

Ban mobile phones to help underperforming students: study

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Students at a school in Melbourne use their mobile phones in class. Photo: Craig Abraham

At De La Salle College in Revesby Heights, mobile phone use is strictly prohibited. From first bell to last, students at the Catholic boys' school are required to keep their phone off or at least out of action - even during breaks. They have the option of leaving it at the front office if they don't trust themselves to abstain.

NSW schools are entitled to set their own phone policy, and De La Salle's is not unusual. Indeed, new research from Britain indicates stricter rules around phone use may contribute to better grades, particularly for underperforming students.

The discussion paper, published by the London School of Economics, found banning mobile phones in schools resulted in a 14.23 per cent improvement in test scores for low-achieving students, and a 6.41 per cent improvement overall in the schools that had introduced a ban.

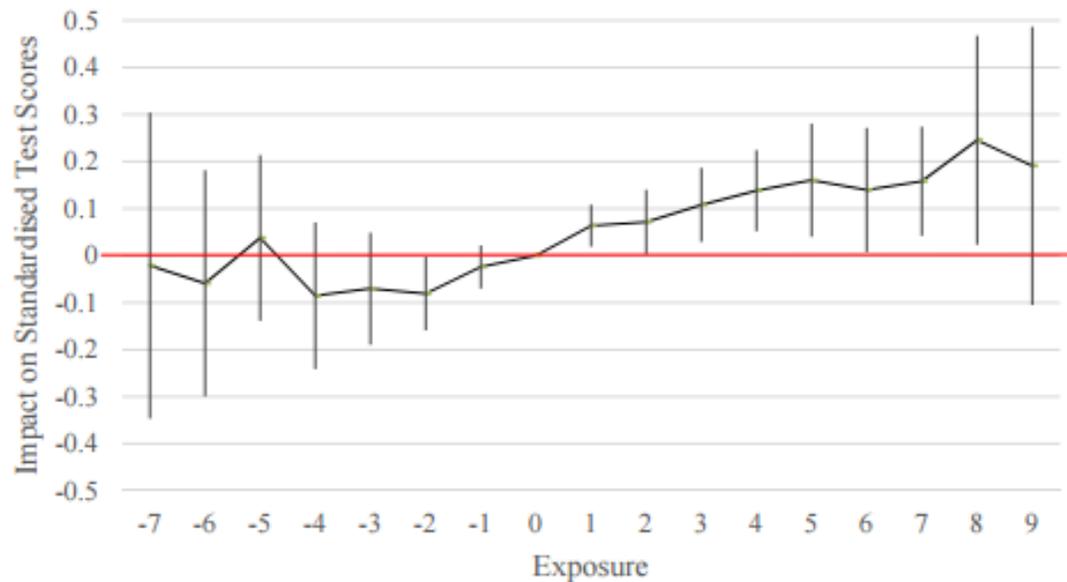
That benefit was [equivalent to an additional hour of school a week](#), or increasing the school year by five days, authors Louis-Philippe Beland and Richard Murphy wrote in *The Conversation*.

Nonetheless, the authors - both assistant professors of economics in the US - noted that phone bans had "no significant impact" on high achievers. They primarily looked at test scores at age 16, but could not replicate the same results for 14-year-olds - an outcome they suggested could be explained by "low phone use" at this age.

The paper, titled *Ill Communication: Technology, Distraction & Student Performance*, also concluded that mobiles could still be useful as a learning tool "if their use is properly structured".

The study examined test scores from 91 schools across four English cities between 2001 and 2011. During that time, all but one of the surveyed schools introduced some sort of ban on phones. The authors surveyed school officials about their mobile phone policies and the rigour with which the policy was enforced.

Figure 2: Impact of Phone Ban by Years of Exposure



Notes: Estimated impact on age 16 standardised test scores of mobile phone ban by years of exposure, conditional on school and year effects, age 11 test scores and pupil characteristics. Reference year is the year prior to introduction. Error bars represent the 95% confidence intervals with robust standard errors clustered at the school level. *Sources:* National Pupil Data Base and author-conducted mobile phone policy survey of schools in four cities in England: Birmingham, Leicester, London and Manchester.

Free to do as they please on this issue, schools in England have taken a tough stance on mobile phones relative to their Australian counterparts. According to the authors, 98 per cent of English schools either don't allow the devices on premises or require students to hand them in at the beginning of the school day.

NSW Department of Education guidelines say phones should not automatically be regarded as a concern. "It is only if a mobile phone is used inappropriately that action may be necessary," the department advises.

And while schools may require students to hand in their phones at the start of the day, they must consult parents before introducing such a policy. "The circumstances of individual students also need to be taken into account when implementing such a system," the department says.

In Victoria, the Department of Education says schools should discourage students from using mobile phones in the classroom "unless they can be appropriately incorporated into the learning program". All schools are able to develop their own policy on this issue, the department advises.

At De La Salle College in Sydney's south-west, punishments for flouting the phone ban are confiscation and detention. Business studies and geography teacher Mark Ashburner, who has been at the school for eight years, says the rule is generally adhered to - and had been introduced in one form or another at all three schools where he has taught.

Mr Ashburner was not surprised to hear that research had indicated a ban could improve results for underperformers.

"I think that's what a lot of teachers feel," he said.

The only electronic device De La Salle students can use is their school-issued laptop, although that too can be a source of distraction and cause headaches for teachers.

"You just have to learn to sit at the back of the room so you can see what they're doing," Mr Ashburner says. "If they're smiling you can usually tell that something else is happening."

In 2011, Christian Brothers' College in Melbourne's St Kilda East [overturned a long-standing ban](#) on students bringing mobile phones to school. Principal Gerald Bain-King said the school could not "embrace the world and ignore technology" simultaneously.

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