

Backwell School

Insights from Smartphone Stakeholder Research

The following report summarises key findings from the smartphone stakeholder consultation conducted in February and March 2025.

Students, staff and parents were surveyed about their views on smartphones and school smartphone policy. The report is organised into two main sections:

1. Concerning school policy
2. Experiences & Beliefs concerning smartphones

The report presents findings which the researchers hope will be most useful in navigating policy dilemmas in this complex area.



Student Data
n=1139



Parent Data
n=236



Staff Data
n=129

Section 1

Smartphone policy



This first section of the report focuses on current and possible future smartphone policy at Backwell.



Student, staff and parent data are compared on identical questions and common themes to illustrate how the different stakeholder groups experience the current policy and what they hope for in future policy development.



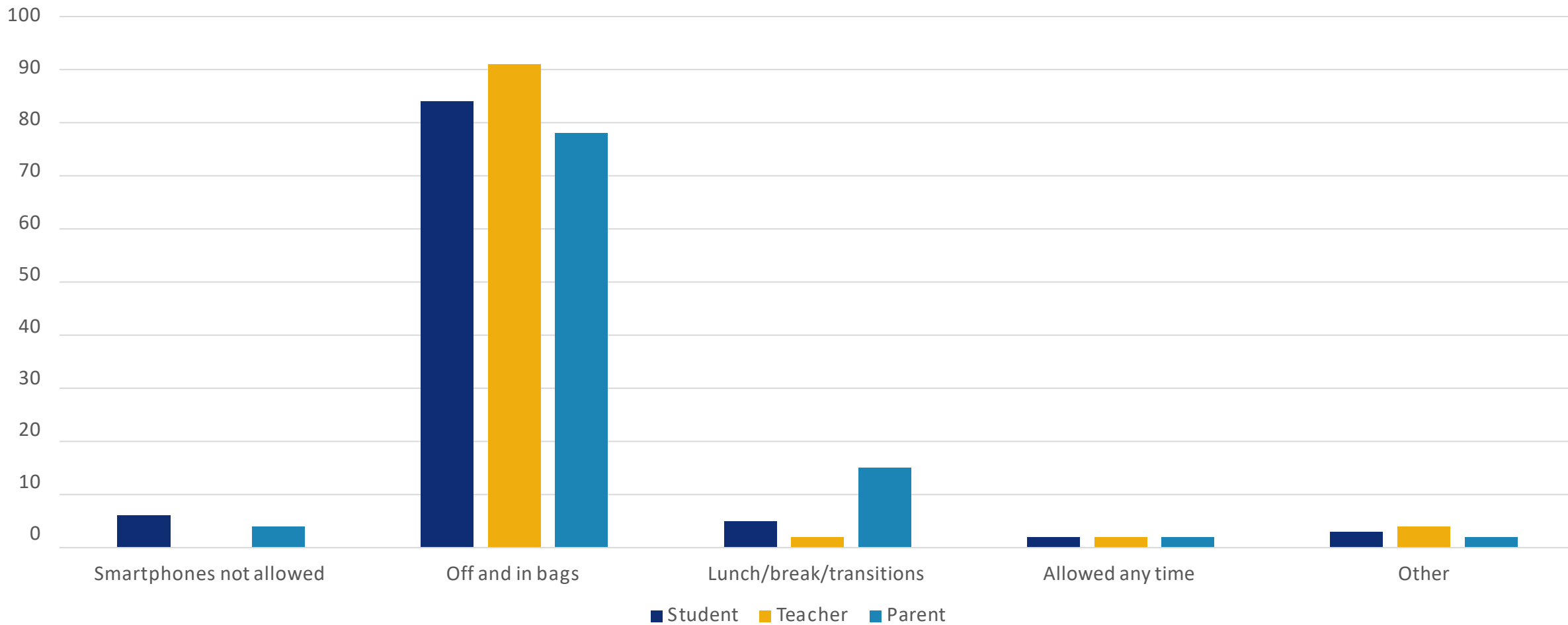
This section is predominantly made up of quantitative data.



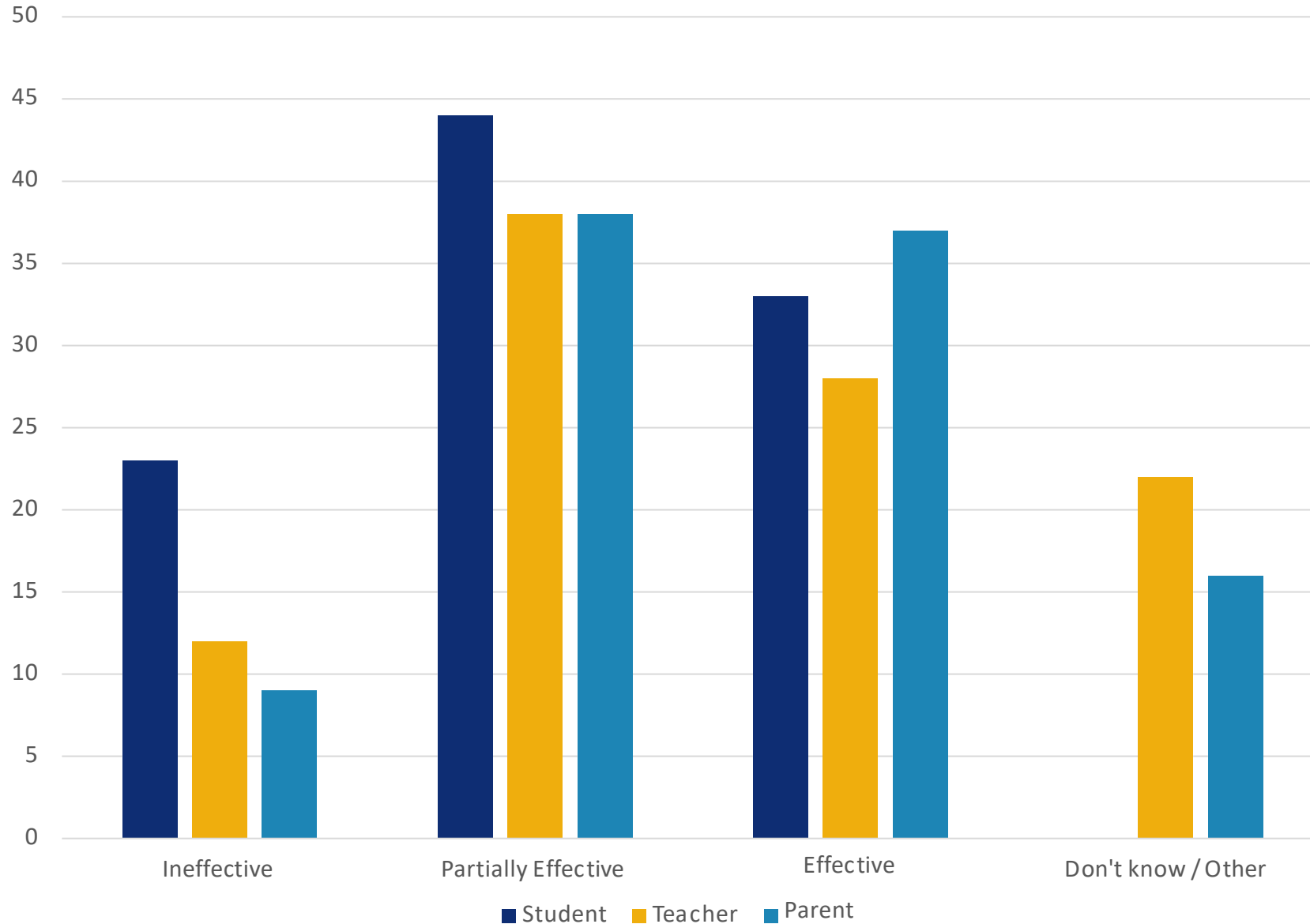
These findings are intended to support policy decision-making for staff and school leadership.

Knowledge of current policy

(To the best of your knowledge, please select the smartphone policy that you think most closely matches your school's policy)



Effectiveness of Policy



27% of staff believe the current policy is '**effective**' at promoting engagement and success in learning.

Other related questions

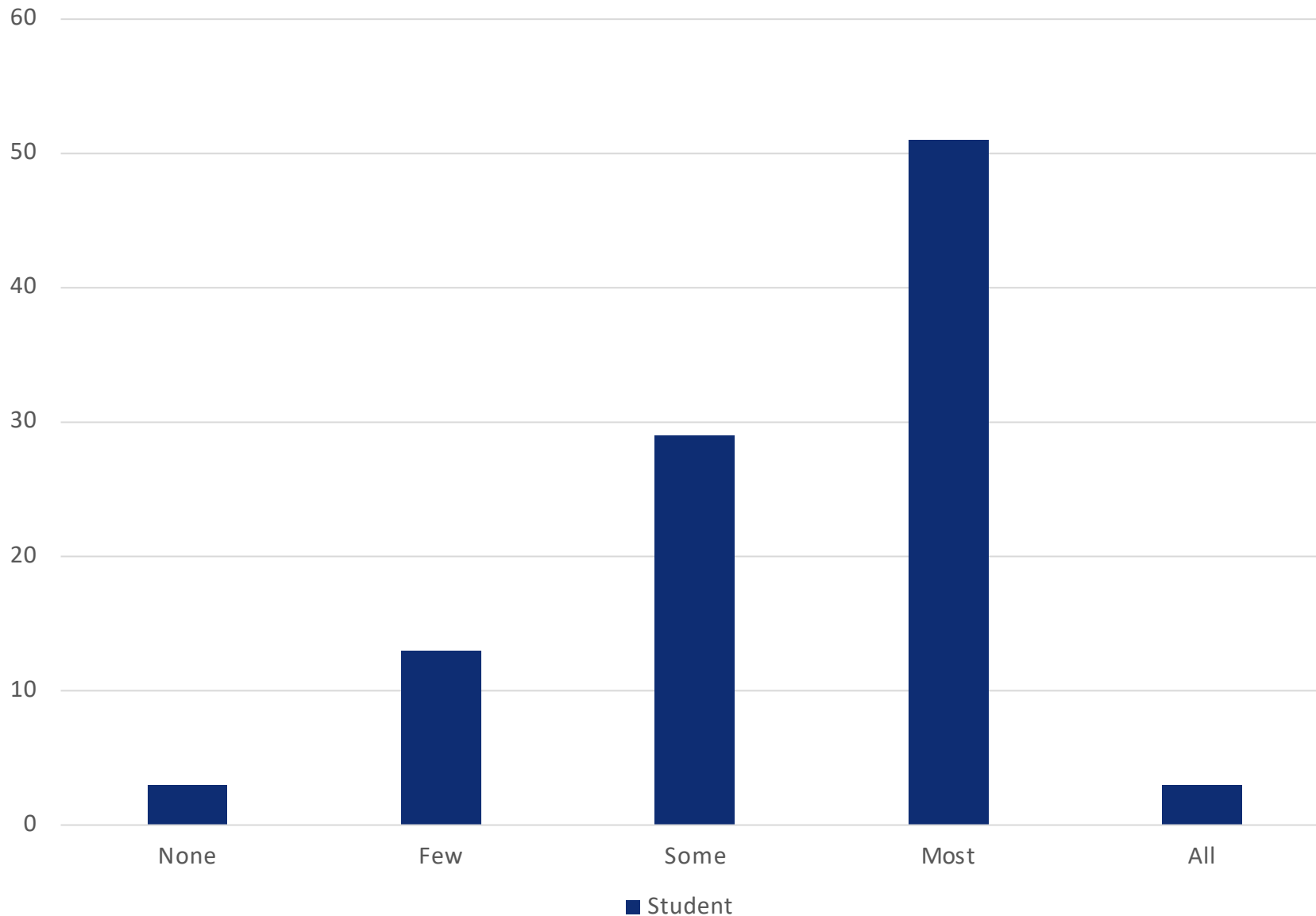
Clarity of policy

74% of staff reported that the rules regarding smartphones are '**very clear**'.

Satisfaction with policy

91% of staff are 'somewhat' satisfied or 'extremely' satisfied with the support they receive from SLT on this issue.

Students views of proportion of students who follow the policy



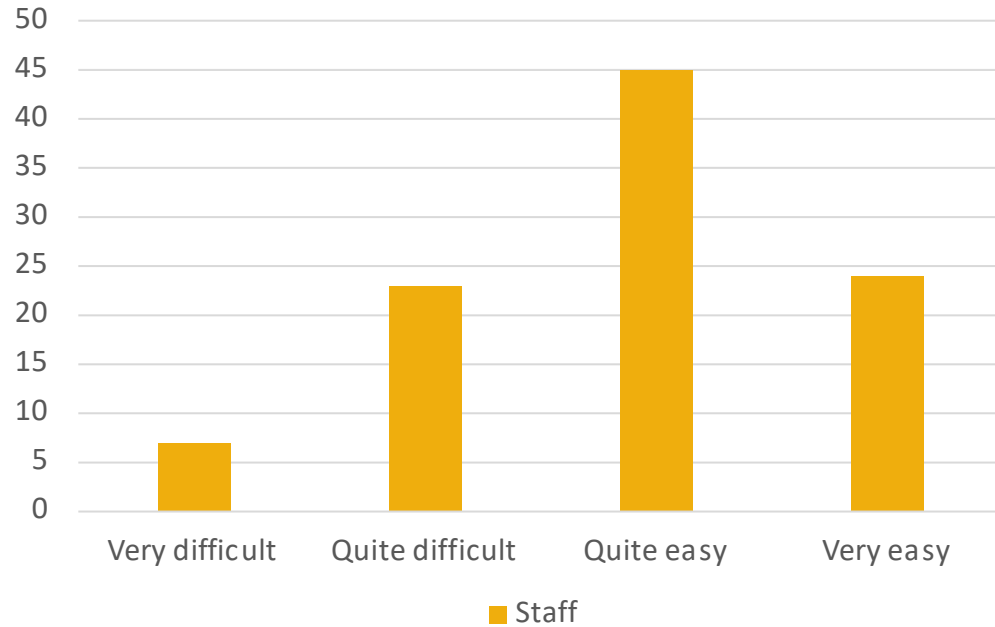
55% of **students** report that '**all**' or '**most**' pupils follow the current policy.

Other relevant questions

Do you follow the policy?

When asked whether *they* follow the policy, **10%** said '**never**', **33%** said '**sometimes**' and **58%** said '**always**'.

Staff ease of enactment



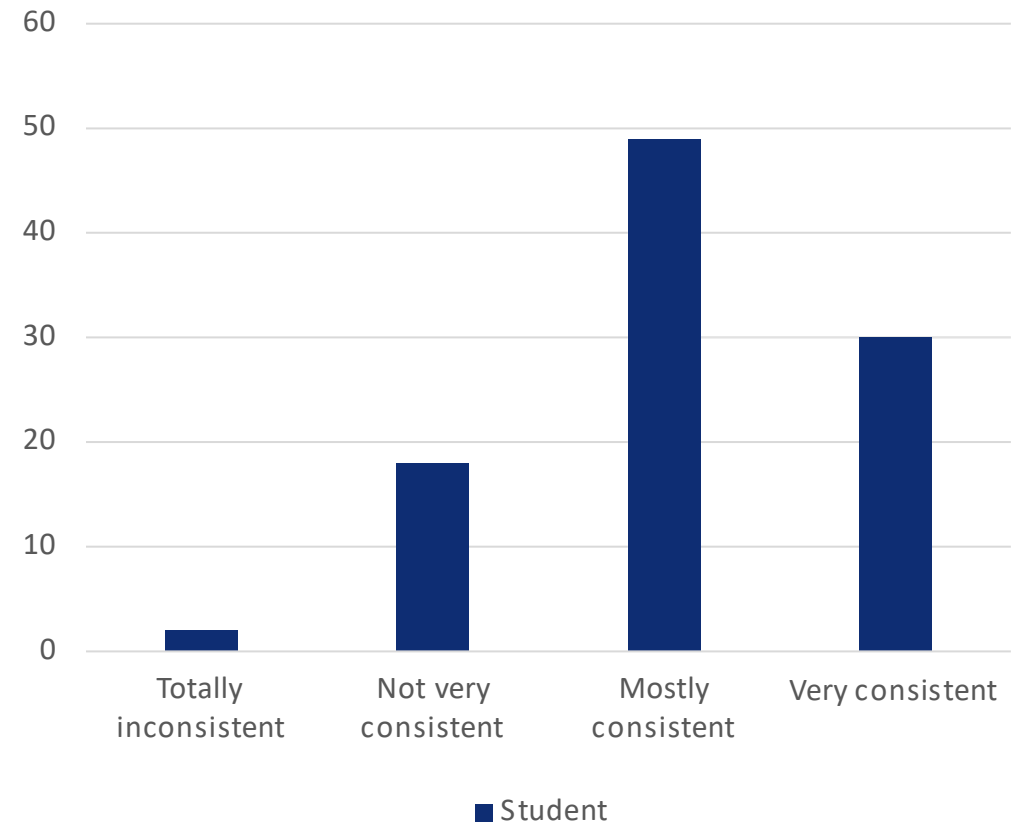
When asked how consistently staff enact the policy **79%** of **students** said 'consistent' or 'very consistent'. **20%** said it was 'inconsistent' or 'very inconsistent'.

Other relevant questions

Only **26%** of **staff** report that '**some**' or '**many**' of the behavioural incidents they manage involve smartphones.

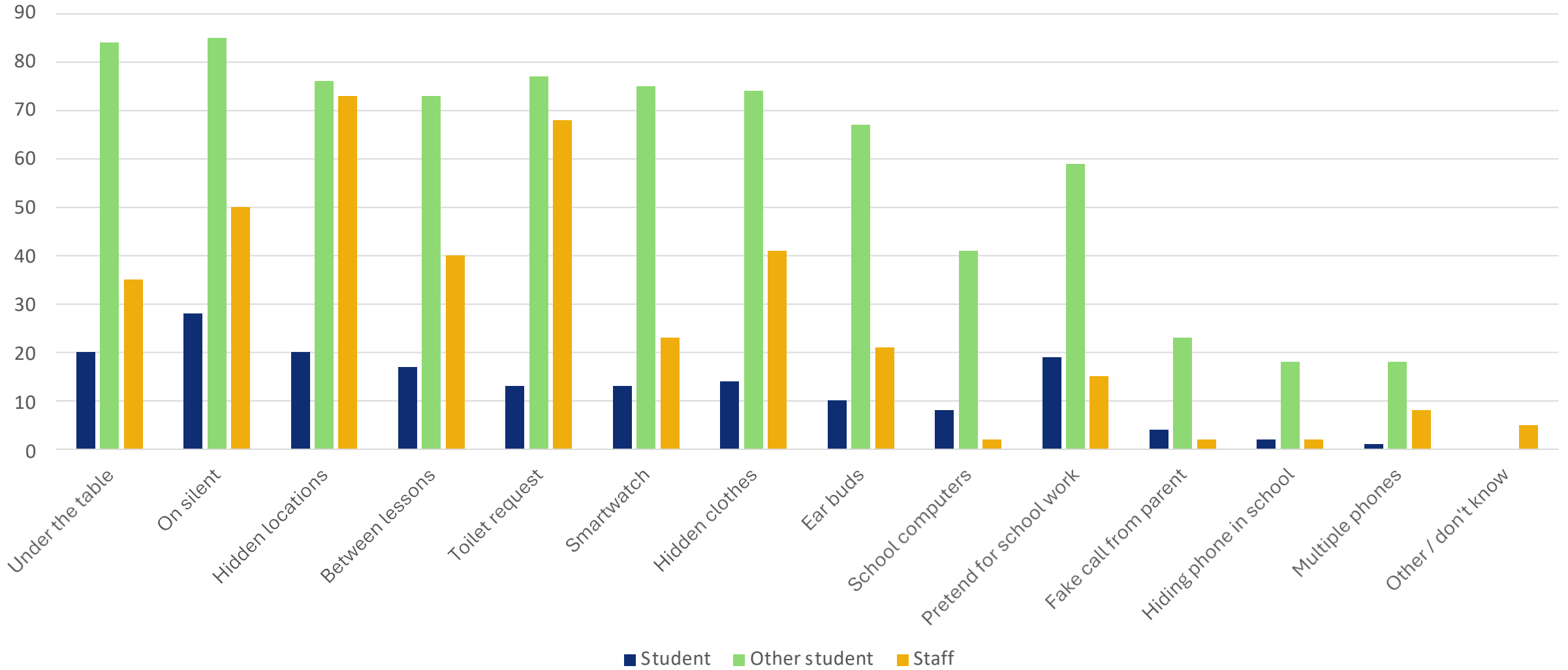
36% of **staff** report dealing with smartphone-related incidents **at least once per week**. **16%** report smartphone-related incidents at least '**once or twice a day**'. **2%** said '**multiple times**' or '**at least once**' per lesson.

Consistency of enactment



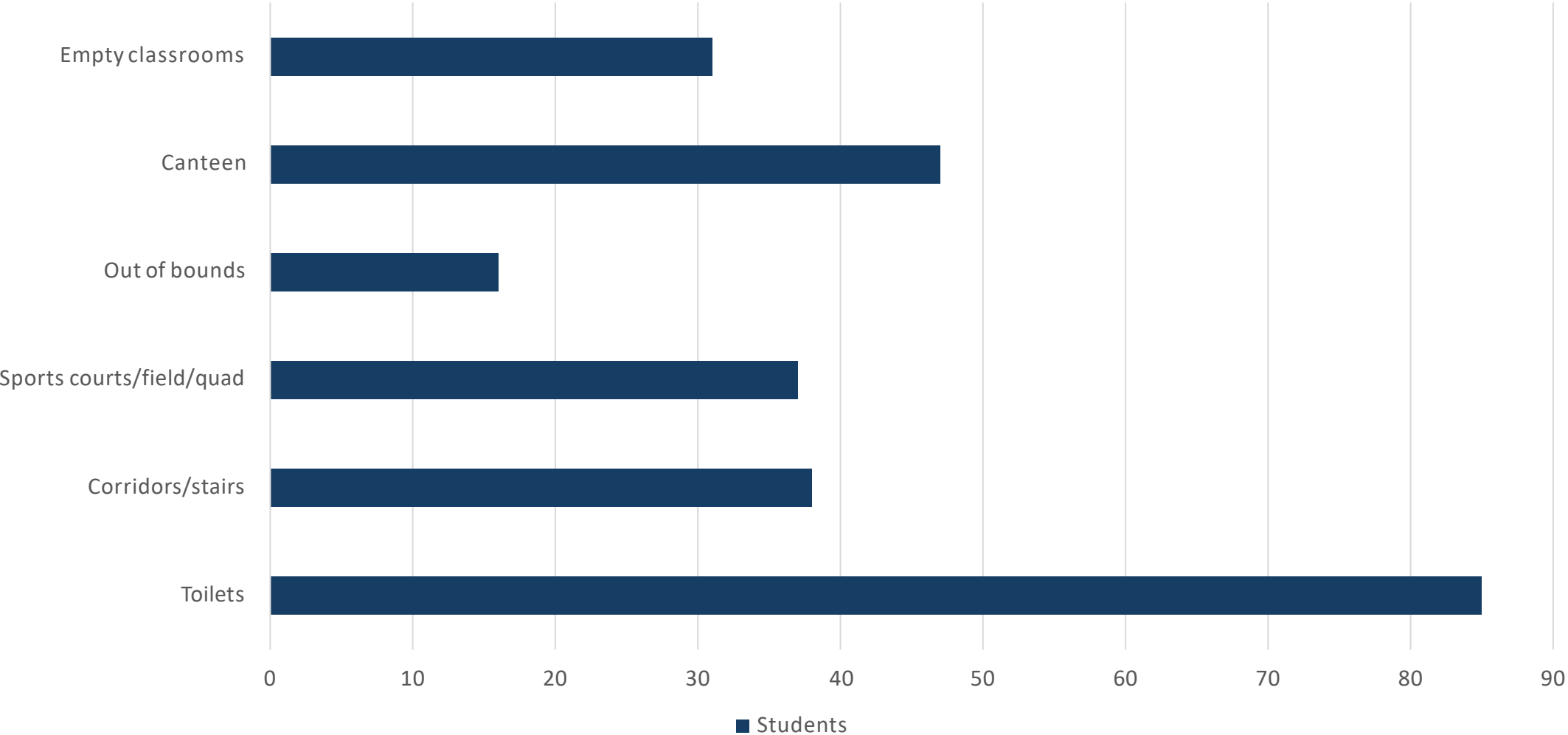
Strategies to get around policy

(This question asked the students about their own and other students' behaviours Staff were about most common violations they witness)

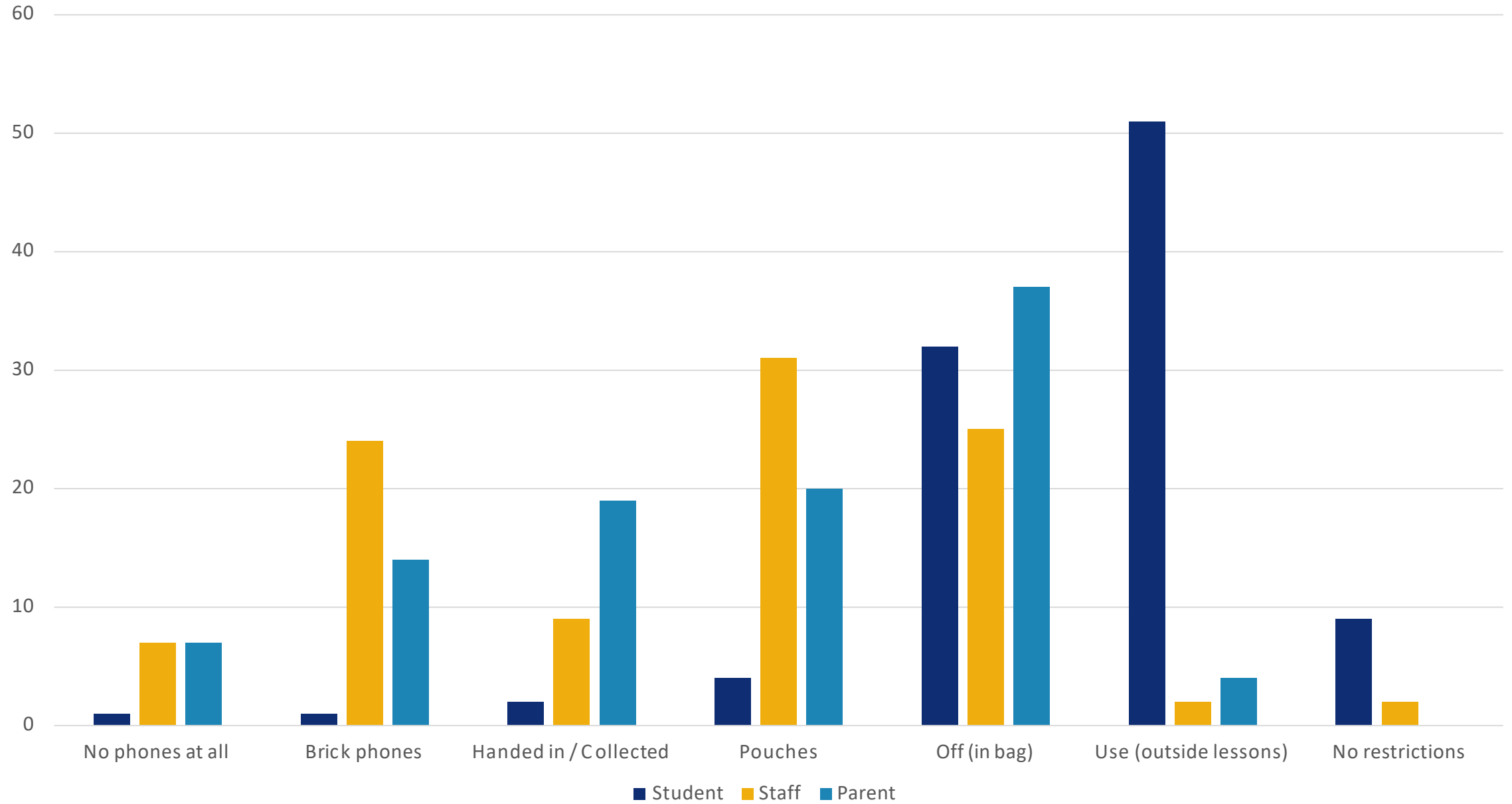


Unsurprisingly, students report that toilets are the most common location for smartphones to be used when in school.

Most common places to use phones when not in class



Which policy is most appealing?



Dilemmas & Discussion Points

Despite a clearly communicated policy, the reality on the ground is that there is inconsistency. Students, parents, and staff each navigate the rules slightly differently—with enforcement often depending on individual discretion rather than collective clarity. This raises questions for school leaders about consistency, equity, and culture.



Consistency vs Autonomy

Enforcement varies widely between staff—should leaders tighten standardisation or preserve teacher discretion?



Policy vs Practice

Clear rules exist, but students sometimes circumvents them. What drives this and how can it be closed?



Equity and Inclusion

Do phone rules disadvantage certain students, e.g. SEND students? How do we balance access with disruption?



Culture Change or Policy Rewrite?

Is the issue the policy itself—or a culture of non-compliance and low accountability?

Section 2

Experiences and Beliefs



This second section of the report focuses on stakeholders' experiences with smartphones and their beliefs about them.



This section is predominantly made up of quantitative data.

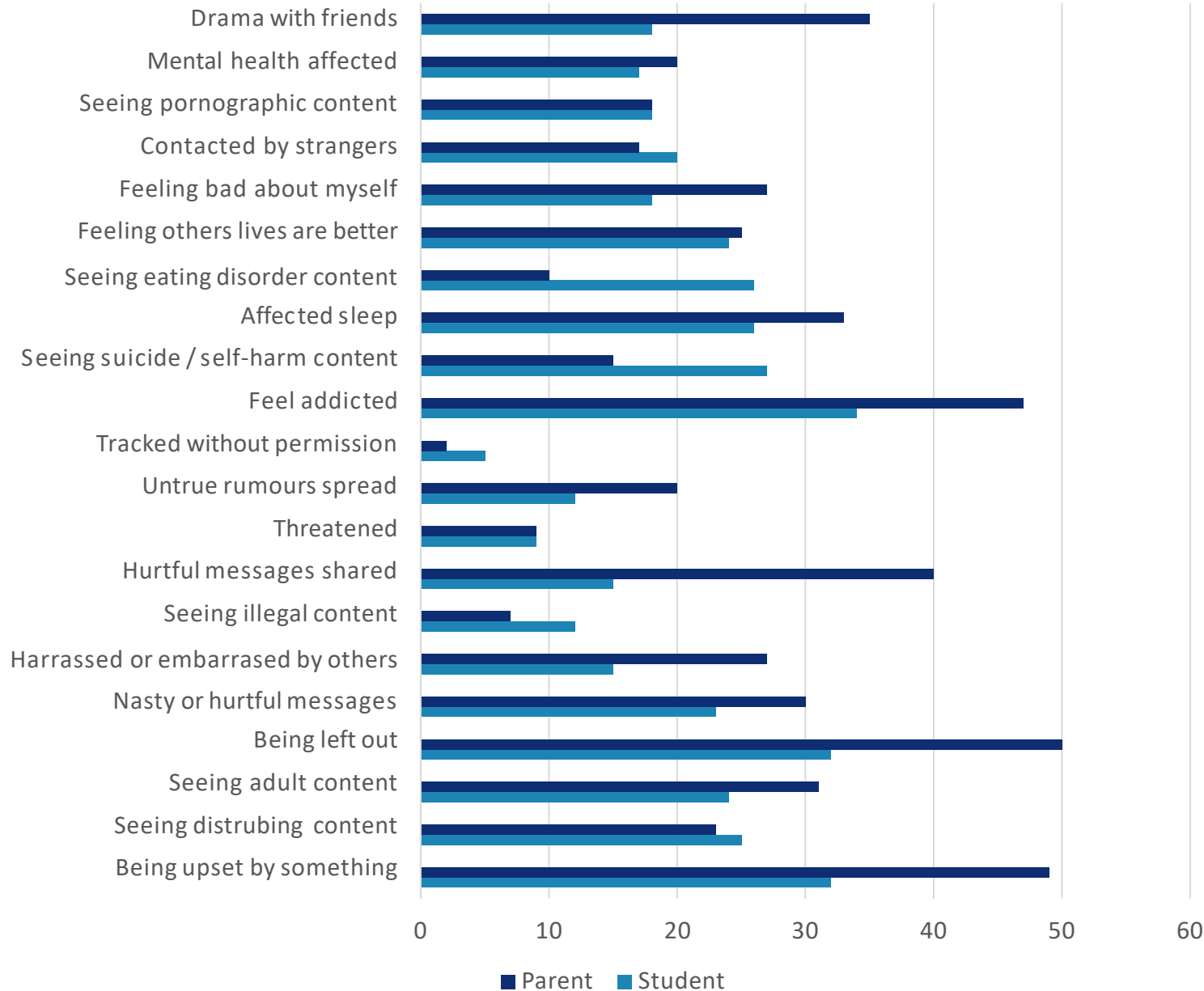


Student, staff and parent data are compared on identical questions and common themes to illustrate how students' view their experiences similarly and differently from their parents and teachers.



These findings are intended to support policy decision-making for staff and school leadership.

Negative experiences via smartphone / social media



In general, **parents** have higher estimates than **students** about negative experiences, with some notable exceptions. E.g. parents underestimate viewing self-harm, eating disorders, illegal content, likelihood of being contacted by strangers and disturbing content.

Parents tend to over-estimate more everyday/peer group-related occurrences (e.g. sleep, upset) compared to **students**, and under-estimate more serious ones (e.g. viewing illegal or adult content). **This may be indicative of what students do and do not share with parents.**

However, both groups report positive experiences most frequently: ***'I/They learnt new things, explored their interests or discovered new things'*** was their top experience answer for both students (**65%**) and parents (**67%**).

Staff were asked about the types of negative behaviours they routinely witnessed.

Every undesirable behaviour on the list has been witnessed by between **38%** and **69%** of staff.

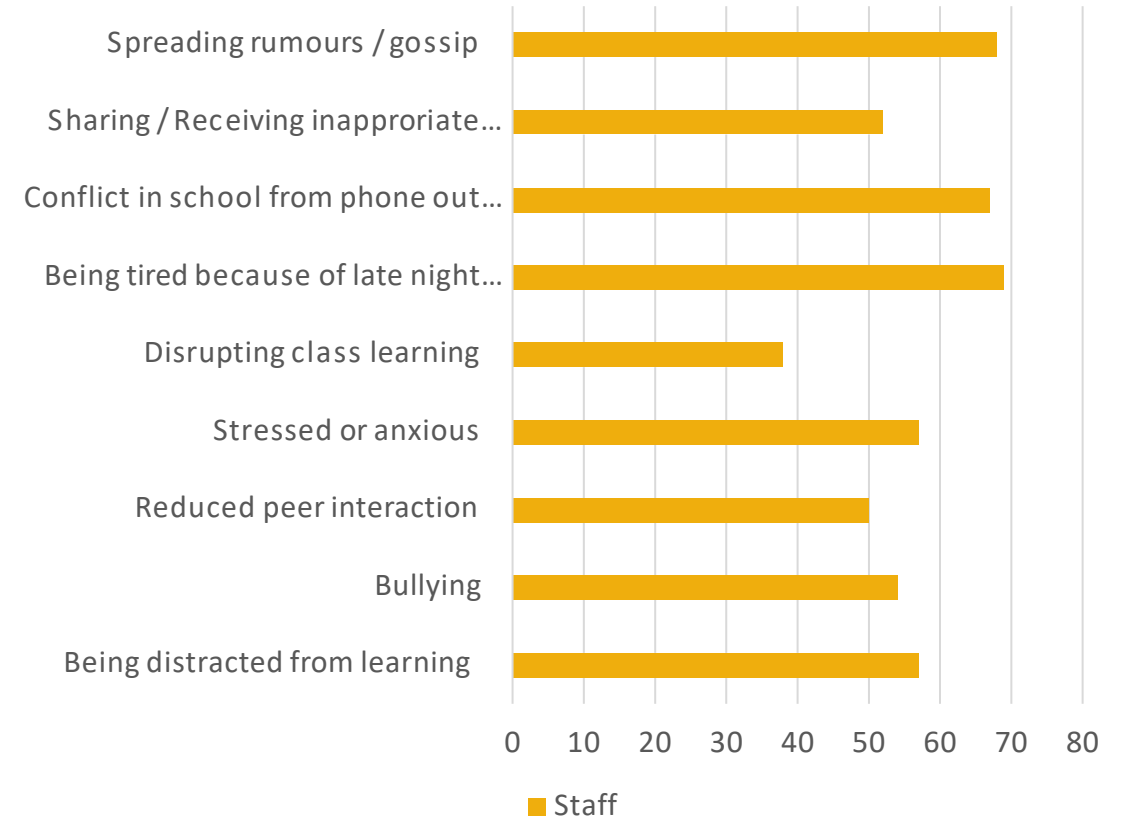
The 'Other' category included:

"Comparing model of smartphone. Teasing related to old models of smartphone. Pressure to have the newest"

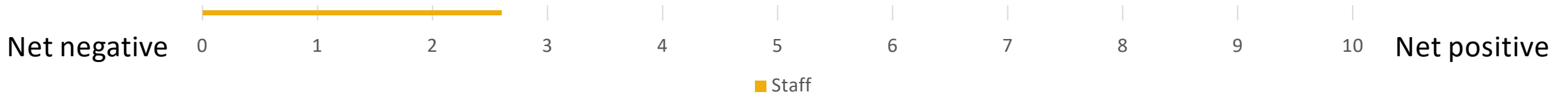
"Use of smartphones whilst walking to school, reducing attentiveness for safety issues e.g. crossing the road"

When asked, on balance, if they see smartphones in school as a net positive or net negative, **staff** felt that smartphones in school as a **net negative** (average 2.5 out of 10).

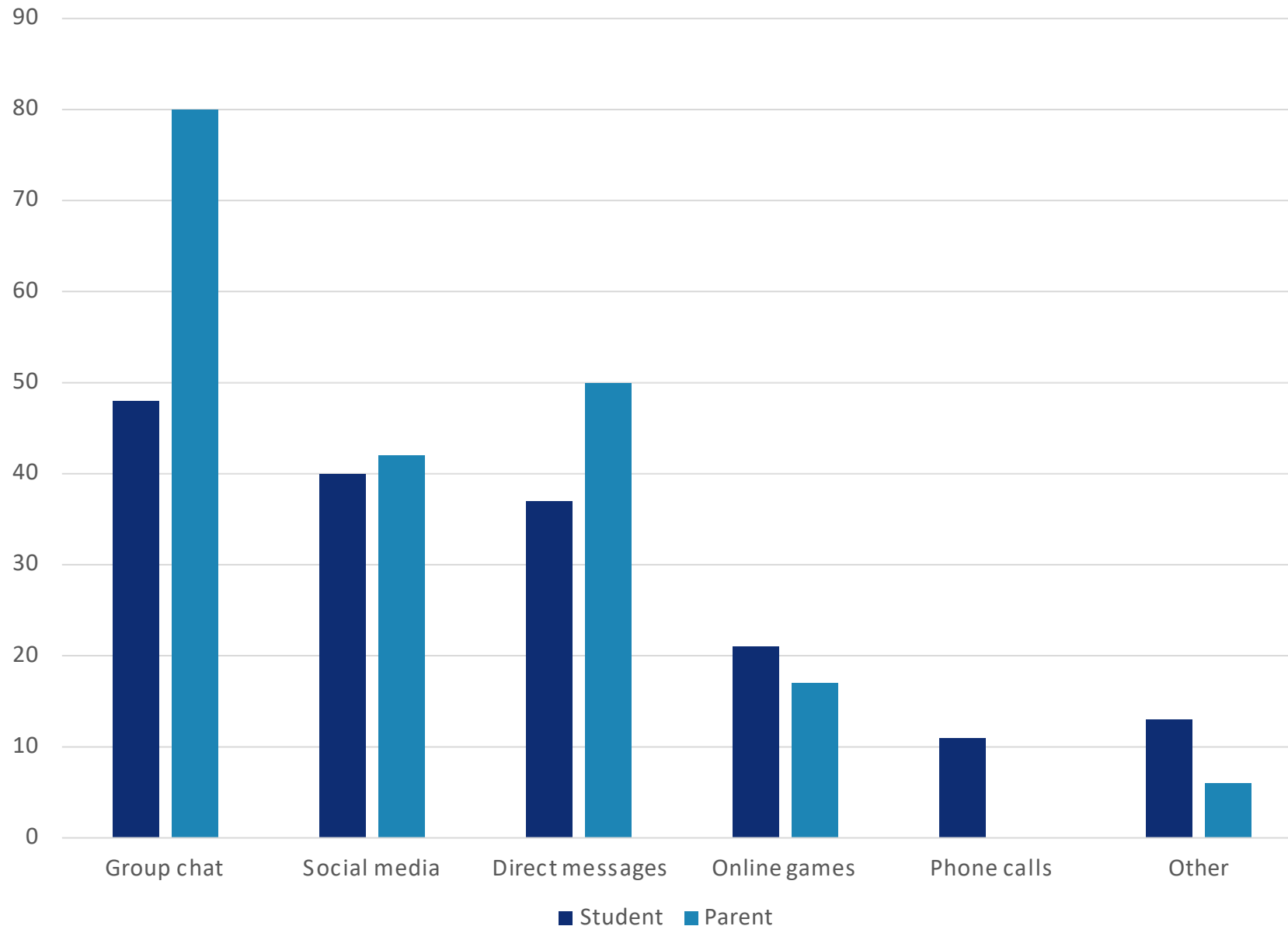
% of Teachers who have witnessed



Are smartphones in school Net positive or Net negative



How do negative experiences occur?



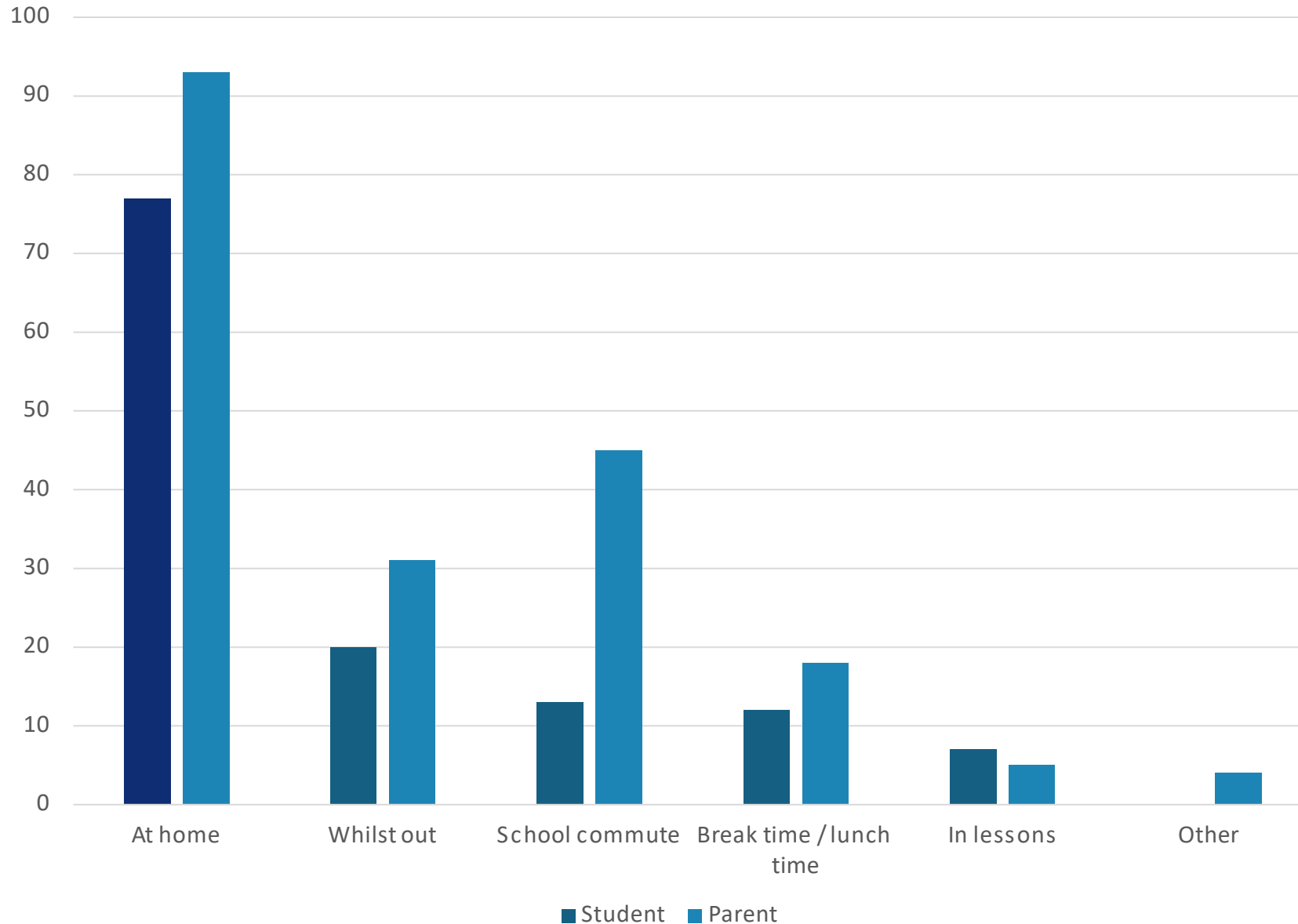
Parents and **students** agree that group chats (e.g. WhatsApp) is the most likely context for negative experiences.

Parents seem less sure about the impacts of gaming and phone calls than pupils.

The **'other'** category from **students** consisted mostly of: *"I don't have negative experiences"*, or similar.

From **parents**, **'other'** included several references to the importance of parental controls and other devices (ipads, laptops) being just as, or sometimes more, problematic.

Where do they occur?

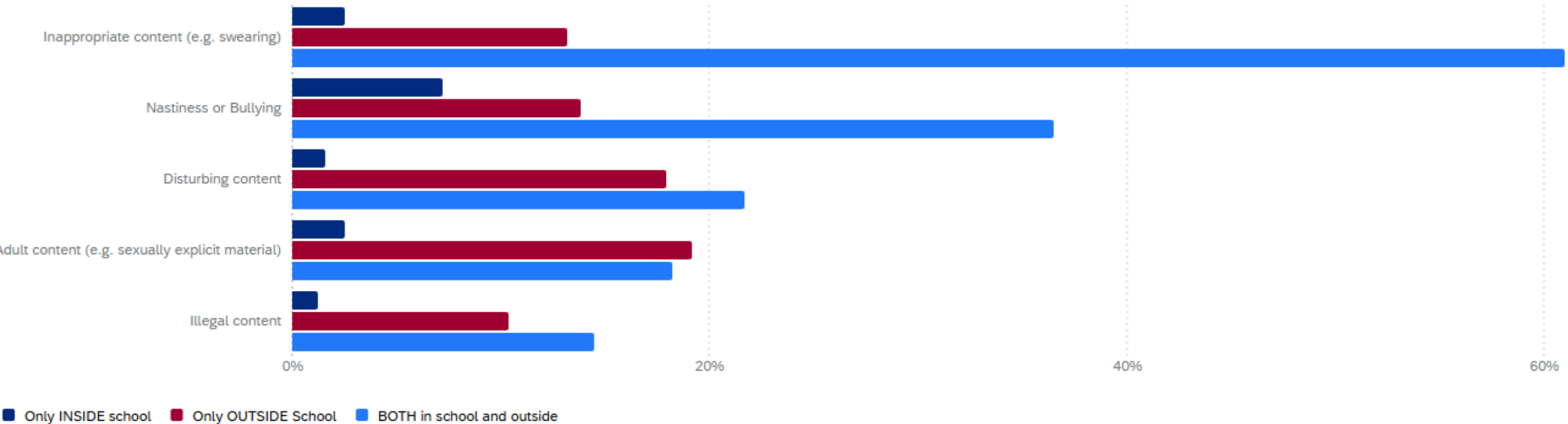


By far the most frequent location for negative experiences is at home. Compared to **students**, **parents** overestimate all locations except in lessons.

According to **students**, *outside of school* is far more problematic than *in school*. However, **67%** of **staff** report witnessing out of school phone-related issues causing problems in school.

Combining data on **how** and **where** negative experiences occur reveals that **messaging** considered the biggest problem and issues mostly occur **at home or while out**.

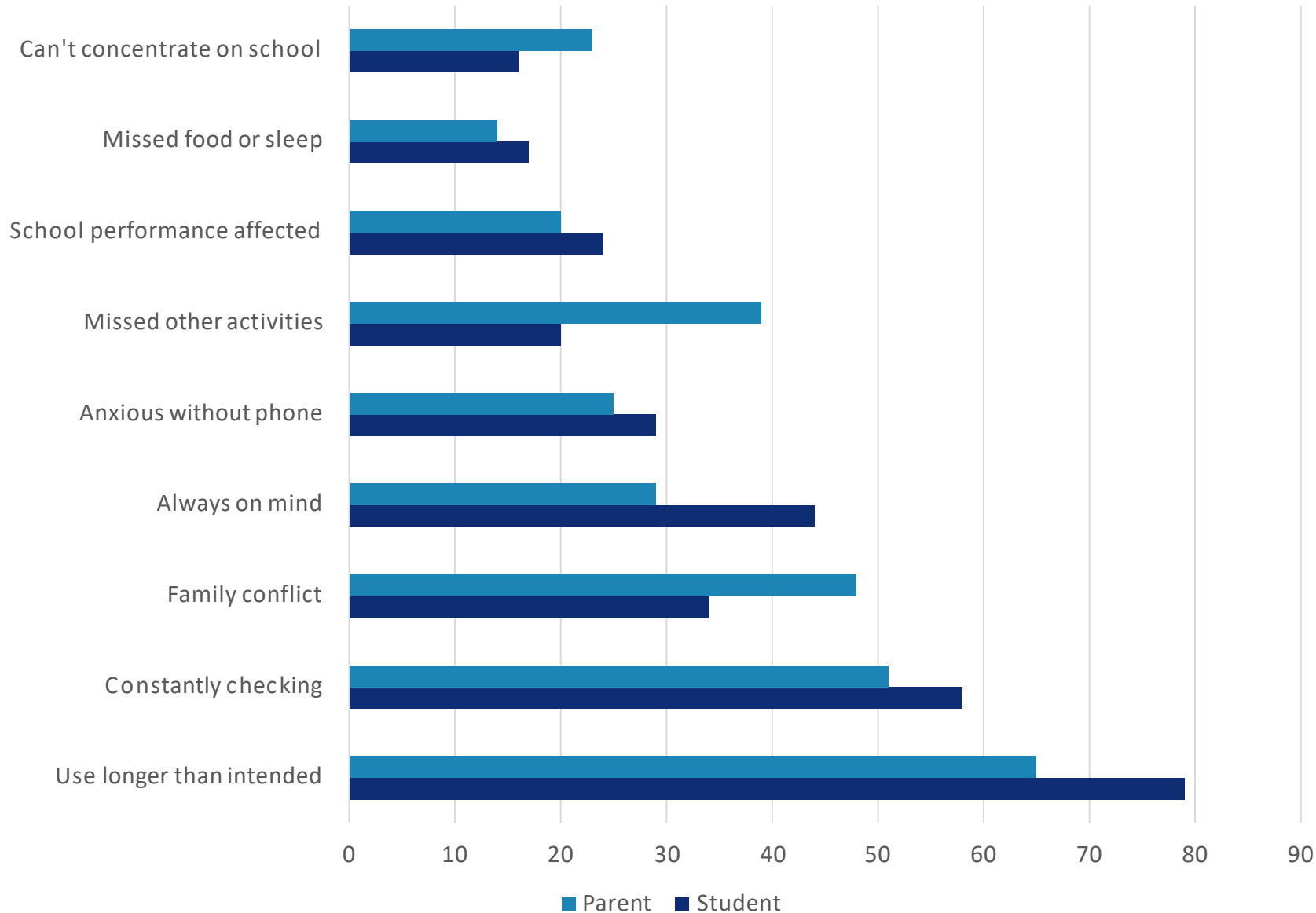
Have you experienced / have you been aware of any of the following occurring in or outside of school involving a smartphone? 318 ⓘ



Other related data on experiences **IN** and **OUT** of school

These data again illustrate that whilst several negative experiences rarely occur **solely in school**, they actually **occur in and out of school**.

Types of negative experiences



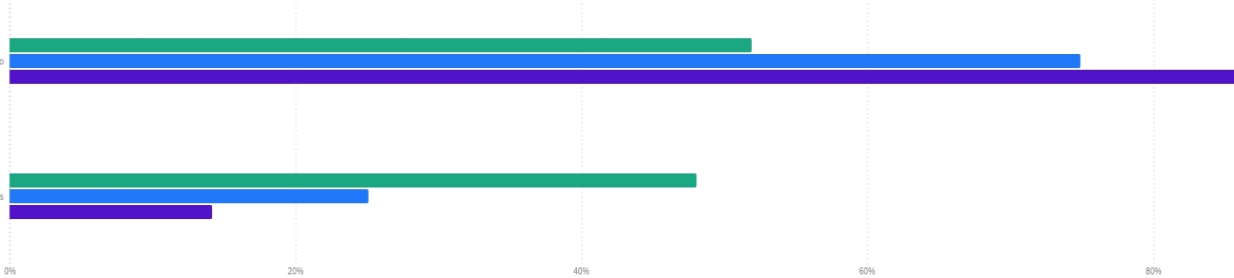
With three notable exceptions, (concentration on school, missed activities and family conflict), **students** tend to *over-estimate* the effects of their smartphone use compared to parents. This is probably indicative of things students themselves are more likely to know about (e.g. what's on their minds).

However, it does illustrate that **parents** are less likely to know everything about the effects of their children's smartphones.

Other relevant questions
86% of **students** 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they '*have a good time*' on their smartphones.

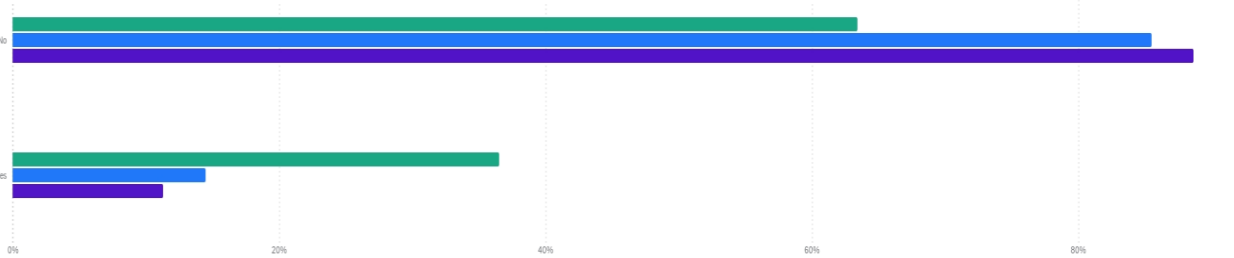
Students who report they are **'struggling'** at school also report **more frequent negative experiences** on smartphones.

Nasty or hurtful messages were sent via smartphone



Struggling / Coasting / Thriving at school

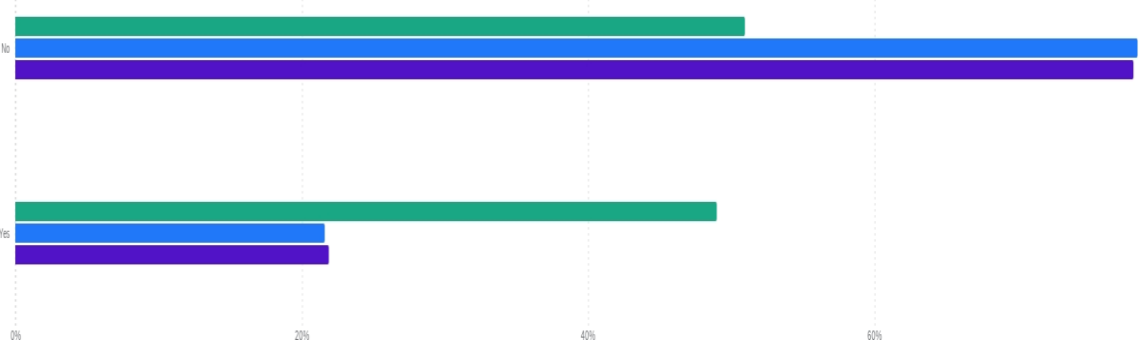
Harassed or embarrassed by others (e.g. in group chat)



Struggling / Coasting / Thriving at school

Seen adult content on your smartphone 548

Seen adult content on your smartphone



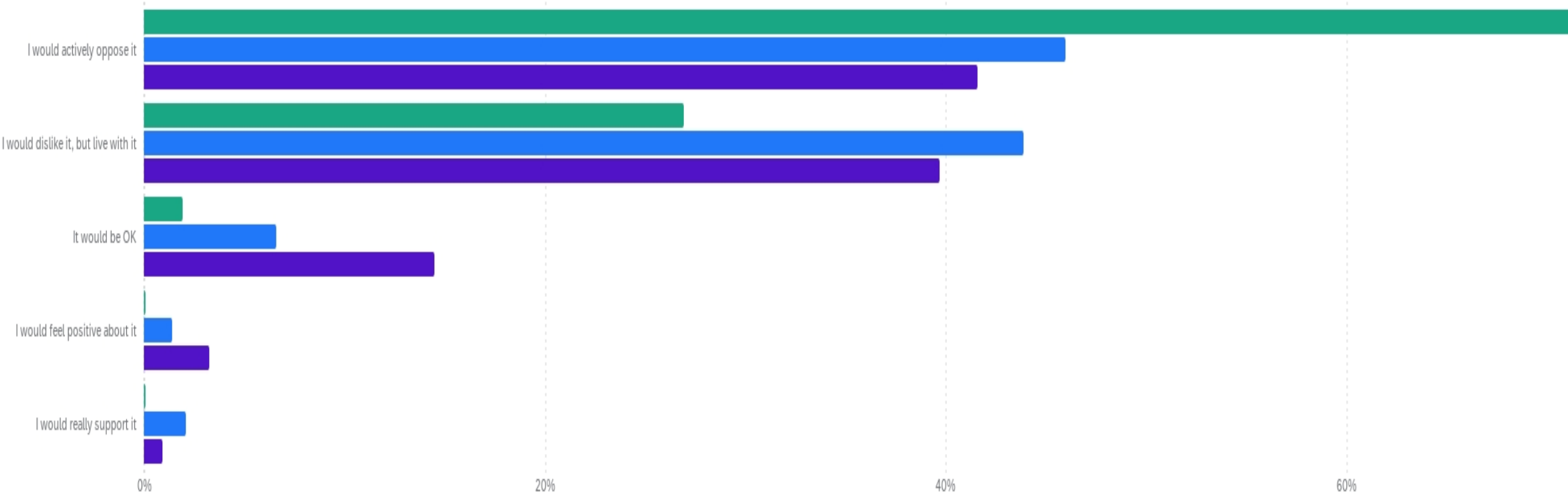
Struggling / Finding things difficult Coasting / Finding things ok Thriving / Enjoying the challenge

Struggling / Coasting / Thriving at school

Students who report to be **struggling** at school also appear to be most **'at risk'** across many of the experience-related measures. This trend exists across all negative experience measures, also including: concentration, constant checking, family conflict and school performance affected.

Despite acknowledging they experience more negativity, **'struggling'** students also **want fewer restrictions**.

Response to a total ban on smartphones







Struggling / Coasting / Thriving at school



Dilemmas & Discussion Points

While many students enjoy their smartphones, the day-to-day experiences they and their parents report include a range of concerning encounters—from online harm to constant distraction. The location and nature of these negative experiences point to the need for coordinated home-school strategies.

-  **Safety vs. Harm**
Phones offer reassurance during travel and emergencies, but also open doors to harmful content and contact.
“How can we protect pupils without removing tools they feel are essential for safety?”
-  **Harm Happens Beyond the School Gate**
Most digital risks (e.g. sexting, trolling) arise at home, but the emotional and behavioural consequences emerge in school.
“Where does the school’s responsibility begin and end?”
-  **Group Chats Are Unregulated Spaces**
Toxic communication, exclusion, and bullying thrive in private chat groups outside school hours, but the fallout often comes into school.
“Can schools influence digital behaviour that occurs ‘off-site’ but impacts learning and relationships?”
-  **Enjoyment vs. Emotional Dependency**
Pupils gain pleasure from phones but also show signs of dependency and anxiety without them.
“Should policy aim to reduce reliance—or accommodate it?”