

# Commentary: Make media literacy a core component of a New York education

Media literacy is an essential skill for the digital age; it shapes critical thinking and prepares students to enter civic life.

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We live in the age of artificial intelligence and unprecedented information flow. From 24-hour news cycles to social media feeds, we're inundated with media messages that shape our opinions, decisions and actions. In today's world, media literacy is an absolute necessity.

Young people spend an average of seven hours a day in front of a screen — and that doesn't include screen time for educational purposes. Social media has become a major platform for news and information, and as such has a significant impact on students' sense of self. Advertisers craft messages to target their insecurities, and influencers are paid to promote unrealistic standards. AI makes it even harder to distinguish truth from fiction.

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The result can be a distorted worldview, where young people may feel inadequate, isolated or disconnected from their peers. They may not realize when they are being manipulated, misled or misinformed. And they may even unwittingly pass along misinformation themselves.

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Are New York's schools equipping our youth with the critical skills needed to navigate this complex media landscape? Not yet — but state leaders can change that. It's time for education officials and policymakers to make media literacy a core requirement in our state's education system.

Media literacy encompasses the knowledge, skills and habits students need to think critically and make responsible decisions about the media they consume, create and share. It provides vital tools that ensure young people can navigate the new world of social media, AI, and other emerging technologies. Media literacy education can encourage positive behaviors and discourage risky ones.

Nearly 20 states have passed legislation to promote media literacy education; five states, including New Jersey, require it; and others are pursuing statewide media literacy initiatives. New York, however, has fallen behind. Although state lawmakers have initiated numerous bills over the past three legislative sessions, not one has made it out of committee.

Gov. Kathy Hochul has taken small steps in the right direction by initiating the development of a media literacy toolkit for educators. The state Education Department has signaled its interest in addressing this important subject. Now, they must take more definitive action.

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Since 2018, DemocracyReady NY, a statewide coalition of advocates, civic groups, educators and youth organizations, has been working diligently to promote research and policy recommendations that would ensure access to media literacy education for all New York students and make media literacy part of the pathway to a high school diploma. We recently provided state education officials with a media literacy action plan.

We urge Education Commissioner Betty Rosa, the Board of Regents and other education officials to immediately establish a statewide task force for media literacy integration. The state should also identify and fund promising media literacy education programs already emerging across the state. Finally the state must expand efforts to ensure that certified school library media specialists are employed in all New York schools, a move that will be critical to providing all students with an appropriate media literacy education.

Media literacy is critical to civic readiness, a value to which the state's education system is committed. New York's leaders must move quickly to ensure that schools can fulfill their role of providing young people with the knowledge, skills and habits to use media positively in their own lives and to safeguard democracy against current and future threats.

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