Over four in ten (41 percent) secondary parents and over three in ten (35 percent) primary parents and whānau have changed how they communicate with their child. Almost one-quarter of parents and whānau in both primary (22 percent) and secondary (23 percent) schools say that the new rules required them to adjust their family routines.

Figure 38: *Percentage of parents and whānau reporting how 'Phones Away for the Day' has impacted them, by school type*



Overall, this means six in ten (59 percent) parents have changed how they communicate with their child at school.

In conversations with parents and whānau, we learned that many had shifted from phone communication (i.e., texting or calling) to emailing their students more frequently or waiting to reach their children during scheduled school breaks. The primary area of impact was the need for more advanced planning to coordinate school pick-ups and similar logistical challenges that families face.

“When she didn’t have a phone I struggled with comms, organising pickups, organised throughout the day. If she posted all [sport] trainings on Facebook page it would be fine.”

PARENT OF INTERMEDIATE STUDENT

“I am a single parent living rurally and working full-time, often from 7am to 7pm, seven days a week. My daughter and I rely on her mobile phone for essential communication throughout the day. At times, I need to notify her of changes to transport arrangements, top up her lunch card, or update her on urgent family matters...”

PARENT/WHĀNAU

Some parents and whānau shared that schools help facilitate communication by allowing students to call from the office or by relaying urgent messages through staff.

“If it’s urgent I contact the student center who relays the information.”

PARENT/WHĀNAU

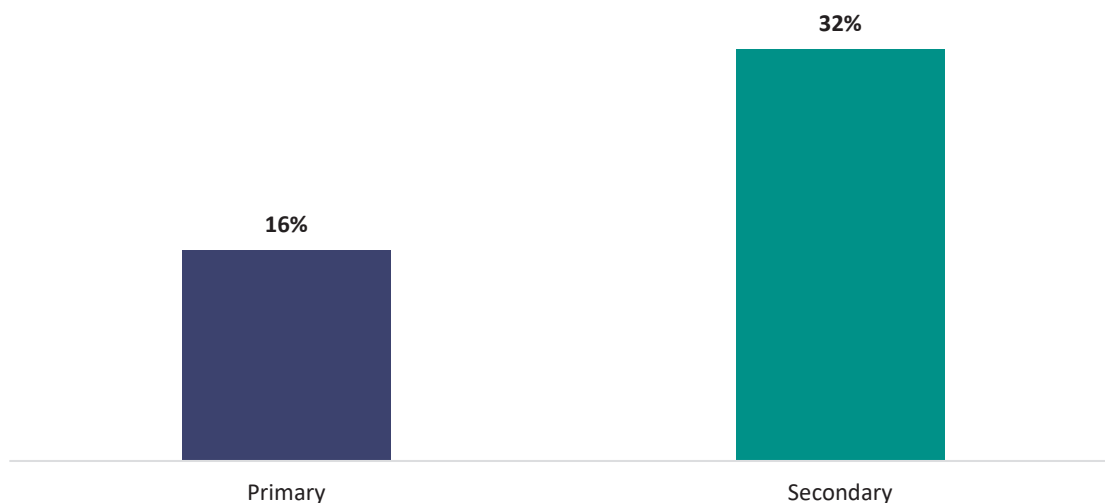
“There is a system whereby parents ring the school, and messages get sent to the child.”

PARENT/WHĀNAU

It has made some parents concerned. They are worried about not being able to contact their child during the school day, the lack of student autonomy, and students’ ability to be distracted by other devices.

Almost one-third (32 percent) of secondary parents and whānau are concerned about not being able to reach their children during the day. This is twice as many as parents and whānau of primary students (16 percent).

Figure 39: *Percentage of parents and whānau reporting 'Phones Away for the Day' has made them feel concerned about not being able to contact their child during the day, by school type*



Parents and whānau expressed that they were concerned because they were unable to provide support to students when issues arose at school.

“My daughter in particular has high anxiety and often needs to contact me for escalation. My son is incredibly sensitive and socially awkward, when he feels alone he wants the ability to contact me to talk. This rule is impacting communication between parents and their children when their children need them the most for guidance on how to navigate social or emotional challenges.”

PARENT/WHĀNAU

Other areas of concern to parents and whānau were issues of inconsistent implementation, over-policing and lack of autonomy for older students, and the persistent need for broader digital boundaries with other devices such as laptops.

“I think in the high school environment... there's almost a there's an element of patronising nature about it by that, particularly by the upper age group. My son's going to be, you know, going off to university next year and independent and this [means he'll be going] from one extreme to another.”

PARENT/WHĀNAU OF SECONDARY STUDENT

Conclusion

Even with only around half of secondary students complying, the impact of 'Phones Away for the Day' is already delivering strong results. Teachers report that students are more engaged and focused in class – especially in secondary schools. Just over six in ten secondary teachers say student achievement has improved since the rules were introduced. Classroom behaviour has also improved, with teachers and school leaders noting positive effects on students' mental health and a reduction in bullying.

These findings show that reducing digital distractions supports both learning and wellbeing, with the greatest benefits seen in schools facing the biggest challenges. With higher compliance and further steps to reduce other classroom distractions, the potential for even greater impact is clear.





Part 6: What works and what gets in the way of 'Phones Away for the Day'?

While 'Phones Away for the Day' is having a positive impact, there is some variation in how it is playing out in schools. There are actions that schools can take to support student compliance and student outcomes, and some of these actions are being shown to be more effective than others. In this part, we look at what works well in schools applying 'Phones Away for the Day' rules, and what challenges are getting in the way.

What we looked at

This chapter sets out:

- 1) What approaches to rules work
- 2) What approaches to enforcement work
- 3) What approaches to consequences work
- 4) What supports schools to take these actions
- 5) What gets in the way of 'Phones Away for the Day'.

What we found

Clear, consistent rules and strong, consistent enforcement drives compliance.

Primary students are more than twice as likely (2.2 times) to be compliant when rules are consistent across year levels. When rules are consistently enforced within a school, compliance increases. Secondary teachers and leaders are twice as likely (2.0 times) to say their students follow the rules consistently when rules are enforced to a great extent. Secondary teachers and leaders are over one and a half times as likely (1.6 times) to report a high level of student compliance when students understand the purpose of the rules.

When secondary teachers actively support and enforce phone rules, outcomes improve.

Secondary schools with teacher support are more than twice as likely (2.2 times) to see improved focus in the classroom, and over one and a half times as likely (1.7 times) to see improved achievement. Strong teacher enforcement is also key to improving student outcomes – student behaviour in the classroom (1.8 times) and bullying (1.9 times) improve.

Tougher consequences like parent notification and confiscating phones increases compliance.

Parent notification increases the likelihood (1.5 times) of secondary students' compliance. Confiscating phones means schools are around twice as likely to report that behaviour (2.0 times), focus (2.1 times) and achievement (1.9 times) have improved.

Simply telling students to put phones away reduces compliance.

Simply telling Year 12-13 students to put phones away halves (0.5 times) their compliance.

Implementing a phone ban is easier under the law, but challenges like student and parent resistance, wearable devices, and inconsistent exemption use remain in secondary schools.

In both primary and secondary schools, leaders, teachers, and key informants told us that the law has helped schools enforce phone rules, even if they already had phone rules, because it helped them respond to parent and whānau, and student concerns and resistance.

However, we also heard that barriers still exist. Most secondary teachers say that the difficulty in having to monitor students and enforce the rules at all times (72 percent), student resistance (61 percent), and wearable devices (50 percent) make it difficult to implement phone rules. Three in ten (31 percent) secondary teachers say parent resistance is also a barrier.

There is also inconsistent understanding of rules, particularly around exemptions – one in six (16 percent) secondary teachers find the exemption criteria to be a barrier to implementing the rules.

These findings are set out in more detail below.

What approaches to rules work?

In this section we explore how different approaches to implementing 'Phones Away for the Day' rules increase student compliance and outcomes.

When secondary students understand the purpose of the rules, and rules in primary are consistent across year levels, more students comply with them.

Nearly half of secondary leaders (48 percent) and teachers (42 percent) say that students understanding the purpose of the 'Phones Away for the Day' policy helps them to implement the rules to a 'great extent'. We found that in these schools, where secondary students understood the purpose of the rules, leaders and teachers were over one and a half times (1.6 times) as likely to report a high level of compliance – that all or almost all students follow the rules consistently.

For students in Years 7-8, having consistent rules across year levels was important, with students in these schools being more than twice as likely (2.2 times) to be compliant. Over three-quarters (77 percent) of primary leaders and two-thirds (67 percent) of primary teachers report consistent rules as an enabler.

Some teachers mentioned that having clear expectations and consistent rules, such as issuing a single reminder before taking action, can help reinforce boundaries and support student understanding.

“...I think the other thing is clear expectations. So there are some teachers that have real clear and gone [the phone is confiscated straight away], you know, I’ve done the one reminder and then it goes after that.”

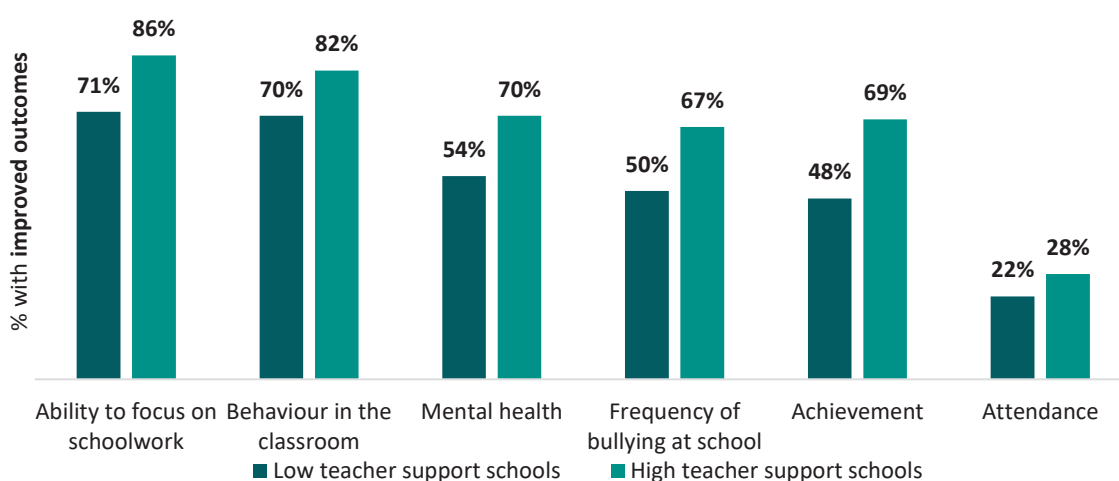
SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER

In secondary schools, when teachers support the rules, student achievement, ability to focus on schoolwork, and classroom behaviour all improve, and bullying reduces.

When secondary teachers support the ‘Phones Away for the Day’ policy to a ‘great extent’, schools are over twice as likely (2.2 times) to see improvements in students’ ability to focus on schoolwork. Similarly, with teachers’ support, they are over one and a half times more likely (1.7 times) to report that student achievement has improved.

Secondary schools where teachers strongly support the phone policy see more positive outcomes than schools with less teacher support. For instance, just over two-thirds (69 percent) of secondary schools whose teachers support the policy to a ‘great extent’ say student achievement improved, compared with almost a half (48 percent) of secondary schools whose teachers support the policy ‘somewhat’, or ‘not at all’. Likewise, bullying has reduced in two-thirds (67 percent) of schools where teachers strongly support the policy, compared to just half (50 percent) of schools where teachers show less support.

Figure 40: *Percentage of secondary leaders and teachers that report outcomes have improved by whether their teachers support the policy ‘to a great extent’*



We also saw that the use of some exemptions was linked to improved student outcomes. When schools had an exception for supporting students with learning needs, they were almost twice as likely (1.9 times) to see behaviour improve.

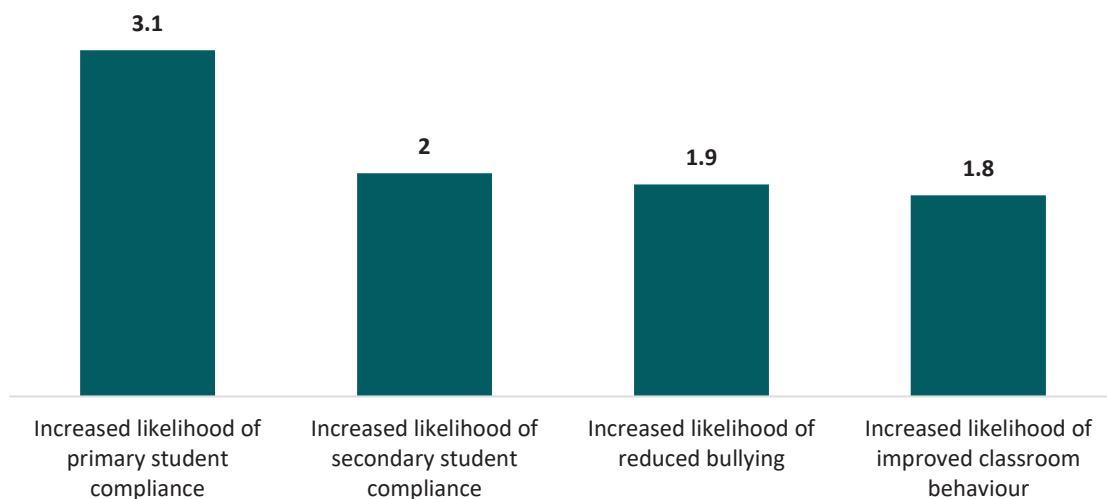
“My child uses headphones and music at a low level to learn. With ADHD this has proven to be effective. His phone allows him to use music where necessary.”

PARENT/WHĀNAU

What approaches to enforcement work?

In this section we explore how enforcement of ‘Phones Away for the Day’ increases student compliance and outcomes. In summary, when schools strictly monitor and enforce their rules, primary students are three times more likely to be consistently compliant, and secondary students are twice as likely. Consistent enforcement also is linked to better behavioural outcomes – the likelihood of reduced bullying and improved classroom behaviour almost doubles (1.9 times and 1.8 times, respectively).

Figure 41: *Impact of rules being monitored and enforced ‘to a great extent’ on compliance and outcomes, compared to enforcing the rules ‘somewhat’, ‘very little’, or ‘not at all’*

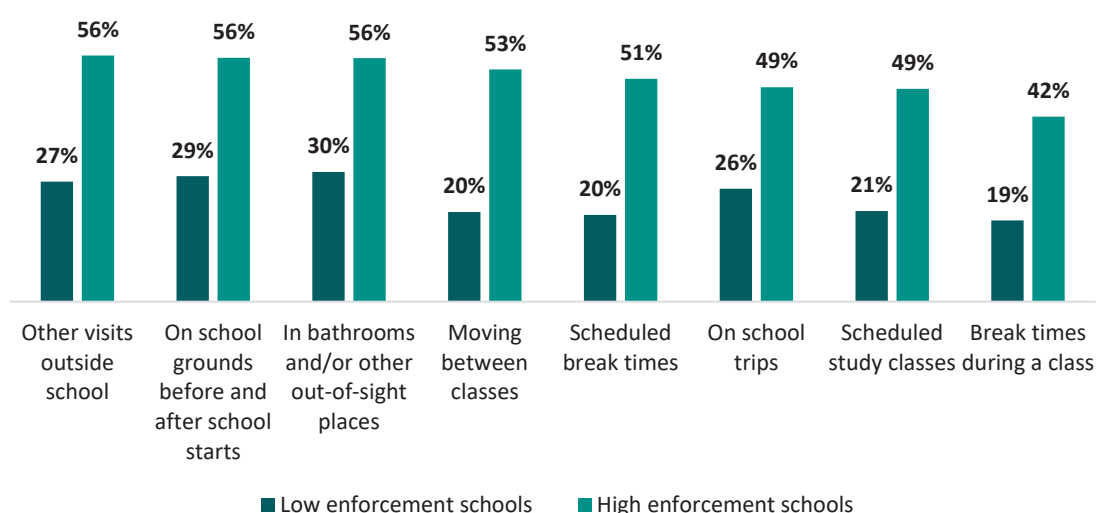


Secondary schools with strong monitoring and enforcement report twice the level of compliance compared to those with low enforcement.

In secondary schools with strict monitoring and enforcement of the rules, students are twice as likely (2 times) to consistently follow the rules compared to schools with low enforcement. In primary schools, strict enforcement leads to over three times (3.1 times) higher compliance.

Schools were asked about how strictly they enforce their rules across a range of spaces throughout the school day. We found that enforcement in both visible and less visible spaces made a difference. For instance, almost six in ten secondary schools (56 percent) report high compliance from senior students when rules were enforced in bathrooms or other out-of-sight places, compared to only three in ten (30 percent) schools with low enforcement in those areas. This was similar to moving between classes (53 percent compared to 20 percent) and scheduled break times (51 percent compared to 20 percent).

Figure 42: *Percentage of schools where senior secondary students consistently follow the rules by whether rules are enforced 'to a great extent' in their schools*



We heard from our key informants that schools with strong foundational policies around behaviour or attendance, tended to have strong uptake and enforcement of 'Phone Away for the Day' policy. Similarly, we heard that strong leadership drives effective implementation, with strategic planning to mitigate 'non-compliance' in out-of-sight places.

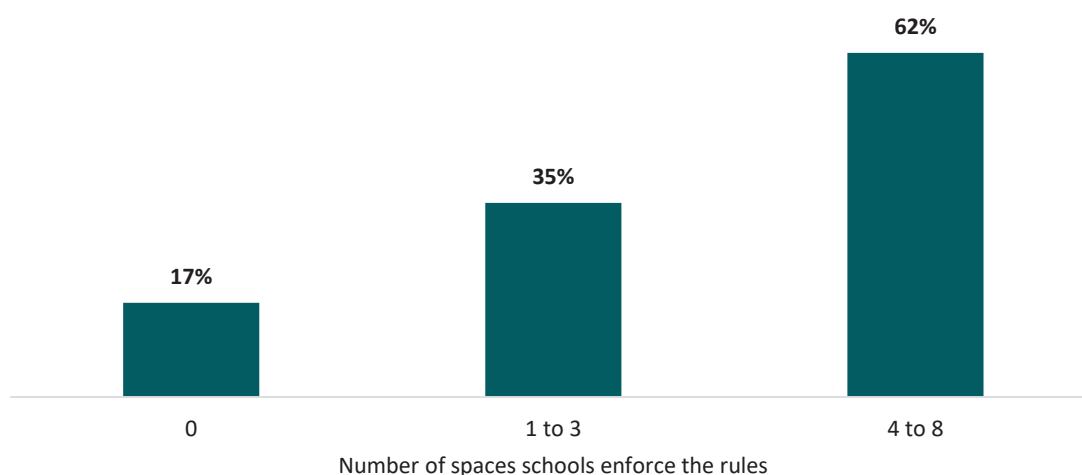
“I had a particular school where leadership have really led from the get-go and a school where in breaks, lunch, in those danger periods I guess, for taking your phone out, they strategically organised sport and activities and clubs and really got behind it... that was led by leadership and pretty organised stuff.”

KEY INFORMANT

Secondary schools that enforce rules in more spaces in school have higher student compliance than those who enforce rules in fewer spaces.

Enforcing the rules across more spaces results in higher compliance from secondary students. For instance, just over a third (35 percent) of secondary schools that enforce the rules in less than half of places have high compliance from senior students. In contrast, over six in ten (62 percent) of schools that enforce rules across four or more spaces – such as classrooms, hallways, school trips, bathrooms, and break times – see higher compliance from secondary students.

Figure 43: *Percentage of secondary schools reporting high student compliance by the number of spaces they enforce the rules 'to a great extent'*



We also found consistency of enforcement across teachers within the same school is a key factor in student compliance. In particular, the proportion of teachers who are relaxed about enforcing the 'Phones Away for the Day' rules during break times and class periods was the strongest predictor of non-compliance among Year 12-13 students. This was more predictive than the proportion of teachers who enforce the rules strictly. This suggests that inconsistent enforcement may undermine overall compliance more than the absence of strict enforcement.

“Some teachers let students use their phones when the students don't have [devices]. This is very frustrating for the teachers who tell students they can't use their phones as it creates a situation where teachers are pitted against each other. Some teachers are 'nice', 'cool' or 'chill' and let student use their phones, makes those that don't let them seem too strict.”

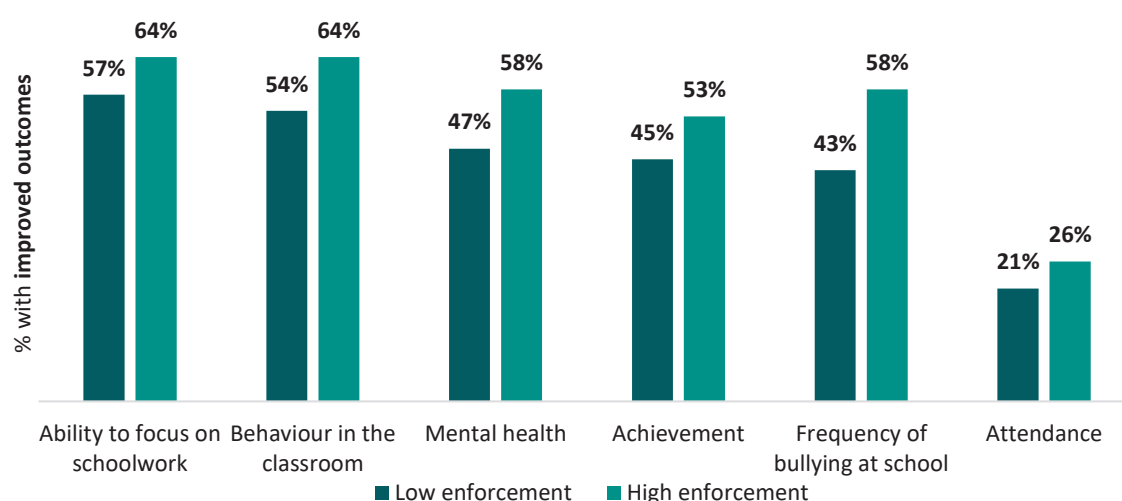
TEACHER

Mental health and student behaviour in the classroom improves, and bullying reduces, when there is consistent enforcement of the rules.

Consistent rule enforcement not only boosts student compliance, but it also links to better student outcomes. When secondary schools enforce the rules 'to a great extent', they are more almost twice as likely to see improvements in student behaviour in the classroom (1.8 times) and reduced bullying (1.9 times).

A greater proportion of schools that highly enforce the rules see improved behaviour, mental health, and reduced bullying, compared to schools that have low levels of enforcement. For instance, 58 percent of high enforcement schools see improved mental health, compared to just 47 percent of low enforcement schools.

Figure 44: *Percentage of secondary leaders and teachers that report outcomes have improved by whether rules are enforced 'to a great extent'*



Some teachers and leaders noted that having consistent and enforced phone policy reduced arguments and distractions, allowing for better teaching and learning.

“Less confrontation in the classroom, because students KNOW that they are not allowed to have their phone out. I still have to give many reminders, but the general attitude is a lot more positive.”

TEACHER

We also heard from students that inconsistent rule enforcement makes it difficult for students to know what to expect and can encourage them to test boundaries.

What approaches to consequences work?

In this section we explore which types of consequences for secondary students increase student compliance and student outcomes. In primary schools, no single consequence stood out as having a greater impact on student compliance. This may be because rule-following is already high in this setting.

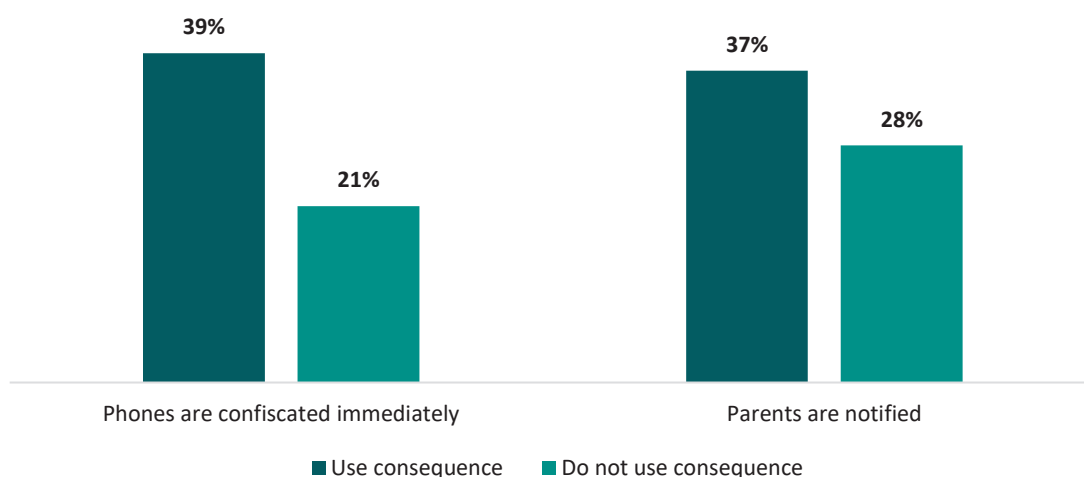
Applying firm and consistent consequences – such as notifying parents – leads to higher compliance among secondary students.

Just under two-thirds (65 percent) of secondary leaders and just over a half (55 percent) of secondary teachers say that consistently applied consequences helps them. In these schools, leaders and teachers were almost twice as likely (1.8 times) to report high compliance from secondary students.

Secondary schools that respond to rule-breaking with stronger consequences appear to have higher levels of compliance. For instance, when schools notify parents when a student is breaking the rules, they are one and a half times more likely (1.5 times) to have high compliance.

Secondary schools that confiscate phones also have higher compliance from senior secondary students – almost four in ten (39 percent) schools that confiscate students' phones have high compliance from Year 12-13 students, compared to two in ten (21 percent) schools that do not.

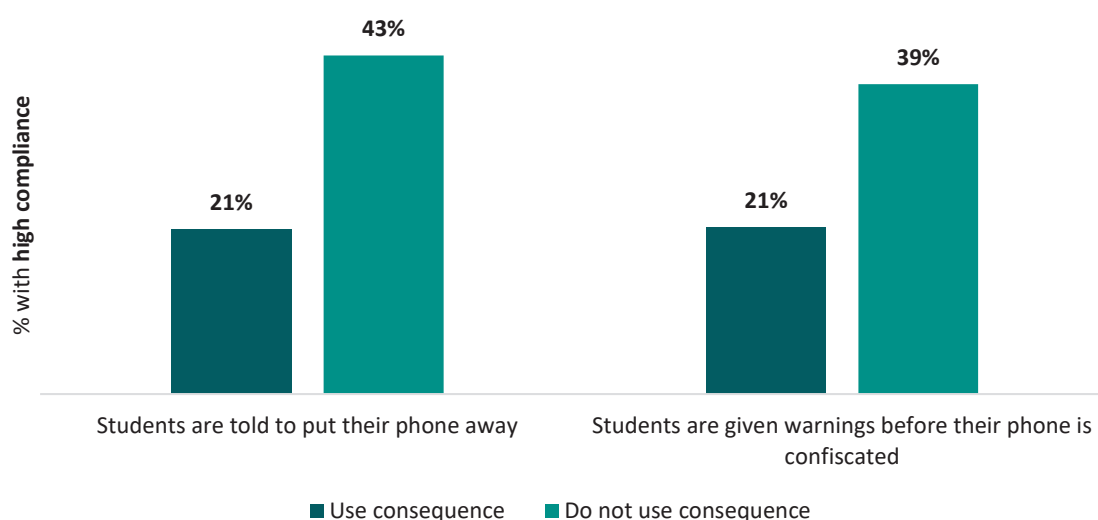
Figure 45: *Percentage of secondary teachers and leaders reporting high student compliance from Year 12-13 students by whether they use the consequence or not*



Telling senior students to put their phones away halves their likelihood of compliance.

A softer approach to rule-breaking appears to be less effective for senior students and can make it worse. Regardless of other consequences used, when secondary schools tell senior students to put away their phone in response to rule-breaking, it halves (0.5 times) the compliance of Year 12-13 students. Schools that issue warnings or ask students to put phones away without confiscation see significantly lower compliance – almost half as many senior students follow the rules.

Figure 46: *Percentage of secondary teachers and leaders reporting high student compliance from Year 12-13 students by whether they use the consequence or not*



An older secondary student described the reverse psychology of how some students will wilfully rebel against the rule, just because they were told to follow it.

“...Like an instinct to always like reverse psychology, everything that adults tell you to do. So it's like if they suddenly banned like bananas and we're really [like] bananas. Everyone would be eating bananas secretly, you know? Yeah, because they're teenagers.”

SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENT

Secondary teachers consistently expressed that verbal consequences trigger conflict or disengagement, especially among senior students, as they may be attached to their phones and often resist handing them over. Particularly, teachers are concerned about jeopardising their relationship with the student.

“Teachers have more weight when asking students to put phones away during class but having to tell them to put phones away during break times negatively impacts relationship with students.”

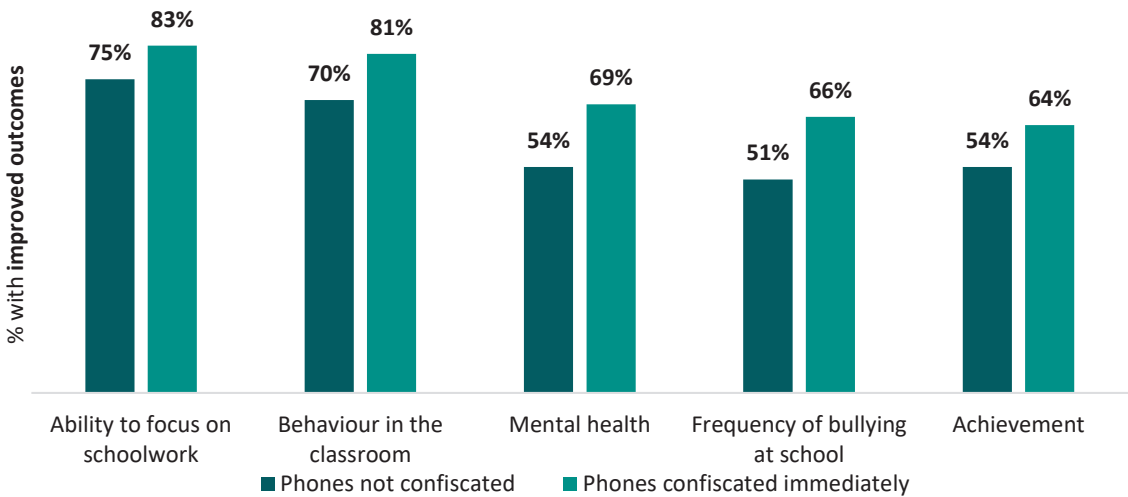
TEACHER

Immediately confiscating phones for rule-breaking results in better behaviour, focus, and achievement from students.

Secondary schools that immediately confiscate phones as a consequence not only improve compliance, but are also almost twice as likely to report that behaviour (2.0 times), focus (2.1 times) and achievement (1.9 times) improve.

Compared to secondary schools that don't confiscate phones immediately, those that do see more improvement in all outcomes except for attendance. For instance, just under two-thirds (66 percent) of secondary schools who confiscate phones immediately say the frequency of bullying has improved, compared with just over half (51 percent) of secondary schools who do not confiscate phones.

Figure 47: *Percentage of secondary schools that report outcomes have improved by whether phones are confiscated immediately in response to rule-breaking*



What supports schools to take these actions?

We heard that the law has made it easier for schools to put in place and enforce their rules on phone use in schools, even if they were already restricting phone use.

In both primary and secondary schools, leaders, teachers, and key informants told us that the government mandate strengthened their enforcement of the 'Phones Away for the Day' policy, even if they already had phone rules. It helped them to respond to parent concerns and resistance.

“Our parents are funny about it. Especially mid- and post- Covid, there was a lot of resistance to anybody being told to do anything or to comply with anything. So this actually little piece of legislation or whatever we call it was an absolute blessing for us because it took it out of my hands.”

PRIMARY SCHOOL LEADER

Teachers shared they felt more empowered to regulate device use, especially when enforcement had previously been difficult.

“Made the school support teachers with actual consequences and actually having to have a policy. Teachers felt supported by the government on this.”

TEACHER

Peer and parent support, consistent rules and consequences, and student buy-in helps teachers and leaders take action.

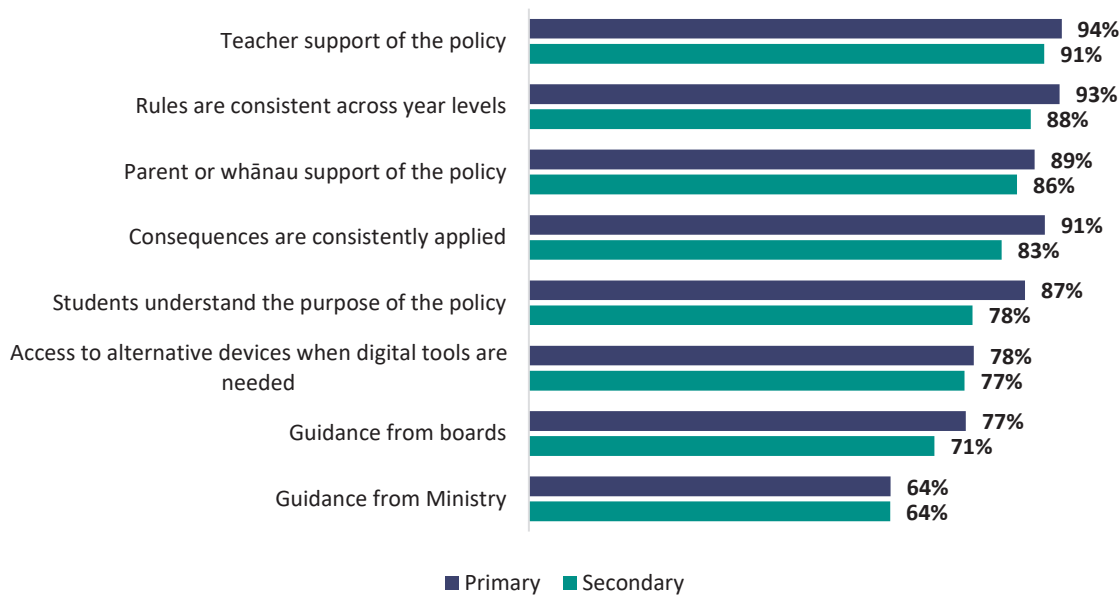
It was discussed earlier that teacher, student, and parent support, and consistent rules and consequences, result in greater compliance and outcomes. When teachers were asked what helps them implement phone rules, they agreed.

Teachers say peer and parent support help make 'Phones Away for the Day' work. Most primary and secondary teachers say peer support (94 percent and 91 percent, respectively) and parent support (89 percent and 86 percent, respectively) helps them implement the rules.

Consistency matters too. Around nine in ten primary teachers (93 percent) and secondary teachers (88 percent) report that consistent rules across year levels helps. Having consistent consequences are seen as helpful by most primary (91 percent) and secondary (83 percent) teachers.

Having students understand the 'why' behind the rules also makes a difference. This was seen as helpful by almost nine out of ten (87 percent) primary schools and almost eight out of ten (78 percent) secondary schools.

Figure 48: *Percentage of teachers reporting what helps them to implement phones away for the day ‘somewhat’ or ‘to a great extent’, by school type*



Leaders, teachers, students, and key informants told us that clear, consistently communicated rules are essential for effective implementation of the policy. This, paired with stepped consequences, support student understanding and compliance. Trust-based approaches and relational enforcement can help build self-regulation and co-operation, especially with older students.

“My kids know that when I take the phone away, that I only take it for the period, and I will give it back to them at the end of the period. And I think that’s, again, a relational thing where they know that I have a relationship with them.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER

What gets in the way of ‘Phones Away for the Day’?

The biggest barriers for schools are not being able to always monitor students, resistance from students and parents, and wearable devices.

As discussed in Part 4, monitoring students remains one of the biggest challenges for schools implementing the policy. More than twice as many secondary teachers (72 percent) as primary teachers (31 percent) say it’s hard to monitor students all the time. Secondary schools that have difficulty monitoring students were also half as likely to have their students follow the rules consistently. We heard from teachers that it can be very difficult to monitor student phone use at break times, as teachers are expected to supervise students over a large area.

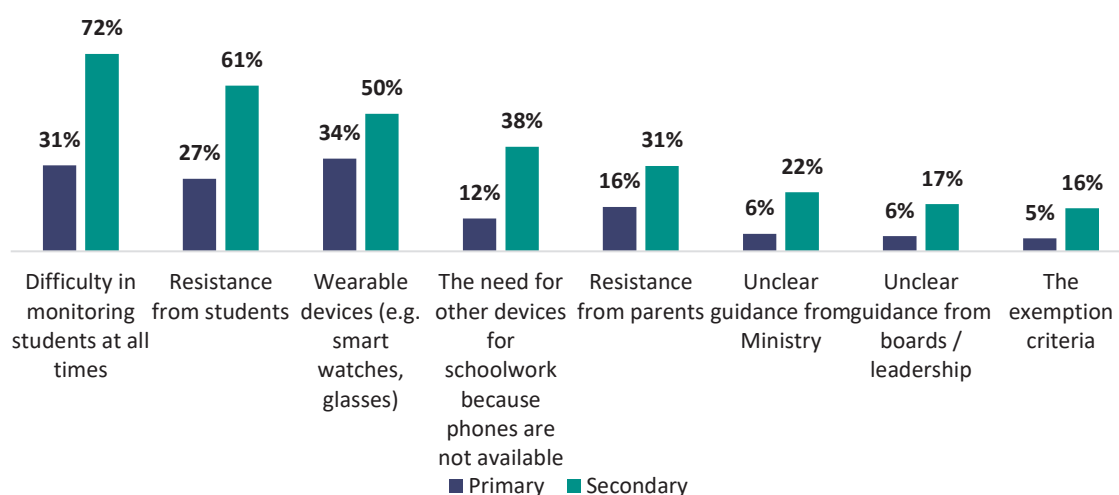
“It’s incredibly hard to enforce a policy across a huge campus. It’s not possible. There’s not enough staff members to do it. There’s not enough places. And it’s speaking to the policy itself, which is when you’re supposed to see the phone and then take it, log it, and then take it back to the office. It’s not, you know, logistically possible to do.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER

Secondary teachers are also dealing with more resistance from students with six in ten (61 percent) reporting this as an issue compared to a little more than one in four (27 percent) primary teachers. Resistance from parents was a barrier to a lesser extent – almost one-third (31 percent) of secondary and just over one in six (16 percent) primary teachers said this was a barrier for them.

More secondary teachers (50 percent) say that wearable devices make it difficult to implement phone rules, than primary teachers (34 percent).

Figure 49: *Percentage of teachers reporting what makes it difficult to implement ‘Phones Away for the Day’, by school type*



We heard that wearable devices pose a challenge because they have some of the same functions as a cell phone. This was consistent with what we heard about access to other distracting devices, such as laptops, also posing a significant challenge.

“...It was like playing whack-a-mole, you know? Whichever service you turned off, there was something else turned on.”

BOARD MEMBER

“...We consider earbuds or headphones to be a natural extension of the phone, because not too many of us work without them now. But we haven’t done anything in terms of smartwatches.”

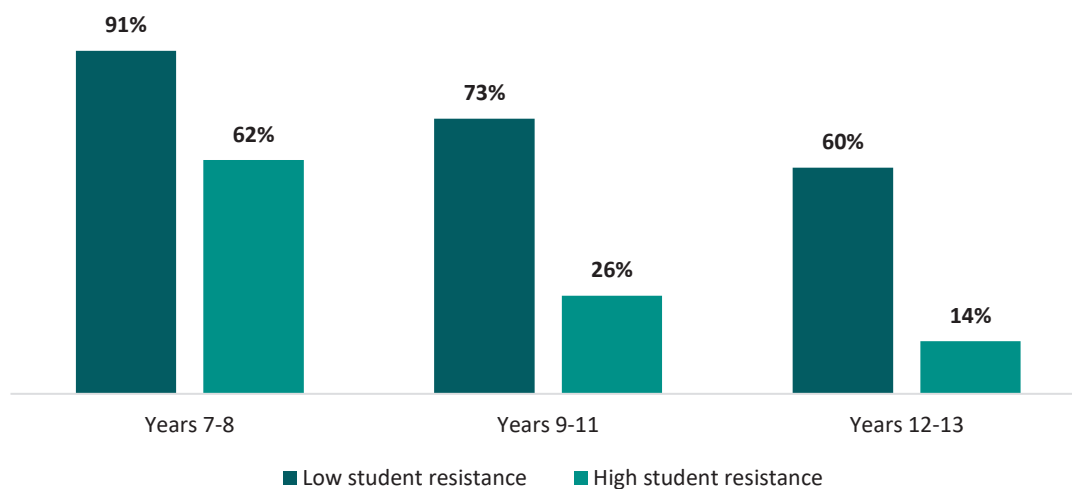
SECONDARY SCHOOL LEADER

Schools with high levels of student and parent resistance see lower compliance.

Some of these challenges can be directly linked to lower compliance by students. Secondary schools with low resistance from students are over three times more likely (3.3 times) to have students following the rules consistently. In primary schools, low student resistance increases compliance by over six times (6.3 times).

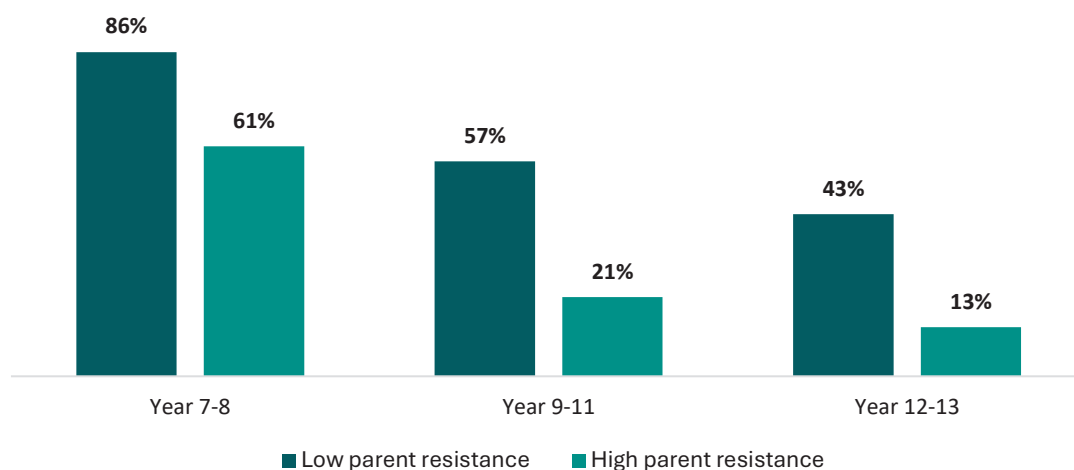
Of the schools with high levels of student resistance, one in seven (14 percent) achieve high levels of compliance among Year 12–13 students. In contrast, six in ten (60 percent) of schools that say student resistance is not a barrier achieve high levels of compliance.

Figure 50: *Percentage of leaders and teachers who report high compliance among Year 12–13 students, by level of student resistance*



When parent resistance is a problem, secondary students are almost half as likely (0.6 times) to follow the rules. Of the schools with high levels of parent resistance, only 13 percent achieve high levels of compliance among Year 12–13 students. In contrast, nearly half (43 percent) of schools with low parent resistance achieve high compliance.

Figure 51: *Percentage of leaders and teachers who report high compliance among Year 12-13 students, by level of parent resistance*



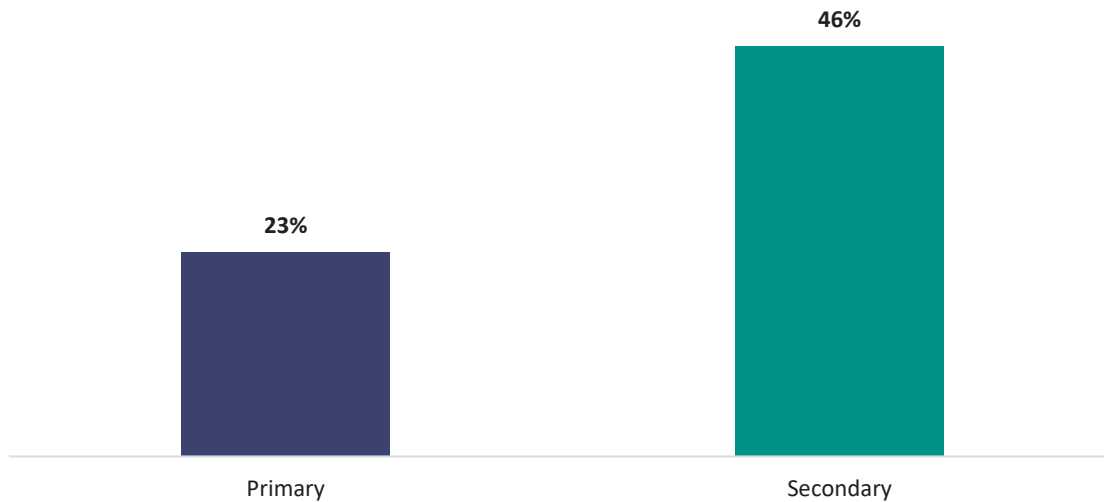
The desire to connect during the day makes it difficult for students to follow the rules and can lead to parents undermining the rules.

As discussed in Part 4, parental actions can interfere with implementing 'Phones Away for the Day'. Almost half (46 percent) of secondary parents and whānau, and almost a quarter (23 percent) of primary parents and whānau say that not having effective communication channels between parents and their child make it difficult to follow rules. This is consistent with student reports, where three in five (59 percent) secondary students who break rules and almost two in five (39 percent) primary students who break rules, do so to stay connected with their family.

“Really dislike not having the ability for my child to contact me independently. Very distressing.”

PARENT/WHĀNAU

Figure 52: *Percentage of parents who say not having effective communication channels between parents and their child make it difficult for students and parents to follow phone rules, by school type*



This is a bigger problem in secondary schools, where students typically keep their phones with them and can contact their parents directly. In doing so, parents and whānau may unintentionally undermine the policy, especially when they expect immediate communication.

“I will also text my child throughout the day. I will check attendance and if late to class I will text to ask why he late or remind him of something he needs to do.”

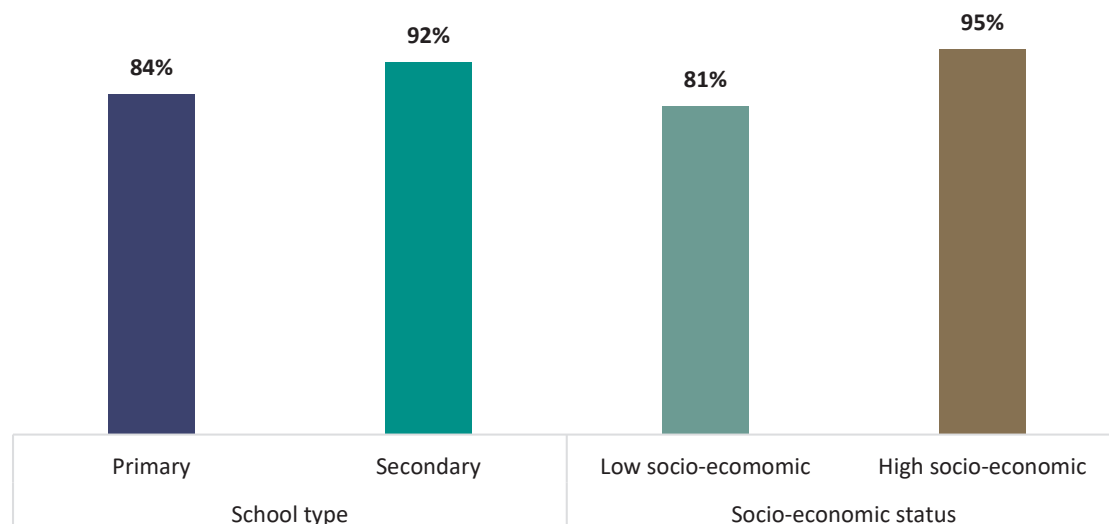
PARENT/ WHĀNAU

Some teachers do not understand their school's rules around exemptions, particularly those in primary and in schools in low socio-economic communities.

Most teachers know their school's rules around where students are expected to store their phones during the day. Slightly more secondary teachers (92 percent) report the same rules around phone storage as their school leader, compared to their primary (84 percent) counterparts.

While nearly all (95 percent) teachers in schools in higher socio-economic communities reported the same rules as their school leaders, fewer (81 percent) teachers in schools in lower socio-economic communities had the same match.

Figure 53: *Percentage of primary and secondary teachers who report the same rules on where students are expected to store their phones during the day, by school type and socio-economic status*

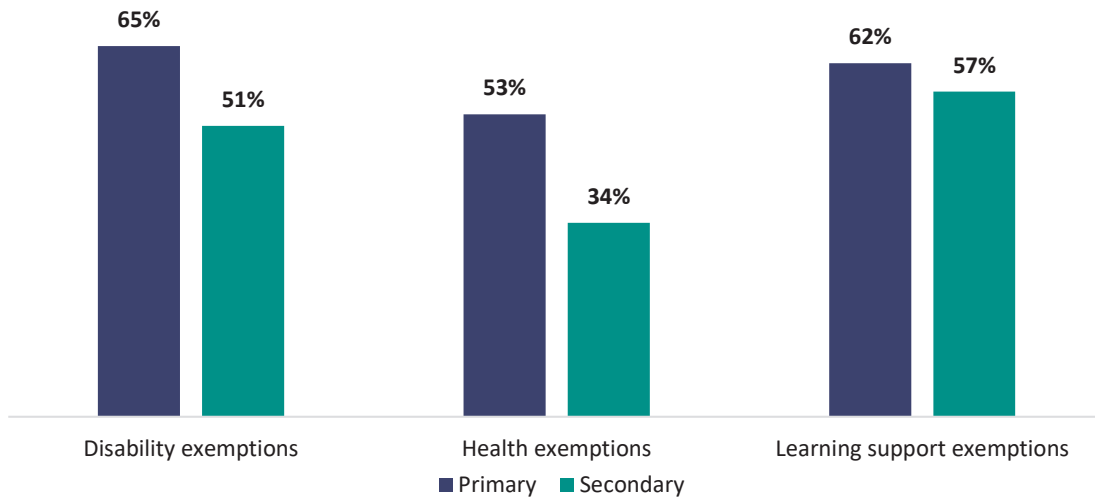


Fewer teachers know their school's exemptions rules. Over one-third (34 percent) of secondary teachers and over half (53 percent) of primary teachers report different rules as their leader around health exemptions. Over six in ten (65 percent) primary and five in ten (51 percent) secondary teachers report different rules as their leaders on exemptions for disability. One in six (16 percent) secondary teachers find the exemption criteria to be a barrier to implementing the rules.

“We have unclear expectations around phones with individual teachers essentially responsible for individual classroom policies and application.”

TEACHER

Figure 54: *Percentage of teachers who report different rules on exemptions as their leader, by school type*



Conclusion

While we are seeing positive impacts following ‘Phones Away for the Day’, there are some key actions schools can take to make the new rules more successful.

Effective implementation of cell phone policies relies on clear, consistent rules and enforcement, and firm consequences. Primary students are more likely to comply when the rules are consistent and secondary students are when they understand the purpose of the rules. When rules are enforced inconsistently within a school, non-compliance increases. Tougher consequences like parent notification increases compliance, while simply telling students to put phones away does the opposite, and notifying parents is linked with improved outcomes.

Teacher buy-in is critical – when teachers actively support and enforce the rules, student outcomes improve. Teachers’ understanding and usage of exemptions for learning needs are not applied consistently, which can impact how well students and parents are supported when they have needs.

Engaging parents and whānau also boosts compliance, but lack of parental understanding or support can undermine school efforts. We are seeing that secondary school students and parents and whānau use cell phones to stay in contact during the day when there is a lack of alternative communication channels. This is a source of concern for them.

While national action helps, banning phones alone doesn’t address other digital distractions like laptops and wearable devices, or the broader risks of social media. Stronger, more holistic approaches are needed to fully support student wellbeing and learning.



Part 7: Lessons learned and recommendations

The questions we asked as part of this review led to 21 key findings and four key lessons learned. Based on these findings and lessons learned, we have identified four recommendations to improve the implementation and impact of 'Phones Away for the Day', as well as to address broader concerns related to student digital distractions.

The Government prohibited student use of cell phones during the school day from Term 2, 2024. This requirement applies to all students enrolled in state and state-integrated schools, with some exceptions. School boards and kura are responsible for putting the rules in place and enforcing them.

The Education Review Office (ERO), in partnership with the Ministry of Education, wanted to know how the implementation of 'Phones Away for the Day' is going and lessons we can learn from new rules.

In undertaking this review, ERO drew on evidence from a range of data and analysis, including:

- a review of national and international literature
- ERO's own data collection, including over 10,700 responses to our surveys and 65 interviews
- 910 ERO school board assurance statements (BAS)
- insights from ERO reviews of schools.

Key findings

From this evidence, we identified 21 key findings across the following areas:

- 1) How well 'Phones Away for the Day' is being put in place
- 2) How compliant students are
- 3) What the impact of 'Phones Away for the Day' is
- 4) What works and what gets in the way of 'Phones Away for the Day'.

Area 1: How well is 'Phones Away for the Day' being put in place

Finding 1	Encouragingly, nearly all schools have a 'Phones Away for the Day' rule.
Finding 2	Nearly all schools have rules prohibiting phone use at school at all times of the day, but there are large variations in when and where teachers enforce the rules.
Finding 3	What 'Phones Away for the Day' looks like is very different between primary and secondary schools. Secondary schools let students keep their phones with them more, and monitor and enforce less. Primary schools store students' phones more and enforce more.
Finding 4	Both primary and secondary schools in low socio-economic communities are less strict in enforcing the rules, but in primary they store student phones more.
Finding 5	When students break the phone rules, schools most commonly confiscate student phones and notify parents.
Finding 6	While most secondary schools allow phone exemptions for health, disability, and learning needs, some students may not be getting the support they need. A quarter of schools do not offer exemptions for learning support reasons, and over a quarter of teachers are unaware of their school's exemption policies.

Area 2: How compliant are students

Finding 7	Only around half of secondary students consistently follow their school's phone rules. Compliance is also lower in schools in lower socio-economic communities, and during breaks and in unsupervised areas.
Finding 8	The top reason students break the rules is to stay connected with their family – especially older students and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
Finding 9	Students also break the rules to connect with friends, for learning, or because they personally oppose the rules.
Finding 10	Parent support matters – when parents resist phone rules, students are more likely to break them.

Area 3: What is the impact of 'Phones Away for the Day'	
Finding 11	There is encouraging evidence that secondary students are more focused on learning as a result of prohibiting phone use at school.
Finding 12	Importantly, secondary teachers report achievement has improved since phone rules were put in place.
Finding 13	Behaviour and bullying have improved, meaning teachers can spend more time teaching.
Finding 14	Encouragingly, more secondary schools in lower socio-economic communities have improved outcomes.
Finding 15	Pacific students benefit the most. But students who are disabled or have learning needs experience some negative effects.
Finding 16	Six in ten (59 percent) parents have not changed how they communicate with their child while at school, and some remain worried about not being able to connect with their child during the day.

Area 4: What works and what gets in the way of 'Phones Away for the Day'	
Finding 17	Clear, consistent rules and strong, consistent enforcement drives compliance.
Finding 18	When secondary teachers support and enforce phone rules, outcomes improve.
Finding 19	Tougher consequences like parent notification and confiscating phones increases compliance.
Finding 20	Simply telling students to put phones away reduces compliance.
Finding 21	Implementing phone rules is easier now there is a law, but challenges like student and parent resistance, wearable devices, and inconsistent exemption use remain in secondary schools.

Lessons learned

Our findings are supported by lessons we have learned through this report. By reflecting on what was particularly successful and where there have been challenges, we identified lessons to inform future decision-making to manage similar risks to students. Each of these lessons are supported by additional insights.

For our lessons learned, we reviewed what we found through this review, as well as:

- previous ERO National Review reports
- other New Zealand evidence
- international evidence
- feedback from our other surveys, the education sector, and other experts.

We identified four high-level lessons:

- 1) National action to limit digital distractions in schools can improve students' achievement and wellbeing (and help teachers teach).
- 2) There are clear actions schools can take that make the biggest difference in ensuring compliance with national rules.
- 3) National action on cell phones helps, but is not enough alone to remove digital distractions and the potential harm of social media.
- 4) Parents play a key role and need to understand and back schools' actions to remove digital distractions.

Each lesson learned is supported by several insights which are summarised in the following tables.

1) National action to limit digital distractions in schools can improve students' achievement and wellbeing (and help teachers teach)

Nationwide bans can ensure action in all schools. Bans can be implemented in all schools nationally, across all school types.

Limiting digital distractions can benefit both learning and mental health. These limits can improve student achievement, focus, behaviour, social connection, and mental health.

Removing distractions from schools can make the biggest difference to students facing the biggest challenges. Schools in lower socio-economic communities can see greater improvements in outcomes.

2) There are clear actions schools can take that make the biggest difference in ensuring compliance with national rules

Clear and consistent rules with firm consequences around phone use are essential. Consistent rules across year levels, and firm consequences such as notifying parents and confiscating phones, increase compliance.

Teachers need to understand, support, and enforce the rules. When teachers support, monitor, and enforce rules around device use, student outcomes improve.

It is key to get students and parents and whānau on board. When students and parents and whānau understand school policy, compliance and outcomes improve.

Tougher enforcement actions are more effective with secondary students. Notifying parents and confiscating phones can increase compliance, while simply telling students to put their phones away can reduce compliance.

3) National action on cell phones helps but is not enough alone to remove digital distractions and the potential harm of social media

Banning cell phones alone does not eliminate digital distractions. Half of secondary schools report that wearable devices make it difficult to enforce phone restrictions, and many schools consistently note that access to other devices, such as laptops, also poses a significant challenge.

Stronger action may be required to properly manage risks from access to devices and social media. While the phone ban has reduced harm linked to social media – such as bullying – and improved students' mental health, students can still access social media through other means.

4) Parents play a key role and need to understand and back schools' actions to remove digital distractions

Parents do not always understand and support school rules, and this needs to be addressed. While parents support the intent of limiting digital distractions in the classroom, they have various concerns and do not always support the school rules.

Parents have an important role to play, and when they are not supportive of school rules, student compliance is compromised. Parent resistance can be a barrier to student compliance.

Recommendations

ERO used the findings and lessons learned to make four recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Keep the 'Phones Away for the Day' requirement – it is making a difference.

ERO finds that the 'Phones Away for the Day' policy is making a positive difference to student wellbeing and learning. To maintain this momentum:

- The legal requirement that schools stop students from using or accessing mobile phones while attending school should continue.
- The Ministry of Education should continue to support schools to comply with the 'Phones Away for the Day' policy.
- ERO should continue to monitor implementation and compliance as part of its regular review processes.
- Schools should ensure that teachers clearly understand the school's rules around phone use, including any exemptions, and are confident in supporting and enforcing them.

Recommendation 2: Increase compliance of secondary students by sharing with schools the approaches that work most.

ERO's findings indicate that compliance with the policy is less consistent in secondary schools. To improve implementation:

- Secondary schools should continue to use consequences to enforce 'Phones Away for the Day' and ensure high compliance across year levels and times of day.
- The Ministry of Education and ERO should provide practical support by sharing effective approaches and strategies that have led to high compliance in other schools.
- Parents should support schools by not contacting their children on cell phones during school hours.

Recommendation 3: Increase parents' awareness of the benefits of removing cell phones (and other digital distractions) and how they can help.

ERO finds that increasing parent support can further support the success of the policy. To build stronger partnerships:

- The Ministry of Education and ERO should increase visibility of the benefits of removing digital distractions, including impacts on wellbeing and learning.
- Schools should actively engage parents to help them understand the benefits of removing cell phones, how they can support it at home, and provide alternative ways for parents to communicate with their child during the day.

Recommendation 4: Consider further action to remove other digital distractions and reduce the potential harm of social media at school – learning from the experience of other countries.

ERO's review suggests that broader digital distractions, including social media, continue to impact student wellbeing and learning. To address this:

- The Government should consider expanding the 'Phones Away for the Day' policy to include other forms of digital distractions such as smartwatches.
- Consider ways to further reduce digital distractions by limiting or removing student access to social media during school hours.

Conclusion

ERO's review of the 'Phones Away for the Day' policy finds that it is contributing positively to student wellbeing, focus, and learning. The policy is making a measurable difference, particularly in environments where it is consistently enforced and supported by school leadership, staff, and parents and whānau.

However, the review also highlights areas where further action is needed to strengthen implementation and maximise impact. In secondary schools, inconsistent enforcement limits the effectiveness of the policy. Increasing compliance through practical support and sharing successful approaches will help schools embed the policy more effectively.

Parent and whānau engagement is another critical factor. When parents and whānau understand the benefits of removing digital distractions, they are more likely to support the policy and reinforce its intent at home. Schools and system leaders have an important role in building this understanding and providing clear, accessible communication channels.

Finally, ERO's findings suggest that broader digital distractions – including smartwatches and social media – continue to affect student wellbeing and learning. There is an opportunity to learn from international experience and consider further steps to reduce these distractions during the school day.

Together, these recommendations provide a pathway to strengthen the impact of the 'Phones Away for the Day' policy and ensure it continues to support positive outcomes for students across New Zealand.



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