

Pouches Provide Phone Free Zone in Dingle School

Pobalscoil Chorca Dhuibhne a secondary school in the small town of Dingle, Co. Kerry has been making use of a system to limit the use of mobile phones in a school setting. Éamonn Mac Muiris, the principal of PCD, decided to install the Yondr system to control the use of mobile phones in order to ensure the school environment was safer and more sociable.

The special Yondr pouches were introduced in September of 2021 making PCD the first school in Ireland to use them. Each morning before students enter the school building, they must place their phones into the Yondr pouch which is locked shut by a magnetic pin. The phone must be switched off before being placed in the pouch, and cannot be opened without either a teacher's permission or until the student is leaving the building again. There are magnets located on the outside walls of the school building to open the Yondrs which happens when the pin is tapped against the magnet. The pouches are next to impossible to pull or pry open, as the fastener is a sharp pin that is quite strong and durable ensuring that once the pouch is closed, the phone is inaccessible.

The initial reaction amongst students was predominantly negative with some claiming it was an unnecessary 'invasion of privacy' and was 'far too extreme'. On the other hand the reaction amongst teachers was quite mixed. Some teachers were very pleased with the new approach to phones, as it would 'help students focus on their schoolwork' and they hoped the school environment would 'be more social'. Others argued it was a 'bit of an overreaction' and criticised the draconian measures taken to control students' use of phones.

However, as PCD students have now completed almost a full school year with the Yondr system in place, the initial shock has died down and much of the negativity has gone. Many of the senior students say they can feel the school turning into a more positive social place, and claim their attention is now more fully focused on schoolwork without distraction. Younger students feel the school to be a safer place and agree their attention is more fully focused on schoolwork. One student said "It's kind of nice not be bothered by the constant pinging every few minutes." With the acknowledgement that cyberbullying is a massive issue amongst students, the fact that students feel safer without their phones at school is a sign that the Yondrs are increasing students' sense of security.

Without doubt no matter how effective the system, there are always going to be those looking for loopholes. Students have been caught putting calculators, old phones, phone cases and other items into their Yondr in order to have access to their phones at school. Some students have voiced dissatisfaction with the disparity between those who are obeying the system and those who are not. Regular spot

checks are conducted where teachers with mobile magnets require students to open their Yondr and prove their phone is switched off inside it. There is a graduated penalty system for those repeatedly caught without their phones in the Yondr.

Teachers who feared that introducing the system would increase tensions between student and staff have conceded that it has in fact eased the policing of the misuse of mobile phones. One teacher explained how “prior to the Yondr system, while there was a strict no-phone policy, it was quite difficult to enforce as students, like many of us, cannot resist checking the phone during the day. Confronting students about having their phones led to tension. With this system, if the phone is visible, it’s just immediately handed over as it’s not where it’s supposed to be – in the Yondr! It has actually made the no-phone policy enforceable. It has reduced tensions.” Teacher Paula Ní Dubháin said she was happy about the way “students are interacting rather than being glued to a screen”. Teachers are also satisfied with the fact that it remains easy to use phones as teaching tools in the classroom when required as the pouches can be quickly and easily opened by mobile magnets which are available to teachers.

The experience of PCD to date is that the overall impact of the Yondrs has been positive and of benefit both socially and academically to the school . Principal Éamonn Mac Muiris says, “Young people spend an enormous amount of time staring at screens nowadays, so the idea to limit that during school time is not only great for their focus on schoolwork, but also very beneficial to their health in a broad variety of ways.”