A You went to boarding school, didn't you?

B Yes, and they were the best years of my life. Of course, things were very different in those days…

A Well, I'm sure you'll be interested to hear that pupils at the elite expensive private boarding school Eton College have been banned from using smartphones, laptops, and tablets in their rooms after bedtime because of fears that their addiction to social media is leaving them sleep-deprived. All thirteen-year-olds have been told to hand over their electronic devices to their housemasters before they go to bed at nine thirty pm. The measure was introduced because, according to the head master, lost sleep could harm pupils' ability to concentrate in lessons and damage academic performance.

B And a good thing too, in my opinion. In fact, if it was up to me, I'd go even further and ban them from schools altogether.

A That's a bit drastic, isn't it? I think these so-called digital detoxes can go too far. After all, the smartphone has become an essential part of everyday life, and for pupils at boarding school in particular, it's a way to keep in touch with family at home.

B Why can't they just write letters as I used to? In fact, I was pleased to see that my old school has brought in a permanent ban not only on smartphones but also on fitness trackers and smart watches, and many other schools are following suit.

A But surely such bans on personal gadgets are completely at odds with the push within education to embrace technology in the classroom and to equip the next generation with the skills and know-how needed to help plug the UK's digital skills gap. I know it's easy to fret about social media, but it's important to maintain a sense of perspective.

B Well, let's talk about academic performance. A ban on phones leading to an improvement in grades appears to be a fairly universal theme. A study by the London School of Economics in 2015 found that schools with an embargo on mobiles saw the test scores of sixteen-year-olds improve by over six per cent on average, equivalent to adding five days to the school year. The results of lower-achieving students improved by twelve per cent. The results of high-achieving students were not affected by the ban, which suggests that they were able to focus regardless of whether or not they had their phones. Prohibiting mobile use in this manner could be effective in reducing educational inequality.

A But smartphones can be a tremendous learning tool if they're used correctly. Just think of all the information that's available literally at your fingertips. I wish we'd had such devices when I was at school.

B Well, there are still such things as books and libraries. And no-one's suggesting that pupils shouldn't have access to computers.

A Yes, but wouldn't it be better for schools to teach ways of using smartphones wisely rather than banning them altogether? Engaging with new technologies under adult supervision is surely better than banning the digital devices that help define their entire generation. And it would help them prepare for jobs and lives in the information-saturated twenty-first century. B If only the kids were using their phones as learning tools. The reality is that they've become addicted to their phones and spend, or rather waste, nearly all their screen time on apps like Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter. We all know that can lead to problems such as cyber-bullying, to name just one.

A But problems like bullying have always been a feature of life at school. While I don't underestimate the pressures that children are under nowadays, there wasn't a pre-digital golden age.

B I don't think I'm just being nostalgic. Everywhere you go on buses, trains, in the street, at work, even people in cars, their heads are down buried in their smartphones. You even see couples in restaurants, sitting across the table from one another, each immersed in their own little world on their phones. The art of conversation, letter writing, and even basic face-to-face interaction is dying as most of the population live their lives on social media in such a detached manner. If schools can provide a safe haven from today's always-on digital world, then that can only be a positive thing.

Outline

A number of schools have introduced a ban on such devices as smartphones, fitness trackers, and smart watches. The first speaker considers that banning personal gadgets is completely at odds with the push within education to embrace technology in the classroom and equip the next generation with the skills and know-how needed to help plug the UK's digital skills gap; it would be better for schools to help children prepare for jobs and lives in the information- saturated twenty-first century by teaching them how to use smartphones wisely. The second speaker points out that rather than using their phones as learning tools, children spend, or rather waste, nearly all their screen time on apps like Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter. Prohibiting mobile use could in fact be effective in reducing educational inequality.

Questions

1. Are you in favour of placing restrictions on smartphone use in a school environment? What kind of restrictions?
2. How would it affect your life if you were unable to use your smartphone?
3. Have digital devices and computers changed the world of education?
4. What skills can one learn by using a smartphone?