

JANUARY 2025

UNPLUGGED AND UNHEARD:

DUTCH YOUTH ON SMARTPHONE POLICIES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

The concerns about smartphone usage among young people are often raised in relation to their academic performance, well-being, and experiences of cyberbullying. In classrooms, smartphone usage is frequently disruptive for both students and teachers. This has led to a growing discussion about how schools should best manage smartphone usage.

To address these concerns, the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science of the Netherlands, in collaboration with various educational sector organizations, decided that, as of January 1, 2024, mobile phones and other digital devices should no longer be allowed in the classroom unless they are being used for educational purposes ([Rijksoverheid, 2023](#)).

The way in which this policy has been implemented varies across schools, and sometimes even within individual classrooms. Some schools have adopted strict policies, requiring smartphones to be kept in lockers throughout the school day, while others allow more flexibility, permitting use during breaks and between classes.

This report reflects on the first year of the stricter smartphone policy in secondary schools, with a specific focus on how students experience it. The report offers concrete guidelines for incorporating student input when further developing smartphone policies in schools.

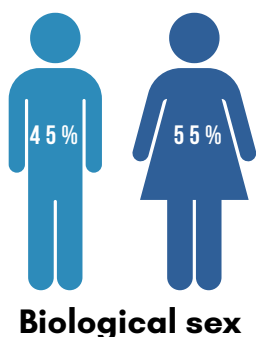
In May 2024, the Radboud University published a Dutch report on the expectations and initial experiences with smartphone policies at two secondary schools in the Netherlands. This report highlighted the benefits of clear rules but also the resistance that can arise among students when they have no say in shaping those rules. The main recommendation, therefore, was to involve Dutch youth in the development of smartphone policies.

Building on those findings, this report provides deeper insights into how young people experience smartphone policies. It focuses on the extent to which young people have had a voice in shaping the policies and how this impacts acceptance and satisfaction. It also examines the level of autonomy Dutch youth experience within different implementations of the policies.

With the insights from this report, we aim to encourage schools to give young people a voice in shaping smartphone policies. Not only because participation is a fundamental right of young people, as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), but also because successful policies rely on support, and support grows when young people feel heard.

RESEARCH DATA

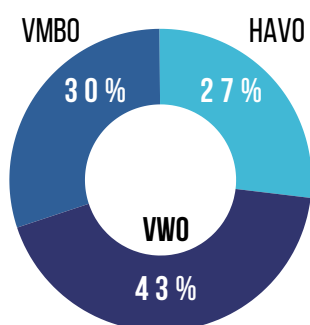
The research data presented in this report forms part of the 8th measurement of the "Samen Uniek" Twin Study, conducted between May 20 and June 20, 2024, by the Leiden Consortium Individual Development (L-CID) in collaboration with [SO-REBEL Research](https://www.so-rebelresearch.com). The research was funded by an NWO VENI granted to Dr. M. Achterberg.



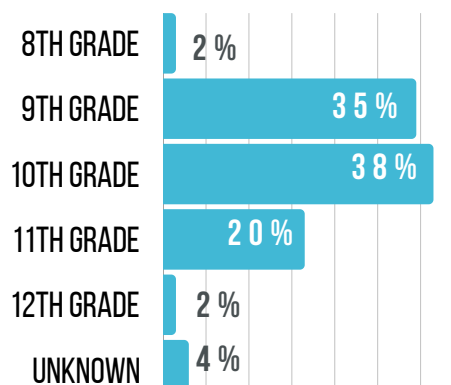
The participants in the study were 170 students aged 14 to 17, residing in 65 different locations in the Netherlands. The majority (85%) of participants were from the western Netherlands (South Holland, North Holland, and Utrecht).

99% identified as ethnically Dutch, while 7% reported having multiple ethnic backgrounds, including Moroccan, Surinamese, and Indonesian. 68% of the participants had at least one parent who completed higher education, (comparable to a bachelor's degree).

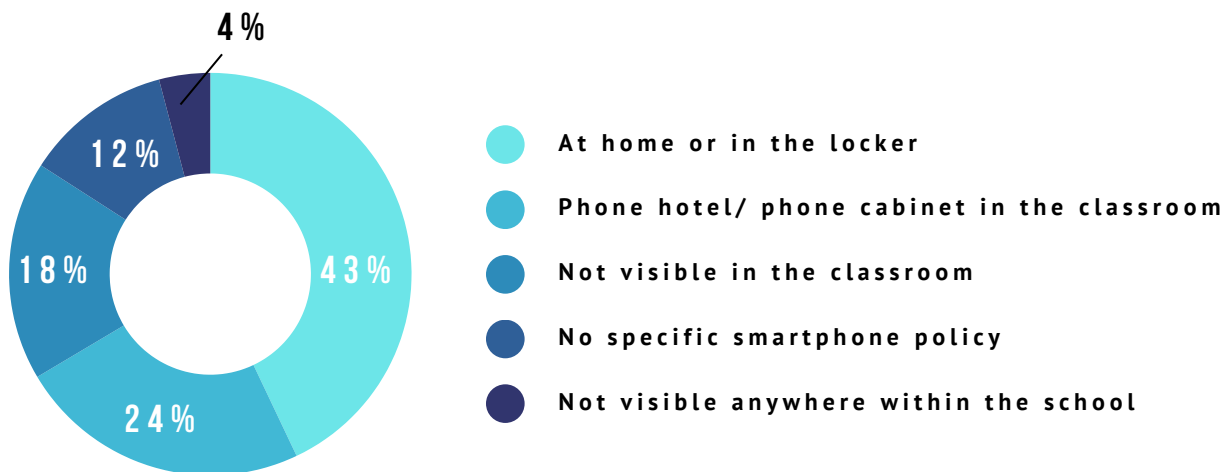
Participants were enrolled in secondary education in the Netherlands, which is divided into different academic tracks: pre-vocational (VMBO/MAVO), general secondary (HAVO), or pre-university (VWO, including gymnasium). Most participants were in their 3rd or 4th year of secondary school, typically around 14 to 16 years old.



CURRENT EDUCATIONAL TRACK

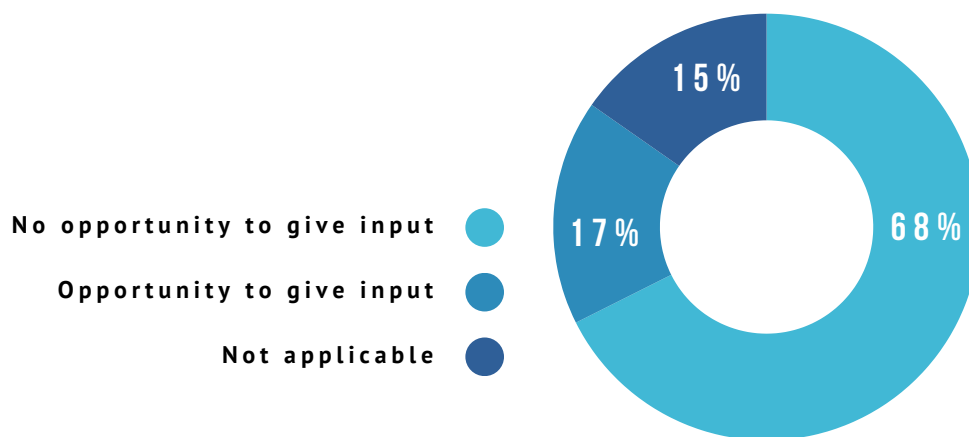


DIFFERENCES IN SMARTPHONE POLICIES



The stricter smartphone policy has been implemented in various ways at schools and differs in the level of restrictions. The differences primarily lie in whether the use of phones is allowed during breaks and to what extent the phone must remain out of sight during lessons.

STUDENT VOICE IN SMARTPHONE POLICIES

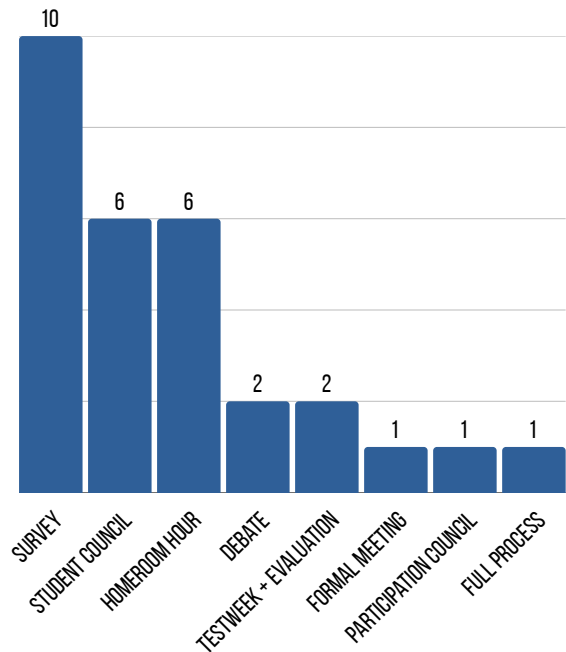


The data shows that the vast majority of Dutch youth had no input in shaping the smartphone policy at their school. Only 29 out of 170 respondents (17%) indicated that they were somewhat involved in the development of the smartphone policy at their school. Most participants (68%) reported that they were not asked to contribute to the policy design. Since some Dutch youth attend schools without a smartphone policy or misinterpreted the question, 15% of the respondents fell under the category 'not applicable'.

TYPE OF STUDENT VOICE

The way students could give their input was mainly through surveys (10 students) and formal structures, such as the student council (6 students). The table below shows the methods through which young people were consulted.

Notably, only one student reported being involved throughout the entire process of shaping the smartphone policy. This student also felt that the school genuinely acted on the feedback and evaluation. This highlights how limited young people's involvement is in the development of smartphone policies.



Of the 29 students who were allowed to provide input on the policy, 5 explicitly stated that they still felt unheard because the school did not act on their input.

“At the beginning of the year, we (the student council I am part of) discussed this with the principal. We had agreed that phones could simply be placed in a phone hotel in classrooms. Unfortunately, the school board decided to implement a complete smartphone ban next year. We were totally left out of the decision-making process.”

AUTONOMY

When it comes to rules and regulations about smartphone usage at school, students report being more satisfied when they have some say or control over how they are allowed to use their phones. Students who are required to hand in their phones at the beginning of class and place them in a phone hotel tend to express greater satisfaction with the rules. Similarly, there are nuances regarding the 'at home or in the locker' policy. For instance, students who are allowed to retrieve and use their phones during breaks are often more satisfied than those who must leave their phones in their lockers all day.

This aligns closely with the **self-determination theory** by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (2000). This theory explains that people are more motivated and happier when three basic needs are met: autonomy, competence, and connection.

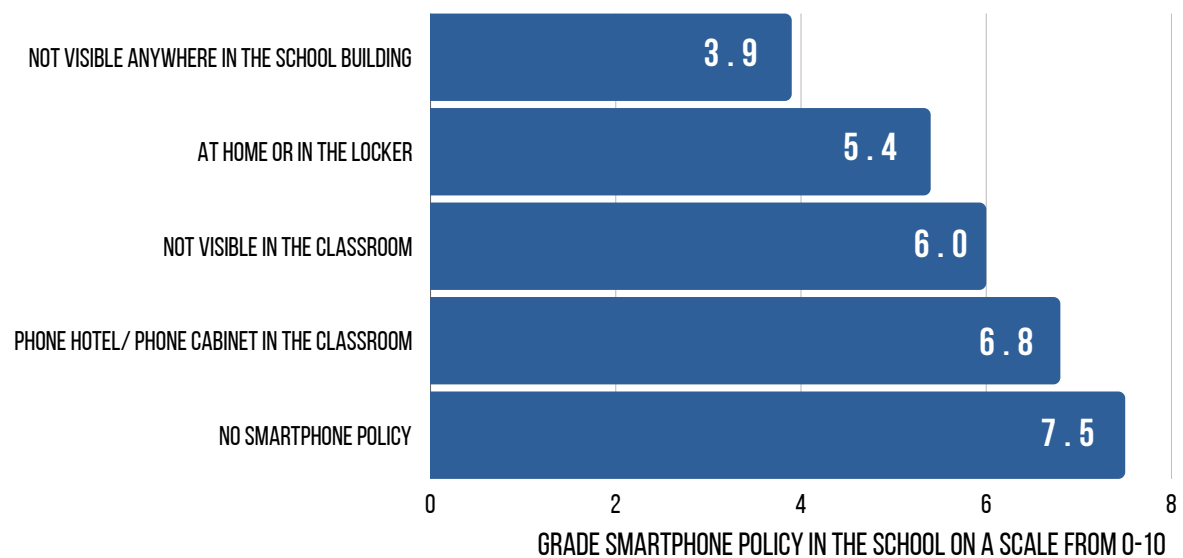


In this context, the sense of autonomy is particularly important. This means that students want to feel a sense of control over decisions that affect them. When students can decide for themselves when and how to use their phones (within the boundaries set by the school), they feel more independent and autonomous.

Strict rules without student input, which completely remove autonomy, are more likely to lead to frustration, reduced support, and lower levels of satisfaction.

STUDENT SATISFACTION WITH SMARTPHONE POLICIES

Young people's satisfaction with the smartphone policy within the school depends on the type of policy implemented. In general, students gave the highest ratings when there was no restricted smartphone policy in place. Policies where phones were only prohibited during lessons received the second-highest ratings. Policies that restricted phone use throughout the entire school day (including breaks and other free periods) were rated the lowest in terms of satisfaction.



... IS LINKED TO THE LEVEL OF AUTONOMY

The data shows that young people's satisfaction strongly depends on the level of autonomy they retain within the smartphone policy.

Overall, **40%** of young people indicated they were satisfied with the current policy at their school. When we focus on which students are satisfied with the policy, we see that those who are allowed to keep their phones in a **phone hotel or phone cabinet** in the classroom are the most satisfied. Of these students, **58%** reported being happy with this policy.

When phones are not allowed to be visible during class, 50% of students report being satisfied with this policy (15 out of 30).

For the 'at home or in the locker' policy, we see a clear distinction:

- On average, **26%** of students report being satisfied with the 'at home or in the locker' policy (19 out of 73).
- When students are allowed to **use their phones during breaks**, **43%** are satisfied (9 out of 21).
- At schools where phone usage is **not permitted during breaks**, this percentage drops significantly to just **13%** (3 out of 24).

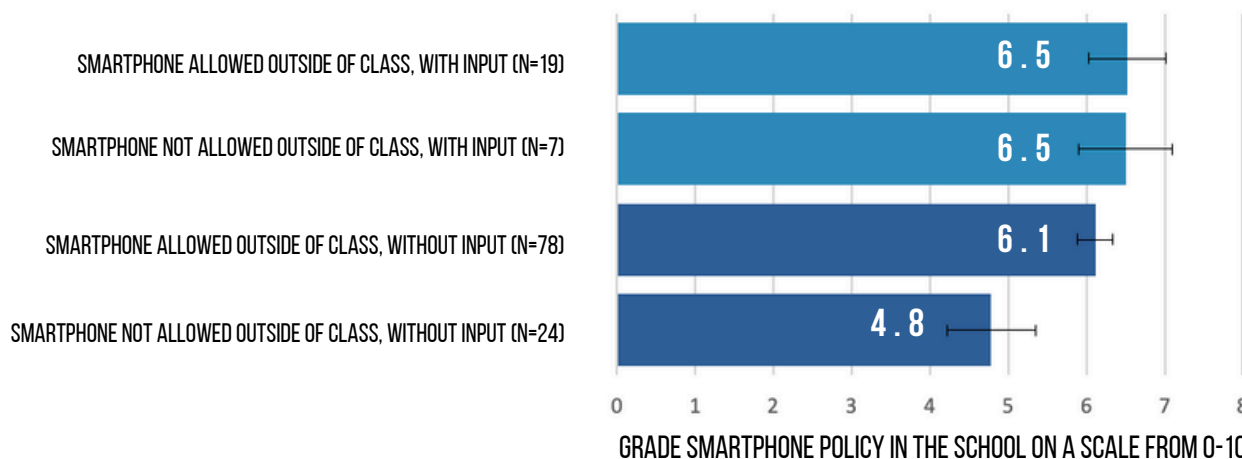
ONLY 13% ARE SATISFIED WITH A TOTAL BAN (IN BOTH CLASS AND BREAKS).



58% ARE SATISFIED WITH A BAN DURING CLASS ONLY (PHONE HOTEL POLICY).

SATISFACTION AND STUDENT VOICE

Satisfaction is closely linked to the level of input students have. The 26 students who were **involved in shaping the smartphone policy** gave the policy a **higher rating** than the 102 students who were not consulted.



The level of input seems more important for satisfaction than the specific policy itself. Even with stricter policies (e.g., no phone use outside of class), satisfaction is higher when students had a say in the process than with more lenient policies where they were not consulted.

SUGGESTIONS FROM THE STUDENTS

It is important to note that only a small percentage of young people (13%) express very negative opinions about the smartphone policies in their school. The vast majority of students who disagree with the current smartphone policy make specific suggestions for adjusting it.

The most frequently mentioned suggestion is to allow phone usage outside of class. This point is especially prominent in schools with a 'phones at home or in the locker' policy, these students express a clear preference for allowing phone usage during breaks and free periods. Students perceive the smartphone ban during breaks as too strict, expressing a desire to check their schedules or contact friends to find out where they are.



At my school, I don't think there are many negative consequences, because you're allowed to use your phone during breaks. You can check your schedule or grades and stay in contact with people. In general, the biggest downside might be that you can't check your schedule if, for example, a class is cancelled. Also, you can't text your friends or parents during school hours, which can be quite inconvenient



However, some students also mention that they appreciate the increased opportunity for in-person interaction with peers during breaks. For free periods or during cancelled class hours, students often express a desire to spend that time as they choose.

CLARITY AND CONSISTENCY

A large portion of the surveyed Dutch youth are asking for **clearer rules and stricter enforcement**. This suggestion is especially common among students who currently follow policies such as using phone hotels or keeping phones out of sight during lessons. The students indicate that ambiguities around the policy lead to frustration or arguments in class.

“Officially, phones are only allowed in your bag or locker. But many kids just keep their phones in their pockets. Teachers react differently to what kids do with their phones. Most teachers are okay with you keeping your phone in your pocket. There's no phone hotel, and we can just keep on using our phones during breaks.”

It is also frequently mentioned that different teachers enforce the policy inconsistently, leading to confusion about the smartphone policy and the consequences of not following the rules.

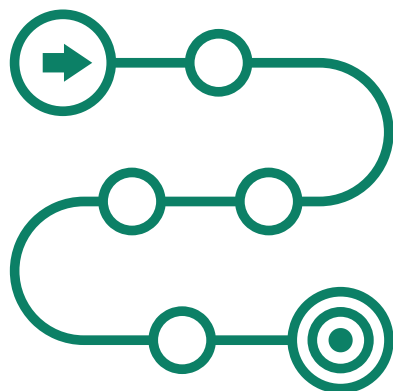
“The idea is that every teacher handles it the same way, but in reality, every teacher does it differently. With some, the smartphone policy is very strict, and with others, it's not. One teacher disciplines you right away, while another gives you three chances before asking you to put your phone in your own bag.”

CONCLUSION & SUGGESTIONS

Although there have been some efforts to involve young people, the level of input they have in smartphone policy remains extremely low and is often limited to one-time consultation moments. **This indicates that student participation is not yet an integrated part of policymaking in many schools.**

The lack of structural involvement and follow-up can lead to students feeling unheard, which may impact the support for the policy. Schools aiming for more effective policies should strengthen student engagement and create opportunities for youth input throughout the entire process.

Youth participation, combined with effective evaluation, enhances both the support and effectiveness of smartphone policies. By giving students a voice, they feel more involved, which in turn leads to greater acceptance of the rules. At the same time, evaluation ensures that the policy remains relevant and can adapt to changing needs.



Through the FINE-framework, we provide concrete recommendations for youth participation in the ongoing development of smartphone policies in schools.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION

F

FOCUS ON THE PURPOSE

Explain to students why the smartphone policy was implemented and how a ban can contribute to a better learning environment. A clear purpose provides a framework for the policy and helps build understanding and support.

I

INTEGRATION OF STUDENT INPUT

Integrate opportunities for student input into the curriculum, for example, during mentor periods, as part of social studies, or as a debate topic in language classes. Collaborate with students to determine how the policy can best meet their needs and those of the school.

N

NURTURE FEEDBACK

Create accessible ways for students to evaluate the policy, such as (online) surveys, an idea box, or recurring evaluation sessions during homeroom block. Ensure this feedback is taken seriously and, where possible, transparently integrated into policy adjustments.

E

ENCOURAGE AUTONOMY AND NUANCE

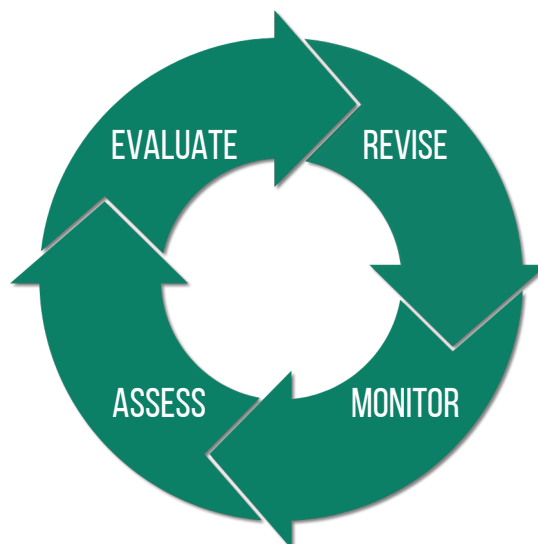
Consider policies that allow for nuance and some degree of autonomy, such as permitting phone use during breaks or between classes. This provides students with a sense of control and can increase acceptance of the rules.

CO-DEVELOP WITH YOUTH

The smartphone policy is the type of policy that needs to be continuously developed. It is a cycle in which youth involvement can be implemented in various phases.

EVALUATE WITH DIFFERENT TOOLS

Schedule periodic evaluations in which the input of both students and teachers is considered. Investigate not only whether the policy is effective, but also how it is experienced. For this, both surveys and mentor hour conversations can be used.



BE WILLING TO **REVISE** THE POLICY

Adjust the policy based on the evaluation and new insights. By remaining open to changes, the policy can be shaped in a way that aligns with the goals and meets the needs of both students and teachers.

MONITOR BEHAVIOR AND SCHOOL CLIMATE

Monitor whether the policy contributes to the desired outcomes, such as less distraction in the classroom and a more positive learning environment. Pay attention to any unintended consequences, such as stress or frustration among students.

ASSESS SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

Discuss the results of the evaluation, revisions, and monitoring with students, and jointly assess the policy. Highlight positive changes and also address various challenges. Work together to find solutions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Funding:

This public report was financed by a Starter Grant awarded to Dr. Jana Vietze and Dr. Michelle Achterberg and by an NWO VENI grant awarded to Dr. Michelle Achterberg.

Cite as:

Brummer, E.C. & Achterberg, M. (2025). *Unplugged and Unheard: Dutch youth on smartphone policies in secondary schools*. Open Science Framework. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/5RW2V>

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