

DIGITAL LITERACY & SAFETY



72% of Alaska high school students use social media several times per day.

What Is Digital Literacy and Safety?

Today's children and teens spend more time online than ever before. In fact, one-third of teens use at least one social media platform "almost constantly" ([HHS, 2023](#)). With so much exposure to online content, students regularly encounter messages and information that can influence their health, safety, and overall wellbeing.

This is why digital and media literacy matter.

Digital and media literacy refers to the skills students need to successfully engage with information and technology. This competence includes understanding how media shapes our world and building inquiry, communication, and self-expression skills that support personal and social wellbeing.



Restricting cell phone use helps reduce classroom distractions, but it does not address the **broader health and safety risks associated with digital media exposure**. As districts implement HB 57, they have an important opportunity to strengthen health education curricula **to ensure digital literacy is explicitly taught**.

Digital and media literacy help students become safe, healthy, and confident users of technology.

Media literacy is tied to important health outcomes. Research shows that building these skills can help reduce risks of cyberbullying-associated depression, body image concerns and disordered eating, and poor sleep quality ([HHS, 2023](#)). By teaching digital and media literacy early and reinforcing it across grade levels and subjects, schools can empower students to navigate a complex digital world and support their academic, social, and emotional wellbeing.

HB 57/SB 18 - Alaska Law on Devices in Schools

Effective, July 1, 2025, the Alaska state legislature mandated that **all schools must adopt a policy** governing the use of non-school-issued devices.

If they do not have a policy in place, **schools may not allow students to use personal electronic devices during regular school hours**, including lunch and passing periods. Policies must include exemptions for medical and translation needs, and emergencies.

The Alaska State Board of Education provides model policy language, and the Association of Alaska School Boards updated **BP 5138: Student Possession & Use of Portable Electronic Devices** in June 2025 to align with the new requirements.

[The full text of HB 57/SB 18 can be accessed here.](#)

Benefits of Digital Literacy

Building digital literacy skills will enable students to:

Recognize credible information and identify bias or misinformation

Participate in online communication

Develop technology and communication skills needed for college, careers, and civic life

Understand the benefits and risks of online platforms

Make thoughtful decisions about the content they consume and share

Think critically and collaborate with others

Create media responsibly and use positive, healthy methods of self-expression

How to Teach Digital Literacy and Safety

Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking begins with asking questions such as:

- Who/where is this information coming from? What do I know about the source? Where did they get this information?
- What is this piece of media trying to get me to think or do? Why?

Model asking these questions with students, and encourage them to find the answers. Thinking critically can help students evaluate information for bias, motivation, and point of view.

Online Identity and Safety

Talk with students about what they post online and how it will still be accessible in many years. Encourage them to think about how they might feel if someone found their current social media information in the future.

Similarly, practicing safe engagement when interacting with others online can protect young people from harm. **Teaching students to recognize a dangerous situation** and seek help from an adult they trust is imperative.



Digital Distractions

Students may have difficulty disconnecting from the social internet, even when they want to. **Helping young people set limits** and stick to them can build skills around boundaries and time management.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying: What Parents Need to Know

Cyberbullying is bullying that happens when **computers, cell phones, or other digital devices are used to embarrass, threaten, or harm someone**. It is a serious issue that can lead to fear, depression, and health problems, as well as academic difficulties. Examples include hurtful texts or posts, sharing private photos, or creating social media content meant to shame or mock someone. Because digital content spreads quickly and lasts forever, the impact can be far-reaching.

How Parents and Adults Can Help

Talk early and often.

Teach students not to send or forward hurtful messages and to treat others with respect online and offline.

Think before posting.

Students may see messages as jokes, but the target may experience real harm. Encourage students to slow down and consider how someone else might feel before posting.

Know the consequences.

Participation in cyberbullying can lead to school discipline or legal consequences.

Ask for help.

If your child sees or experiences cyberbullying, they should save the evidence and share it with a trusted adult.

If you know a child is being targeted:

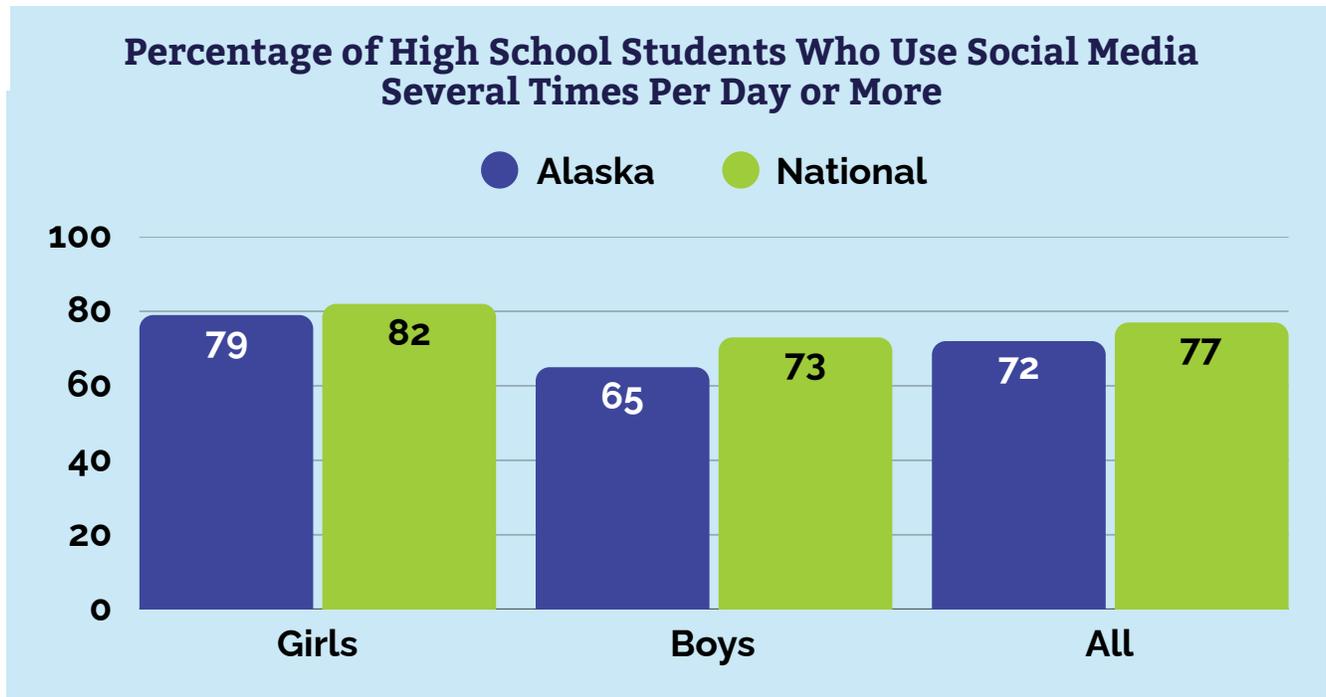
- Advise them not to respond to hurtful messages. Instead, save the messages and share them with an adult who can help.
- Help them block the sender and adjust privacy settings.
- If the bullying involves school peers, contact a counselor or principal.
- Report any threats of violence to law enforcement.

Watch For Warning Signs	Emotional changes, irritability, withdrawing from friends, drop in academic performance, attendance issues, defensiveness
Prevention Strategies	Have frequent conversations about online behavior and conflict, and emphasize digital responsibility and real-world consequences
When A Student Reports Cyberbullying	Thank the student for reporting. Collect the evidence, and report it to the relevant authorities (school counselor, principal, police) and to the child's parent/caregiver.
Offer Support	Provide non-digital activities, help students practice coping skills, connect with mental health supports, and encourage offline relationships

Alaska and National Data

National and Alaska Social Media Use

In 2023, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey included questions about social media use for the first time, both in Alaska and nationally, (YRBS, 2023; and Alaska YRBS, 2023).



Social Media Use Associated with Mental Health Risks

37%

of Alaska students report using social media at least hourly, with girls 1.5x more likely to do so than boys.

Compared to peers who do not use social media, Alaska high school students who use social media hourly or more are

- 3.5 times more likely to report feeling sad or hopeless for 2+ weeks in the past year
- 2.2 times more likely to report feeling anxious for 2+ weeks in the past year

Frequent social media users are **3.5 times more likely to engage in unhealthy weight-loss behaviors** than their peers who do not use social media.

Bullying & Cyberbullying

In 2023, **30.7% of Alaska students reported being bullied** on school property, off school property, and/or electronically in the last 12 months.



Digital Literacy, Safety, and the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model

The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child components can support digital literacy and safety in your school.

Family & Community Engagement

Digital literacy and safety are a shared responsibility between schools and families. Schools can strengthen this partnership by providing families with simple, accessible guidance to support caregivers in addressing students' online activities.



Integrate identifying credible information into computer and technology courses.



Create workshops and tip sheets to support parents in discussing online safety, balancing screen time, and supporting positive digital citizenship.



Help caregivers build digital literacy skills by hosting family tech nights and computer skills courses for caregivers.



Encourage families to have consistent expectations across school and home.



Health Education

Health Education equips students with the knowledge and skills to make informed, healthy decisions, and digital literacy is now an essential part of that foundation. Students regularly encounter health information online, from social media trends to targeted messages that may be inaccurate or harmful.



Integrate digital literacy into Health Education to help students learn to evaluate the credibility of online content and navigate digital spaces safely



Ensure that health education curricula includes necessary skills to analyze how information and media can influence one's health decisions



Educate school staff about the role of trusted adults and how to report safety concerns

Social Emotional Climate

As online communication, social media, and virtual learning become part of students' daily life, digital literacy plays a key role in helping students build respectful relationships, manage emotions, and create a sense of belonging.



Teach students how to recognize online risks, practice empathy in digital communication, set healthy boundaries, and respond to cyberbullying

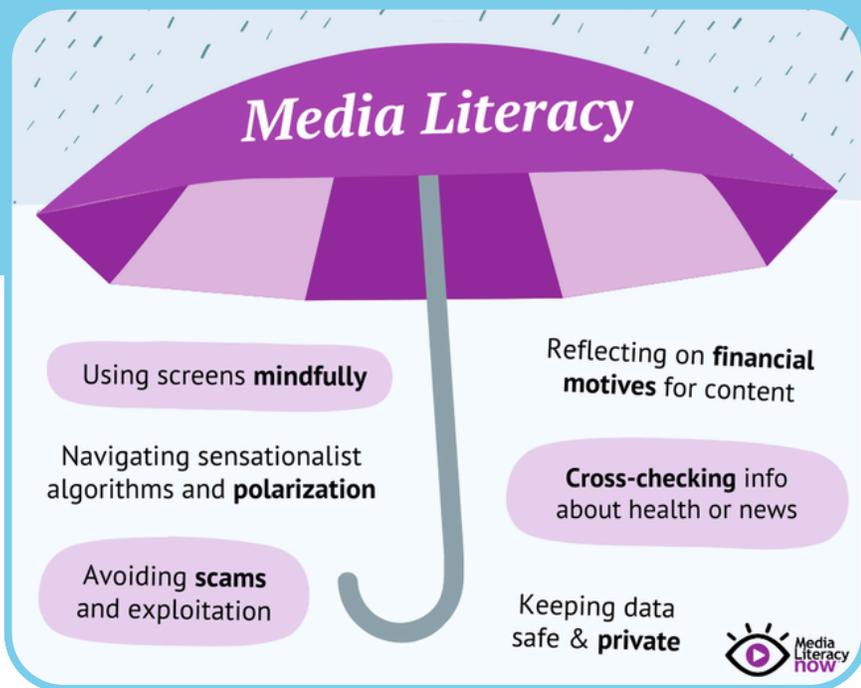


Instate a strong anti-bullying policy, and encourage students to "treat others how you want to be treated," both in person and online

National Resources

Media Literacy Now:

Media Literacy Now is a U.S. nonprofit organization that works to ensure all K-12 students are taught media literacy as an essential 21st-century literacy skill. Its mission is to inform and drive policy change at the local, state, and national levels so that students become healthy, confident, and competent media consumers and creators in a complex media environment. The organization supports educators, advocates, and policymakers with tools, resources, and legislative guidance to expand media literacy education in schools across the country.



Online Health and Safety for Children and Youth: Best Practices for Families and Guidance for Industry:

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has compiled guidance and resources for families to promote online safety. These resources are intended for adults working with children of all ages.

FBI SOS:

The FBI Safe Online Surfing website is designed for students in grades 3-8 to promote cyber citizenship and help students learn about online safety while engaging in fun, interactive games. There are also resources for teachers and families on the website.

RMC Health: Access Valid and Reliable Resources:

In a digital world where research articles, social media posts, influencers, targeted advertisements, and AI-generated content all compete for attention, students must learn to identify credible sources and distinguish evidence-based information from misinformation. These resources prepare teachers to help students learn and practice this skill.

Common Sense Media:

Common Sense offers resources for parents/caregivers and educators around digital literacy and safety. Their research, independent media ratings, and award-winning curricula support their mission of encouraging families and students to take charge of their digital choices.



Local and Culturally Relevant Resources

Alaska Children's Trust Online Safety Resources:

The Alaska Children's Trust has several online safety resources developed including an original comic book for use with younger kids and conversation starter cards for families to discuss safety with their teens. They have tips for safety uses on a variety of platforms, similar those found on national resources but which might be welcome coming from a familiar local source.



Alaska Digital Citizenship Week:

The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development encourages schools and districts to participate in the Alaska Digital Citizenship Week. This dedicated week is part of an ongoing effort to teach students how to make safe, smart, and ethical decisions in a rapidly advancing digital world.

Alaska Library Association:

The Alaska Internet Circle of Safety is a resource for adults who would like to teach their children to be responsible online citizens. It is our responsibility, as adults, to teach children to navigate the Internet safely, efficiently, and legally. The Internet is uncharted territory for many of us, so we must take time to educate ourselves first.

STAR Alaska - Raising Digitally Safe Kids:

"Raising Digitally Safe Kids" from STAR Alaska's blog is a guide for parents and caregivers on helping children use the internet safely. It emphasizes teaching kids about digital consent (their right to say no online), understanding that online identities don't always match reality, and encouraging open, ongoing conversations about the apps and platforms they use.

Sources:

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