

2024.06.11

### **3.5 Connétable K. Shenton-Stone of St. Martin of the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning regarding mobile phones in schools (OQ.106/2024)**

Will the Minister advise what consideration, if any, is being given to following France and banning (or limiting) the use of mobile phones in schools in Jersey and, further to his response to Written Question 212/2024, will he advise when the responses to the 2024 Children and Young People Survey about this topic will be published?"

#### **Deputy R.J. Ward of St. Helier Central (The Minister for Education and lifelong Learning):**

I thank the Constable for the question. There is an ongoing consideration of mobile phone use in schools and what a blanket ban may look like for schools. I would say that most secondary schools on-Island already have strict mobile phone policies in place and many local schools have been phone free during the school day for a number of years. Statistics Jersey, in the second part of the question, will be conducting the Children and Young People Survey on 7th and 18th October 2024. The year groups involved are years 4, 6, 8, 10 and 12 and the results are expected to be published in March 2025.

#### **3.5.1 The Connétable of St. Martin:**

Smartphone Free Childhood is a parent-led movement on a mission to protect millions of children from the dangers and distractions of smartphones and this movement is gaining traction in Jersey. Some of us met members of this movement at a recent constituency surgery. I would just like to know whether the Minister would be prepared to meet with this group to further understand their concerns?

#### **Deputy R.J. Ward:**

Yes, I have had a lengthy conversation with one of the members of the group already, so I am aware of the issues involved here, and I am very cognisant of some of the issues that are raised. I also will be meeting headteachers in their meetings next week for secondary heads and primary heads as well. I have also been to a number of schools recently. I will be visiting all schools in the next few weeks and months and doing that thing which is most important, which is speaking to young people. Their views on this are mixed. I will say one interesting statistic, which is that based on the 11-day term time and 7 hours a day in school, that equates to approximately 15 per cent of the time in a year that is actually spent in school. So the influence that schools can have in terms of the ban of mobile phones leaves 85 per cent away from schools, and therefore there needs to be a relationship between the school, the student and parents if you are going to look at what is safe in terms of the access to smartphones across the Island.

#### **3.5.2 Deputy T.A. Coles:**

Is the Minister concerned that if there was a ban of more tech ... sorry. As tech is becoming more prevalent within our education system that banning technology may have a detrimental impact on students ability to learn?

#### **Deputy R.J. Ward:**

I thank the Deputy, and I think the Deputy has hit the nail on the head in terms of this debate itself. There is a delicate balance to be had between access to phones, policing the access to

phones and the appropriate use of phones and the long-term education of young people in appropriate, considered, and safe use of online resources. Indeed, I think there are many adults who might need advice on the use of their phones. I say that quite seriously in terms of when to switch them off, when to take time away from the phones, and I think we all have become somewhat addicted to this incredibly powerful device. I will say that one of the issues we have is that we do not have control over large social media providers. They do not have servers in Jersey. I have a huge concern that profit has come before safety for many of those providers. But that balance between the use of phones as an educational tool, and they can be ... you can get G.C.S.E. (General Certificate of Secondary Education) Bitesize on your phone, if you are revising. It is a real difficult one to balance. Schools that do give access to mobile phones really want to use them in an educational way, and we have to discuss the way that will happen and the appropriateness before we make blanket bans.

### **3.5.3 Deputy H.L. Jeune:**

The Minister has just started to allude to an answer to my question, but could the Minister advise if the Curriculum Committee - I think that is what it is called - advises the schools on the maximum amount of screen time that should be allowed when setting daily online homework, often by multiple teachers, and online revision for exams?

### **Deputy R.J. Ward:**

I thank the Deputy for that, because again that has highlighted an issue that we have. We are talking about screen time or mobile phone time. The digitisation of education is a reality. We use a screen. There is an online safety policy, I have it in front of me but it was only updated in 2021. That is certainly something that needs to be addressed. I think that is an issue across schools, that screen time and a number of different subjects can build up so that young people spend a lot of time in front of iPads or P.C.s (personal computers) or laptops. I think the question though about mobile phones is how we will use those appropriately in conjunction with that screen time. Yes, it does have to be controlled. I know there is research into the effect of blue light, when they should be switched off. What I would say is I would like to take the opportunity to say to parents, I know how difficult it is with children - I have children myself - but I would urge them to think very carefully about when they would buy a mobile phone, having the controls, and there are parental controls that can be used on phones, and having the switch-off time for their children and controlling that. It is really difficult, but schools will be there to support parents in terms of that application of controls over the use of phones.

### **3.5.4 Deputy H.L. Jeune:**

Will the Minister advise what discussions have been had on some of the potential addictive qualities of online curriculum support apps that are used in school? This could add to the concern around behavioural addiction, especially at primary school age. I can give some examples to the Minister in private as well.

### **Deputy R.J. Ward:**

That is a real issue. The online safety policy does need to be reviewed. It is more a safeguarding policy as much as anything else when it comes to addiction. These are new issues that are arising all the time, particularly with the way that apps are produced, and there is an issue that we have to address. But I will go back to the point that the 15 per cent of time spent in schools, it will be easier for us in schools to control that access, to control what is used and control the use of mobile phones. All of the 11 to 16 schools do not allow, for example, phones to be used in school. My concern is that other 85 per cent, and how we can educate, inform,

help parents, help young people to really control when they are not within the auspices, control, and *in loco parentis* of the school day.

**Deputy H.L. Jeune:**

Sorry, Sir, I was just wondering, both my questions the Minister was not really answering in the sense he is answering about parents and the control outside of school, but I was talking about the curriculum and the fact that the use of the curriculum on these specific apps that have addictive behaviour. If he could just answer if there are discussions around that particular use of these support entities that schools are starting to introduce into the curriculum.

[10:15]

**The Deputy Bailiff:**

I think you did address that, is that right, Deputy Ward?

**Deputy R.J. Ward:**

It is a very generic question in terms of the curriculum. Forgive me, but the curriculum to me is the content of a curriculum. I think what the Deputy means is the increased use of apps that may come with a particular curriculum resource. For example, schools I know can buy curriculum resources, a book, and the book can also be online, it can be an app for questions, et cetera. They can be very useful. They can support learning. They can be a background to learning, and they can give you ease of access, particularly around exam time. In terms of the balance of time and the addictiveness of them, we have to look very carefully at that. I agree. But we also need to think about how are we going to guide our students through the preparation for exams, the preparation for the future world in terms of the use of digital technology. That balance is a very, very difficult one to have. But I am more than happy to talk that through, both at Curriculum Council, at P.S.H.E. (Personal, Social, Health and Economic) development, and also when I talk to headteachers in the coming weeks, because that is certainly something we will be discussing.

**3.5.5 Deputy I. Gardiner:**

I welcome the Minister's response about the balance and control in school and outside of school. Would the Minister advise what plans he has to enhance online safety training within school and to parents, to make sure that it has all worked cohesively?

**Deputy R.J. Ward:**

I thank the Deputy because I think that is exactly the point. We do have to work on that. We are in a world of exponential growth in what is available on smartphones, and we need to try and respond to that in terms of the way in which we educate and inform parents on the use of those apps, et cetera. I think we do have a larger piece to do across the board with parents and young people. I will say though, that schools can only be responsible for so much. There is only so much time in the day and access that we can have, that teachers can have. Teachers cannot be responsible for every single aspect of what is going on in a wider society. However, they do do that. There is some good advice given. I am working on some things that we could put out centrally. For example, some simple videos on showing parents how to set parental locks on phones, which can be done, and some simple advice on limiting screen use. I would say, there is also a balance that sometimes phones are given to children who will start to walk to school, for example. In those situations, I know that primary schools, year 6s for example, give their phones into the office when they arrive, and yet again schools are doing their best to control that usage. There is a balance to be had, and that is the relationship between parents,

schools, and the student that we can certainly build and work on to give the advice where possible.

### **3.5.6 Deputy M. Tadier:**

Does the Minister accept that whether it is for an adult or a child or pupil, that a phone is not just a phone, it is also a diary, it is a wallet, it is a calculator, it is a compass, it is an encyclopaedia, it could be their books, and it can be a music tool including for writing, reading and even playing music? Et cela peut même être utile pour la pratique de l'apprentissage de notre langue, c'est on le veut. Does the Minister think that actually the focus should be on not banning, but limiting and encouraging appropriate use of phones in schools?

### **Deputy R.J. Ward:**

*Merci pour la question.* Yes, I agree. Again, we are in this delicate balance. Where do we educate our children in the appropriate use of these devices, which are real? I know I have music on my phone, and I spend my life, really - the majority of my time - listening to music on my phone. Children do have diaries. There are some really useful learning apps, for example, but we have to get that balance right. I go back to this figure that only 15 per cent of time is spent in school. I think as an Assembly, if we want to make a decision on the wider use of phones and the wider ban or the wider access to what type of phones young people will have, that will be a decision for this whole Assembly because it is much wider than just schools. It goes across our society into all aspects of what young people do. That will be the issue. But the balance is correct. Otherwise, we have young people hitting a cliff at the age of 16 or 18, whatever age we decide, and entering into a digital world that they really do not know how to work with, and that could have unintended consequences.

### **3.5.7 Deputy M. Tadier:**

There is also a question of equity that I would like to put to the Minister. Some families or some children may either choose not to have a phone or they may not be able to afford to have a phone at all. Other children may have one phone but wealthier children arguably might have a phone, a laptop and an iPad which they can bring to school. If we are taking away a child's only use of technology that they have, when another child might have multiple forms, will the Minister agree to look at technology in the round and not simply limit it to the mobile phone argument?

### **Deputy R.J. Ward:**

We are stretching the question over mobile phones here. But, yes, I think that was exposed largely during COVID when young people were working at home online and many did not have devices other than a phone to work on. There were many constituents, parents, who were contacting me saying that they were having to give their phone to their child to work on online work. So yes, we do need to address that. I think the access to digital devices to access is different from the access to mobile phones. It is a strange sort of mix, really, between the access in terms of economic ability to have a phone and those who may well have the economic ability and much more that want to protect their children in a different way from access to phones. Again, we have another disparity between the 2 areas of our society. I do not have the full answer to how we address that issue. I do not know if we have that full answer as an Assembly and as a society. But one of the things we need to do is try and work together to come up with the best solution to that. Personally, I think that is funding our schools appropriately. Looking forward and enabling our schools to do the best possible job they can in supporting our teaching staff and our schools in general.