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MP for Chelmsford

The distraction of smartphones in classrooms makes learning harder

IN the past week or so, I've spent quite a bit of time talking about children and education.

As I mentioned last week, I recently joined parents at a meeting with representatives from Essex County Council, discussing special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). A few days later, I visited Newlands Spring Primary School where I had the privilege of looking around the school during a very busy and bustling lesson time, and speaking briefly to some of the pupils.

I then met with some of the school's Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) – the staff who provide additional support to teachers and pupils in the classroom. They told me about the increasing challenges they are facing and the extra demands that are being placed on them, which are making their roles harder and harder.

Some of this is about the surge in children with SEND and the complexities surrounding that. Then there are changing parental attitudes towards teachers and schools, with more and more parents being less respectful and less willing to work together with schools to help regulate their children's behaviour. Not all parents, of course, but an increasing number nonetheless.

And while I certainly believe that it's right and proper that parents raise questions and hold schools to account, doing this in an appropriate way is absolutely key to success.

We also talked about the misunderstood and increasing influence and dangers of smartphones on children. Coincidentally, this was the topic of a virtual roundtable discussion I joined a few days later in Parliament where headteachers from across the country explained what they were witnessing in their schools in relation to smartphones, what they've done about it, and why the Government should be doing more. In short, they were advocating for a legal ban for smartphone use in schools. It was difficult to disagree with them.

The debate over smartphones in classrooms is less about technology and more about priorities. Schools are meant to be spaces of learning, curiosity, and social growth. Yet, the glow of a screen too often eclipses the spark of a conversation or the focus of a lesson.

Advocates for banning smartphones argue that it's not about



Marie Goldman, the Liberal Democrat MP for Chelmsford, visited Newlands Spring Primary School and, inset below, at Beaulieu Park School

demonising devices, but about reclaiming attention. Teachers know the struggle: one eye on the board, the other on TikTok. The result? Fragmented learning and a culture of distraction. A ban would send a clear message: that education deserves our full concentration, not the half-hearted multi-tasking that smartphones encourage.

There's also the matter of equity. Smartphones amplify social divides, flaunting who has the latest model and who doesn't. Removing them from the school day levels the playing field.

It's a small but symbolic step toward inclusion, ensuring that status symbols don't dictate social hierarchies in the lunch hall.

But for me, the most pressing concern is mental health. Research shows that excessive smartphone use among children is linked to anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and low self-esteem. Social media, in particular, fuels unhealthy com-

parison and the fear of missing out, leaving young people feeling inadequate. Cyber bullying thrives in these digital corridors, often spilling into the classroom and undermining wellbeing. Schools cannot solve the entire mental health crisis, but they can reduce one of its daily triggers by limiting phone use during the school day.

The panel of experts also pointed out the lack of knowledge that many parents have about what their children are seeing on their smartphones. It's easy for parents to have a false sense of security, assuming that their children will see similar stories, images and videos that they see in their own doom-scrolling. But that couldn't be further from the truth.

The way the social media algorithms work, children are frequently being served up vastly different content to their parents – and I don't just mean cute picture of pets or teenage angst issues, but graphic pornography, violence, and suicide ideation.

It's incredibly worrying and an obvious place to look for the cause of a growing mental health crisis in our children.

Listening to the roundtable headteachers discuss the positive impact banning mobile phones in their schools has made on the mental health of their pupils, it was hard to find any genuine argument for keeping smartphones in schools, other than perhaps for pupils with certain health conditions where a phone app helps them to monitor them.

We also heard from Parentkind, a network for parents across the UK. It was clear from their research that the vast majority of parents would be keen to see a ban, too, especially for primary school-aged children. Many felt a legal ban would make it easier for them to delay giving their own children a smartphone, with much less peer pressure emanating from the school playground.

Critics will say banning phones is draconian, that students must learn to manage technology responsibly. Fair point. But schools already regulate countless behaviours: uniforms, attendance, even chewing gum. Why should smartphones be exempt, given their out-sized impact on concentration and wellbeing?

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The ban isn't about nostalgia for chalkboards or a fear of progress. It's about recognising that education thrives on focus, dialogue, and human connection. Smartphones can wait until the final bell rings. In the meantime, let's give students the gift of undistracted learning, and perhaps remind them that the most important network they'll ever join is the one built face-to-face.

Finally, in my week or so of talking to and about children, I'd like to say a huge thank you to Beaulieu Park School for inviting me in to talk to their students and to take questions.

I was grilled for two hours, first by Year 8, then by the Student Council, and finally by Year 13. They asked some brilliant, thought-provoking questions. I hope they enjoyed it as much as I did.

Keep being inquisitive.
Marie