

TRUTH DECAY

APPROACHES AND OBSTACLES TO PROMOTING MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION IN U.S. SCHOOLS

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Recent, widely publicized incidents of misinformation and disinformation underscore the need to equip Americans with the knowledge and skills required to navigate a changing media landscape (Pew Trusts, 2021).¹ Schools can play a crucial role in developing these skills, but we know relatively little about how schools promote media literacy (ML) education. Data from a fall 2019 survey indicate that majorities of U.S. social studies teachers in kindergarten through 12th grade (K–12) have witnessed problematic media-related behaviors among their students, such as making unfounded claims based on unreliable sources (Hamilton, Kaufman, and Hu, 2020). Similarly, a national study of nearly 3,500 youth found that the overwhelming majority “floundered” when tested on ML-centric competencies, with 90 percent receiving no credit on four of six tasks asking youth to demonstrate these skills (Breakstone et al., 2019). Moreover, although numerous ML resources are available (Huguet et al., 2019), educators might not prioritize ML or might face barriers in accessing or using these instructional resources. Systematic evidence regarding how schools and teachers promote ML—and what obstacles they face in doing so—could help school leaders, policymakers, and technical assistance providers identify areas of greatest need.

¹ See the *New York Times*' viral misinformation tracker (2020, updated daily).

Media literacy (ML) can be thought of as an approach to processing information that can be applied in any context. ML refers to the abilities to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate various media messages in a variety of forms. A central concept in ML is that all media are constructed for a purpose and thus inherently come with some degree of bias or filter. ML education also considers how different kinds of media and other technologies affect the nature of communication. For more specifics about competencies related to ML education, see the RAND Corporation's Media Literacy Standards (Huguet et al., 2021).

This report is one in a series about how schools can equip students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will need to contribute to their communities and their country as adults. The other reports in this series are

- Alice Huguet, Garrett Baker, Laura S. Hamilton, and John F. Pane, *Media Literacy Standards to Counter Truth Decay*, RR-A112-12
- Alice Huguet, John F. Pane, Garrett Baker, Laura S. Hamilton, and Susannah Faxon-Mills, *Media Literacy Education to Counter Truth Decay: An Implementation and Evaluation Framework*, RR-A112-18

Eighty percent of respondents said that they believed that the teachers in their school are addressing ML competencies in some manner—a large proportion, and an indication of the growing recognition of the importance of ML education.

In this report, we provide evidence about the kinds of ML instruction promoted in public K–12 schools and discuss the obstacles that teachers face in using ML curricula or instruction in their classrooms. For this purpose, we administered survey items to K–12 public school teachers via the American Teacher Panel (ATP).² The ATP is a nationally representative panel of U.S. public K–12 teachers recruited through probability-based methods. ATP survey data are weighted to state and national teacher characteristics to account for differences in sampling and response to ensure that our data are representative of the target population. Our survey was fielded in September and October 2020. After dropping cases in which respondents did not answer any of the relevant questions, our final sample size was 1,514.

The questions asked of teachers focused on whether and how they or other staff in their school implement ML instruction and the obstacles they face in doing so. We disaggregated results by demographics of the schools, which consisted of grade level, poverty level,³ and majority ethnicity of the student body. We present noteworthy descriptive contrasts between demographic groups when statistically significant.⁴ These disaggregated, descriptive survey results are helpful for identifying necessary steps to promote equity of access to ML instruction.

Teachers' Use of Media Literacy Resources in Schools

We asked teachers whether and how their school addressed ML with students (see Table 1). Eighty percent of respondents said that they believed that the teachers in their school are addressing ML competencies in some manner—a large proportion, and an indication of the growing recognition of the importance of ML education. However, this also means that one in five teachers agreed that, “We do not address media literacy in this school in any way.”⁵ We examined whether responses to this question differed by poverty level or majority ethnicity of the student body and found no differences but did find that elementary school teachers (23 percent) were significantly more likely than middle school teachers (15 percent) to say

² See Appendix A for the full questionnaire.

³ We defined these levels by the percentage of the student body that qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.

⁴ We used logistic regression models, with significant results at $p < 0.05$ without adjustment for multiple hypothesis tests.

⁵ See Table B.1.

TABLE 1 Media Literacy Approaches in Schools

Question	Percentage of Teachers Responding YES									
	Poverty Level				Ethnicity			Grade Level		
	Low	Moderate	High	Very High	Black	Hispanic	White	Elementary	Middle	High
Our school has adopted an explicit media literacy curriculum from an organization like Common Sense Media or the Center for Media Literacy.	17	16	16	20	21	20	15	21	18	13
We have no schoolwide media literacy curriculum, but I or other staff teach media literacy using materials designed for this purpose.	26	26	27	21	22	21	26	22	25	29
I or other staff integrate some media literacy concepts into regular classroom instruction (e.g., during language arts or math classes).	49	44	34	37	25	42	44	36	45	44
I or other staff address media literacy with specific students when problems arise (e.g., student misuse of social media).	30	28	25	22	24	24	28	20	31	30

that their school does not address ML in any way.⁶ Seventeen percent of responding teachers indicated their school had not adopted an explicit ML curriculum, with fewer high school teachers than elementary teachers reporting that their school adopted a curriculum (13 percent and 21 percent, respectively).

It was more common for teachers to report that they integrated ML concepts into regular classroom instruction (41 percent). Roughly 26 percent of teachers reported that they addressed ML with students when problems emerged (e.g., student misuse of social media), and 25 percent said that they used materials that were not school-selected but designed to address ML.

Our results suggest noteworthy differences by school composition. Teachers at majority-Black schools were less likely to report integrating ML concepts into their regular instruction than teachers at majority-White schools.

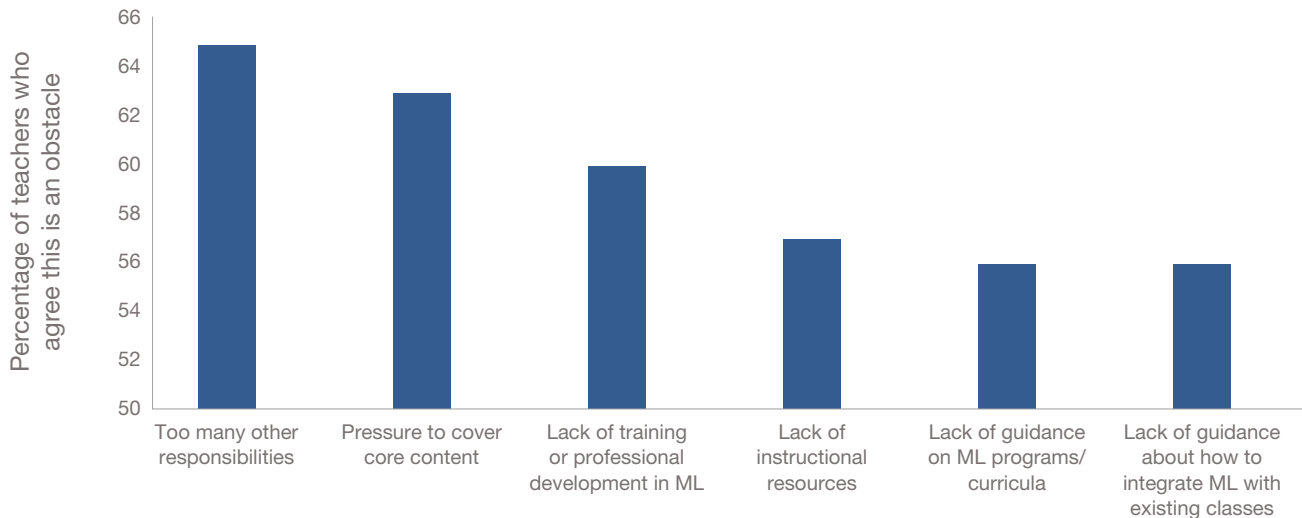
Teachers at high-poverty schools (schools where more than 75 percent of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch) were also less likely than teachers at low- and moderate-poverty schools to report that they integrate ML concepts into instruction and address ML when problems occur.⁷ Additionally, teachers at high-poverty schools were less likely than teachers at all other schools to report that they used ML materials that were not school-selected. Although we cannot directly identify the reasons behind these differences in our data, it is possible that they speak to a greater degree of instructional flexibility offered to teachers in some schools over others.

⁶ High school fell in the middle (20 percent) and was not statistically significantly different from middle or elementary schools.

⁷ The difference between very high and moderate poverty schools for “integrate into instruction” was borderline significant at $p = 0.056$.

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FIGURE 1 Obstacles to Implementing and Promoting Media Literacy



Obstacles to Implementing and Promoting Media Literacy

We asked teachers about conditions that might affect their ability to implement ML instruction. Across all surveyed teachers, a majority identified six conditions as obstacles to ML instruction. These six obstacles can be seen in Figure 1.

These results indicate that a majority of teachers in the United States face meaningful obstacles implementing ML education. Some of these obstacles (e.g., a lack of instructional resources) suggest relatively clear solutions; others (e.g., too many other teacher responsibilities) are more intractable.

The survey data indicate that teachers at low-poverty schools were less likely than their peers at higher-poverty schools to report obstacles to promoting

ML education (Table 2). For instance, teachers at low-poverty schools were less likely to say that a lack of leadership support was an obstacle, although relatively few teachers overall (26 percent) indicated that this was an obstacle, regardless of school demographics. Teachers at low-poverty schools were also less likely to say that they faced obstacles related to a lack of guidance about such topics as integrating ML or about what curricula/program to use; in addition, fewer teachers in this group reported feeling pressure to cover core academic content. Elementary teachers were also more likely than middle or high school teachers to report that pressure to cover academic content (e.g., math, reading) was an obstacle to delivering ML.⁸

TABLE 2 Obstacles by School Poverty Level

Question	Percentage of Teachers Agreeing											
	The leadership in my school does not value ML				I haven't received enough professional development related to ML				I don't have enough guidance about how ML concepts could integrate with my existing classes			
	Low poverty	Moderate poverty	High poverty	Very high poverty	Low poverty	Moderate poverty	High poverty	Very high poverty	Low poverty	Moderate poverty	High poverty	Very high poverty
Condition exists and is an obstacle	17	25	25	29	53	62	61	60	50	57	58	58

NOTE: For other response option results, see Appendix B.

⁸ This comports with findings from a recent RAND report on civics education (Hamilton, Kaufman, and Hu, 2020): 73 percent of elementary teachers felt that pressure to cover academic content was an obstacle to addressing students' civic development.

When disaggregated by majority ethnicity of the student body, data show that 67 percent of teachers at majority-White schools considered having too many other priorities an obstacle to prioritizing ML compared with 55 percent of teachers at majority-Black schools (see Table 3). These two groups of teachers reported other obstacles at essentially identical rates, such as (1) school leadership not valuing ML and (2) feeling pressure to cover required academic content. Teachers at majority-Hispanic schools, however, were most likely to report that school leadership did not value ML, which suggests that teachers at majority-Hispanic schools might be in need of more organization-level supports and resources.

Teachers at majority-Hispanic schools were most likely to report that school leadership did not value ML, which suggests that teachers at majority-Hispanic schools might be in need of more organization-level supports and resources.

TABLE 3 Obstacles by School Ethnicity

Question	Percentage of Teachers Agreeing		
	Condition does <i>not</i> exist in my school	Condition exists but is <i>not</i> an obstacle	Condition exists and <i>is</i> an obstacle
I have too many other responsibilities as a teacher, and am unable to prioritize media literacy.			
Majority Black	18	27	55
Majority Hispanic	14	23	63
Majority White	13	20	67
The leadership in my school does not value media literacy.			
Majority Black	57	21	22
Majority Hispanic	54	18	29
Majority White	59	19	22

NOTE: For results of other questions, see Appendix B.

Conclusion

Our results indicate that the majority of U.S. public schools address ML in some fashion. It is encouraging that many teachers (41 percent) report integrating ML concepts into their broader instruction—a promising approach recommended by ML experts (National Media Literacy Alliance, 2020). However, ML education appears to be enacted in a classroom-by-classroom manner instead of directed or supported centrally by school, district, or state leadership. Only about 17 percent of teachers in our survey reported that their schools adopted an explicit ML curriculum. This likely translates into ML instruction that diverges considerably, perhaps even within individual schools. Students might receive a very different experience with ML education depending on their teachers' decisions. Additionally, a majority of teachers reported a considerable slate of obstacles they face in using ML, such as a lack of training and a lack of instructional resources.

These findings differ in important ways by the ethnic composition and poverty level of the student body at each school. For example, teachers at low-poverty schools were the least likely to report obstacles to implementing ML. Additionally, there were differences among teachers at majority-Black, majority-Hispanic, and majority-White schools in how ML was typically being delivered to students (e.g., teachers at majority-Black schools were less likely to report integrating ML concepts into their regular instruction than teachers at majority-White schools).

Taken together, these demographic variations imply that school and district leaders, policymakers, funders, and others who support schools should work to

identify and eliminate inequities in students' access to ML instruction and consider the conditions that might influence teacher opportunities to provide that instruction. For instance, the relatively low use of ML curricula—and the high number of teachers who reported that a lack of training in ML was a barrier—highlights a potential opportunity for school, district, and state leaders to provide greater guidance around resources, ML training, and implementation support. School leaders should explore ways that they can support all teachers in providing ML instruction and consider whether a more consistent schoolwide approach would be appropriate. At the district level, leaders could publicly commit to a professional learning agenda and provide professional development in ML education for their teachers. Similarly, state and local policymakers should weigh their options for requiring some form of ML education across schools to support implementation of ML education that is more widespread and consistent.⁹⁸

There are some limitations to this research. First and foremost, surveys are valuable but constrain answers to a set of predetermined responses and do not allow for follow-up questions. In addition, surveys are self-reports—we did not observe actual behaviors. We were limited by the small number of questions that we posed, and we had to make decisions about what to include and what important lines of inquiry would be left off. We emphasize that this brief report is exploratory, and more research is needed to further illuminate the realities of ML education in the United States.

⁹ For an example of state-level efforts, see Illinois' HB0234, which states "that, beginning with the 2021-2022 school year, every public high school may include in its curriculum a unit of instruction on media literacy" (Illinois General Assembly, 2021).

Appendix A. Questionnaire

In this appendix, we provide the questionnaire that respondents received.

QUESTION STEM 1 CALLED FOR YES/NO RESPONSES

1. Our school has adopted an explicit media literacy curriculum from an organization like Common Sense Media or the Center for Media Literacy.
2. We have no schoolwide media literacy curriculum, but I or other staff teach media literacy using materials designed for this purpose.
3. I or other staff integrate some media literacy concepts into regular classroom instruction (e.g., during language arts or math classes).
4. I or other staff address media literacy with specific students when problems arise (e.g., student misuse of social media).
5. I or other staff have adopted another strategy to promote media literacy (please specify):
6. To my knowledge, we do not address media literacy in this school in any way.

QUESTION STEM 2:

Condition does not exist at my school; Condition exists but is not an obstacle; Condition exists and is a minor obstacle; Condition exists and is a major obstacle.

1. I have too many other responsibilities as a teacher, and am unable to prioritize media literacy.
2. I feel pressure to cover core required content, such as reading and mathematics.
3. The leadership in my school does not value media literacy.
4. I don't have enough guidance about what media literacy programs or curricula I should use.
5. I don't have enough guidance about how media literacy concepts could integrate with my existing classes.
6. I haven't received enough professional development related to media literacy.
7. I don't have sufficient instructional materials for media literacy.
8. Media literacy is not relevant to my students' ages or needs.

Appendix B. Additional Results

Tables B.1–B.3 provide additional details about ML approaches in schools and obstacles in school as delineated by school poverty level and school ethnicity. The makeup of our sample in terms of poverty level was low = 21.1 percent; moderate = 28.8 percent; high = 27.5 percent; and very high = 22.6 percent. We assessed these levels as follows: Low poverty = 0–25 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch; moderate = 26–50 percent; high = 51–75 percent; very high = 76–100 percent.

In our sample, 11.4% of teachers were from majority Black schools, 24.8% from majority Hispanic schools, and 63.8 from majority White schools.

Finally, our sample was split by grade level as follows: 38.9% elementary, 21.2% middle, and 38.4% high school. Note that these numbers do not sum to 100 because some teachers were from schools that did not fit these categories (for example, K–12 or K–8).

TABLE B.1 Media Literacy Approaches in Schools

Question	Percentage of Teachers Responding YES
Our school has adopted an explicit media literacy curriculum from an organization like Common Sense Media or the Center for Media Literacy.	17.1
We have no schoolwide media literacy curriculum, but I or other staff teach media literacy using materials designed for this purpose.	25.4
I or other staff integrate some media literacy concepts into regular classroom instruction (e.g., during language arts or math classes).	40.7
I or other staff address media literacy with specific students when problems arise (e.g., student misuse of social media).	25.9
I or other staff have adopted another strategy to promote media literacy.	1.5
To my knowledge, we do not address media literacy in this school in any way.	20.1

TABLE B.2 Obstacles by School Poverty Level

Question	Percentage of Teachers Responding YES											
	The leadership in my school does not value ML				I haven't received enough professional development related to ML				I don't have enough guidance about how ML concepts could integrate with my existing classes			
	Low poverty	Moderate poverty	High poverty	Very high poverty	Low poverty	Moderate poverty	High poverty	Very high poverty	Low poverty	Moderate poverty	High poverty	Very high poverty
Condition exists and <i>is</i> an obstacle	61.8	58.5	58.3	52.0	24.8	19.1	20.0	22.3	27.8	20.1	21.3	24.1
Condition exists but is <i>not</i> an obstacle	20.9	16.8	16.9	18.8	22.2	18.8	19.0	17.4	22.6	22.7	20.5	18.0

TABLE B.3 Obstacles by School Ethnicity

Question	Percentage of Teachers Responding YES		
	Condition does <i>not</i> exist in my school	Condition exists but is <i>not</i> an obstacle	Condition exists and <i>is</i> an obstacle
I feel pressure to cover core required content, such as reading and mathematics.			
Majority Black	19.2	17.7	63.1
Majority Hispanic	15.8	24.0	60.2
Majority White	15.2	21.6	63.3
I don't have enough guidance about what media literacy programs or curricula I should use.			
Majority Black	33.9	9.2	56.9
Majority Hispanic	22.3	20.9	56.8
Majority White	23.2	21.0	55.8
I don't have enough guidance about how media literacy concepts could integrate with my existing classes.			
Majority Black	33.9	11.5	54.6
Majority Hispanic	19.8	21.6	58.6
Majority White	22.5	22.8	54.7
I haven't received enough professional development related to media literacy.			
Majority Black	31.5	5.4	63.1
Majority Hispanic	19.8	20.9	59.4
Majority White	20.9	20.6	58.6
I don't have sufficient instructional materials for media literacy.			
Majority Black	30.0	15.4	54.6
Majority Hispanic	21.6	18.4	60.1
Majority White	22.3	20.9	56.8
Media literacy is not relevant to my students' ages or needs.			
Majority Black	58.5	14.6	26.9
Majority Hispanic	52.0	22.7	25.3
Majority White	55.3	20.7	24.0

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

In this report, we provide evidence about the kinds of media literacy (ML) instruction promoted in public schools and discuss the obstacles that teachers face in using ML curricula or instruction in their classrooms. We administered survey items to public school teachers via the American Teacher Panel (ATP), a nationally representative panel of U.S. public K–12 teachers recruited through probability-based methods. Our survey was fielded in September and October 2020 and focused on whether and how teachers or other school staff implement ML instruction and the obstacles faced in doing so. The ATP is part of the American Educator Panels (AEP), which are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country.

This work is part of RAND's Truth Decay initiative (Kavanagh and Rich, 2018), which studies the diminishing role of facts and analysis in public life. Through this initiative, RAND has invited researchers and engaged stakeholders to find solutions that counter Truth Decay and the threat it poses to evidence-based policymaking. More information about Truth Decay is available at www.rand.org/truth-decay.

This study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking. More information about RAND can be found at www.rand.org. Questions about this report should be directed to ahuguet@rand.org, and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to educationandlabor@rand.org.

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