

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENCOURAGE DIGITAL EDUCATION AND ENSURE YOUTH PROTECTION

The SPRING Group

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Prepared for:

Call for inputs on the solutions to promote digital education for young people and to ensure their protection from online threats

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1. Past American Digital Education Policy

1.1 Policy Encouraging Digital Education

There are currently no federal laws mandating digital education.¹ Congress and other agencies have proposed, but not yet passed, certain measures relating to media literacy:

- 1) The Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act,² introduced in June 2022, would send grants to organizations used to encourage digital education.
- 2) The 2024 National Educational Technology Plan³ recommended implementing specific curricula for student learning that incorporate digital safety lessons and training teachers accordingly.
- 3) The Cyberspace Solarium Commission,⁴ a special group created to defend against cyberattacks, recommended Congress study possible ways to improve digital citizenship through classroom curricula.

Despite these efforts, the absence of federal laws mandating digital literacy means there has been little action from school districts encouraging this type of learning.

Digital education efforts have similarly been made on the state level.

- 1) Louisiana⁵ has incorporated strict standards for digital literacy and education, although they are not legally binding.
- 2) Delaware, New Jersey, and Texas⁶ require digital literacy education for all students grades K-12, while 18 total states mandate some digital literacy curriculum at some point before graduation from high school.⁷

1.2 Policy Promoting Digital Human Rights Knowledge

Similar to education for digital citizenship in general, there has been a considerable but incomplete push for ensuring the accessibility of this information.

The ISTE, or International Society for Technology in Education, set standards for students and teachers that cover the aspect of using technology correctly in a humane manner.⁸

¹ [Gifford, 2023](#)

² [U.S. Congress, 2022](#)

³ [Rodríguez, et al., 2024](#)

⁴ [Cyberspace Solarium Commission, n.d.](#)

⁵ [Louisiana Department of Education, n.d.](#)

⁶ [Condo, 2023](#)

⁷ [Hutton, 2023](#)

⁸ [California Department of Education, 2023](#)

Their definitions, followed by many educational organizations in states like California, hold that schools should follow several goals:

1. Students should be able to recognize the rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of living in a digital landscape, acting in an ethical manner.
2. Educators should inspire students to participate and contribute to the digital world.
3. Educators should support equity, inclusion, and digital citizenship.
4. Coaches should model digital citizenship for their students.

1.3 Policy Guarding Against Online Threats

Several actors on the federal level have all taken separate action to promote online safety in the United States—resulting in a specialized team and a pair of national laws.

- 1) The Biden-Harris Administration formed a Task Force on Kids Online Health & Safety, led by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Commerce. The force is dedicated to keeping minors safe and private online, recommending pro-privacy policies to the digital industry.⁸
- 2) The Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) is a law protecting under-13 children online. It obligates websites and online services to obtain parental consent before gathering the personal information of underage users.⁹
- 3) The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) keeps student education records private. It also grants parents the right to review those records and request corrections to any inaccuracies. Aside from certain exceptions, parents must approve a school’s disclosure of any student information before it can be released.¹⁰

Some American states have also implemented privacy and safety measures for children.

- 1) In Utah, the Social Media Regulation Act¹¹ requires social media companies to obtain age confirmation and parental consent before accounts may be created.
- 2) Laws in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas effectively ban social networks from granting access to minors without parental approval.¹²
- 3) California’s Age-Appropriate Design Code Act requires websites frequented by children to implement systems safeguarding their mental health and well-being.¹³

⁸ [The White House, 2023](#)

⁹ [National Archives, n.d.](#)

¹⁰ [U.S. Department of Education, n.d.](#)

¹¹ [Utah State Legislature, 2023](#)

¹² [Perkins Coie, 2022](#)

¹³ [California State Legislature, 2022](#)

2. Challenges Facing Digital Education

2.1 Challenges in Digital Education Access

An alarming number of households have unreliable access or none at all to an Internet connection and the technology needed to attain digital education. Over 9 million students¹⁴—around 12% of the total student population¹⁵—lack access to the Internet entirely. 1 in 4 students have unreliable Internet networks. This also extends to teachers, as around 400,000 lack access to digital education.¹⁶

Several societal disparities further highlight Internet accessibility issues.

- 1) Urban-rural divides: rural students are twice as likely to not have digital devices to finish their coursework.¹⁷ Only 47% of rural areas even have high-speed Internet, in contrast to 77% of suburban areas.¹⁸
- 2) Racial cleavages: Black (83% access) and Native American (78% access)¹⁹ households are least likely to have Internet access. A large culprit is the wealth gap, considering that people of color are disproportionately low-income after years of marginalization. 97% of households making over \$75,000 a year have Internet, far more than the 69% of households making under \$20,000 a year.²⁰
- 3) Geographic disparities: the South has the lowest rates of access and the West has the highest rates of access across the regions of the United States.²¹ A possible root of this divide is gaps in service: 19 million Americans, or 6% of the total population, lack access to fixed broadband service at threshold speeds.

Systemic factors play considerable roles in furthering Internet inequality.

- 1) Cyclical poverty has further pushed down already marginalized groups. Accessing technology and the necessary tools to use it come with a high barrier of entry, making it inaccessible to a large portion of the population.
- 2) Furthermore, the disproportionate allocation of funds to majority-white schools means that schools in underprivileged, majority-minority communities get far less funding. This means that while wealthier students can get school-issued

¹⁴ [National Center for Education Statistics, 2023](#)

¹⁵ [U.S. Census Bureau, 2013](#)

¹⁶ [Ney, 2022](#)

¹⁷ [House Oversight Committee, 2021](#)

¹⁸ [Michigan State University Quello Center, 2020](#)

¹⁹ [Heacock, n.d.](#)

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ *ibid*

computers that run effortlessly on high-quality Wi-Fi, underfunded and overcrowded schools cannot afford the infrastructure to maintain such a system.

2.2 Challenges in Online Safety

Despite attempts to safeguard the privacy and security of children on online platforms, the abuses and negligence of private corporations have made that extraordinarily difficult.

These companies continually fail to verify the age of their users, allowing under-13 children to make accounts and access every feature of their platforms. Accounts for most social networks can only be created after a user confirms their date of birth, but children can easily circumvent these systems by simply lying about their birthdays.

Even when the accounts that slip through their initial age test are exposed, they don't take action: Meta, the company running social media platforms Instagram and Facebook, "received over 402,000 reports of under-13 Instagram users through its website and app reporting systems, but its records show that fewer than 164,000—far fewer than half of the reported accounts—were disabled for potentially being under the age of 13."²²

The recommendation systems of these companies, which show users content similar to what they've viewed in the past, connect illegal pornography networks with their clients. Researchers looked up highly explicit hashtags on Instagram and were flooded with recommendations of illegal content. After reporting the private groups where this material was distributed, Meta only took action against 4 of the 20 groups sent for review.²³

In a similarly harmful manner, users with poor mental health or suicidal tendencies are continually recommended a flow of negative content—not just bad news like celebrity deaths or tragedies, but also videos filled with mentions of suicide and self-harm.²⁴

The final shortfall of social media regulation is the lack of filters on possibly harmful or illegal content. In preparing for its lawsuit against Meta for endangering child safety, the state of New Mexico created a "decoy" account that posed as a mother looking to traffic her young daughter. Researchers reported the illegal accounts inviting them to private groups, yet Meta didn't take action on any of them.²⁵ Similarly, BBC researchers made reports on 100 images that sexualized children, and action was only taken on 18.²⁶

²² [Brodkin, 2023](#)

²³ [ibid](#)

²⁴ [Nittle, 2023](#)

²⁵ [New Mexico First Judicial District Court, 2023](#)

²⁶ [Toor, 2017](#)