



Insights for parents and whānau: Cell phone rules and how you can help

The Education Review Office (ERO) found that removing cell phones from class has led to increased focus, improved academic outcomes, and a reduction in bullying in New Zealand schools. This guide gives suggestions and tips for how parents and whānau can help their children experience these benefits.

ERO looked at the removal of cell phones from New Zealand classrooms

Like many other countries, New Zealand has put rules in place around students using cell phones at school. ERO reviewed the difference that these rules have made. We gathered over 10,000 survey responses, ran focus groups, and interviewed board members, school leaders, teachers, students, parents and whānau, and education experts.

What is the 'Phones Away for the Day' policy and how does it work?

This policy, introduced in Term 2 2024, says that students should not access or use their cell phones at all during the school day – including break times. Schools design their own rules and consequences to make sure this happens.

Exemptions to this rule are allowed for health, disability, and learning support needs. Teachers can also allow students to use phones in class for a specific educational task.

Why does removing cell phones from the classroom help?

- **Focus:** There is increasing evidence that simply having a phone nearby can reduce students' attention and 'working memory', which are critical for learning. Around eight in ten secondary leaders and teachers told us that removing phones from school has improved students' ability to focus on schoolwork.
- **Learning:** There is also growing evidence of the benefits that removing cell phones has on achievement. In our review, two-thirds of secondary teachers said students' learning has improved.
- **Behaviour:** Over three-quarters of secondary teachers and leaders say restricting cell phone use has improved classroom behaviour.
- **Bullying:** Just over two-thirds of secondary leaders say that bullying has decreased.
- **Social interactions:** Teachers report that students are now talking more and having good social interactions during breaks – now that they aren't on their phones.

Why we need parents and whānau to help

Students need to buy in to the rule

- We found that students are more likely to follow the cell phone rules when they understand why they have been implemented and how the rules benefit their learning.
- If not, they tend to see the rules as 'unfair'. Three in ten (30 percent) of the students who use their phone at school break the rules because they disagree with them.

Mixed messages from parents and whānau make things harder

- Messaging parents and whānau is the number one reason students break the rules.
- We heard that while some parents and whānau understand prohibiting phone use can reduce distractions, others still expect to be able to reach their children, even during class time. Over 85 percent of teachers say parent support helps them implement phone rules.
- In schools where parents resist phone rules, students are nearly twice as likely to break them. For example, parents and whānau complaining to the school about their child's phone being confiscated, gives mixed messages to students.

“I'd given zero consideration to the fact I was perhaps encouraging rule breaking. It's so natural for me to prioritise replying to my kids, I'd not stopped to think that most of the comms could wait until they were outside of school.”

PARENT

Practical steps

- 1) **Talk to your child about the *benefits* of keeping their phone off at school.** The rule is about improving focus, learning, behaviour, social interaction, and reducing bullying.
- 2) Talk with your child to **decide on how to communicate without texting or calling** them on their cell phone. For example, you could email their school account, or agree that any urgent messages will be delivered through the school office from now on. You can also ask the school about their ideas and processes for leaving voicemails or texting staff.
- 3) **Support the school's enforcement of cell phone rules.** This is about making sure what you say to your child aligns with the school's messages, including when the school puts consequences in place.

Want to know more? The full report is on ERO's website www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/do-not-disturb-a-review-of-removing-cell-phones-from-new-zealand-s-classrooms



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