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Beyond the Smartphone Ban:

Building a Holistic Strategy for Digital Literacy, Citizenship, and Student Well-Being

Anya Kamenetz

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Foreword

Authored by Julia Fallon, Executive Director, SETDA
(State Educational Technology Directors Association)

In recent years, state education leaders have been navigating continual shifts in how technology shows up in schools–and in students' lives.

This work has always required balancing opportunity and risk, but the balance feels especially delicate right now. SETDA's latest State EdTech Trends Report reflects a landscape shaped by constrained budgets, persistent cybersecurity threats, heightened public scrutiny of digital tools and platforms, and growing attention to student well-being and artificial intelligence. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that personal device policies, especially around smartphones, have emerged as a national flashpoint.

Across the country, momentum behind classroom device restrictions reflects real, immediate challenges. School leaders are working to protect instructional time, re-engage students in learning, and reduce social disruptions that can ripple from screens into classrooms. Smartphones have become an "always-on" presence: deeply personal, socially consequential, and difficult to manage through informal norms alone. When expectations are unclear or inconsistently enforced, schools often find themselves pulled into ongoing conflict–between students and staff, among peers, and with families who want reassurance that learning is prioritized and students are safe. In this environment, clear, developmentally appropriate boundaries can help restore focus, reinforce routines, and strengthen the conditions for learning.

But boundaries alone are not a strategy. Students' digital lives do not begin and end at the classroom door. Whether they use smartphones, tablets, laptops, or shared devices at home, the digital world remains constant, persuasive, and increasingly shaped by algorithms and AI-enabled tools. That reality makes self-regulation and skill-building non-optional parts of a coherent educational technology strategy. Young people need explicit instruction and repeated opportunities to practice managing attention, evaluating information, safeguarding personal data, communicating responsibly, and navigating online spaces in ways that support their well-being.

Many state leaders are holding both of these truths at once. In SETDA's 2025 survey, three out of four respondents said their state has adopted device restrictions, issued guidance on them, or is considering a policy shift. Yet the survey also highlights sustained state activity around digital citizenship and responsible technology use: nearly 60 percent of respondents reported their state is supporting digital citizenship for students, and nearly half reported issuing guidance for districts and educators on responsible technology use. Together, these findings point to a broader stance emerging across state education systems, one that views device restrictions and digital citizenship as complementary strategies: the first aimed at protecting the learning environment during the school day, the second at strengthening students' readiness for life beyond it, from postsecondary education to the workplace.

Foreword

Yet, device policies do not operate in isolation. Their success depends on consistent implementation, clear communication, and the capacity of educators who are already balancing many demands. They also intersect with broader issues: developmental needs, equity considerations, family expectations, and the reality that many underlying student wellness concerns predate smartphones. And even with restrictions in place, schools still play a critical role in helping students build the digital literacy, self-regulation, and judgment they will need in adult life.

The through-line is intentionality. Smartphone policies cannot be treated as standalone levers. Outcomes depend on the systems that surround them: clear expectations, consistent adult support, sustained professional learning, reliable funding, meaningful and relevant student learning experiences, and communication that helps implementation hold over time.

The broader educational technology environment makes this work even more urgent. Artificial Intelligence now sits at the top of state edtech priorities, and states are responding with guidance, professional learning, and procurement improvements that emphasize safety and privacy. As AI-enabled content becomes more common, more convincing, and harder to verify, the foundational skills associated with digital citizenship move from "nice to have" to non-negotiable. These skills are central to student well-being, civic readiness, and long-term success.

In this moment, state leadership is essential—not to mandate one-size-fits-all solutions, but to provide guardrails, guidance, and resources that help local leaders make informed decisions. States can reduce fragmentation by sharing evidence-informed practices, clarifying expectations, and supporting sustainable implementation. And because this work ultimately lives in classrooms, states play a critical role in helping ensure that "responsible use" becomes visible in everyday teaching through developmentally sequenced instruction and resources that support both educators and students.

Educators also need support to make this vision a reality. If schools are expected to maintain strong conditions for learning and build student capacity for responsible technology use, implementation must be paired with investment—in professional learning, time for planning, and practical resources aligned to classroom realities. SETDA's 2025 EdTech Trends Report elevates professional learning as both a priority and an ongoing gap, a finding reinforced in SETDA's Improving Professional Learning Systems to Better Support Today's Educators report, which highlights the structures and supports educators need to integrate technology effectively and responsibly. Implementation depends on confidence and consistency, and in many communities, capacity is already stretched. Investing in the people responsible for carrying these expectations forward is not optional—it is the hallmark of a modern, coherent education system.

Foreword

A cell phone policy can reclaim attention during the hours students are in school, but it cannot do the rest of the work on its own. Young people will still spend most of their day in the networks and platforms that shape their lives, and the pressures that shape within those spaces do not pause when the school day begins. What endures is the role of schools as places where students practice good judgment with the support of caring adults: learning to notice what technology asks of them, to protect themselves and one another, and to make choices that align with their values. The strongest school communities approach this as a layered commitment, helping students move from simply using tools to intentionally shaping their relationship with technology as it continues to evolve.

About

This paper examines the growing momentum behind smartphone restrictions in schools and argues for a more comprehensive approach to student technology use. Drawing on research, policy analysis, and interviews with state leaders, district superintendents, educators, and experts, it explores how device policies can coexist with intentional instruction in digital literacy and digital citizenship. Rather than treating phone bans as an end point, the paper positions them as one component of a broader strategy to support student well-being, strengthen learning environments, and prepare young people to navigate an increasingly complex digital world.

Author

Anya Kamenetz is a journalist and author who focuses on the intersection of education, parenting, and technology. She is the author of The Art of Screen Time: How Your Family Can Balance Digital Media and Real Life, the first evidence-based, practical guide for parents navigating kids' digital lives. Kamenetz covered education for NPR for nearly a decade, where she also co-created the podcast, "Life Kit: Parenting." She has written a number of other books including The Stolen Year, which examines how the pandemic reshaped childhood in America. Her reporting has earned national awards from the Education Writers Association and the American Educational Research Association, and she was part of the NPR Ed team recognized with an Edward R. Murrow Award. Kamenetz currently advises the Aspen Institute and the Climate Mental Health Network on initiatives supporting children in a changing climate. Her writing has appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, Slate, and New York Magazine, and she is a frequent speaker on topics related to kids, media, and mental health.

About W/A

Whiteboard Advisors is a mission-driven communications, research, and consulting firm that supports organizations working to advance educational equity and economic mobility. Our clients include the nation's most respected philanthropies, companies, nonprofit organizations, and investors. Our work is truly multidisciplinary, sitting at the intersection of business, policy, practice, and the media.

About Learning.com

Learning.com is dedicated to empowering all K-12 students, regardless of their circumstances, develop healthy and proficient relationships with technology. Founded in 1999, the company partners with millions of students, educators, district administrators and state legislators to bridge the digital learning gap and ensure every learner is better equipped to improve academic outcomes, develop practical life skills and foster more meaningful connections with others. Learning.com has earned more than 30 industry awards including the CODiE award for Best Digital Citizenship Solution and Award of Excellence from "Tech & Learning".

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- **Ralph Valensizi,** Assistant Superintendent for Digital Learning & Innovation, Norwalk Public Schools

Introduction

Smartphone bans are gaining steam in schools in an effort to bring students' attention back to learning and to protect wellbeing.

Rather than leave policies in the hands of individual schools or districts, in many cases this matter is being taken up at the state level. Since 2023, at least 39 states have passed legislation related to cellphone use by students. 5 of these states have enacted blanket bans on cellphone use. Additionally, in at least 11 states, state education agencies or boards of education have taken action, and governors in New York, Arkansas, Montana, Oklahoma and Virginia have issued related orders.

> **Policymakers are stepping in because they see real concern,"** says James Lane, a former Virginia state superintendent and U.S. Department of Education official. **"They're responding to rising anxiety about how technology is affecting students' mental health and classroom engagement, and they see school-level restrictions as a concrete way to show they're taking action."**

In general, school leaders interviewed for this white paper affirmed that these restrictions can improve school climate. Teachers tend to agree that keeping smartphones out of reach helps students concentrate. Beyond the anecdote, the limited evidence available is mixed. For example, a Norwegian study with a quasi-experimental design released in February 2024 showed that in middle schools that restricted cell-phone use, girls, in particular, were significantly less likely to seek mental health care and their academic achievement increased, while bullying decreased for both genders. But a UK study in April 2025 found no significant differences in mental wellbeing, or even in total weekday phone use, at schools with more restrictive policies.

While they may find good-enough reasons to avoid allowing digital distractions in every student's pocket, experts and educators caution that simply banning cell phones isn't a lasting or complete solution to equip-ping students for their futures or even improving their wellbeing for the moment. And more importantly–there is growing concern that smartphone bans could move tech struggles out of sight and out of mind for schools rather than allowing them to shift resources to better support students' learning and wellbeing.

Introduction

Bans can't be the end. They have to be the beginning of the conversation," says Lisa O'Masta, CEO of Learning.com. **"When you do finally get your phone back in your hands, how are you going to react to it?"**

"The intention of supporting our kids in these learning environments is coming from a good place," says Merve Lapus, Vice President of education, outreach and engagement for Common Sense Media. "How we get there is not necessarily going to be solved just by a blanket policy like a ban. I often tell folks it's a yes-

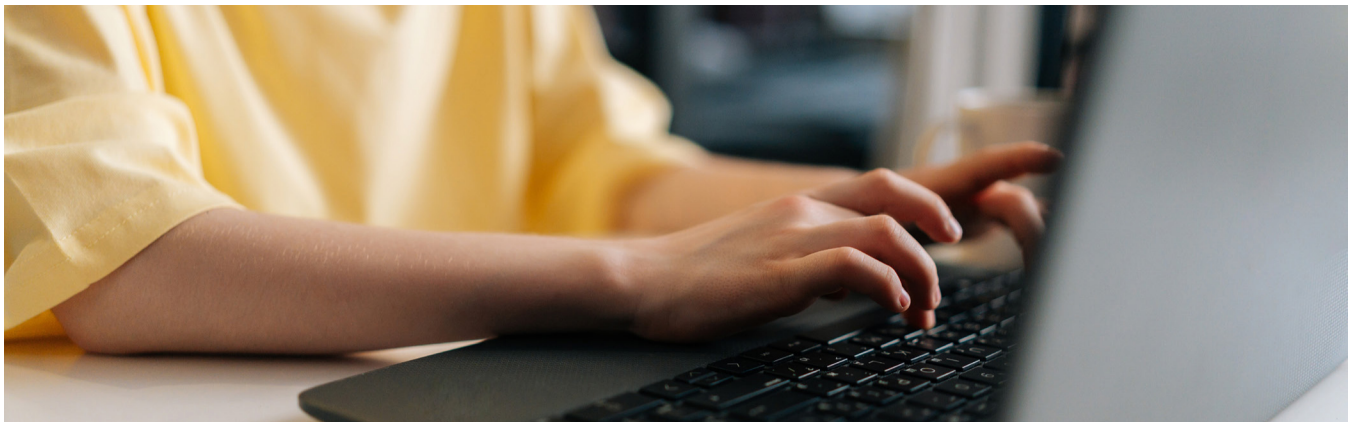
"Real problems exist around young people's attention and engagement with learning," says Mimi Ito, an anthropologist at UC Irvine who studies young people's digital lives. "But this idea that if you magically extract the tech from the context these problems will go away, flies in the face of experience and common sense."The challenge is this: Whether the "screen" is a phone, tablet, laptop, or VR headset, today's students are living an online life today, and will be for the foreseeable future. Empowering them for success, and protecting their safety and wellbeing, requires intentional instruction from parents, schools, and technology providers on everything from digital creation tools to cyberbullying to AI.

Education and support for student digital skills must be an ongoing conversation. A range of safeguards, policies, and curricula and instruction is needed to provide a layered approach to security, privacy, and mental wellbeing for students.

How We Got Here

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a phase shift in the role of digital technology, both in education and in young people's lives. Screen time skyrocketed.

Districts across the country received federal funding to swiftly shift to a one-to-one device model, of necessity, since remote and hybrid learning extended for months. Education Week found in a survey that one-to-one device adoption at the middle and high school level grew from about two-thirds before the pandemic to 90% by 2021, and doubled, from 42% to 84%, at the elementary school level.



In fact, one way to understand the proliferation of smartphone bans is that schools no longer need to allow phones in the classroom for instructional purposes, for example through a Bring Your Own Device model, because students are now more likely to have fully-featured, school-issued laptops available instead.

Educators also observed post-pandemic that students seemed more attached to their phones than before, sometimes as a tether to home and sometimes as a substitute for in-person interaction. Screen time, which we all relied on as a substitute for in-person interaction during the pandemic, began crowding out IRL face time afterwards.

John McNamara is superintendent of the Wantagh Union Free School District in Long Island. He said that immediately after the pandemic, they loosened up on their phone policy at the district's middle schools. "It was a post - COVID reaction, easing students' anxiety, getting them back in the building, and ensuring access to Mom and Dad." But staff had the feedback that they were losing too much instructional time policing cell phone use. Now middle school students must keep their phones in their lockers all day. "We're hearing such positive things from the teachers: They're more productive, more focused, more engaged."

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Where We Are: "Ban" is a Misnomer

Despite the language of "bans," school-wide policies on smartphone and other personal device use tend to be more flexible in the real world.

At the elementary school level and at most middle schools, the most common policy is to require that devices be kept either in the backpack or in the locker all day. At high schools, it's common to see a shoe storage bag hanging on the back of classroom doors, with phones placed inside for the duration of class.

The high-tech, and more expensive, alternative is an individually issued lockable pouch made by a company such as Yonder, which blocks signals to cellphones.

In high school, phones tend to still be allowed during passing periods, lunch, and other non-instructional times. And since students spend most of their time out of school, overall screen time may remain high even at schools with bans. "As the day ends they become so anxious to get their phones back," McNamara says of his middle school students. "It's amazing to watch– as they're walking out the door they're right back to it. On the bus, everyone is heads down."

No matter the policy, it requires staff time to implement and enforce. "It's something for teachers to monitor, and it's a personal device that can cost $1000," says Lapus at Common Sense Media. "More effective policies are backed up with real ways we can engage our staff, kids and families around how we deal with the main challenges we're trying to achieve."

Superintendent Dr. Alexandra Estrella, of Norwalk Public Schools, enlisted her student council members across the district in the winter and spring of 2024-2025 to review the evidence and best practice, and craft a new personal device policy alongside other stakeholders.

"We wanted to put forward something that would ensure that we had the buy-in of students, and that we didn't have to deal with disciplinary issues in retrospect as a result of how students reacted to decisions adults were making." The policy will cover both effective and responsible use of technology.

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A Holistic Approach to Safe and Responsible Use of Technology

Safety is the top responsibility of schools. But how that relates to tech rules can be complicated.

For some parents, a feeling of security comes from being able to reach their children all day. Schools that restrict cell phones have to respond to these concerns. For McNamara, a cohort of "really vocal parents" initially pushed back against the cellphone ban. "It's always a school shooting example. That's what we hear from parents." McNamara has countered, citing experts, that best practice is to centralize communications in a security situation or lockdown. "What we reiterate is that in a worst-case scenario, it's important for our students to be present and taking direction from the adults and not communicating with you. We'll get messaging out to you." He said that what made the change more palatable to parents was a recent renovation that put conventional landline phones in each classroom.

Mimi Ito, at UC Irvine, underlines that smartphones have become a "space of personal agency," that, for some students, is essential to their feelings of belonging and safety.

She points out that groups like neurodivergent students, English learners, and those with disabilities may use tech in assistive and supportive ways, and personal smartphones might be easier to configure for these purposes than school-owned devices. "Digital technology tends to disproportionately support more marginalized and disabled students. These bans are quite likely to have an outsized impact that is important to understand from an equity dimension."

Ito also raises the question of connection to online affinity groups. "We have found that phones are a lifeline for gender, religious, cultural, or racial minority youth. It's unclear how much schools are supporting that in general, but to the extent that students are accessing this support, it's going through the mobile phone, because that's the zone of privacy and agency."If schools choose to restrict phone use, Ito argues, they have a responsibility to understand who is impacted most and mitigate that impact.

"Schools need to be inventorying what the technology is supporting, as well as what it's distracting from."

On the other hand, young people can certainly be exposed to danger through unsupervised access to tech.

In the spring of 2023, South Fayette High School, southwest of Pittsburgh, had some serious incidents involving photos, bullying and harassment. Students were assuming others' identities on social media, necessitating police involvement.

The district reacted by rolling out a consistent school-wide policy of phones placed in a shoe storage bag during classes. According to superintendent Michelle Miller and high school principal Natasha Dirda, the entire school community welcomed the reset, which was introduced as a positive culture shift.

A Holistic Approach to Safe and Responsible Use of Technology

There's always been inappropriate behavior," says Dr. Miller. **"It's part of human development. What we can do is ensure kids are speaking up when they feel unsafe."**

"Knock on wood," says Dr. Dirda. "Discipline referrals have gone down. Teachers are seeing students engage in a way that we haven't seen since before the pandemic. Students are connecting more at passing periods. We had multiple families reach out to Dr. Miller and myself and say, my child came home from school and shared at the dinner table they felt a difference in the community feel within their classroom spaces. I can't put into words the impact that we have seen on our school culture just with how peers interact

Another facet of promoting safety is how schools learn about behavior or discipline issues that may be developing on social media or otherwise outside of school. For grades five through 12, South Fayette uses a platform called Safe2Say Something https://www.safe2saypa.org/, which is an anonymous portal for reporting rumors or incidents.

Promoting a healthy balance in the use of technology may also mean providing resources to assist students to connect face to face. At Wantagh Middle School, where phones now must stay in lockers all day, the principal created a game room for kids to go during recess and lunchtime. "It's cool. It's old school–ping pong, foosball, board games," says Superintendent McNamara. They also assigned a recess coordinator to organize outdoor games, like flag football. "We felt like it was a skill the kids were lacking," but with this assistance, they're learning to socialize again, and bullying and harassment is down. Of course, not all districts have the resources, staff or space to meet students' needs in these ways.

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Supporting Digital Skill Development

For more than a quarter-century, since the Internet first became available, schools have navigated the complexity of integrating digital citizenship curriculum alongside the many other subjects they are tasked with addressing.

It's a challenge: Technology keeps evolving, more quickly than curricula have historically been updated. Meanwhile, developmental challenges and typical youth behaviors persist, but may manifest in new ways, enabled or exacerbated by advances in technology. Bullying becomes cyberbullying, becomes bullying via AI-driven deep fakes.

As a result, teaching digital skills has never been more important, even lifesaving in extreme cases.

Justin Reich, a scholar of educational technology at MIT, states "A US public school should have some part of their mission teaching young people to navigate technology for their own lives and the working world and the civic sphere. The question of how to do that changes." And, he says, schools have always needed external help and partnerships to do that well—often, more help than they're getting.

While Reich sees the phone ban as a practical adaptation to the distractions posed by devices, he maintains, "The best possible option is to have caring adults teach them how to use [the phone] and have teachers model responsible use. I do struggle with the idea of, how are you going to learn to deal with the distraction if you don't use it?"

Merve Lapus, at Common Sense Media, underlines that schools still bear this responsibility even when they don't allow device use in class. "Just not having the device around doesn't solve the remaining 15 hours in their day," he says. "Ban or no ban, the single most important thing we can all do is to help kids learn healthy digital habits."

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Building Blocks: The What, When, How and Why of Digital Literacy

Experts and school leaders agree that successful schools build digital literacy and digital citizenship step by step, like other forms of literacy and social-emotional skills.

Beginning in early elementary school, students are introduced to the proper use of devices and the building blocks of behavior online, including a healthy balance with screen time.

According to Superintendent Miller at South Fayette, "We start talking about being a good friend in K-2. In 3rd through 5th grades, we have a class on tech literacy where they're talking about appropriate usage and how to protect themselves. That continues into middle school through STEAM classes." In high school, digital skills are elaborated through project-based assignments across subjects, teaching research protocols, presentation making, and more.

Digital literacy must be integrated across core instruction—in every class from ELA to math to social studies and science. It starts with the basics like keyboarding and using a touchpad or mouse. While technology may seem omnipresent, many "digital natives" are only comfortable on a mobile device, and often require direct instruction to learn the mechanics of other digital tools. After that, lessons proceed to digital fluency and productivity: The ability to use tools, from calendars and planners, to spreadsheets, to AI integrations, responsibly and effectively. These topics and skills are required for almost any job in the 21st century economy.

Computer Science is a high school graduation requirement in 12 states, and 60% of high schools offer at least foundational computer science courses, according to Code.org. Digital literacy in the computer science classroom may advance to the ability to create with technology: using image editing software, coding and setting up websites and mobile apps, and more job-specific technical skills. As of now, programs like these are still specialized, but there is a case to be made that they should be core to any student's learning.

Building Blocks: The What, When, How and Why of Digital Literacy

Digital citizenship is the skills and behaviors necessary to navigate the digital world and the internet in responsible, respectful and ethical ways. It includes everything that addresses a student's well being and functioning in society. This means security, privacy, conduct, and best practices. "What it means to be a good human, a good citizen online, making responsible choices," O'Masta of Learning.com summarizes.

Digital citizenship is more than simply enforcing the Golden Rules and etiquette of online behavior. Today, online life poses serious legal and safety risks for the unaware. Inappropriate texting has landed teenagers in legal hot water and even forced them to register as sex offenders.

The swift and widespread adoption of generative AI has schools scrambling to guard against, and sometimes even to define, plagiarism, fair use, and cheating in the modern age. Generative AI also brings with it the proliferation of deepfakes, which is another layer of challenge to students' critical thinking skills. Weaponized misinformation and disinformation doesn't just undermine student's factual understanding; it is contributing to hate and polarization.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the comprehensive promotion of digital citizenship includes building meta-cognition and healthy habits around the impact of digital usage on wellbeing itself.

Why is digital citizenship so important? Beyond equipping students with the skills they need for navigating a digital world, digital citizenship helps students protect themselves from online risks and cyber threats. Research shows that teaching digital citizenship doesn't only encourage responsible use of technology,

but also promotes a positive online environment, fosters ethical decision-making and helps students understand the implications of their actions online.

Digital citizenship is broad and multidimensional, meaning it doesn't fit comfortably in the traditional curriculum or school day. It's essential to raise the importance and priority of these topics. This requires professional development for all of the adults within the school: administration, counseling staff, and teachers. A digital citizenship lens can enhance traditional core instruction and project-based learning, serving multiple instructional goals.

As this focus is evolving, schools today are addressing these topics wherever they can fit them in. In the districts interviewed in this report, which are recognized for their innovation by Digital Promise and other organizations, this instruction takes place during library time, by guidance counselors, in ELA, or during dedicated computer classes, supplemented with occasional assemblies and speakers.

"The default is the library media specialist," says Ralph Valensizi at Norwalk Public Schools. "There are technology coaches in some schools, and sometimes teachers in different grade levels will take this on, but it predominantly is owned by library."

Unfortunately, school librarians are in decline. The number of school librarians dropped 20 percent between the 2009-10 and 2018-19 school year. In 2020-21—the first full school year after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic—29.5 percent of schools reported having no librarians. That includes 7 out of 10 charter schools.

"We have the kids download TikTok's license agreement, the teacher puts it into ChatGPT and have ChatGPT summarize how it uses their private data. This license agreement is 70 pages, and no one is ever going to read it. So in the same lesson, you're teaching the basic use of AI, teaching kids to notice license agreements, teaching kids to create a prompt: 'show me how my data is used based on this license agreement.' And they get back a summary that talks about how their data is being used."

The lesson is effective: "Almost half take TikTok off their phones after this."

> **As we adapt to emerging technology, we're teaching a kid to troubleshoot and push the boundaries,"** says O'Masta. **"The primary focus is about developing proficient and healthy relationships with tech for today, tomorrow and their future."**

Merve Lapus, at Common Sense Media, sees opportunities for teachers in other subjects to weave digital citizenship into their work. For example, a math teacher might ask students to graph and analyze the usage data on their devices. An English teacher might assign a writing prompt based on the feelings that come up when you see those "three little dots" that mean a message is coming.

Learning.com CEO Lisa O'Masta describes a classroom activity for middle schoolers that maximizes instructional time by nesting active learning, skill building, and real-world applications for two different technologies at once.

When schools truly embrace digital literacy and digital citizenship, it can have a subtle but pervasive positive impact across the entire educational experience. That's because tech is always changing. Technology will always outpace the curriculum to teach with or about it, so a key part of digital strategy is sharing power with students as they learn how to learn, unlearn, and re-learn and teach themselves new skills. In that way, when you teach "digital," you're also teaching the life skills of adaptability and lifelong learning. This is true most recently with lightning-fast adoption of AI.

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Looking Ahead: What To Look For In A Digital Partner

In the three decades of the Internet age, schools have been subject to many rounds of pendulum swings between tech hype and tech fears. Meanwhile, the idea of schools as sanctuaries dedicated to hands-on learning and in-person socializing gains currency in an ever-more-connected time.

Standing on the brink of AI's full integration into the American education system, the urgency of teaching students the skills to utilize tools responsibly, ethically, and in ways that boost critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication skills has perhaps never been greater. Meeting the moment increasingly depends on our ability to cultivate 21st century digital citizens who are confident in navigating the challenges on the internet and other ed tech tools effectively.

The digital learning ecosystem offers opportunities for schools to partner with organizations with specialization across the domains of content, standards, and solutions. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution to teaching digital literacy and digital citizenship, school leaders and experts identified several characteristics to look for when considering a potential curricular partner.

Aligned with standards:

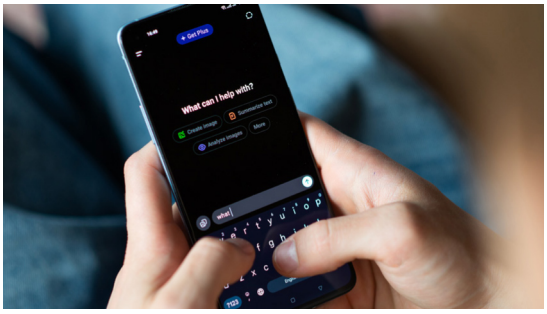
- Districts should ensure tools meet any specific state standards. This includes the Common Core State Standards for Math and ELA, and state content standards as identified in science, social studies, and computer science where applicable, to support integration into core instruction.
- For example, Common Core English standards for 10th grade include: "make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest."

Looking Ahead: What To Look For In A Digital Partner

- ISTE, the International Society for Technology in Education, has a comprehensive set of standards for empowering students in the use of technology, both for learning and for citizenship. They envision students learning to research and curate information, design and create, manage data for problem solving, and collaborate globally. The ISTE Seal is a designation that indicates alignment to the best-in-class ISTE standards, as well as that validates the quality and usability of the product. The Computer Science Teachers Association (CSTA) also offers standards around computer science and technology; alignment to these is another mark of quality.

Full stack solution that evolves at the pace of the digital age:

- Trusted partners offer the full suite of standards, guidelines, curricula, lessons, and training in a fast-moving field. Partnering with a provider that offers materials for all grades and ages, covering both digital basics and workplace-oriented tools, ensures that a district will have all the resources they need across the ever-growing set of digital literacy and citizenship skills. And since ChatGPT, along with other generative AI tools, updates every few minutes, look for a digital learning partner that can keep up, creating new resources that match emerging technologies.



Modular and flexible:

- Districts indicated flexibility is key. Whether you have time for an hour-long lesson or just 15 minutes, the digital tools you're using should be able to accommodate your schedule.
- Lessons should be available asynchronously for independent learning and supplementation.
- Content should be user-friendly so that lessons can be delivered by any number of school staff – librarians, homeroom or advisory teachers, STEM and computer lab instructors, ELA, math or even health class educators.
- With technological changes and advancements happening every day, content should remain updated and relevant to evolving needs.
- Bonus if you partner with an organization that has a team of implementation specialists available to work with districts to help develop technology instructional plans.

Easy to deploy:

- Beyond ensuring that the curriculum can be used with students in various settings – such as a computer lab, library or media center – it also must be able to accommodate multiple learning management platforms or through a single sign-on. Compatibility with programs like Google Classroom, Canvas, Schoology, Itslearning and others, ensures a smooth implementation, as does its ability to run on most internet connected devices, including PCs, Macs, Chromebooks and tablets.

Looking Ahead: What To Look For In A Digital Partner

Accountability

- Schools manage what they measure. Digital literacy partners need to provide rich, automated district and school-wide reporting for progress monitoring and accountability.

Teacher-friendly

- Whatever organization you partner with, ensure that they support teachers with training and resources. It will also save you all sorts of headache to know that the provider listens and responds to concerns in a timely manner, including via email and chat, and has a deep library of videos, planning and howto-guides, pacing calendars and FAQs to help teachers answer any questions.

Student-friendly

- It won't be enough to simply offer students content on how to be effective digital citizens. Look to partner with organizations that offer fun and engaging lessons that motivate students to take online safety seriously. Whether that's through competitive games, group projects, or mock scenarios, students learn best when the material connects to real-world scenarios. Moreover, products should be accessible for English learners and those with disabilities, as well as compatible with assistive technology.

"They have resources that are age appropriate and aligned with standards," says Denis Wisner, District Instructional Technologist for the Corpus Christi Independent School District in Texas, of his district's partner, Learning.com. "That's what teachers want, some type of framework or guidance with resources they can deliver that isn't a heavy lift." Plus, he says, they're responsive. "Before the summer of last school year, 2024, AI was already being used. We wanted to make sure we had something. They listened, and they came out with lessons."

If past is prologue, technology will continue to evolve. And in another five years, schools may be facing a whole new set of challenges. They will need partners that can evolve along with them.

"Learning.com is providing kids not only with the skills they need today, but ways of thinking about how to use tools in the future," says O'Masta.

Looking Ahead: What To Look For In A Digital Partner

No matter what comes, the schools that express the highest levels of confidence in responding to all of these changes are those that function as learning organizations. They model for their students the art of responding to changing circumstances with enduring values. And they use the exploration of new technologies as catalysts for learner-centered and project-based work.

"I don't see these as issues, I see them as opportunities," says Superintendent Estrella at Norwalk Public Schools. "It's just a tool and resources that create efficiencies in the way we do things."

She relates an "eye-opening" conversation with a student council member who responded to a teacher's comment that "technology is the devil of education."

"He was like, I was really taken aback because it shouldn't be seen as the devil. It should be seen as a catapult to making things better. I felt like that child understands where I'm coming from. The kids know that this is not going anywhere and that this is going to be part of a lived experience. So how do we build the adult capacity to adapt to the changes that are happening and support students?"

As technology continues to evolve, one fact remains the same. The schools that express the highest levels of confidence in responding to all of these changes are those that function as learning organizations. They model for their students the art of responding to changing circumstances with enduring values. And they use the exploration of new technologies as catalysts for learner-centered and project-based work. In this way, digital literacy and digital citizenship can truly converge with the highest goals for students.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