Six Questions to Advance Media Literacy and Digital Citizenship

By Celina Pierrottet

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Media literacy also has the attention of state lawmakers across the country. To address concerns that students are not well equipped to engage effectively in civil public discourse with current technology, 19 states had passed legislation on media literacy as of February 2024. Some mandate media literacy learning standards; others have convened exploratory committees (map). Also, the U.S. Surgeon General, the National Academies of Science, Medicine, and Engineering, and the American Psychological Association identified media literacy education as an effective tool to strengthen students’ media awareness and digital resiliency.

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State boards of education are well positioned to set media literacy standards that foster students’ skills in using media while promoting healthy, safe, responsible use. State boards can ask the following six questions to advance media literacy in schools.

1 WHAT BENEFITS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH STUDENTS’ MEDIA LITERACY?

A 2021 survey found that tweens (8- to 12-year-olds) consume approximately 5.5 hours of screen media a day and teens (13- to 18-year-olds) consume 8.5 hours of screen media, with the most time spent watching online videos, using social media, and browsing websites. Screen media usage accelerated during the pandemic. From 2019 to 2021, the total amount of daily screen media use increased by about an hour for tweens and teens—more than the increase between 2015 and 2019. On average, 16 percent of adolescents use their smartphones between three and four hours per day, and about a quarter receive 201 to 300 notifications daily. Through these devices, children and adolescents receive myriad messages that influence their knowledge and behaviors. Media-literate students can decode the messages they receive and identify the behaviors that companies, influencers, political groups, and others are encouraging. Media literacy improves

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students’ knowledge of media, encourages positive behaviors, and discourages risky behaviors. A meta-study of 51 research studies found that media literacy improved students’ understanding of media, including the intended messages, target audiences, and an ability to identify media by type (e.g., advertising). ⁴

Digital wellness is an intentional state of physical, mental, and social health that occurs with mindful engagement in the digital and natural environment. ⁵ To strengthen digital wellness and combat harmful messages promoting body image distortion and substance abuse, media literacy can also be embedded into health education. ⁶ One randomized controlled study found that teaching 10- to 15-year-old students to think critically about media images and messages and understand the business strategies behind these messages is associated with reduced body dissatisfaction and a more positive body image. ⁷ Media literacy may also be associated with students engaging in less smoking and underage drinking.

Although research on social media’s effects on adolescent mental health is nascent, some research has pointed to social media causing feelings of anxiety and depression, as well as body distortion. ⁸ Supporting students’ self-awareness and emotional regulation through a digital lens can build resiliency and foster digital stewardship.

³ HOW DOES MEDIA LITERACY PREPARE STUDENTS TO BE CIVICALLY ENGAGED?

The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) defines civic engagement broadly “to encompass a wide range of actions and behaviors that improve communities and help solve problems.” ⁹ The ability to be civically engaged is contingent upon the public’s ability to access, process, and use information to exercise its civic duties and participate in civic discourse. Much of this civic discourse occurs online, and youth especially use digital media to raise their voices and weigh in on issues affecting them.

Media literacy not only equips students with skills to access and interpret information, it also promotes ethical, responsible media production, which, in turn, increases their civic engagement. A survey of 400 high school students found that students engaged in a media literacy program were more likely to report seeking out information, developing media knowledge and news analysis skills, and being motivated to volunteer, vote, and express political opinions in a public forum. ¹⁰ Youth creation of media in schools is associated with enhanced collaboration skills, higher self-esteem, and motivation to participate in classroom activities. ¹¹ Youth media creation in a classroom also allows for identity development, expression, and inquiry, especially for racially diverse and nonnative English speakers. ¹²

To be civically engaged and well-informed citizens, students must be able to distinguish between fact and opinion, identify false or misleading information, and hone their awareness of perspectives and agendas in media messages. Yet a majority of high school students in a Stanford study could not identify fraudulent claims on social media, and less than 9 percent could articulate why these posts were problematic. ¹³ “Such credulity makes it too easy for bad actors to undermine faith in the democratic process. Students displayed a troubling tendency to accept websites at face value,” the authors of the report said.

Artificial intelligence—based methods for creating deepfakes—images, videos, or audio recordings that have been convincingly altered and manipulated to misrepresent someone—have added another layer of complexity to teaching media literacy. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has argued that media literacy education can help build artificial intelligence literacy and address the risks and opportunities this new technology poses. ¹⁴ Although artificial intelligence (AI) literacy is in its infancy, young people and adults urgently need education and training to become more critical consumers of digital information and maintain trust in civil society.

3 HOW IS MY STATE ENCOURAGING K-12 INSTRUCTION IN MEDIA LITERACY?

Media literacy is an interdisciplinary subject. Relevant competencies may be part of instruction in social studies, English language arts, computer science, health, and science classes. It can also be taught through library programs.

State laws vary significantly. For example, New Jersey, Delaware, Florida, and California require the state board to develop K-12 media literacy standards, but only New Jersey and Delaware require that students be taught media literacy skills. Two states tie media literacy to graduation requirements: Minnesota embedded technology and information literacy standards into the state’s academic standards and graduation requirements, and New Mexico offers media literacy as an elective that can fulfill high school graduation requirements.

This variation stems in part from definitions in the originating legislation, which may narrow the scope of what is taught. In Texas, the legislature mandated that the state board require school districts to incorporate instruction in digital citizenship, which, according to the statutory definition, includes media literacy. ¹⁵ Nebraska similarly requires elementary and middle schools to provide instruction on computer science and technology education that includes digital citizenship and requires high school students to take at least one course. New Jersey, on the other hand, requires instruction on information literacy, which the bill defines as including media literacy.

Some state boards are incorporating media literacy education into their learning standards without a legislative mandate. After more than 20 years without an update to its health and physical education framework, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adopted a Comprehensive Health and Physical Education Curriculum Framework, whose health standards promote digital wellness and online risk reduction skills. ¹⁶ When it revised its social studies standards in 2023, the District of Columbia board expanded the requisite knowledge and skills to include digital literacy. ¹⁷
4 HOW ARE OUR TEACHERS EQUIPPED TO PROVIDE INSTRUCTION?

The National Association of Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) surveys school staff each year, providing a snapshot into how media literacy policies are implemented in schools. Seventy-seven percent of survey participants indicated that their media literacy training is self-taught, 62 percent said it was part of their professional development, 39 percent derived it from their academic degree, and 13 percent from badging and certificate programs.

The lack of teacher professional development and access to high-quality curriculum materials aligned to state standards is a barrier to creating equitable access to media literacy education. A survey conducted by CIRCLE found that 53 percent of 14- to 17-year-olds said they had opportunities to learn media literacy or how to analyze and evaluate news and media. Students who are White, live in urban areas, and have parents with college education were more likely to have access to media literacy education. In an assessment of basic digital evaluation skills, researchers found that students who have been historically underserved by public schools were less likely to be able to identify false information online.

The National Academies found there are no model digital media literacy standards or curriculum guides for teaching modern media literacy, which can significantly constrain a teacher’s ability to provide high-quality instruction. Although numerous organizations offer high-quality instructional materials, teachers spend a significant amount of time each week looking for curricular resources or creating their own, and only about 30 percent of teachers nationwide are actually using high-quality materials.

In many cases, teachers create their own materials. The Data and Society Research Institute described this as a “grassroots effort led by impassioned educators.” Relying on teachers’ initiative is counterproductive, given how quickly technologies and materials change and teachers’ myriad competing responsibilities. Even in states that adopt media literacy standards, teachers who lack professional development and high-quality instructional materials will continue to struggle, and students with less qualified teachers and access to instructional materials will be disproportionately affected.

States can overcome this implementation challenge by ensuring that teachers receive training and materials. Georgia, Virginia, Minnesota, and New Hampshire require media literacy training through teacher certification or preparation programs. Some states like Washington designated a state media literacy specialist in the department of education to assist with identifying professional development opportunities for teachers and to administer grants for developing and sharing openly licensed curriculum units supporting media literacy and digital citizenship.

State curriculum models aligned to learning standards can help teachers identify high-quality instructional materials. In January 2020, the Connecticut Board of Education adopted recommendations from the Digital Citizenship, Internet Safety, and Media Literacy Advisory Council to “assist stakeholders with instructional practices and methods regarding digital citizenship, Internet safety, and media literacy.” The recommendations included a list of instructional materials, sample curricular units, and other resources districts could consider in creating curricula. During this meeting, the state board asked the council to explore instructional tools to help students protect themselves online. After speaking with experts and school staff, the council determined that the state also needed to update its technology and literacy framework, which had last been updated in 2006. Then in December 2021, the state board approved revised standards to assist teachers and librarians in aligning curriculum materials with standards and expected student outcomes.

5 ARE THERE BEST-PRACTICE STANDARDS FOR MY STATE TO REVIEW?

Because of its emphasis on skill development, media literacy is interdisciplinary in nature and can be woven into multiple content areas. The National Media Literacy Alliance, a group convened by NAMLE, issued a joint statement in 2020 identifying all the ways media literacy can be incorporated into early childhood education, ELA, math, science, social studies, and other content areas. However, due to the lack of a comprehensive, modern national media literacy education framework in the United States, many states have been developing their own by merging standards from different organizations.

At its September 2023 board meeting, the Delaware Board of Education adopted new media literacy standards. A task force comprising education agency staff, school librarians, and instructional technology specialists developed the standards. The state librarian and a state board representative reviewed standards and guidelines from other states and national organizations, as well as standards from Finland. The resulting framework combined standards from the International Society for Technology in Education and the American Association of School Librarians.

The National Academies also identified the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers standard framework for digital intelligence, literacy, skills, and readiness as the broadest framework, which the Data Quality Institute turned into a framework for educators. Other examples of media literacy frameworks noted by the National Academies include the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens and NAMLE’s principles for media literacy education.

For states aiming to improve students’ digital wellness, embedding media literacy skills within health education standards can equip students with critical thinking skills to evaluate health claims on social media and other websites. In March 2024, the Society for Health and Physical Education (SHAPE America) released a new version of the National Health Education Standards that includes eight learning goals, related knowledge and skills, and performance indicators by grade span, creating a framework for a skills-based health curriculum. Two of the eight learning standards emphasize media literacy skills: Standard 3 engages students in critical thinking around media messages and resources, including how they are accessed, evaluated, and used to support health and well-being. Standard 7 promotes indi-
vital individual and collective responsibility by encouraging the exploration and practice of skills and processes that support health and well-being.

Outside the United States, UNESCO’s Global Standards for Media and Information Literacy Curricula Development Guidelines include 19 broad media and information literacy learning outcomes as well as key principles for developing and implementing a media and information literacy curriculum. Although UNESCO’s target audience is country leaders, the standards were designed for use at all levels of government and by nongovernment organizations and individuals. UNESCO has also created a Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Teachers, which includes a competency framework to train teachers in providing media literacy instruction.

Other organizations have keyed into the importance of teaching students about AI within the context of media literacy or computer science. For example, the AI4K12 initiative created by the Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence and the Computer Science Teachers Association developed national guidelines for AI education in K-12 organized around five big ideas: perception, representation and reasoning, learning, natural interaction, and societal impact. TeachAI recently released policy ideas for AI in education, including promoting AI literacy and integrating AI skills and concepts into existing curriculum and instruction of computer science, data science, ethics, psychology, and statistics. In 2021, the Georgia Board of Education approved AI learning concepts within the Information Technology Career Cluster, which includes skills such as investigating and designing potential solutions to social and ethical issues related to AI.

Students need the most current knowledge and skills, and teachers need timely and relevant training in order to teach. Many states are required to update their learning standards on a 5- to 10-year schedule, but some do not have such requirements, and significant time can lapse between updates. Given the rapid changes in technology, state policymakers should consider the appropriate timeline for their media literacy standards adoption process.

### HOW CAN WE ENGAGE STUDENTS AND FAMILIES IN CULTIVATING POLICIES ON MEDIA LITERACY?

Although the current school-age generation has grown up with increased access to digital media through smartphones and tablets, students recognize that their relationship with media messaging can be improved. U.S. teenagers have said they spend too much time on social media and that they struggle to set boundaries. However, a majority of teens also say social media provides them with a space for connection, creativity, and support. A majority of parents said parenting is harder today than two decades ago, citing technology like social media as a reason.

Youth are ready to be a part of the policy solution and have been increasingly vocal about proposed policies. In a hearing for the Senate Committee on the Judiciary about protecting children online, youth advocates spoke in favor of regulating social media companies but not without youth voice. As Emma Lemke, founder and executive director of the LOG OFF Movement, said in her testimony, “[A]s young people, we share the frustration of being portrayed as passive victims of Big Tech, when in reality we are ready to be included as active agents of change.”

State education leaders can directly engage with students to co-design policies on media literacy. Twenty-four state boards have voting or nonvoting student board members. Connecticut and the District of Columbia include their student representatives in committees, which can give state board members direct access to a student perspective throughout the standards adoption process. The DC state board grants its student representatives voting power in committees. The DC board also has a strong track record of engaging its community and including students in advisory committees to draft standards.

State policymakers also have options for engaging with parents to build media literacy awareness and develop standards. Thirty-nine states have parent or family engagement policies, and at least five states have advisory councils with the power to influence policy. States can also encourage or require parent education supports in schools. A 2022 survey of American adults found that only 38 percent of respondents reported learning how to analyze media messaging while they were in high school, and 84 percent said they supported required media literacy education in schools.

### CONCLUSION

Interest groups, individuals, corporations, and state actors around the globe hope to influence public discourse, and the smartphone gives students and adults constant connectedness to this flow of media messaging. This tidal wave of content has also blurred the line between fact and opinion, which fosters mistrust in civic institutions. Students need to be equipped to navigate this media environment.

As the UN deputy high commissioner for human rights put it, “Information literacy empowers individuals and allows the effective exercise of a wide range of human rights, including the rights to seek, receive and impart information and ideas, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” The RAND Corporation has been exploring what they call “truth decay,” and they have identified media literacy as a strong strategy to prevent the spread of false or misleading information online and create savvier consumers of information.

Every generation confronts new media and technology, and every generation must be protected from new potential harms and equipped to reap potential benefits. While technology may change, the skills students can develop through media literacy are durable. State policymakers should ensure that students can assess and evaluate media messages, protect themselves from harm, and embody ethical principles for creating their own content.

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