European Schoolnet

AGILE COLLECTION OF INFORMATION Series

Screen time and digitalisation

Agile Collection of Information **Volume 4**

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Executive summary

This report synthesises findings of European Schoolnet's Agile Collection of Information from its member education authorities regarding the issue of screen time and digital device use in schools. The report includes information about 17 education systems in 16 countries in Europe. Although not exhaustive, the information presented in this publication aim to build a more detailed picture of the state of play in different countries regarding the topic and the impact it has had so far on policy reforms and actions.

In most countries, government **policy priorities** in response to the concern of excessive time spent using screens tend to focus on the use of mobile phones and digital devices. In particular they target concerns about potential disruptions in concentration and focus during school hours, especially among primary school children. **Specific concerns** prompting actions relate to mental health and wellbeing (e.g., anxiety, addictive behaviour, short attention span), behaviour (e.g., signs of addiction, bullying, lack of concentration) and physical health (e.g., lack of sleep, obesity, exercise).

Reactions from education authorities include efforts to **enhance the authority** of teachers and school leaders to restrict device usage; setting up **expert groups** to study the impact of screen time on health, quality of life, and learning; recommendations for **policy measures**; and issuing **guidelines** outlining appropriate device usage in schools. Several countries favour integrating smartphone policies into broader whole-school approaches covering media literacy, health guidelines, counselling, exercise, and behaviour prevention, while preserving school autonomy. At national level, policy actions vary from none to complete nationwide mobile phone bans in schools. Regional education authorities have issued regulations limiting phone use, particularly at pre-primary and primary school levels. Some regions allow schools to set their own rules within a guiding framework. **No country covered in this report has taken action to restrict the use of digital textbooks and learning resources.**

Respondents from nine countries felt that **digitalisation** has not slowed down at any school level. On the other hand, respondents from some countries witness a slight slowing down of digitalisation, especially at primary and secondary level. However, the majority of education authorities that responded to the survey shared that **screentime concerns have had no effect at all on the current status of digitalisation in their country**. To support schools develop their own policies, education authorities often **provide guidance** such as publications, guidelines, advice articles, training courses, and online toolkits. Initiatives focus on promoting digital literacy, preventing cyberbullying, and achieving a healthy digital balance. Teacher education courses in different countries cover methods for integrating technology responsibly into lessons. Some schools have introduced **daytime storage systems** (e.g. mobile phone 'hotels') to limit student device access during school hours. Campaigns engage parents in raising their digital citizenship and e-safety awareness. Student leadership programs empower young people to adopt critical and responsible technology use habits.

When it comes to the **curriculum**, the pre-primary curriculum is partly digitalised in six countries, while the primary curriculum is partly digitalised in 11 countries and fully in three. The secondary school curriculum is partly digitalised in 11 out of the 17 responding jurisdictions and fully digitalised in four. In most countries represented in the survey responses, pupils are sometimes allowed to **use their own smartphone or digital device** in lessons, while in some, personal devices are not allowed at all in lessons. In no country represented in this survey may personal devices be used whenever pupils want to. There is less consensus on pupil **access to their own devices outside lessons**, and in most of the represented education systems this depends on individual schools.

When asked **what triggers policy action** on the issue, authorities most often cite the opinions of teachers and school leaders, followed by those of parents and carers. In some cases, evidence from educational research, cognitive and child development research and health research has also influenced policy action.

Respondents reported **mixed reactions from students, parents, and teachers** on personal device usage in schools, with different actors' arguments ranging between responsible use and outright bans. Authorities are promoting different initiatives, including awareness campaigns and teacher training, but the debate is still ongoing among stakeholders on striking the right balance.

Introduction

The digitisation and digitalisation of education in the past 20+ years and the rapid increase in personal digital device ownership by individuals across different ages in most societies around the world, has ultimately accelerated their use and time spent on screens. Such developments have raised concerns about the potential impact the excessive use of digital could have on -especially young people's- health, development, wellbeing, and educational performance (UNESCO MGIEP, 2021). Concerns over excessive time spent by young people on screens have led to calls across Europe for restrictions on the use of smartphones and other digital devices during school hours. The debate is partially fuelled by large-scale studies that suggest about one third of students across OECD countries reporting distractions when using digital devices during mathematics lessons (OECD, 2023). However, the OECD highlights the distinction between use of digital devices for learning at school and for leisure activities. Its findings indicate that using digital devices for learning up to five hour per day, on average, lead to better achievement in mathematics. However, use of devices for leisure, either in school or at home seem to be connected to lower student performance and higher decree of distraction (OECD, 2024a).

On the other hand, organisations such as UNESCO have argued that the "*mere proximity to a mobile device was found to distract students and to have a negative impact on learning in 14 countries*" (UNESCO, 2023a). Although most of these calls do not advocate for a total ban in digital devices use, they advise for technology "*only to be used in class when it supports learning outcomes, and this includes the use of smartphones*" (UNESCO, 2023b). Even when smartphone use is banned in schools, it is essential that other measures are in place to improve students' learning (OECD, 2024b). Access to digital technologies is, after all, essential for preparing children to be resilient, successful, and active participants of society in the 21st century.

In response to these concerns raised by international organisations and a growing number of public education authorities, and to build a more detailed picture of the issue's impact and policy responses, European Schoolnet invited its members to complete an online survey in early 2024. The survey comprised of a mix of closed and open-ended questions gathering information about policy changes connected to concerns about screentime, plans to reduce the use of digital technologies and tools in schools, and any practical measures taken. The report summarises the responses from 17 education authorities in 16 countries: Belgium (French community and Flemish community), Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Malta, Norway, Portugal, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden.

1. Policy changes

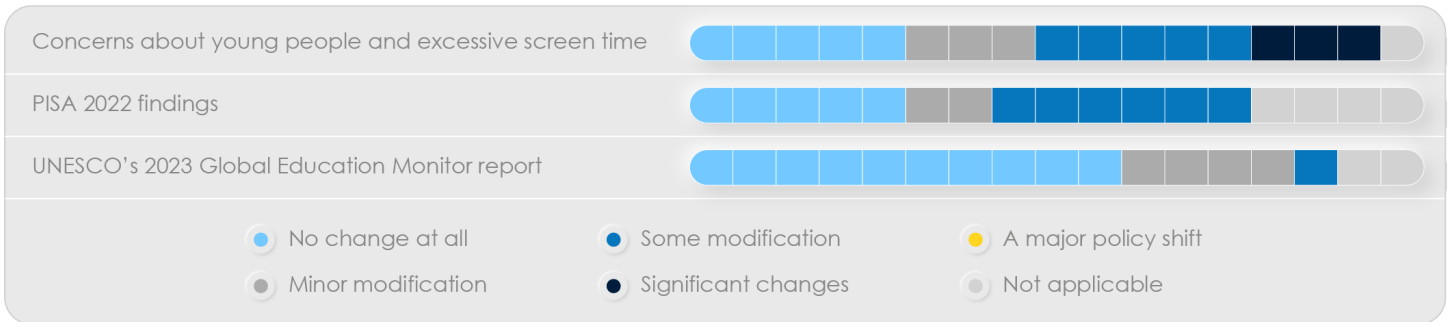
This section describes changes in public education authorities' policy priorities and reforms or actions that relate to the use of digital devices by young people during school hours. It covers both the overall time spent using a screen during lessons and the use of personally owned digital devices such as mobile phones during class or breaks. The survey aimed to capture any recent actions by education authorities such as restricting access or providing guidance to schools, as well as the evidence justifying them.

1.1. Policy priority changes resulting from screen time concerns

Survey results indicate that concerns about young people's wellbeing and the possible impact of excessive time spent on screens have led to priority shifts in policies in most countries covered in this report. In particular, 11 of the public education authorities that responded to the survey indicated at least some level of priority change resulting from such concerns (Figure 1). Significant changes were recorded in three countries (EL, ES, SE) with actions connected to, respectively, a complete ban on mobile phones in school; a ban in pre- and primary schools and reduced screen time in pre-school; curriculum changes and excluding younger students from sitting national tests online. On the other hand, five countries (BEfl, HR, CY, HU, PT) reported no significant changes in the policy priorities linked to the issue.

Participants were also asked whether any change was triggered by findings and data from recent international studies investigating connections between use of digital devices, academic performance and wellbeing. The PISA 2022 report (OECD, 2023) findings about digital devices being a distraction in class led to some or minor changes in priorities in eight countries (BEfl, FI, LT, NO, PT, SI, SK, ES) and no change in five (HR, CY, EL, IE, MT). The UNESCO 2023 Global Education Monitor report (UNESCO, 2023a) and its call for technology to be used only when it clearly supports learning has led to minor or some modifications to policy in five countries (MT, NO, RS, SI, ES). On the other hand, the report had no apparent effect on policy priorities in ten countries (BEfl, HR, FI, EL, CY, HU, IE, LT, PT, SK) and, overall, no country has significantly shifted priorities based on its results. It is likely that respondents answered 'Not applicable' when no policy changes were considered.

Figure 1: Screen time-related policy changes



Responses from the participating public education authorities reveal that changes in government policies tend to address concerns about the disruptive effect of digital devices and mobile phone use on students' concentration and focus during school hours. It seems that there are particular concerns about smartphone ownership among primary school children. Steps considered by these authorities include enhancing the authority of teachers and school leaders to restrict device usage, implementing curriculum changes to reduce screen time for younger students (e.g. in Sweden), excluding younger children from digital assessment, and requiring educational technologies to demonstrate pedagogical value before use. Multidisciplinary expert groups and committees in different countries have been tasked to study the impact of screen time on children's health, quality of life, learning and

upbringing, and to recommend policy measures. Several countries have already proceeded with the preparation and publication of guidelines, outlining appropriate device usage in schools.

In **Finland**, experts, the media, and the wider public have paid attention to the results of the PISA 2022 reports. In particular findings such as that 41% of Finnish students are disrupted by the use of digital devices in all or most mathematics classes, have attracted attention. These results put Finland significantly higher than the OECD average which was 31%. On the other hand, when asked if students using digital resources disturb the concentration of others, less than a quarter (23%) of Finnish students felt that the use of digital resources disrupts the concentration of other students in all or most mathematics classes. In almost all countries, students perceived the use of digital devices as more disruptive to the user's own concentration than to the concentration of other students, but the difference in these percentages in Finland was exceptionally large compared to other countries. Nevertheless, there has been no action at the central level because the policy is that it is up to each school to decide.

In **Sweden**, there have been changes in the curriculum to reduce screentime for younger children, especially at pre-school ages. Moreover, changes were made to exclude grade 3 students (9-year-olds) from sitting national tests using the new online digital platform. The National Agency for Education has also been tasked with drafting recommendations for the use of several learning resources, with a particular focus on textbooks. The recommendations do not exclude the use of digital resources but will require a documented pedagogical value prior to their use.

In **Norway**, the government has set up a committee to gather evidence on children's and young people's use of screens in kindergarten, school, and leisure time and the impact on their health, quality of life, learning, and upbringing. Where the committee discovers that special challenges are sufficiently well documented, it must provide input for policy development and advise on the need for measures. The first episode of European Schoolnet's new podcast series, with two expert- members of the committee, provides more information about the issue.

In **Slovakia**, the Ministry of Education has set up an expert group to discuss possible modifications of the current rules in relation to smartphone use at schools as a response to PISA 2022 results.

In **Slovenia**, while there have not been major policy shifts, there have been initiatives and campaigns aimed at raising awareness and promoting healthier digital habits among young people. Campaigns have been initiated to educate parents and young people about the potential negative impact connected to excessive time spent on screens, with information on setting healthy boundaries for device use, and encouraging more physical and social activities. Annually, safe usage of the internet is presented and debated. There is collaboration with health organisations to monitor and address the physical and mental health impacts of excessive screen time.

1.2. Policy actions on mobile phones and digital devices

Responses regarding policy actions related to the use of personal devices range from no action to total smartphone bans. In several countries, the preferred option is to integrate smartphone use policies into broader whole-school approaches, for example, media literacy, health guidelines, counselling, exercise, and behaviour development. Such a stance respects school autonomy in making decisions related to the use of these devices. In other countries, governments are giving teachers and school leaders more authority to restrict disruptive device use during class to improve students' concentration. Measures taken include complete mobile phone bans in schools, education level-specific bans of smartphone use, promotion of device use only for pedagogical purposes, development of anti-cyberbullying platforms, expert groups for evaluation and assessment of policies based on evidence.

In **Belgium (Flemish Community)**, a separate policy for "*the digital environment*" or "*smartphone use*" is not expedient for schools. The online and offline worlds may still be separable theoretically, but in practice this is hardly the case. The digital environment is a part of children and young people's life. Smartphone policy has to be linked to a broader whole-school policy with links to media literacy, elements of health policy (e.g., prevention of myopia) and student counselling, provision of exercise, prevention of anti-social behaviour (such as cyberbullying), etc., with the autonomy of the school at the centre.

In **Croatia**, schools formulate their own rules with regards to the use of cell phones. Some elementary schools prohibit their use during school hours. In others, pupils may use them during breaks. The Ministry does not provide any specific

regulations with regards to mobile phone use in schools at national level.

In **Finland**, the government's programme for 2023-2027 sets out new policy actions, stressing that the government aims to enhance the authority of teachers and principals to address disruptive behaviour and activities during school hours. The government may therefore enact specific legislative changes to more effectively restrict, for example, the use of mobile devices during the school day. This is connected to an effort of strengthening students' focus on learning. The National Agency for Education and the Ministry are currently preparing more detailed measures to be considered regarding this government priority.

In **Greece**, the government is enacting a complete ban on mobile phone use by students in schools, starting from the school year 2024-2025. The measure aims to support and foster a more conducive learning environment and to minimise distractions. A dedicated digital platform (stop-bullying.gov.gr) was launched in April 2024 by the Ministry of Education to combat bullying in schools, both in digital and physical spaces.

In **Ireland**, concerns centre around smartphone ownership and their use amongst school children, There have been recent changes to government policy to ensure that there is a ban on mobile phone use by children in schools during the school day.

In **Lithuania**, there are recommendations on the use of tools.

In **Malta**, there is a focus on filtering, encouraging educators to report any form of abuse.

In **Norway**, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training provides strict guidelines for regulations on privately owned smartphones and smartwatches. School owners (municipalities) are recommended to effectively regulate their access and use. It is recommended that between the ages of 6 and15 use of these devices should also be restricted during school breaks.

In **Portugal**, there are no national policy actions to restrict the use of young people's digital devices, including smartphones, in school. On the contrary, the use of digital devices is nurtured for pedagogical reasons, so that students can achieve a better learning experience and teachers can use more innovative learning approaches. It is acknowledged, however, that some schools and municipalities are restricting the use of smartphones. In Portugal, the digital area is a priority, with heavy investment in the Schools' Digital Transition programme. Since 2004, there have been efforts to raise awareness in schools about the importance of healthy and critical use of technologies, with the SecureNet Awareness Center playing a significant role in this regard. National measures that promote this awareness include integration of digital citizenship aspects to the curriculum and national and European strategies.

In **Serbia**, the Institute for Quality Assurance for Education published guidelines related to the use of smartphones and other electronic devices in primary and secondary schools. The guidelines are in line with schools' obligation to specify how electronic devices are to be used.

In **Slovakia**, given that there is currently no unanimous position on this topic, even among the competent stakeholders, the Ministry has approached the solution within the legal framework to provide schools with the flexibility to adapt the rules for the use of mobile phones during school lessons according to their conditions. Currently, the Ministry does not prohibit or otherwise impose restrictions on mobile phones during school hours. The situation and rules regarding mobile phone use in individual schools can vary. Decrees stipulating rules for pupils' conduct, including rules for the use of mobile phones, dress codes, educational publications, safety, and health protection, are regulated by school regulations issued by the headteacher after consultation with the school board and the pedagogical council. Each primary school's regulations state whether it allows pupils to use mobile phones. Some schools actively use pupils' mobile phones during lessons, teaching personal discipline and responsibility. Others have imposed strict bans on their use during breaks but allow students to use them during lessons when needed. Therefore, as with other rules, schools are responsible for setting their own regulations.

In **Slovenia**, the Ministry of Education has not introduced direct restrictions. Schools prepare and use their own regulations on the use of devices in the classroom some schools have banned the use of devices during breaks. The primary policy goal is to encourage schools to adopt a positive approach in comprehensively developing digital competencies, emphasising the relational aspect of digital competencies.

In **Spain**, the Ministry of Education, VET and Sports, following a meeting with the regions regarding the regulation on the use of mobile phone devices in schools, has proposed *"zero use"* of mobile phones in pre-primary and primary education, and limited use in secondary education and VET. Such use should be restricted for pedagogical activities,

and only when the teacher considers it appropriate. The School Council of the State – Ministry of Education, VET and Sports (Consejo Escolar del Estado) has issued a proposal on the use of mobile phones devices in schools. The Spanish Association of Paediatricians (Asociación Española de Pediatras) has published an official announcement on the use of mobile phones during childhood and adolescence.

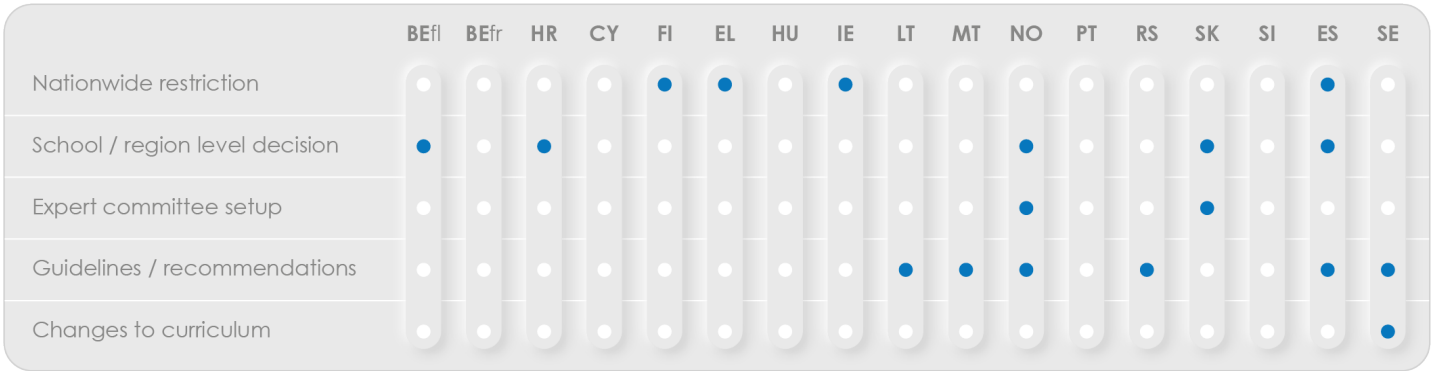
At regional level, 10 out of 17 autonomous regions of Spain have published regulations on mobile phones and devices. Given that in Spain, competence in education lies with the autonomous regions, they are responsible for developing their own regulations based on general proposals suggested by the ministry. Moreover, according to the education law, schools are autonomous to elaborate and implement their own rules of organisation and functioning. Therefore, schools are responsible for regulating the use of mobile phones in most of the country. Regions that have proceeded with measures to limit the use of mobile phones are Galicia, Madrid, Andalucía and Murcia. Regions where schools decide on the regulation on the use of mobile phones by students are Cantabria and Castilla y León.

Regulations on the use of mobile phones by region:

- Galicia: Decree regulating the Law on school coexistence and the protocol of the use of mobile phones and electronic devices.
- Madrid: Decree establishing the Regulating Framework of Coexistence in Schools.
- Castilla La Mancha: Law on Social and Juridical Protection of Infants and Adolescents in the region
- Cantabria: Instructions for the new school year 2023-2024.
- Andalucía: Instruction on the regulation of the use of mobile phones in schools.
- Murcia: Instruction on the regulation of the use of mobile phones in schools.
- Castilla y León: Decree regulating rights and duties of students, rules of coexistences in schools.

The above policy actions (proposed or implemented) are summarised in *Figure 2*.

Figure 2: Policy changes and actions summarised, based on information provided



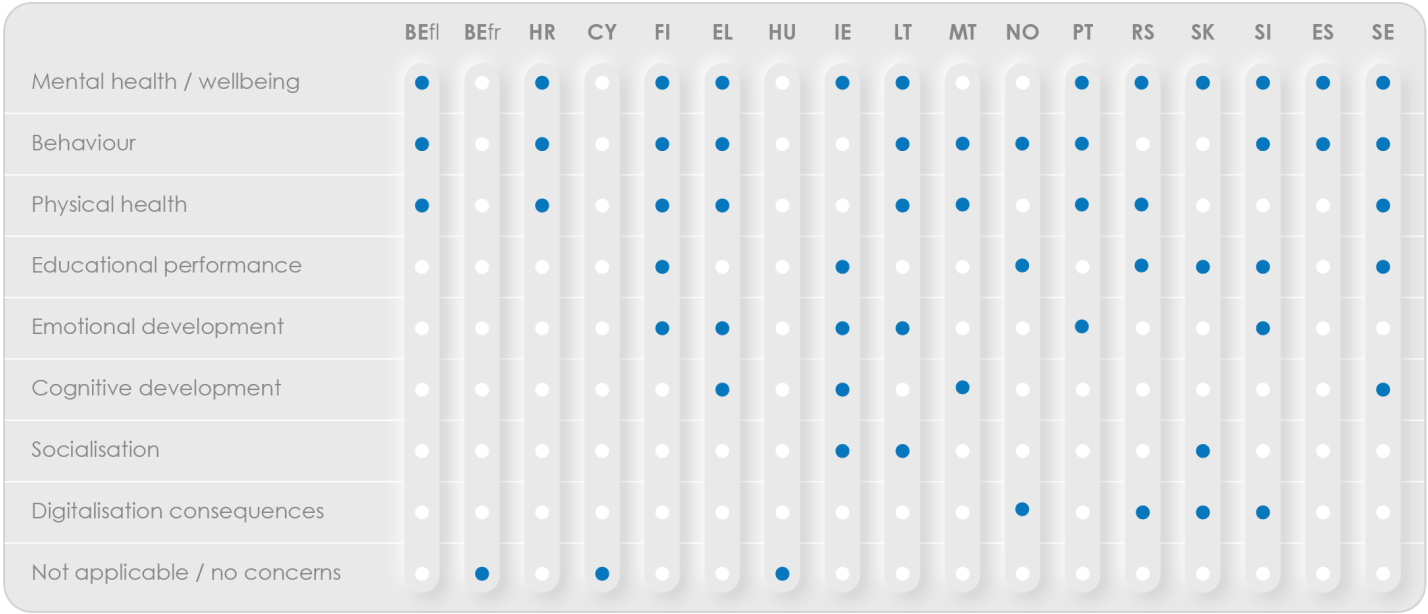
1.3. Policy actions on digital textbooks and digital learning resources

No country participating in this survey has taken action to restrict the use of digital textbooks and learning resources. In **Croatia**, teachers decide on the use of digital learning resources and there are no restrictions in their use. The law regulating the creation of textbooks specifies that they all should have a digital element. Currently, there are no plans in **Finland** to implement policy actions restricting the use of digital textbooks or digital learning resources. Planned restrictive measures focus on devices, primarily mobile devices. The Finnish Publishers Association's educational material statistics show the proportion of educational material sales that are in print and digital format at different educational levels. In **Portugal** no changes have been made in this regard and policy actions target the use of digital resources such as digital textbooks at 3rd grade of ISCED 1 and above. In **Belgium (Flemish Community)**, the government encourages and facilitates broad access to quality and innovative learning resources and learning platforms for teachers and supports projects using digital tools, platforms, and games. **Norway** has no restrictions in the use of digital textbooks and digital learning resources. However, advertisements are prohibited in schools except for some freeware. In **Serbia** the use of digital textbooks is allowed and no change is foreseen. **Slovenia** has no restrictions and focuses on a positive approach with regards to the use of digital learning resources.

1.4. Concerns triggering interventions to restrict screen time

The main triggering concerns that prompt actions or consideration for action relate to mental health and well-being (e.g., anxiety, addictive behaviour, short attention span) of young people (Figure 3). These factors were reported as key by 12 countries. Moreover, 11 of them listed behaviour (e.g., signs of addiction, bullying, lack of concentration), and nine of them mentioned physical health (e.g., lack of sleep, obesity, or exercise), as triggers to any action. Fewer countries reported educational performance (7 countries), emotional development (6 countries), cognitive development (e.g., language development) (4 countries) as the main triggers for policy action. Socialisation (e.g., isolation, poor communication skills), and consequences of the digitisation of teaching and learning (e.g., time spent in front of a screen, pace of reforms) were considered only by a few respondents as intervention triggers.

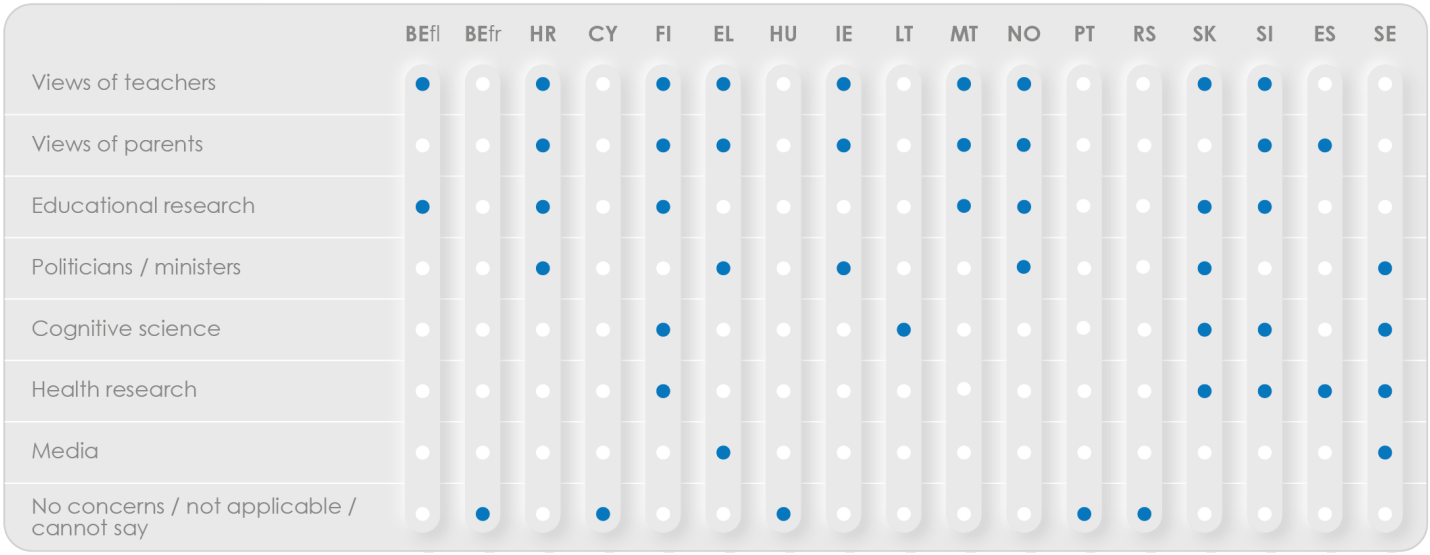
Figure 3: Concerns giving rise to policy actions



1.5. Sources influencing policy development regarding screen time

The views of teachers and school leaders are the source of evidence most frequently cited by respondents in nine countries (*Figure* 4). Eight countries reported parents' and carers' opinions as sources influencing policy development. Evidence from educational research is an influencing source in seven countries, cognitive science and child development research in five countries, and evidence from the field of health also in five countries. Five respondents mentioned that policy is influenced by politicians' opinions and statements, while the media (articles, TV programmes) influence policy action in only two countries. Five countries reported that a specific source of influence cannot be determined.

Figure 4: Source of evidence / pressure to take policy action. Multiple choices possible



1.6. Evidence from research or practice used to support policy debates or changes

In **Belgium (Flemish Community)**, independent research (Ghent Univeristy and Imec[1]) is monitoring the effects of smartphone use on wellbeing in the educational context. It aims to provide important insights and will result in policy recommendations. Furthermore, the effects of using digital devices are becoming more and more integrated in government supported monitoring instruments. An example is Apestaartjaren which focuses on the impact of media (and screentime) on youth culture and youth identity.

In **Croatia**, the Institute for Social Research has carried out research on the use of mobile phones in Croatian primary schools. The report analyses teachers' and pupils' attitudes to the possibility of banning the use of mobile phones in primary schools. The institute has also conducted research on "*The application of ICT in the Process of Learning, Teaching and Assessment in Secondary Vocational Schools*".

In **Finland**, the main sources used in this context are the PISA 2022 results, the government plan 2023-2027, publications of the Research Centre for Education, Assessment and Learning, such as one on the impact of digitalisation on learning environments, learning, and learning outcomes in middle schools, the physical activity recommendations for 7-17 year-olds, data on the wellbeing of students by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, and leading publications such as the study on Health Behaviour in School-aged Children.

In **Greece**, actions related to anti-bullying policies were informed by data presented by major child rights organisations such as The Smile of the Child's national survey on school bullying.

In **Ireland**, research is being undertaken by the Anti-Bullying Centre at Dublin City University DCU to inform the impact of smartphone restrictions on bullying behaviour in the Irish context. The study includes surveys of primary, and post-primary students, collected over a number of timepoints as well as focus groups with students and school staff. The purpose of the study is to obtain a better understanding of

1 Interuniversity Microelectronics Centre (IMEC) is an international research & development organisation, active in the fields of nanoelectronics and digital technologies with headquarters in Belgium.

how effective these initiatives were from the perspective of both staff and pupils, ensuring that a broader picture has been captured. As part of the study, researchers are also undertaking a review of existing international research in this area.

In **Lithuania**, Mediavaika, created by the Vilnius University researchers and funded by the Lithuanian Science Council and the State Public Health Promotion Fund, collates information from scientific studies of children's screen-based media use.

In **Norway**, the main sources used for policy actions are findings from the UNESCO 2023 Global Education Monitor report, the PISA 202 national results, the PIRLS 2021 national results, and the ICCS 2022.

In **Slovakia**, two studies have been influential in this regard. The first is Beland, L.-P., & Murphy, R. (2016). Ill Communication: Technology, distraction & student performance. The second is Labour Economics, 41, 61–76. Beneito, P., & Vicente-Chirivella, Ó. (2022). Banning mobile phones in schools: Evidence from regional-level policies in Spain. Applied Economic Analysis, 30(90), 153–175.

In **Sweden** cognitive science studies from, among others, Linköping and Lund Universities and from Karolinska Institute have influenced the debate.

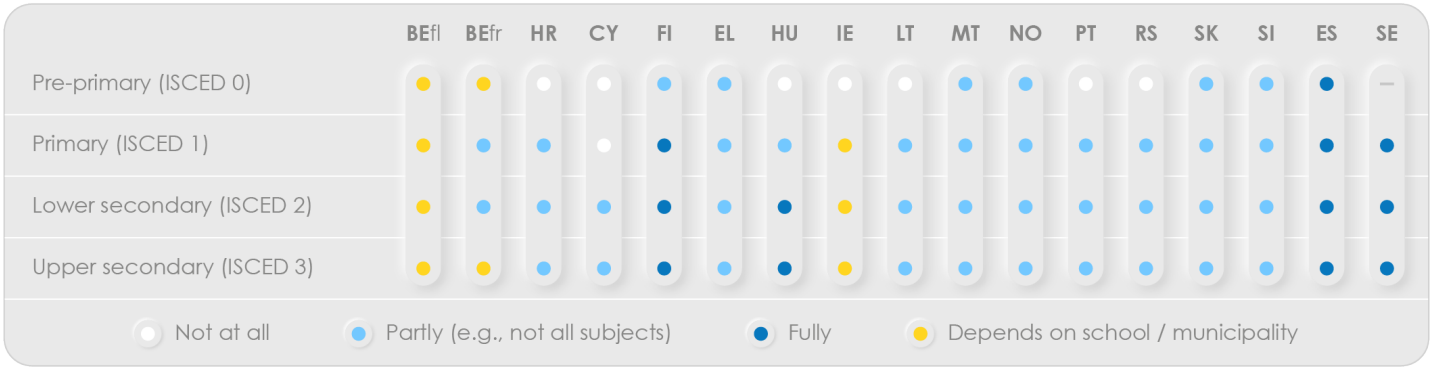
2. Education systems and personal device policies

The second part of the survey investigated the move from analogue to digital in education, the integration of digital technologies, tools, and services in the curriculum as well as new and innovative teaching and learning practices in schools. In this publication, the terms 'digitalisation' and 'digitisation' are both used. Digitisation is a technical process of moving information into digital form, whereas digitalisation refers to changes in ways of working that utilise digital technology (McGrath, C., & Åkerfeldt, A. 2019; Korhonen, T., Juurola, L., Salo, L., & Airaksinen, J. 2021). However, since the debate revolves around the issue of the increased use of screens, it is appropriate not only to consider the innovative nature of technology integration in education, but also the potential impact of the technical process that has led to the digitisation of several elements in education.

2.1. Extent of curriculum digitisation

The pre-primary school curriculum is partly digitised in six countries and fully only in Spain (Figure 5). The primary school curriculum is partly digitised in 11 countries, fully in Spain, Finland and Sweden. The secondary school curriculum is partly digitised in 11 of the responding countries and fully digitised in four (ES, FI, SE, HU). In Belgium (both in the Flemish and French Communities) and Ireland curriculum digitisation depends on the school or municipality, at two or more levels.

Figure 5: Extent of curriculum digitisation



2.2. Screen time concerns and digitalisation

Asked to what extent concerns about screen time or results from relevant international studies have affected the process of digitalisation of teaching and learning in schools, respondents from nine countries felt that the process had not been affected at any school level. On the other hand, four respondents (FI, HR, NO, RS) agreed that digitalisation processes have slowed down '*a little*' at ISCED1 (primary) and ISCED 2/3 (secondary) level, while in Sweden it has slowed down '*to some extent*' at all levels from pre-primary to secondary.

The picture is more consistent with regards to digitising assessment. 14 of the 17 respondents reported that screentime concerns have had no effect on digital assessment in their country. However, four (FI, LT, MT, SE) reported that these concerns have slowed down moves in ISCED 1 (primary) schools '*a little*' (2) or '*to some extent*' (2). In Finland and Malta these concerns have slowed down '*a little*' digitisation of assessment in ISCED 2/3 (secondary) schools.

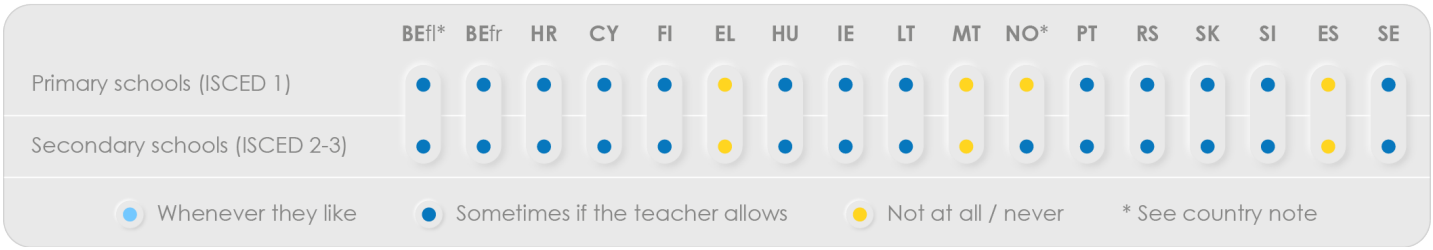
In 11 countries, digitisation of administration is a school level responsibility, in five it is led at local (municipality) or regional level, and in four countries it is central government that leads on digitising school administration. Seven respondents stated that concerns about screen time have

not had any influence on the digitisation of administration. Others may have felt that, owing to the decentralisation of responsibility, it is not possible to state categorically that concerns have had no influence in their country.

2.3. Use of personally owned smartphones, tablets or laptops in lessons

In most systems that are reflected in the survey, students are allowed to use their own smartphone or other device *'sometimes if the teacher allows it'* in lessons in both primary (13 countries) and secondary schools (14 countries), as seen in Figure 6. In four countries (EL, ES, MT, NO) at primary school level and three countries (EL, ES, MT) at secondary level, students are not allowed to use their mobile devices at all in lessons. In no country represented in this survey may personal devices be used whenever pupils wish to.

Figure 6: Are pupils allowed to use their own smartphone, tablet or laptop in lessons? (n=17)



Individual country responses provide more nuanced picture with some respondents emphasising that the International authorities may issue recommendations but that decisions are made at school level (see below, section 2.5).

In **Belgium (Flemish Community)**, schools decide the rules about mobile phone use. Schools are divided into three different types when it comes to smartphone policies: schools with a strict policy of no smartphones at all, those where use is permitted if the teacher allows it, and those where pupils may use them whenever they like (however, the last category is an exception). Most schools apply the rule that students may use them occasionally in a targeted way for a specific exercise. This happens more often in secondary than in primary school.

In **Croatia**, the teacher decides if and when digital devices may be used during the lesson. There are no strict rules. In some elementary and secondary schools, the use of mobile phones during school hours is prohibited, unless it is necessary for the class activity. In other, pupils may use their phones during breaks between lessons. Rules on mobile phone use in school are not set at state level.

In **Cyprus**, rules prohibit primary school students carrying mobile phones and teachers using them during working hours. According to The State Secondary Schools Regulations 2017, secondary and VET school students are not allowed to activate or use mobile phones or other technological devices in class or at school events, but they may use them during break time. If students are caught carrying or using a mobile phone during class, they can be suspended. Students may use their own device in some circumstances, only if the teacher allows it, depending on the subject and the learning outcomes.

In **Finland**, guidance is provided by the Finnish Board of Education and specific recommendations it publishes. Examples are the 'Restrictions on phone use' (2023), and the 'Rights and obligations related to the use of mobile devices at school' (2017).

In **Hungary**, current policies neither allow nor prohibit the use of personal devices such as smartphones, tablets, or laptops by students in lessons. It is, however, the responsibility of the school to control and regulate it.

In **Ireland**, until 2024 it depended on the school's policy whether students can use their devices for learning. This changed in 2024 and there are now policy changes to ban the use of smartphones for all students in schools during the school day.

In **Malta**, the Bring Your Own Device policy (BYOD) is still to be regulated.

In **Norway**, there are different recommendations for primary, lower and upper secondary schools. In primary school (grades 1-7, 6-12 years), it is recommended to strictly regulate the use of private mobile phones and smart watches during lessons and breaks. Pupils' maturity, social competence, and ability to self-regulate are at their lowest early in the school year. To create peace and order and

a safe and good school environment, there is therefore an additional need for clear and predictable rules for smart watch and mobile phone use in primary school. In lower secondary school (grades 8-10, 13-15 years), it is recommended to strictly regulate the use of private mobile phones and smart watches in teaching, and that, as a rule, mobile phones should also be restricted during breaks. Although the pupils at secondary school are older than at primary school, consideration is given to fewer disturbances and strengthened school environment. In upper secondary schools, it is recommended to strictly regulate the use of private mobile phones and smart watches during teaching hours. Strict intervention during free time and breaks is not considered proportionate and is out of consideration given the pupils' maturity and age. Considerations for a strengthened learning and school environment may nevertheless justify certain restrictions also during free time. Secondary schooling is complex in Norway, with several different educational programs. Any regulation must take into account that the teacher considers that pupils may need access to private mobile phones or smart watches during training and this should be included in the assessment when establishing regulations, as long as it is in line with the principle of free schooling.

In **Portugal**, mobile phones are often used as educational tools in the classroom. Excessive screen time is more related to its use for non-educational purposes than as a support for learning. Therefore, the main focus at the moment is on promoting guidelines for teachers, pupils, and parents, with particular attention to children and young people. Within the scope of school autonomy, each school/municipality can define actions to restrict the use of mobile phone or other digital devices. At a central level, the main policies aim to raise awareness of excessive screen use by promoting various digital citizenship initiatives in schools.

In **Slovakia**, the use of personal student devices is the responsibility of individual schools.

In **Slovenia**, there are no current government, national, or local policies in addition to school level rules. Research financed by the Ministry of Education (ICT in schools, not yet published) shows that the use of personal devices is allowed in slightly more than half of primary schools, and use of mobile phones is permitted in 77% of primary schools. However, actual use in the classroom is less frequent, only 43.5% of teachers allow laptops, 29.6% tablets, and 31.2% mobile phones to be used by students. A significant percentage of teachers (43.4% for laptops and 38.6% for tablets) mention that the school's policy does not support the use of these devices. In secondary schools, the permissiveness is notably higher: 88% of school principals report the use of personal laptops and tablets, and 94% mobile phones. Secondary school teachers reflect this permissiveness, some 60% allowing the use of laptops and tablets during lessons. The use of mobile phones is particularly high, with 72.7% of teachers permitting their use in class. Only a small percentage of teachers (12.7% for laptops and 13.6% for tablets) explicitly forbid their use.

In **Sweden**, decisions with regards to the use of students' personal devices in schools are taken at local level. However, the current situation in Sweden is evolving and new policy and political actions might be taken to further control the use of mobile device use in schools.

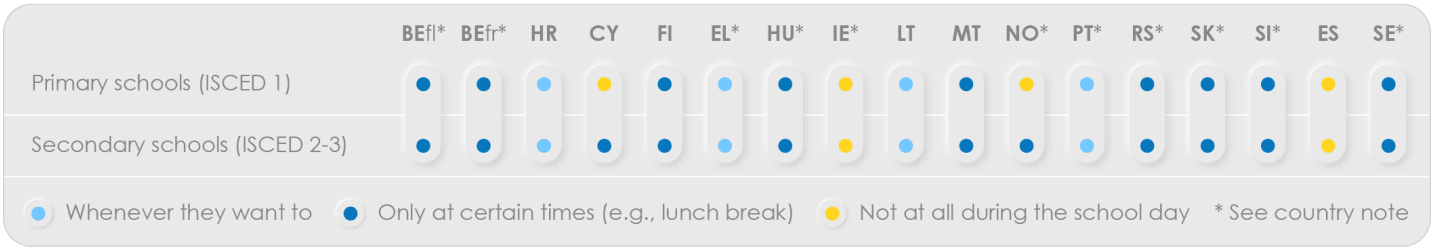
In summary

Policies vary across countries on using personal devices such as smartphones, tablets and laptops during lessons. In some areas, it is up to individual schools to control and regulate usage as they see fit. Other countries prohibit students from carrying or using mobile phones during class altogether, though exceptions may be made if the teacher permits it for specific learning activities. National guidelines exist recommending strict regulation of personal device use during lessons, particularly for younger students in primary and lower secondary levels. However, more flexibility is afforded to upper secondary students based on maturity considerations. The overall trend is towards allowing controlled usage for pedagogical purposes under teacher discretion.

2.4. Use of smartphones and other portable devices outside lessons in school

There is less consensus on pupil access to their own devices outside lessons than inside lessons (Figure 7), and most countries commented that it depends on individual schools. Responses are divided across the range from total freedom to a total ban. In only four countries are pupils allowed to use their own phone whenever they like outside of lessons (EL, HR, LT, PT). In the other 13 countries there are some restrictions. Five countries (BEfl, CY, ES, IE, NO) reported complete prohibition in using mobile phones during the school day at primary school level, while two (ES, IE) reported similar prohibitions for secondary school pupils as well. In eleven countries, secondary school students may use them only at certain times (e.g., lunch break), while the same applies for primary school pupils in eight countries.

Figure 7: Are pupils allowed to use their own smartphone, tablet or laptop outside lessons? (n=17)

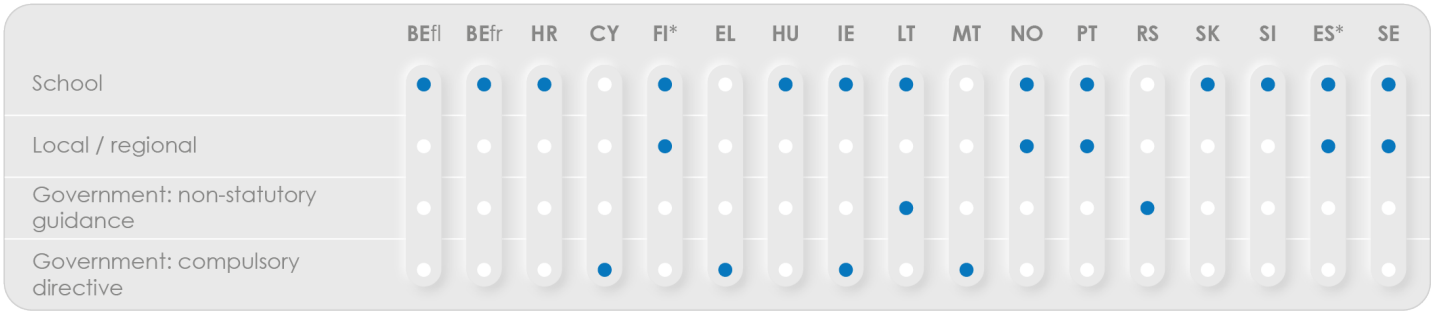


Most education authorities (BEfl, BEfr, EL, HU, IE, NO, PT, RS, SK, SI, SE) stated that, as the issue is a school responsibility (see below), and it is not possible to give a categorical answer. In **Finland** during breaks, the use of phones can be completely prohibited. However, essential communication must be allowed, for example, with parents (more information in Finnish). In **Ireland** it varies from school to school. In some secondary schools there may be tolerance of phone use at lunchtime. However, this might change with the new policy actions regarding phone use that are currently being considered.

2.5. Level at which rules for smartphone use in school are set

The individual school was reported by most countries as the level where decisions are made regarding smartphone use (Figure 8). Of the 17 respondents, 13 stated that education systems follow this approach, while in five systems local or regional authorities also have a responsibility to this regard. The government is responsible by compulsory directive in three countries and by non-statutory guidance in two.

*Figure 8: Level at which smartphone use in school is set (n=17). *: see comment by respondent.*



In **Belgium (Flemish Community)**, schools autonomously set rules for smartphone use and include them in their school regulations so that parents enrolling their children know what to expect.

In **Finland**, the primary responsibility lies with the educational provider (rules of conduct), which are primarily municipalities, as well as to some extent private educational institutions or, for example, universities. All of them adhere to the national curriculum and establish rules of conduct and limitations in accordance with national legislation.

In **Ireland**, from 2024 schools must ban the use of smartphones in schools during the school day.

In **Spain**, competence in education lies with the regions and they develop their own regulations based on general proposals suggested by the ministry. From 2024, schools regulate the use of mobile phones in most of the country, as schools are autonomous to elaborate and execute their own rules of organisation and functioning (according to the Educational Law). As mentioned previously, regions limiting the use of mobile phones are Galicia, Madrid, Andalucía and Murcia. Regions where schools decide on the regulation on the use of mobile phones by students are Cantabria and Castilla y León.

2.6. Examples of policies and rules related to smartphone use in school

- **Finland**: How to make rules of conduct (from the National Agency for Education):. Examples on rules of conduct: Tampere, Helsinki.
- **Greece**: Circular issued in 2018: "*Use of mobile phones and electronic systems in school units*"
- **Lithuania**: Digital education guidelines for general education school leaders
- **Slovenia:** Many schools have prepared rules on the use of mobile devices including computers, e.g. (in Slovenian):
  - Hudinja Elementary School Rules
  - Simon Gregorcic Kobarid elementary schools, "*Computers, smartphones and tablets in Slovenian language lessons*"
  - School Rules (1)
  - School rules (2)
- **Spain**: A meeting of the Ministry of Education, VET and Sports with the regions on the regulation on the use of mobile phones devices in schools proposed "*zero use*" of mobile phones in pre-Primary and Primary Education and limiting it in pedagogical activities when the teacher decides to in Secondary Education and VET. The School Council of the State published a Proposal on the use of mobile phones devices in schools. The Spanish Association of Paediatricians made an official announcement on the use of mobile phones during childhood and adolescence. 10 out of 17 regions have published regulations on the use of mobile phones / devices in schools.
- Regulations on the use of mobile phones by region:
  - **Galicia**: Decree regulating the Law on school coexistence and the protocol of the use of mobile phones and electronic devices: Decreto 8/2015, de 8 de enero, por el que se desarrolla la Ley 4/2011, de 30 de junio, de convivencia y participación de la comunidad educativa en materia de convivencia escolar; Orden de 4 de enero de 2024 por la que se aprueba el protocolo sobre el uso de los teléfonos móviles y dispositivos electrónicos.
  - **Madrid**: Decree stablishing the Regulating Framework of Coexistence in Schools: Decreto 60/2020, de 29 de julio, del Consejo de Gobierno, por el que se modifica el Decreto 32/2019, de 9 de abril, del Consejo de Gobierno, por el que se establece el Marco Regulador de la Convivencia en los Centros Docentes de la Comunidad de Madrid.
  - **Castilla La Mancha**: La won Social and Juridical Protection of Infants and Adolescents in the region. Ley 5/2014, de 9 de octubre, de Protección Social y Jurídica de la Infancia y la Adolescencia de Castilla-La Mancha.
  - **Cantabria**: Instructions for the new school year 2023-2024: las instrucciones de inicio del curso 2023-2024.
  - **Andalucía**: Instruction on the regulation of the use of mobile phones in schools instrucción el 4 de diciembre de 2023.
  - **Murcia**: Instruction on the regulation of the use of mobile phones in schools Instrucciones para la regulación del uso de los teléfonos móviles y otros dispositivos electrónicos en determinados centros docentes no universitarios sostenidos con fondos públicos de la comunidad autónoma.
  - **Castilla y León**: Decree regulating rights and duties of students, rules of coexistences in schools. Decreto 51/2007, de 17 de mayo, por el que se regulan los derechos y deberes de los alumnos y la participación y los compromisos de las familias en el proceso educativo, y se establecen las normas de convivencia y disciplina en los Centros Educativos de Castilla y León.

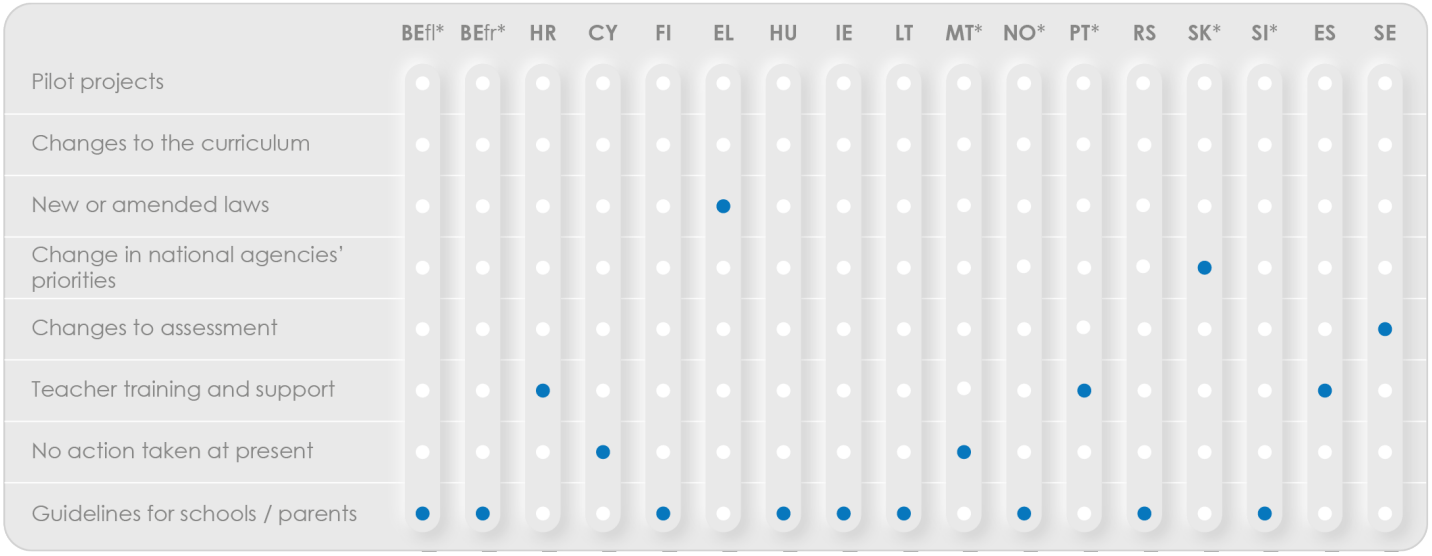
3. Practical measures and reactions

In this final section, practical initiatives by national, regional, and local education authorities, as well as schools to tackle screen time concerns are examined. In addition, the reactions of young people, teachers, and parents to both the screen time issue and the initiatives taken are explored.

3.1. Government or national/local agency actions to address screen time issues

As seen in Figure 9, the most frequently chosen action (9/17 respondents) to address screen-related concerns is the development of guidelines. In three (ES, HR, PT) it has been the provision of training for teachers. Only three countries reported no action having been taken, with the respondent from Malta commenting: *"We are still in a stage where we are quantifying this and understanding its impacts."*

*Figure 9: Actions taken by government/national/local agencies (n=17). Only one answer possible. *: see comments.*



As the survey allowed only one response, the chosen options could be considered as the key action. Several respondents added other actions in comments. In **Slovakia**, for example, there are also pilot projects. The respondent from **Finland** commented: *"As well as guidelines, there has been a change in the remit, focus, and priorities of national agencies and teacher training and support. Laws, new curricula and changes to assessment may become possible in the future if the restriction of mobile devices, as outlined in the government program, is promoted during this government term from 2023 to 2027."*. The respondent from **Slovenia** added that there have also been pilot projects, teacher training and support, and changes to the curriculum.

3.2. Practical measures to address concerns about screen time use in school

In **Belgium (Flemish Community)**, the government provides information and general guidelines that schools can use to shape their own policy. This is done through non mandatory publications and advice in the form of articles, training courses and information sheets. Some examples are:

- Digisprong knowledge centre website, where the ICT policy planner is published to help schools get started on creating a general ICT policy plan. With the policy tool Media Literacy, the school can develop a policy on media literacy and a specific theme (cyberbullying, sexting,

portrait and copyright, online identity, disinformation, digital balance and smartphones, cybersecurity and privacy).

- With an information sheet on smartphone use, schools are supported to develop their own policy via concrete guiding questions and answers.
- Via the educational portal KlasCement, all kinds of teaching materials and teaching packages -also about smartphone use- are also made publicly available. There is a specific theme page on this topic with a charter that schools can use to make agreements about smartphone use.
- The education magazine Klasse also covers the issue of smartphones at school.
- Interesting trainings and information for teachers are media coach training, First Aid For Cyberbullying, the Digital Balance, Safe Online and Clicksafe.

In **Belgium (French Community)**, there are guidelines produced by Yapaka on screen time and children. In the previous edition, 405 School Clusters were certified with the 'School Without Bullying-School Without Violence' Label. Interesting trainings and information for teachers are media coach training, First Aid for Cyberbullying, the Digital Balance, Safe Online and Clicksafe.

In **Malta**, there are efforts to quantify screen time use in schools, compare with data from schools abroad and understand how best to address any issues.

In **Norway**, most schools have introduced daytime storage for phones and smartwatches, to limit pupils access to the devices during school hours, although it is not mandatory.

In **Portugal**, some initiatives that have impacted schools, promoting the healthy and critical use of digital environments and the prevention of online addictions in children and youth are as follows:

- The oldest initiative of the SeguraNet Awareness Center is the SeguraNet Challenges that involves schools, students and parents. These challenges are organized within schools, involving teams composed of teachers, students, and/or parents or guardians. The mission of these teams is to respond to the challenges that are launched throughout each edition on an online platform. Over 80,000 participants are involved in each edition.
- The Digital Leaders have the mission to intervene both among their peers and other members of the educational community in which they operate, encouraging them to adopt a critical, reflective, and responsible attitude in the use of technologies and digital environments. This initiative already has 9 editions.
- The School Without Bullying-School Without Violence initiative aims to raise awareness within educational communities about bullying and cyberbullying phenomena. It encourages schools to implement anti-bullying policies, provides training for teachers, and fosters a culture of respect and empathy among students.
- The Digital Academy for Parents Program is an initiative promoted by E-Redes (the company energy distributor in Portugal), in partnership with DGE, provides training sessions for parents promoting digital skills, with the participation of volunteer students. Three courses are available in a Moodle community of practice from DGE about: 1. Basic digital skills; 2. eSafety and Digital Citizenship and 3. Digital Consumer.
- Teacher training is crucial for schools to keep up with the fast changes in education. Continuous training helps teachers stay updated on the latest trends and tools, ensuring that they are prepared to put in practice new teaching methods. A set of accredited Digital Citizenship courses and workshops were developed for teachers, which were made available to the network of School Associations Training Centres (CFAE, composed of 91 centres). This network submitted 300 requests for the provision of these courses to the Directorate-General of Education to be able to implement them in the schools they oversee. Being one of the training courses on the theme of preventing online addictions in children and youth.

In **Slovakia**, the Research Institute of Child Psychology and Patho-psychology, an organisation managed by the Ministry, is engaged in spreading awareness in the use of mobile phones by children. The Institute has developed several supporting materials on this issue, for example, in the form of podcasts and commented on this topic also through interviews in the media or at various professional events.

In **Slovenia**, there are two examples of non-mandatory practical measures:

- In 2021, guidelines for screen use in children and adolescent were developed by the Ministry of Health and education experts. Implementation is ongoing, through counselling and promotion.
- "*Parental control over mobile phones*".

In summary

To support schools developing their own policies, authorities provide guidance such as publications, advice articles, training courses and online toolkits. These offer general guidelines that schools can adapt. Initiatives focus on promoting digital literacy, preventing cyberbullying and achieving a healthy digital balance. Teacher education courses cover methods for integrating technology responsibly into lessons. Some schools have introduced daytime storage systems to limit student device access during school hours, though not mandatory. Awareness campaigns engage parents on digital citizenship and safety. Student leadership programs empower young people to adopt critical and responsible technology use habits.

3.3. Reaction of young people, parents and teachers to the issues and policy responses

In response to a question about the views of young people, parents and teachers on this issue, the public education authorities surveyed summarised them as follows:

In **Belgium (Flemish Community)**, learners and parents benefit from clear guidelines regarding what can and cannot be done in the school with regards to smartphones. Parents share the view that responsible use is key. No signals have yet been received from these target groups concerning the need for a general broad ban.

In **Finland**, several news items (in Finnish) provide a reasonably good insight into the current state of public discourse in Finland and our country's media, as well as among citizens and guardians. Some examples are APU360 (2023) which cites views that mobile phone bans are becoming more common in schools and that the rules are perhaps a bit too strict. In the YLE article (2023) an opinion was cited that one should not restrict the use of children's phones, even if most people would like to.

In **Greece** there was an overall positive reaction among teachers and parents regarding the ban on mobile phones in schools. On the other hand, young people disagreed with it.

In **Hungary**, according to research conducted in elementary schools that have introduced restrictions related to the use of cell phones, some pupils and parents support it, but some others do not.

In **Malta**, parents and teachers tend to have opposing views on the matter. The topic elicits mixed feelings.

In **Norway**, many schools had already strict regulations for private digital devices before new national guidelines were introduced. Most parents and teachers agree with the guidance.

In **Portugal**, there is a complex and comprehensive debate about screen time, which involves various stakeholders, especially parents and teachers. Major concerns are expressed about the impact of screen time on the development of children's and young people's cognitive, physical, emotional and social skills, and health.

In **Slovenia**, there is a complex and comprehensive debate about screen time, the reactions are varied. With regards to the measures that are not general but concrete and transferable to everyday practice, the reactions are rather positive.

In summary

There are mixed reactions from students, parents, and teachers regarding policies on personal device usage in schools. Some support clear guidelines and responsible use, while others disagree with strict bans or restrictions. Parents and teachers tend to have differing perspectives on the matter. Public discourse reflects concerns about the impacts of excessive screen time on youth development and well-being. Authorities are promoting initiatives including awareness campaigns, teacher training and student leadership to foster digital literacy and balance. Schools are implementing measures such as storage systems to limit device access during school hours. Overall, there is an ongoing debate among stakeholders on striking the right balance.

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