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Media literacy in K-12 education: The case for equipping students for a lifetime of news and information consumption

In June 2024, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy made a startling announcement about the mental health consequences of avid social media use by America's children and adolescents.

"It is time to require a surgeon general's warning label on social media platforms, stating that social media is associated with significant mental health harms for adolescents. A surgeon general's warning label, which requires congressional action, would regularly remind parents and adolescents that social media has not been proved safe," Murthy said. "Evidence from tobacco studies show that warning labels can increase awareness and change behavior."

Take a minute to think about that pronouncement by our nation's highest-ranking medical professional: Sixty years after a previous surgeon general warned Americans about the deadly health consequences of tobacco use, the current surgeon general has raised an alarm about the dangers of social media use by our children.

Dr. Murthy's warning was not issued in isolation. He noted that a "substantial review of the available evidence" raised concerns about the amount of time teens and children spend on social media platforms, the types of content they are exposed to, and the ways their digital media consumption affects their mental, emotional, and physical health.

The current generations of children and adolescents (Gen Z and Gen Alpha) are the first to live their entire lives in a thoroughly online environment. Increasingly, they are bombarded at a young age – Stanford University researchers found the average age that children receive their first smartphone is 11.6 years – with unprecedent levels of information from a multitude of sources. And the Pew Research Center found in 2022 that more than a third of teenagers surveyed reported using social media "almost constantly." (YouTube and TikTok were the most popular platforms for American teens).

The surgeon general noted that children and teens' brains are at critical stages of development between ages 10 and 19. Frequent use of social media, he said, may harm impulse control and the self-regulation of emotions.

"The most common question parents ask me is, 'is social media safe for my kids'. The answer is that we don't have enough evidence to say it's safe, and in fact, there is growing evidence that social media use is associated with harm to young people's mental health," Dr. Murthy said. "Children are exposed to harmful content on social media, ranging from violent and sexual content, to bullying and harassment. And for too many children, social media use is compromising their sleep and valuable in-person time with family and friends.

We are in the middle of a national youth mental health crisis, and I am concerned that social media is an important driver of that crisis – one that we must urgently address."

So then, how can educators, policy makers, and parents "urgently address" online media use by America's young people? A growing number of states have added media literacy education to their K-12 curriculum. Nonprofit organizations and business enterprises also have entered the space – either by developing media literacy tools or advocating for heightened awareness of the need for education.

Renee Hobbs, founder of the Media Education Lab and the National Association of Media Literacy Education, says that students (and their teachers) need four media literacy competencies to be successful in our current culture and to possess the ability for lifelong learning:

Access skills: Those include listening skills, reading comprehension, the ability to use a computer and accessories, and an understanding of how to effectively use search engines and hyperlinks to find information.

Analysis skills: They include abilities to identify the purpose and point of view of a message, to evaluate the credibility and quality of messaging, and to recognize stereotypes embedded in news and information.

Creation and collaboration competencies: The skills associated with brainstorming, generating ideas, collaborating to create content, and using feedback to revise and improve content are fundamental to media literacy.

Ability to reflect and act: These skills include understanding the power of communication in maintaining the status quo or driving change, assessing the potential risks of media messaging, and understanding how messages may be understood and accepted based on individuals' life experiences and values. "People who reflect and take action apply ethical judgment and social responsibility to online communication situations and understand how concepts of 'private' and 'public' are reshaped by digital media," Hobb says. "A media literate individual also appreciates and respects legal rights and responsibilities (copyright, intellectual freedom, fair use, attribution, etc.) and is active in participating in advocacy and self-governance at the local, regional, national and international levels, using the power of information and communication to make a difference in the world."

Hobbs describes what she calls a "robust spirit of experimentation" now taking place in K-12 schools with media literacy in the United States.

"Practitioners, advocates, artists, media professionals, community leaders and researchers from a wide range of fields – including education, communication and media studies, psychology, public health and more – have implemented a vast number of projects large and small in a variety of school- and non-school contexts, documenting their work and beginning to contribute to a knowledge base of best practices," Hobbs told the Society for Media Psychology & Technology.

The initiatives that Hobbs cited include the work of organizations such as Media Literacy Now, a self-described politically neutral nonprofit that advocates for the inclusion of media literacy as an essential part of K-12 education. In its 2023 annual report, Media Literacy Now noted that 18 states have enacted legislation requiring media literacy education or digital citizenship education in K-12 schools. Most notably, California adopted legislation in 2023 requiring comprehensive media literacy training in K-12 schools and directing money for teacher training in media literacy. Florida, which adopted a media and information education law in 2013, enacted legislation in 2023 that requires instruction in social media safety and in the emotional, physical and social effects of social media.

In 2020, the Indiana Department of Education issued Academic Standards for Digital Media. The department's report noted that the standards are "designed to help educators, parents, students, and community members understand what students need to know and be able to do at each grade level, and within each content strand, in order to exit high school college and career ready."

The standards include key components of media literacy such as the ability to "read and interact with a variety of media from journalistic outlets and read other texts related to media within a range of complexity appropriate for grades 9-12 that include possibilities for analysis of literary techniques, structure, and style."

The IDOE's report states that "while the standards may be used as the basis for curriculum, the Indiana Academic Standards are not a curriculum." Finding and adopting relevant and effective curriculum is left to each district or school and approved by each school board across the state.

Indiana's standards, while a welcome step in the right direction, leave critical questions unanswered: What are the most effective media literacy curricula available? When should media literacy education begin? Are educators well trained in how to teach media literacy theories and skills?

Michelle Lipkin, executive director of the National Association for Media Literacy Education, says interest in media literacy education surged in 2016 when discussions about "fake news" entered the political arena. The COVID-19 pandemic brought another acceleration in media literacy initiatives as people in the United States and around the globe attempted to separate good information from bad.

Yet, Lipkin says that too few educators have been trained in how to help their students learn to use social media and other information platforms safely and wisely and how to analyze the news and information they consume. She also notes that classroom teachers often do not have access to the resources needed for effective media literacy education.

So where can educators turn for curriculum and other resources needed to equip students to become media literate? Here are commonly used sources for media literacy tools:

- The News Literacy Project, a nonpartisan education nonprofit, offers a free online instruction designed to help students identify credible sources of information and adopt a healthy skepticism about news and information.
- Civics Online Reasoning, a nonprofit supported by the McCormick Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation and others, provides free lessons that help students learn to check multiple sources to verify information and to resist the tendency to click on the first site offered via an online search engine and to instead review multiple sites.
- Ithaca College's Project Look Sharp is a free database that helps educators find media literacy materials and professional development tools that promote critical thinking and civic engagement.
- Common Sense Media, a nonprofit that offers media resources for parents and teachers, provides lesson plans in digital citizenship and media literacy in cooperation with the Harvard University Graduate School of Education.
- The Media Education Lab, an online global community focused on media literacy, offers lesson plans and other education resources.

In each case, the curriculum is free for educators to use and available online.

Challenges and conclusions

A consensus on the need for media literacy education is growing among policymakers and educators, but less evident is the effectiveness of the training in equipping adolescents to consistently identify false information amid the flood of social media posts, news reports and internet sites they navigate.

A 2021 study by the Rand Corporation concluded that "media literacy instruction is unevenly implemented, at best, and that obstacles to teaching media literacy (such as lack of time and other priorities) are common."

Educators also have noted that states such as California and New Jersey that passed high-profile media literacy bills have been slow to provide dedicated funding for curriculum and teacher training.

Other states leave it to school districts to decide how and whether to teach media literacy, how to train teachers to deliver media literacy instruction, and the type of curriculum to use. The result is a patchwork of instruction with few checkpoints on effectiveness.

"Even within the same states, we saw that teachers had very different experiences with support for teaching media literacy," Alice Huguet, a Rand researcher, told Stateline in 2024. "While I absolutely think that education should be tailored to context to an extent, leaving an important subject like this completely open to interpretation — or to not being delivered at all — is risky."

Objections have been raised at times by elected leaders and others who are concerned that media literacy education is an attempt to control the news and information that students consume and to direct them away from "unsanctioned" sources of information.

It is critical then that instruction in media literacy steer clear of endorsing or condemning specific news and information sources, advocating for particular points of view or policies, and reinforcing any perceptions of ideological or political bias.

Media literacy is a growing but still evolving branch of education that can serve an essential need in helping adolescents and adults navigate an ocean of news and information. Although much work remains to ensure broad access to effective instruction, failing in 2024 to teach our children how to identify misinformation and disinformation is tantamount to setting them adrift at sea on a raft without swim lessons or life preservers.

Their personal well-being and the health of our democracy depends on equipping them with the skills they need to stay afloat.

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