



Council of Catholic School Parents

Submission

Review into the non-educational use of
mobile devices in NSW schools

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1. Preamble

This submission has been prepared by the Council of Catholic School Parents NSW/ACT (CCSP) on behalf of the parents of 257,000 students in Catholic schools in NSW/ACT.

CCSP is an independent association and the officially recognised body representing the interests of parents and carers with children in Catholic schools in NSW/ACT. The work of the Council is guided by the principles of choice, equity and social justice.

CCSP is a founding member of the national body Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA). This submission provides general comments in relation to the scope of the Review into the non-educational use of mobile devices in NSW schools with a particular focus on current risks to student mental health and best practice approaches to ensuring students in NSW schools are responsible users of digital technology.

2. Response to the Terms of Reference

2.1. Smartphones and youth mental health

One of the concerning things about smartphones is that according to recent studies, the pervasive use of smartphones among children and young people is linked to an increased incidence of depression. In 2017, Professor of Psychology, Jean Twenge, at San Diego State University, found in her research that in the US, between 2010 and 2015, there were increases that appeared in depression, suicide attempts and suicide among teens. She links the rise in mental health problems among teenagers to the increasing use of smartphones.¹

Professor Twenge notes that not only did smartphone use and depression increase in tandem, but time spent online also was linked to mental health issues. According to research released by the Office of the eSafety Commissioner in 2016, 82% of teenagers (14-17 years old) online use social media, while 34% of children (8-13 years old) online use social media.²

With the rising use of technology among children and young Australians, as a society we've seen bullying take on a new form through the sharing of offensive or inappropriate content online that is designed to hurt another person. This type of bullying can be anonymous and posted online where it can be seen by many people. Unlike face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying can go on 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Research shows that being bullied can have serious effects on a young person's physical and mental health, and their performance at school and at work, which can continue to affect them as an adult.

¹ Twenge J. With teen mental health deteriorating over five years, there's a likely culprit. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/with-teen-mental-health-deteriorating-over-five-years-theres-a-likely-culprit-86996>. Accessed September 2018.

² Office of the eSafety Commissioner. Research: Digital Participation. <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-the-office/research-library>. Accessed September 2018.

Experiencing bullying can also increase the risk that someone will develop depression and anxiety in the future.³

Cyberbullying rates are of concern in Australia with up to 1 in 5 young Australians having reportedly experienced cyberbullying.⁴ This is an alarming statistic that has parents genuinely concerned for the health and welfare of their children, at school and at home.

2.2. Smartphones in primary schools

In the primary years, CCSP agrees that there is no need for smartphones to be used by students on school grounds. At school, students should be focused on learning in class and if lessons require the use of a device, then that device should be provided by the school with appropriate controls enabled so that use is restricted to the specified activity.

However, parents are often concerned about safety when children travel to and from school and for this reason, children should be allowed to have access to mobile devices before and after school. During schools hours, phones should be switched off and placed inside lockers (or equivalent) so that students are not accessing their devices when they are on school grounds. If an issue arises around student safety or behaviour and a student needs to get in touch with a parent or vice versa, this should be facilitated through the school office.

2.3. Smartphones in secondary schools

In the secondary years, the debate about whether smartphones should be allowed on school grounds becomes increasingly complex. Principals, parents and students have advised CCSP that there is a place for electronic devices on school grounds and that when they are used in the right way, they can be beneficial for learning. Teachers report that they encourage students to use their smartphones for research among other learning-based activities in the classroom. Using smartphones in the classroom is also beneficial in developing media literacy and educating students about evaluating the quality of online information. However, teachers also report that smartphones can often be distracting for students and they will often play games or listen to music rather than focusing on the task at hand.

Overdependence is another issue that is fostered by giving students continued access to smartphones in school. Teachers report that students will phone their parents when they feel consequences for poor behaviour are unfair, which is an inappropriate response.

Parents who have children with special needs have advised CCSP that smartphones are an invaluable tool for their children especially as a social support. Smartphones can be a lifeline for students with special needs.

In secondary schools, banning smartphones is not the best way forward to ensuring young

³ Headspace. Understanding Bullying. <https://headspace.org.au/young-people/understanding-bullying-for-young-people/>. Accessed September 2018.

⁴ ReachOut. Cyberbullying. <https://au.reachout.com/everyday-issues/cyberbullying>. Accessed September 2018.

Australians become socially responsible users of electronic devices nor is it practical when smartphones are so heavily integrated in every other part of their lives. Banning smartphones would prove difficult to enforce at this age taking into account that 9 in 10 Australian teenagers have a mobile phone.⁵ This means that rather than banning them, it is critical to ensuring appropriate and good use of smartphones in secondary schools.

2.4. Smartphones and best practice approaches

It is important that parents and schools partner together to educate children about being socially responsible users of digital devices.

Parents have reported to CCSP that more guidance needs to be provided by primary schools to parents regarding rules around the appropriate use of smartphones and education about the socially acceptable use of smartphones, before even purchasing a device for their child. By educating parents early on about the appropriate use of smartphones and providing guidelines about rules they can implement and monitoring protocols, they are then equipped with the information they need to ensure their child becomes a socially responsible user of digital devices when the time comes.

The concept of a digital licence program is a positive way forward in addressing e-safety issues or concerns in NSW. It is important that to maximise the reach and impact of the program, a whole community approach is adopted to ensure parents, teachers and students are engaged and well-equipped to be socially responsible users of digital devices, at home and at school. This means that a 'one size fits all' approach will not be appropriate. Rather, for digital licence programs to be most effective, community and cultural factors will need to be considered with the program easily adapted and accessible by all with no financial commitment from parents.

In secondary schools, smartphones can be a valued tool and it is important that the rules and expectations around the use of digital devices become part of the orientation or induction program when families first enrol in the school so that teachers, parents and students understand the rules and also the consequences for students not using phones in the appropriate or approved way. It is essential that there is continued support and commitment to the school's policies regarding the use of digital devices on school grounds with an effort to engage parents in ongoing discussions and education regarding the appropriate use of digital devices by reaching them through multiple communication channels. Schools and parents need ongoing access to information about the best ways to enforce rules and set expectations at home with regard to the appropriate use of smartphones.

Some parents have expressed to CCSP that they feel smartphones are not required during the day at school and should be switched off or handed into the office to mitigate the risk of it serving as a distraction or used as a tool to facilitate cyberbullying during school hours. As

⁵ Roy Morgan. 9 in 10 Aussie teens now have a mobile (and most are already on to their second or subsequent handset). <http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/6929-australian-teenagers-and-their-mobile-phones-june-2016-201608220922>. Accessed September 2018.

parents have not reached a consensus on the use of smartphones in schools, the decision to ban them should be made at the individual school level with parent input. In cases where the use of digital devices is prohibited on school grounds, exemptions should be considered or made on the basis of individual student need. CCSP recognises that when on school grounds, students are in the care of teachers. If students need to contact parents during school hours or vice versa, this should be done via the school office and in line with the school's policy.

Schools must be a safe place for children and young people, free from bullying in all forms, face-to-face and online. Critical to preventing serious issues such as cyberbullying, image-based abuse and online harm is a robust policy on the use of electronic devices in schools. It's essential that schools are supported to develop strong policies around the appropriate use of smartphones in schools and that these policies are adhered to by students and equally supported by parents.

At the school level, students should feel encouraged, supported and safe to come forward with bullying complaints and have confidence in the procedures that will be followed when any form of bullying is reported. Legislation must support schools and authorities in taking appropriate action when cyberbullying or image-based abuse cases arise.