# St Albans campaign sees sharp drop in smartphones among under-14s after year of advocacy



On a tranquil afternoon in St Albans, as the sun shone over the Cunningham Hill Primary School playground, head teacher Matthew Tavender was engaged in a conversation with local parents about an increasingly contentious issue: smartphone usage among children. Just a year prior, Tavender, along with executive head Justine Elbourne-Cload, had initiated a campaign aimed at discouraging parents from providing smartphones to children under the age of 14. This endeavour arose amid growing concerns regarding the impact of smartphones on children's mental health and development, as highlighted in a joint letter sent to parents throughout the city.

The initiative gained significant traction after it was reported by Matt Adams, the editor of the St Albans Times, which in turn attracted national and international attention. The campaign has since drawn comparisons to a grassroots movement against the influence of tech companies on youth, echoing similar sentiments from various global locales, including Singapore and Australia.

Despite the publicity surrounding the initiative, a year later, the ambition of making St Albans a smartphone-free city for under-14s appears to be more of a long-term aspiration than an immediate reality. However, there have been notable shifts in behaviour at Cunningham Hill Primary. An internal survey revealed a staggering drop in smartphone ownership among Year 6 pupils—from 75% in December 2023 to just 12% by early 2025. Other local schools have reported similar declines, indicating a potential cultural shift regarding smartphone use in the community.

Tavender’s concerns extended beyond mere device ownership; they were grounded in the alarming increase in mental health issues among young people. Reflecting on insights from Jonathan Haidt's book, "The Anxious Generation," he noted profound rises in depression and anxiety among adolescents, emphasising the need for proactive measures in an age shaped by digital interactions. His worries were compounded by incidents requiring police involvement, stemming from incidents of inappropriate image sharing among pupils—issues that earlier generations of educators did not face.

In informal discussions with fellow primary heads, Tavender discovered that anxiety around smartphone usage and its effects—particularly among girls—was a common thread. He observed an increase in body image concerns and school aversion linked to prolonged exposure to digital screens. Teachers, including Tavender, were noticing that students showed reduced resilience and concentration, with shifts in behaviour that reflect the influence of technology on their cognitive abilities.

Tavender's campaign gained momentum following a series of community meetings where parents expressed their anxieties about smartphone use. The St Albans primary schools consortium communicated in their letter that while they had established smartphone-free zones, there was a pressing need to alter the norms surrounding when children receive smartphones. The message was clear: parents should resist impulses to acquiesce to peer pressure regarding technology.

The campaign's structure allows parents to pledge to delay purchasing smartphones for their children until they reach maturity, drawing some parallels to initiatives advocating for healthier lifestyles among children in schools. Even among affluent populations in St Albans, the movement encountered some resistance, albeit much less than similar past campaigns. Many parents recognised the potential pitfalls of premature smartphone access, suspended between their perceived need for connectivity and the desire to shield their children from the complications associated with social media.

In response to growing concerns, other educational institutions across the UK have adopted similar stances. Schools in Southwark, London, are now working to discourage parents from providing smartphones to children before they enter secondary school. Initiatives have also emerged in Barnet, while Eton College recently provided students with basic phones to limit their connectivity.

However, amid these positive indicators, the reality remains mixed. Shops in St Albans still report an average smartphone acquisition age of around 11 years, and despite the positive developments, many teens continue to navigate the complexities of social media in daily life.

The narrative woven around St Albans serves as a barometer for a broader societal discourse on the role of technology in children's lives. While leaders like Tavender celebrate the notable declines in smartphone ownership among younger students, they remain aware of the challenges that lie ahead, recognising that true change will require continued community engagement and collaboration. As the evolvement of this movement continues to gain traction, it remains to be seen whether it will lead to a sustainable cultural transformation or if broader issues will necessitate further discussions on managing technology’s impact on childhood.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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