

6th June 2024

Press Release: Southwark secondary headteachers align mobile phone policies to address problems associated with smartphones and Social Media

Headteachers from 16 of Southwark's secondary schools will work collectively to shift behaviours away from smartphone use, helping families and pupils to positively tackle issues including mental health, bullying and screen-time.

The headteachers were prompted to collaborate as they saw first-hand the negative impact of smartphones and social media in their schools. Whilst the issues that they had to address typically occurred outside of school hours, it was often in school that these negative behaviours were exposed. Therefore, a strong desire to collaborate to address smartphone and social media use *outside* of the school gates has been central to the group's aims.

Each of the schools already have strict mobile phone policies which ensure that their schools and classrooms are phone free. Building upon these, the group have agreed to;

- 1. Support pupils and families to understand the well-documented downsides of smartphones and social media use amongst young people.** These include mental health concerns, screen-time addiction, the impact on sleep and attention spans, access to inappropriate and graphic content and increased risk of thefts/muggings.
- 2. Work with their families to update their respective mobile phone policies so as to encourage students to have non-smartphone devices (or 'traditional' mobile phones) until they are – at the very earliest – in Year 10.** Central to this will be higher sanctions for smartphones compared to non-smartphone devices should they ever be confiscated, alongside guidance on ways to move away from smartphone use. This will be aimed, in particular, at pupils in Years 7/8/9 although a number schools within the group are adopting the change as a whole school policy.

Many of the schools are working quickly to make these changes ready for September, with others seeking to rollout the new measures later in the academic year.

A recent House of Commons Education Committee reported that extended screen time has become increasingly normal for young children and teenagers, with a 52% increase in children's screen time between 2020 and 2022. According to this report, "Nearly 25% of children and young people use their smartphones in a way that is consistent with a behavioural addiction." In seeking to make these changes, the 16 Southwark headteachers considered this report as well as wider research including the work undertaken by movements such as <https://smartphonefreechildhood.co.uk/> and publications including Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation*.

The headteacher of The City of London Academy, Southwark, Mike Baxter said, "*The evidence presented over the past 12 months is clear; for our young people, the negative impacts of smartphones and social media use far outstrip the benefits. By working together, the secondary headteachers of Southwark are committed to addressing this problem head-on. The proposed changes will give parents a real alternative as to what type of phone to buy their child, and at what age. Working together we hope to see a dramatic decrease in smartphone ownership amongst Southwark pupils and, as a result, an enormous improvement in their wellbeing and education.*"

The headteacher of Ark Walworth, Jessica West said, "*Southwark secondary schools want children to be safe, well and happy. Many requests for stronger measures have been made of 'big tech' companies but action is woefully slow and that leaves our children at risk. We are therefore acting in collaboration to support families and children in making healthy choices - we take our responsibilities to children seriously.*"

The measures will impact over 13,000 young people in Southwark, one of the highest performing boroughs in London at GCSE and A-Level. The group of secondary headteachers are also in contact with the leaders of primary headteacher groups within Southwark in the hope of establishing a borough wide approach to addressing smartphones spanning both primary and secondary phases. Creating this positive change for the wellbeing and success of young people in Southwark is at the centre of this collective drive.

For any media enquiries please contact;

Matt Jones OBE – m.jones@arkglobe.org – Executive Principal at Ark Globe Academy

Mike Baxter – mbaxter@cityacademy.co.uk – Principal at The City of London Academy, Southwark

The list of schools who have pledged to support this are outlined below.

Ark All Saints Academy
Ark Globe Academy
Ark Walworth Academy
Harris Academy Bermondsey
Harris Academy Peckham
Harris Boys Academy East Dulwich
Harris Girls Academy East Dulwich

Sacred Heart Catholic School
South Bank University Academy
St Michael's Catholic College
St Saviour's and St Olave's
St Thomas the Apostle School
The Charter School Bermondsey
The Charter School East Dulwich
The Charter School North Dulwich
The City of London Academy, Southwark