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Illinois' First in the Nation Media Literacy Law Falls Short

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ILLINOIS' FIRST IN THE NATION MEDIA LITERACY LAW FALLS SHORT

by

Emily R. Cooper Pierce

B.S., Southern Illinois University, 2021

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Science

School of Mass Communications and Media Arts
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
May 2023

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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

ILLINOIS' FIRST IN THE NATION MEDIA LITERACY LAW FALLS SHORT

by

Emily R. Cooper Pierce

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science

in the field of Professional Media and Media Management

Approved by:

William H. Freivogel, Chair

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
March 22, 2023

AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

Emily R. Cooper Pierce, for the Master of Science degree in Professional Media and Media Management, presented on March 22, 2023, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: ILLINOIS' FIRST IN THE NATION MEDIA LITERACY LAW FALLS SHORT

MAJOR PROFESSOR: William H. Freivogel, J.D.

What is media literacy? How is it taught? When lawmakers passed Illinois' Public Act 102-0055 in July 2021, Illinois became the first state in the United States to require media literacy at the public high school level. This project focuses on southern Illinois, Chicago, and Metro East regions and examines what the impact of this new requirement means for Illinois. This media project uses investigative reporting to explore Illinois' requirements in-depth and educators' awareness of this new requirement to understand how media literacy is implemented into the instruction of Illinois public high school curriculums during the first semester. The article series presented in this work explores perspectives of educators from across the state, individuals involved with the law like the Illinois State Board of Education members and Illinois Media Literacy Coalition, among many others. This project is vital to understand how influential media is in America's democracy and how media literacy can be an avenue to curb its degradation of it. How is media literacy implemented with little to no oversight from the state?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express gratitude to the College of Arts and Media, especially the School of Journalism and Professor Freivogel, who helped and supported me in investigating this new requirement. Southern Illinois University holds a special place in my heart. I came to Southern as an aspiring young journalist in 2017. From the incremental first days in the School of Journalism to now, I have flourished into what I once aspired to be and then some. I took Professor Freivogel's media law class to fulfill my major's requirement while in my undergraduate program, yet little did I know it would change the course of my future. Professor Freivogel believed in me from the start and was a big push for me to continue in graduate school at Southern. So, thank you to Professor Freivogel for believing in me and guiding me through this progress. Without him, there would be little of this project.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my family. First and foremost, to my parents and sister. As a first-generation college student, this is a celebration for us four. It has been a long-time coming, but it has been worth every step and all the distance between us. Thank you for believing in young me and letting me spread my wings and come to SIU at 18. Secondly, to my husband. Your continuous love, support, and patience as I progressed in this work, all while preparing to walk down the aisle to you, inspired me to complete this. Thank you.

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CHAPTER 1

ILLINOIS' PIONEERING MEDIA LITERACY PROGRAM LACKS RESOURCES, OVERSIGHT

In the year since Illinois' pioneering media literacy requirement went into effect, experts, teachers and the state have scrambled to define what media literacy means and how to implement the new law without additional funding, professional development or clear standards.

Illinois became the first state in the nation to require instruction of media literacy at the public high school level when Illinois' [Public Act 102-0055](#) was passed in July 2021.

There is no state money for professional development and no state plan to check on compliance. Some teachers who already were teaching media literacy say they had not heard it was now a requirement.

Hannah Maze, a social studies teacher at Anna-Jonesboro Community High School in southern Illinois, said she has been already teaching it as a unit, so it wasn't anything new for her students.

The school already knew Maze was teaching it in her classes, she said.

"We have been teaching it maybe since 2018/2019, maybe even before that," she said. "So, it wasn't a brand-new idea to us. It was just one of those 'hey, are you covering it?' I showed them my unit plans, and we were fine."

A few hundred miles north in Chicago, Dan Katz-Zeiger, a social studies teacher at Roberto Clemente Community Academy, said he was not aware of this requirement.

"I pay fairly close attention to the news," he said. "It's not like I'm watching every bill that comes out of the state government, but I pay fairly close attention. So, I do think it's an interesting example of the way that things are passed by legislative bodies don't actually end up."

They tend to often disconnect to what actually happens on the ground” because, he said, the mechanism by which he should have heard—as a high school social studies educator—clearly failed.

What is a unit?

The new law requires a “unit” of media literacy but does not specify if that’s an hour, a day, a week, a semester or a school year.

Illinois’ Act states “beginning with the 2022-2023 school year, every public high school shall include in its curriculum a unit of instruction on media literacy.”

“Is that a 30-minute instruction, or is it six months of continuous curriculum,” Yonty Friesem, associate professor of civic media at Columbia College Chicago and a co-founder of Illinois Media Literacy Coalition (IMLC), said. “It doesn’t define unit on purpose to give this flexibility, but it can create a gap.”

The use of “unit” in this bill is intended to give teachers more autonomy, Friesem said.

A unit of media literacy “can come in lots of different forms, it doesn’t say how it should be and all that,” Michael Spikes, PhD candidate at Northwestern University, Media Literacy Now’s current Illinois chapter leader and a co-founder of IMLC, said.

It gives a lot of opportunity, he said.

Pushback on bill:

The bill passed the Illinois General Assembly almost exclusively along party lines.

The House passed the bill by a vote of 68 to 44 without a single Republican voting in favor. In the Senate, the vote was 42 to 15, with three Republicans voting in favor and 15 against.

Sen. Terri Bryant (R) voted ‘no’ on the [bill](#).

“There was some question of when you’re talking about media literacy, who decides which media you’re going to be looking at? Who decides what’s good and what’s bad,” Bryant said.

The bill itself had some flaws because it didn’t identify what the curriculum would look like, it was pretty wide open, she said.

“What does that mean where they are going to be studying the media itself? Was it just social media? Would it be CNN and Fox News? Who is going to determine what is the right way to approach something? Who is going to say what is true and what is not true if you have situations where it’s purely subjective?” she said.

When asked about any pushback over the media literacy curriculum, Friesem said there are the usual suspicions that this is a Trojan Horse for “student indoctrination.”

However, Friesem said most people understand the need for proficiency in navigating the contemporary media-saturated environment.

Bryant said a lot of legislation that is written is kind of arbitrary in its nature.

“So, you look at it and say ‘is the concept good’” she said. “Maybe the concept is good, but the way the bill is written is not. That was my read on what happened.”

What does this bill mean?

Sen. Karina Villa (D), Chief Senate Sponsor of [House Bill 0234](#), said the thing with this bill is that it says a unit of study.

“That can be incorporated into an already existing class,” she said.

This bill, Villa said, aligns with critical literacy skills that are present in many core content areas like English/Language Arts, social studies and sciences, in all of these standards.

“This isn’t a new idea,” she said. “This has been a hot topic. Media literacy has been a

hot topic in literacy instruction for many, many years.”

Maze teaches media literacy in a required stand-alone civics course to sophomores, she said.

“Every semester, we have an introduction to history. So, I teach about primary and secondary sources, the importance of corroboration,” Maze said. “So, this year, I kind of tied that into that unit because then as we’re talking about corroboration, all right let’s look into who these sources are.”

In years past, Maze said she taught it in a separate unit near the end of the semester, but this year she incorporated it into primary and secondary sources.

“Who are our sources? Who’s behind that information? What evidence are they using? How do we know that websites are reliable? Because a lot of times [students] will say if it’s ‘.org,’ it’s reliable,” she said. “So, we’ve been actually investigating who can potentially own those sites and causing them to dig a little deeper.”

Though Katz-Zeiger said this new requirement has never been communicated to him, he still teaches media literacy in his class.

“I think that’s basically one of the most key skills in any social studies classroom,” he said.

When he thinks about the intent of social studies education Katz-Zeiger said the biggest thing is to make informed citizens. He said a key skill for having informed and empowered citizens is to be able to navigate media literacy.

“I think it’s very tied into what we’re doing most days in my class although there is no specific unit that we do that’s like ‘this is our media literacy unit,’ but I think it’s built into basically everything we do,” he said.

What we know about the law:

Maaria Mozaffar, attorney and legislative drafter who wrote the bill, said she was approached by MLN's Alicia Haywood, former Illinois chapter leader and current Florida chapter leader, to help bring this legislation to Illinois.

The key thing for this legislation, Mozaffar said, is that it's in the curriculum as a *shall* versus *may*, "which is awesome because now it's in the curriculum. It has to be taught." Shall means it is mandatory, not optional.

"I think the critical piece about this is that the transition from 'may' to 'shall' is a challenge because schools don't like to be told what to teach, but I think people realize how important media literacy was," Mozaffar said.

Friesem said Haywood was the orchestrator of the bill, working on it for five years with different people.

At the last moment, when it was given to experts to evaluate, Haywood involved Friesem in the language of the bill, Friesem said.

The law has three parts:

- A. A definition
- B. Five practices of media literacy
- C. Illinois State Board of Education resources

Definition of media literacy

Media literacy, according to the Act, "means the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create and communicate using a variety of objective forms, including, but not limited to, print, visual, audio, interactive and digital texts."

Friesem said it's broad and vague, but a lot of people can agree on it.

Friesem said in a way the act's definition is a modified version of the [1992 Aspen Institute](#)'s definition.

The '92 definition uses the term "produce" whereas the Act's definition uses the term "create and communicate."

"It's very different from the way that it was in the 90s," Friesem said. "It was produced, you were producing something, but now you're creating something by resharing, remixing, it's so different in that sense. The practice shifted. So, that's why the term is instead of 'produce' it's more create because in production you usually need to have a lot of stuff to produce, but today you can create easily with a click. In several minutes, you can create, which can be good and can be bad. So, it's a little bit different in that sense."

Friesem said the Act's definition means that media literacy is the ability to access, evaluate and communicate with and through media.

"It's any media in that sense," Friesem said. "It doesn't matter if it's social media, if it's a song, if it's a book or if it's a mural. It doesn't specifically say social media, but when you create, it's on any of those platforms."

In the language of the bill, it names the specific media, Friesem said. Usually, nobody does that but it's for clarity that it's included.

It's basically for teachers and not academics. In the classroom to just think about how to analyze, evaluate, create, communicate, it doesn't help, Friesem said.

"How does that look in a science class," Friesem said. "That's really not helpful for people."

Five competencies of media literacy

Friesem pushed to have the five competencies the way Renee Hobbs, founder of the

Media Education Lab at the University of Rhode Island, defined media literacy in [2010](#), Hobb's report was based on the conclusions of the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy and the Aspen Institute.

The second part of the bill is where Friesem contributed to the majority of – the five competencies, Friesem said.

“I was getting more into the midst of like, ‘okay, so what does media literacy look like,’ which it’s not a typical way that a bill would have, but it does explain the five practices, which for me, stand for media literacy,” Friesem said.

Here are the five competencies and Friesem's explanation:

1. Make responsible choices and access information by locating and sharing materials and comprehending information and ideas

What does it mean to act as reliable information, Friesem said. It's not access in terms of having technology.

“It's about how to access the information and to know that it's reliable,” Friesem said.

2. Analyze messages in a variety of forms by identifying the author, purpose and point of view, and evaluating the quality and credibility of the content

This means analyzing media messages by deconstructing them, Friesem said.

3. Create content in a variety of forms, making use of language, images, sound, and new digital tools and technologies.

“It's not just about sitting and doing academic analysis, but it's also about creativity and also being practitioners,” Friesem said. “Everybody is communicating online in different ways. So, how do you communicate coherently?”

4. Reflect on one's own conduct and communication behavior by applying social

responsibility and ethical principles

“Are you aware of your media usage consumption, and what does that mean,” Friesem explains. “Do you reflect on other people’s way of consumption?”

5. Take social action by working individually and collaboratively to share knowledge and solve problems in the family, workplace and community, and by participating as a member of a community.

This is civics. “You cannot be media literate if you don’t have social responsibility,” Friesem said. “So, how does it look to be socially responsible with the media, for you and others? How do you look at it?”

Providing state resources

Then, the final part of the law, which Friesem insisted on the language, is that ISBE will provide resources and professional development options, Friesem said.

“My point was you cannot ask teachers to do something and not provide them tools and support,” Friesem said. “That doesn’t make sense to add more to the teacher’s plate without supporting that.”

In response to the Act, the IMLC was created, Jackie Matthews, ISBE Executive Director of Communications, said.

Spikes and Friesem co-founded the coalition.

“The coalition has a Media Literacy Framework and is currently working to develop curriculum resources aligned to the framework and the legislation,” Matthews said. “The next step for the coalition will be to identify professional development opportunities.”

Amanda Elliott, Executive Director of Legislative Affairs at ISBE, said ISBE has been working with the coalition in the implementation of the bill.

“We have a [fact sheet](#), we co-hosted a [webinar](#), we have the [framework](#), all on our [website](#),” Elliott said. “We are still working with the coalition on additional guidance that can go out to the field to inform really anyone, but educators in particular, on how to best implement this mandate.”

Elliott said there may be more resources to come, but at this point, the resources on their website are what has been done.

Resources currently offered to educators are limited due to lack of funding and oversight mandated by the bill.

“We as ISBE do not dictate or endorse specific curriculum,” Johnson said. “So, in the past we have had some legislative measures that have provided us opportunity and specifically funding to dig deeper into creating resources, but they’re free and we ensure that they are aligned with standards, but in terms of a lot of unfunded mandates, this being one of them, we don’t have the opportunity or ability to say this is what you have to use or should use, that’s really up to local districts to determine what meets their needs and with a bill like this, that has the flexibility of allowing students or schools to determine where to place this unit of study. It really has to be incredibly flexible because it could appear in an English course, a history course or a stand-alone course. So, it really depends on what the school district identifies as its needs.”

According to [HB2683](#), Illinois is a local control state, meaning every district has control over its curriculum, Spikes said.

ISBE develops state standards to serve as a general guide for what students should know and be able to do at each grade level, Matthews said.

Illinois Arts Learning Standards [Media Arts Standards](#) provides ISBE approved standards for media arts learning.

It is broken into four sections: creating, producing, responding and connecting. The term “media literacy” is identified in connecting and ranges from 5th grade to intermediate high school levels.

Out of respect for local control, Johnson said the only thing that ISBE pushes out are standards.

“Standards weren’t attached to this particular legislation,” Johnson said. “So, I didn’t have a role in that. A lot of it comes down to funding and resources as well. In the past with other curriculum measures, it would be a funded mandate. This one unfortunately didn’t have any funding for professional development or those types of things.”

School districts locally develop curriculum that aligns to the state standards and meets any curriculum mandates required by law, Matthews said.

“Because of that, it can make it kind of messy because while the state can say ‘okay, you need to include this thing,’ say media literacy in our case, it can’t say how it should be taught,” Spikes said. “It can’t say what materials they should be using.”

ISBE put a task force together to do that at the end of last year. It was made up of teachers, librarians, similar to IMLC, Spikes said.

At the beginning of this year, that task force was dissolved because ISBE was getting some pushback because the state cannot recommend or tell teachers what curriculum they should be using, Spikes said.

The person who initially ran that task force was Kimberly Johnson, English Language Arts Principal Consultant at ISBE, Spikes said.

“Task forces are legislative requirements, so they’re oftentimes written into the bill. So, it wasn’t a task force,” Johnson said. “We put together an advisory group. Oftentimes, when we

have bills or things that require curriculum, we try to reach out to as many other stakeholders as possible to include them into that conversation.”

There was no pushback on this advisory group, Johnson said.

“There was nothing negative with that,” Johnson said. “Our concerns when identifying, from my perspective in my role, when identifying curriculum resources, ISBE, we don’t endorse curriculum and that becomes particularly problematic when we have paid resources or those types of things. After diving into this work, it was becoming more and more apparent that there are not a lot of free resources that exist in this space or even identifying professional development resources. So, I wanted to do justice to the topic of media literacy as a whole and the external group was able to dig into that a little more than what we had. But no pushback, it’s just we have limitations as a local control state.”

Johnson said she helped identify and put together this advisory group made up of teachers and educators.

Spikes and Friesem were part of the advisory group, Spikes said. Johnson approached Friesem and Spikes and asked if the coalition could put together recommended resources, he said.

“We ended up shifting that group to the external group of the Illinois Media Literacy Coalition because they too were working on the same efforts,” Johnson said. “And many of them had been involved in the creation of the bill as well as the two leaders, Yonty and Michael. So, it just made sense instead of having duplicative efforts, we would just combine forces.”

Spikes said Johnson knew of his and Friesem’s background in media literacy while part of the advisory group.

“When she had received information, at least this is what she had indicated to us, that

IBSE really couldn't be involved in trying to put together or like say 'we are recommending certain resources or places to go' or things like that to get information on media literacy, that's when she reached out to us and said 'I would like to talk to you guys about being that provider,'" Spikes said.

What we don't know:

The state does not say how they will check this media literacy requirement, Spikes said.

"There is no media literacy police out there that will go to every school and say 'how are you doing this?' There is no means for that," he said. "Those are limitations, but I think those are also limitations imposed based on the structure of how schools are run in the state and so on, but again, I do think that there is a great opportunity here in the fact that it has been formalized in this kind of way."

Johnson said ISBE's Regional Offices of Education throughout the state do more of their compliance checks. So, it's communicating with them about the changes in mandates and what's required of school districts.

Don Corrigan, a St. Louis journalist, contributed information to this article.

CHAPTER 2

**‘TEACHING THROUGH EXPERIENCE AND LEARNING FROM REACTIONS’: A
FIRST-HAND LOOK AT IMPLEMENTATION OF ILLINOIS’ PIONEERING MEDIA
LITERACY PROGRAM**

A windy 27 degrees covered Bedford Park, IL as airplanes from nearby Chicago Midway Airport flew above John Hancock College Prep High School. The bell rang to start the day.

In the year following a [new Illinois law](#) that requires instruction of media literacy at the public high school level, the state’s educators have been learning and relearning how to implement this new requirement into classrooms like this one with little oversight or guidance from the state as to how to proceed.

Raymond Salazar, an English teacher at JHCPHS, hit pause on his calming music from behind his desk in the front of the room. Students of his AP English class slowly quieted as Salazar walked to the center of the whiteboard to explain the class’s assignment for the day.

There were three options written colorfully on the board. One, students will complete their box project. Two, students will finish their audio essay: “yes, this counts as an assignment,” read the board. Or three, read the school’s newspaper and write a response to something.

The sounds of keys pressing on student’s Chromebooks filled the classroom.

Students sat in pods softly talking about their class project, an audio story. The story, Salazar explained, was a personal narrative detailing space and a life lesson where students learned how to tell a story with a digital twist.

Of all the students, a handful were chosen to share their work within the school. Those picked crafted a black box in which they created a QR code to showcase their audio story in an audience-friendly manner.

Across the classroom, students working on the box project worked together to complete their projects.

In one pod, specifically, students collaborated to help each other center their text on Word and download their QR codes.

Those picked crafted a black box in which they created a QR code to display their audio story in an audience-friendly manner.

Salazar answered students' pressing questions like how to create a QR code using qr-code-generator.com or which fonts to use in their box project.

According to the [Illinois Press Foundation](#), JHCPHS was among 16 awarded with a grant to help fund the school's accounts on Soundtrap by Spotify for each student for a whole year.

Soundtrap by Spotify is the audio recording platform Salazar uses with his students, he said.

“The biggest takeaway from the box project is that another area of growth for us is teaching students how to read fluently,” Salazar said. “We talked about this a little bit, that was a big struggle, but they really enjoyed it. I think it was a nice challenge with a real outcome for a real audience. I’m just really happy that I was able to give them this opportunity so that they can find some confidence and competence as writers.”

During Salazar's class, students engaged in the class project through constant conversation amongst each other in their desk pods. Their reactions to the media literacy material stemmed from their continual questions to Salazar as he stood behind his podium uploading student's projects to their class website.

Students, who referred to Salazar as Salazar, were responsive to his comments or suggestions.

For a majority of the class period, students quietly focused on finishing their project

before the bell concluded the class session.

Merging on Interstate 57 south to Mt. Vernon, IL, after a few hours, stands Mt. Vernon Township High School right off the highway exit.

Before the sound of the bell, Raquel Bliffen, an English teacher at MVTHS, and students discussed the best types of road trip snacks as Bliffen prepared for the class.

After the students' silent 10-minute reading time, Bliffen walked to the front of the room to sit on her wooden stool. Media literacy is spelled out in the corner of the whiteboard's schedule.

Introducing the new state requirement of media literacy, Bliffen's students recalled learning about media literacy with a different teacher. Student's interest spiked up as if a light bulb was lit.

A brief classroom discussion followed.

Bliffen walked to each pod of desks and passed out a sheet of paper to her students: "what do you know?"

The front of the worksheet categorized various media-related terms and the backside determined whether a headline was legitimate, unfortunately worded but true or was clickbait.

Following a semi-silent few minutes, Bliffen requested students stand up if they fall in the worksheet's "I could teach" category to learn where each student was on each of the terms.

Confirmation bias. Fringe source. Native ad. Satire. Spin. Vetting.

Bliffen defined each term.

Turning the page over, Bliffen and her class walked through news headlines and determined which category they fit in.

“Bank runs starting in United States!!! Liquidity Crisis Erupts!” read one headline.

Students shouted out “clickbait.” Bliffen returned their answer with “why?”

Class discussion followed.

What do you think when you think of the internet, Bliffen asked the class.

Bliffen wrote fake news on the whiteboard. Biases, Photoshop, The Daily Wire, bullying, reality TV, viruses, lack of proper support, legit, too much celebrity news (i.e., BuzzFeed), personal rights, Twitter, nudes (lack of responsibility) and idolization of extremists, follows suit.

After each student left a check mark on the whiteboard next to the one, they believe is the worst, Bliffen determined personal rights had four check marks.

Class discussion followed, Bliffen chimed in, when necessary, but let the students lead each conversation.

Bliffen said the use of media, regarding the bill’s terms, is to come later in student’s speech research.

Students in Bliffen’s classroom filled the air with comments, questions and even suggestions throughout her interactive worksheet activity. Sitting in on the introduction class on media literacy for Bliffen’s class, her students engaged in the topic from the start. Many jumped at the opportunity to provide input to the class’s varying discussions.

Heading westbound on 64 from I-57 through a field of corn comes the light of a school on the horizon, Belleville West High School.

The 8 a.m. bell rang, and students made their way to their seats. It was presentation day for the project they were working on in Nick Johnson’s senior English class.

Student in Johnson’s class used the book titled “True or False, A CIA analyst guide to

spotting fake news” by Cindy Otis alongside their market research project.

“I gave them a demographics and psychographics survey for the class to take,” Johnson said. “Then, when we looked at the results. We looked for trends, surprises, like any data we find significant. Then, they have to invent a product to market to this demographic, this class, based on what they learned. So, a little bit of media research and then inventing of a product, a little bit of writing going with that, and then they’ll ultimately, in a group, choose one of their products to turn into an internet ad, like a video ad. So, there will be some creation in there, too.”

Otis’s book goes through the entire history of how fake news has been used like disinformation campaigns and not just yellow journalism around the world and in the United States, Johnson said. Then, it goes through the modern day.

“That’s a nice text to add that has been good for conversation and just kind of understanding and awareness,” Johnson said.

After a few moments of last-minute changes, and the sounds of a Kahoot game over the classroom’s speakers lowered, the first group of four students in Johnson’s class made their way to the front of the class.

How to spot fake news articles.

Students read through slides that showcased their understanding of Otis’s text while sparking conversation with the larger group.

Students were advised by the first group to determine which headline was real or fake. One read about Beyoncé and was published on Feb. 31.

“Why did you think it was real,” Johnson asked one of the presenters.

Through class discussion, the date of the article was raised and made aware to the larger group that Feb. 31 does not exist, thus it is fake.

Group two covered understanding bias, group three covered polling and other fake news, while the final group covered spotting fake photos and videos.

Throughout the presentations, students asked “why,” sparking additional discussion on each topic. Johnson chimed in, when necessary, but let the students lead each conversation.

In addition to the presentations, students created an advertisement using WeVideo, an online cloud-based video editing platform, in which they produced a video to promote their invented product. Johnson showed a handful.

It was cool to see classmates perk up when others presented, Johnson said. It’s uncommon, so it’s nice to see.

Though an 8 am class may seem quiet, Johnson’s students actively participated in Johnson’s media literacy material. With the push to create a presentation, whether through a slideshow or Kahoot game, students were open to classroom discussion on the varying topics that were presented. Many of the students were seen laughing and even asking their fellow classmates questions to learn more about a specific topic like polling biases.

Salazar, Bliffen and Johnson were receptive to student’s opinions and comments while keeping the core of the media literacy topic at the center of the conversations, guiding the discussions while also letting students take a primary lead.

With little else to lean upon, teachers lack resources and guidance to navigate through this new requirement. This forces teachers to rely on personal experiences and in-the-moment reactions to structure their classroom.

Salazar said he is a teacher teaching through experience and learning from reactions.

CHAPTER 3

AFTER COVID-19, MEDIA LITERACY WAS ON A 'BACK BURNER'

Teachers came out of the COVID-19 pandemic, then they heard about the Illinois' media literacy requirement.

Raquel Bliffen, an English teacher at Mt. Vernon Township High School, said her reaction to the new requirement may have been tainted by her whole mindset since COVID-19, which is "kind of like one more thing."

"I kind of felt a little burnt out at that point," Bliffen said. "I think that's every teacher's first response when they are told they have to do something else. I don't think that's necessarily in response to the bill itself because I think it is really important. Part of me wondered if it wasn't smarter to have our computer teachers teach that because media literacy, while it is really important and everybody should teach it, it just kind of felt more in line with what our computer teachers are already teaching. So, whenever I found out English had to teach it, I was sort of like 'really?' But I get it. I think I was just kind of like a kid getting used to an itchy sweater where I just kind of had to fight against it for a second and be like 'okay, I get it, I need to do this.'"

Beyond the reactions stemming from the effects of COVID-19, the other thing that impacted Bliffen's initial reaction is time, she said.

"There's so much that we have to cover in English that it's a little, it can be overwhelming to think that we have to add one more thing," Bliffen said. "I'm kind of glad that our department chair kind of phrased it like 'you already do this in your classroom. So, just take what you're already doing and make sure that it follows the guidelines that are given to you' instead of being like 'now you have to add something else to what you're already doing.'"

Bliffen wasn't the only teacher who reacted this way.

Mark Klaisner, the president of the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools, which covers all 38 offices across the state, said as the president of IARSS, he has become the primary conduit to legislatures and the Illinois State Board of Education. He found a lot of teachers were left without guidance and faced a big post-Covid workload.

Klaisner said there is no guideline or outline to follow.

He said the law is clear when it says media literacy is mandatory.

“However, it doesn’t say how, where, when or who is checking up on it, or who is going to be following up with the accountability piece,” Klaisner said “So, it’s my perception that it’s somewhat on the back burner. The ROEs and ISCs are trying to find ways to provide both training and materials that would be useful to our district.

Klaisner said the last three years have been pretty intense, leaving many districts having to deal with a lot of unforeseen things that came along with COVID-19.

“It’s my perception, and this is just me speaking, but it’s my perception that districts have not done much with [media literacy],” he said. “Frequently when I have asked, who knows about these requirements, digital literacy isn’t on the top of their priority list. There are a number of other things, teacher shortage, for instance, the whole health and wellness arena, even more so social and emotional learning. A lot of people have been through a lot of trauma the last few years, and so, I’ve heard districts talk much more about that. If I bring up digital literacy, typically the response that I’m getting is ‘we’ll get around to that when we have time.’ Or ‘has ISBE developed specific learning standards for specific grade levels or ages that we are supposed to implement?’ They are looking for us to kind of hold their hand and guide them, and there isn’t anything very substantive to help with.”

How teachers learned of the literacy requirement

Bliffen said she was made aware of the new requirement by her department chair who let the department know it was coming.

“Whenever it passed, they filled us in and the school board just asked that all of us go ahead and have a media literacy unit ready,” Bliffen said. “And so, we each kind of took our own take on it and used it for our own classes, but then we shared it within the department so that way all of us could kind of be on the same page of where we are at. So, I think we are all kind of taking the same approach. Some people are going in more depth, but for the most part, we kind of have the same plan.”

Bliffen said MVTHS’s school board is really good about figuring out what is necessary and following through.

“So, if the school board was just like ‘hey, this needs to happen’ and so we all just sort of jump on board with whatever the board says that,” she said.

Raymond Salazar, an English teacher at John Hancock College Prep High School, said he did not hear about Illinois’ media literacy law.

“I think it’s a necessary requirement,” Salazar said. “I think that as teachers prepare students for the 21st century, we need to make sure that we incorporate learning experiences that address the visual, audio and written texts that students are going to encounter, so we can help create awareness about accuracy of information, so that we can also build student’s confidence in themselves to make decisions about the information that they access, that is given or thrown at them. I think it really fits with what a 21st century literacy education should include.”

Still, Salazar said he believes, in general, sometimes decisions that affect teachers don’t include teachers.

“So, they don’t include us in the decision-making level enough, and then there is a poor communication chain in general to get information to teachers,” he said.

Salazar said he has not seen anything from JHCPHS’s school district in regard to this new requirement.

“I’m on my own with this,” he said.

Most of the time, the lessons that teachers are dealing with controversial issues, if they exist, Salazar said, are really superficial.

“They talk about ‘oh, discuss this situation, ask students what they think about it, what they feel about it,’” Salazar said. “That doesn’t get them anywhere. I make sure that we ground our media literacy experiences in real rhetorical concepts that they can apply not only in this situation, but they can learn something from it. So, any time that they have to analyze someone’s reaction to a controversial event, they can use these strategies to ask, ‘how effective is this?’”

Despite not hearing about the new requirement, Salazar said it fits with what he has been doing for the majority of his teaching career, incorporating current events and media into the classroom.

“So, whenever something big happens in the world, I find a text that we ground ourselves in,” he said. “Then, students engage in some type of learning experience where they understand the text first and understand the situation, understand what’s going on. They take a look at different perspectives on the situation, and they ultimately make an evaluation on the text in some way. We ground ourselves in classic questions of rhetorical analysis, and it’s simply ‘how effective is this text in achieving whatever goal it wants to achieve?’”

Nick Johnson, an English teacher at Belleville West High School, said there has not been anything done at the school level in regard to this new requirement. He said the teachers have

never had any curriculum advisor from above, school or district wide, saying anything about media literacy.

“It is only coming from my department chair,” Johnson said.

Johnson said his school district is very unusual. The district has someone who oversees curriculum and professional development, but is also the superintendent of special services, he said.

“So, there’s almost too much under her purview to really focus on that,” Johnson said. “So, what instead the structure lends itself better to giving the department chairs also double as curriculum leaders. So, our department chair, John Lodle, has been really like on the daily, he has been sending out articles and possible things. A few people here and there have been sharing slideshows and lessons. So, he’s really taken the lead on that for us and for the English department’s media literacy requirement. I’m going to be perfectly honest, I’m ignorant to the, I don’t know whether that was a media literacy requirement across all the curriculum, but I assumed it was just an English curriculum requirement, but I really don’t know. I was just told we have to do it this year and I was like ‘okay, I will make it happen.’”

Johnson said though he thought it was an ELA standard, he now knows it is a school wide standard. He said there is not yet an adopted system-wide approach to teach media literacy.

“That does make me a little frustrated that this has been dumped on, it feels as though it has been dumped on the English department,” Johnson said. “However, I have no idea what they’re talking about in social studies. I would assume that they are talking about it as well, but you know, I’m just in this silo in this particular school system we’re in. So, that’s interesting.”

Because of autonomy in the department, teachers at BWHS don’t have a unified curriculum at this point, Johnson said. However, the department has been contributing ideas and

some even lessons in their senior English class that can be used as they want, he said.

“But we did decide that we would do it all in the first semester to keep it consistent,” Johnson said.

Johnson said it is an important skill to learn, it’s just really tricky. Having taught media for many years, the media landscape has evolved completely, he said.

“Kids don’t even consume media the same way they used to,” Johnson said. “They don’t even really watch the news. They can learn about the world and what’s going on, but it’s typically through TikTok or something else. They don’t necessarily turn on the tv and watch the news, rarely. There’s not even this awareness of some of the things that we think are important that we know that are like media, headlines that are misleading, and convincing older generations to share disinformation. It’s just something they don’t relate to. They’re like ‘yeah, that’s not me.’ So, it’s been interesting bringing it back into the senior curriculum. Number one because they’re all consumers of media but the kinds of content we want them to learn about, how to identify fake news and all of that, they seem a little disinterested, but I’ve got them finally now we’re a little bit into our project because this is regular English 7-8. These aren’t people who signed up for a media class.”

Kalani Aydt, a social studies teacher at Centralia High School, said she heard about Illinois’ new requirement through a civics education newsletter that informs people about new requirements in the state and how to implement it into curriculum in different ways.

Aydt said she heard about the requirement “early on.”

Aydt said she remembers thinking that the requirement is a good thing. With the rise in social media and the way in which information is consumed, she said it’s really important to learn how to be responsible consumers of information.

“And I think that when we think of media, we’re typically thinking of professional journalists or newscasters or something like that, and that’s not the case anymore,” she said. “I think the definition of media has even expanded to include us [educators] and what we post or the information that we put out there. I do think it’s important that we understand that we are putting out quality information or truthful information because what we have to say really matters to the people in our digital circles at the very least, if not our personal social circles.”

Initially, Aydt said it was a lot more challenging to fit everything in.

“Just like with any new requirement trying to rework what we have with the available time, it can be a struggle, but in my classes just the nature of civics keeping up with current events is always very important,” she said. “Illinois also has a [current and controversial \[issues\]](#) requirement within their civics law that is important to tie media literacy in with that.”

Aydt said she thinks most teachers see that this requirement is not difficult to actually implement.

Implementing

The mistake that English teachers make many times is that they make classes literature based all year, Salazar said.

“Now, I’m not opposed to teaching literature,” he said. “I think the problem is we can’t just give student literature to read. They can’t be reading fiction all year because my question is ‘what are they producing if they are reading so much literature?’ The goal of literacy instruction should be that students should be engaged with texts that they are then going to produce responsibly in some way. If we want them to produce an article for an online publication, then they should be reading articles that are well written or maybe not so they can evaluate and see why they are not well written. It can’t just be fiction 100 percent of the time all year all four

years of high school. Students need a variety of non-fiction and real-world experiences that connect to 21st century literacy needs.”

Salazar said something that is very helpful is visuals, like an advertisement.

“We looked at the Army. They have a new campaign recently to attract millennials,” he said. “They are trying to attract them by promoting leadership and presenting the military as a way to develop leadership skills if these millennials who don’t feel like they’re are getting them in their careers post college. We look at the photographs, we look at the fonts, we look at the colors, we look at the arrangement, we look at the positioning of things. And then again, students have to decide, ‘Here is what the text is deciding to do now, how effective is it in achieving those goals?’”

With controversial events and real-world situations, Salazar said “it’s literally one day to the next that I stop the class, and we bring it in and say ‘alright, let’s actually apply what we’ve been learning to this context, this real-world situation that has been happening.’”

For example, Salazar said when Trump gave his speech from the Oval Office in favor of building the wall, he stopped his class. He said his class watched the speech.

“I asked students to give him a grade,” he said. “How effective is this in communicating the idea that we should build a wall, but the big question there was who was his audience because when we study rhetoric the big question is always ‘who is this intended for?’ And what we all realized is that his speech was not to the nation, his speech was to his supporters. So, students wrote over and over ‘as much as I don’t want to, I have to give him an ‘A’ because it achieved its goals for his audience.’”

In addition to grounding his students in texts, Salazar said the goal is always that they have to produce something.

“Two to three times a quarter, they have to produce something that can live and breathe outside of our classroom,” he said.

Salazar said the one thing he doesn’t do is the evaluation of sources over and over.

“I mean, I think that’s an overkill,” Salazar said. “I think many times teachers feel like that’s the lesson, like ‘let’s look at the credibility over and over and over.’ I think students get more out of actually creating content that is credible, that is accurate where they’re also transparent about their intentions behind it and motivation behind it, but I think there is overkill when it comes down to ‘let’s evaluate sources.’ There is some of that, but that can’t be the ultimate goal. That should be a small part of a lesson.”

Five key questions to media literacy

Johnson said he didn’t read the bill but has previously taught a semester-long English elective for seniors called mass media where he focused on media literacy. After COVID-19, scheduling became easier to not offer electives to seniors, but rather just call the class English 7-8 – senior English, he said.

“So, while I was bummed, I wouldn’t teach mass media, it just coincided with there being a media literacy requirement to be in the senior curriculum,” Johnson said. “So, I was like ‘okay, great, I get to incorporate some of that stuff in that semester long class.’ So, that’s kind of where I’m at in a general sense with incorporating media literacy into my class.”

Johnson said though he has enough content to fill a semester and then some, in his English 7-8 course, he spends half a semester on media literacy.

“I’m sure I’m spending way more time on it than other teachers but just because I have the resources,” Johnson said. “I’ll spend half a semester on media literacy, but still being able to get the other requirements in. So, ‘okay, we have to do a research paper. Great, it’ll be a media

research paper. We have to read a book. Okay, we're going to read a book about media literacy.'”

Johnson said that's where he feels that it's not just squeezed in there and shoved at the end. It was something that was constantly on their minds, he said.

Johnson said he started a media literacy unit full throttle beginning in the middle of October. He uses “True or False, A CIA analyst guide to spotting fake news” by Cindy Otis.

“So, pairing that book, ‘True or False’ with the project, which is the market research, developing a product and then ultimately creating a video ad that they can do in teams,” Johnson said. “So, I feel like that'll take a couple more weeks, which doesn't give much time for anything else, but I'll figure out some mini unit. What sort of makes sense since we've been talking about media is then they'll be exhausted with fake news, like that whole concept. I think I'll have them do a mini research project to find another problem that exists in the media, and that might be something that just fills the rest of the semester. So, I see it going clear to the end of the semester. And we do have a requirement that seniors do a research paper and even if it's a mini research paper, I'm fine with that.”

Johnson said he spends more attention on his students creating media in a way that shows they can think critically.

“You cannot always tell what students are thinking about the media they consume, but when they create a product, it becomes evident,” Johnson said.

Although his students know how to create media content, Johnson said there are still some things left to teach his students to elevate their media content.

Johnson said he has equipment that he can borrow for his English class to use, but there isn't necessarily a lab available for them to edit their videos. So, his English students don't get to

use the professional equipment in the lab.

“They all have phones. So, they can videotape on their phones, but it makes it kind of challenging for me to instruct them how to edit when I may only have familiarity with one, the iPhone...so, there’s some challenges with creation, but there’s always something to get around it with,” Johnson said. “We can adapt.”

Johnson said he develops things on his own from lots of different places, but one resource he has used is from a colleague of his that put together a presentation introducing students to media literacy.

“It goes through the five key questions of media literacy like: who created this message, whose opinions are omitted from it and there are a few other questions that they consider,” Johnson said. “There was a name on it, I would certainly look back at that slide show, and I would go back to that author and see what other resources they have because one of the things that evolved is in very, very recent times is I remember there are four tenants of media literacy was ‘to be able to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media’ but now they’ve added ‘and act.’ So, the fifth thing is to act. So, I’ve been thinking recently what that act means. It, of course, could mean to be an activist to take action from the media you consume and being able to take action knowing that you were able to discern the information is correct and valuable to just inspire others with a call to action in your media, or something like that. There’s just different ways to consider that fifth piece. From that author, she would be a resource, but I jump to the internet [and books].”

Johnson said speaking for himself, when he sees something that speaks to what his class is talking about and could spark a great conversation, he brings it in.

“There’s definitely a big push in our school to have discussions around equity,

particularly racial equity, and when we see a news article that talks about bias and crime statistics, in reporting a crime statistic, on John Oliver or something, ‘hey, this is something that I can bring in,’” Johnson said. “There is some language in it, but I think bringing in some things that you see and you identify with. How you can find one opinion, or one news story presented this way on one particular site, you’re going to find the news slanted a different way on a different site. Just being able to present those things to students to have them pick out the differences and what language is being used to kind of encode a specific POV with each of them. So, the autonomy allows us to bring in the things that we are energized about which makes us a little bit more passionate, but I can see it being a challenge for teachers who don’t look at the world that way as much or don’t consume as much media. They really rather not talk about things like that that maybe make them uncomfortable to talk about, things that might relate to political conversations, who knows.”

Show don’t tell

Aydt said with implementing media literacy into her class with freshmen, she has to show them and not just tell them along the way.

“So, I introduce [media literacy] pretty early whenever we are talking, when we are getting into our civics semester and it’s not necessarily a unit, it is more of an ongoing process that happens throughout the semester and just kind of builds upon itself,” she said.

Aydt said as she got more comfortable with different resources, she looked for things that are engaging to her students that might have an impact on their immediate world view.

“I personally receive a daily newsletter in my email from [The Skimm](#), but it kind of condenses major news topics from around the world everyday Monday-Friday,” she said. “It gives you links to a wide variety of news sources to kind of go into further explanation, and I like

that because it really does summarize major events that we don't want to ignore.”

Due to the nature of civics, especially with the [current and controversial issues requirement](#), Adyt said she has to constantly be changing a lot of her curriculum. So, whenever she sees something that can fit into where her students are in the curriculum, she just goes with it, like a class read and discussion.

A lot of times, Adyt said she'll have her students read an article and then try to decipher what they read by summarizing what they think are the most important takeaways from the article. She said she does this to get them to express their opinions to see where they are and how well they are digesting the media.

“It can go really any way,” she said. “I'm really flexible in the classroom which is, I've always seen as a benefit. Some other people might have a different approach to it and that is perfectly fine because you just have to do what works best for you.”

Adding to an earlier media literacy course

In addition to teaching honors English and poetry, Bliffen said she teaches performance studies which is ethos, logos and pathos and using the internet as a source.

“So, I'm lucky in that I kind of already had [media literacy],” Bliffen said. “I just sort of fine-tuned it so that way the kids knew what the term ‘media literacy’ meant because they were learning what they needed to know, but they didn't know it was called media literacy and I wanted them to understand the moral implications of media literacy as well because that seems to be a big focus of the bill.”

Bliffen said since she started at MVTHS in 2016, it has been part of the curriculum a little bit.

“I just kind of emphasized it more by my second year, and last year whenever it was

required, I used it more on purpose, you know purposely said ‘media literacy is what we’re covering today,’” she said.

Bliffen said she uses the internet a lot as a general jumping off point.

“Anytime I’m not sure about what I need to do for it, I just look at the actual wording of the bill, which was emailed to us whenever this all started,” Bliffen said. “And then, I kind of use that to make sure that I’m doing everything that I should.”

Bliffen said the first thing she did was read the wording of the requirements.

“Then, I just looked at a lesson I thought already kind of fit that, and most of my lessons deal with online research for performance studies because kids have to give speeches that are researched, so I just used it as how can they responsibly research information and cite the sources,” Bliffen said. “So, I took that existing lesson, and then used the phrasing ‘media literacy’ within it. Instead of just teaching it and then when they give their speech looking for that, I monitor that much more closely as they are composing it. So, every day I’m looking for the fluidity of their perusing of the internet. How are they citing sources? Do they know terminology? Things like that. So, it’s much more like ‘yeah, I’m assessing they know what they’re doing.’ There’s a little quiz at one point that we take to make sure that they know, but I just want to make sure that they actually know it in everyday use. That’s kind of how I formatted it.”

Bliffen said she teaches media literacy just as a subject for about a week.

“Then, throughout the rest of the semester media literacy is built into all of the lessons,” she said. “So, it’s sort of like teach it at the beginning, and then reteach and gauge for understanding for the rest of the semester.”

Bliffen said she starts off the week of media literacy as a subject by doing a slideshow

presentation, 'what is media literacy' so that her students know what the phrase is.

"Then, we have kind of an open discussion about how they feel that their skills measure up to what is expected," she said. "Do you know how to navigate? Do you know how to cite sources and what are the consequences of not citing sources correctly? How can you use the internet responsibly? After we do that, they have to put it into practice. So, they have to find some research and then cite it within a speech. Then, I look at it and say 'yes, this is correct' or 'no, you need to work on it.' Whenever they give the speech, they also get written and verbal feedback from me on how they approached it because sometimes they write it okay, but then whenever it comes time to deliver it it's not accurate or something like that."

When she first heard the phrase 'media literacy,' she said she thought it meant being able to navigate the internet.

"But what, the feeling that I'm getting, is that it's really just anything to do with media at all and the umbrella is so wide that you can hit so many things within it," she said. "So, I think that it's kind of moving towards the kids using it in their everyday vernacular, especially whenever they get to the professional level. I don't know what college looks like whenever it comes to media literacy, but they're really pushing that here. So, it seems like it's going to be important in the next few years."

At the end of that unit, sometimes she'll do a quiz, Bliffen said. But she said she believes the discussion portion is much more beneficial.

"It can be as much as a two-minute question and answer session, or we'll take a whole class where students come in with questions prepared," she said. "So, I feel like that's really important because my voice doesn't really matter as much as theirs when it comes to what they're learning. They get more out of it if a peer says it than if I say it. I try to use that to my

advantage as much as possible whenever teaching things like that. So far, it has been okay.”

Variation of professional development

Salazar said he has not received professional development on media literacy.

“I’ll be honest, most of the stuff that I do with media literacy is based on my own experience...I understand the role that media plays in my life, and I react to it,” Salazar said.

“So, that’s kind of been my professional development.”

BWHS also has not offered any professional development on media literacy, Johnson said.

“Professional development is a really touchy subject for me,” Johnson said. “We are not given any time. When we have any professional development in my building in our system, we’re given no time to actually digest it, then to work on it and adapt it to our curriculum. We’re just expected to do it. But there has been no media literacy PD, right now. I think that would be absolutely something that we should have, and I would be happy to lead it.”

Bliffen said MVTHS has a Teachers Pay Teachers license, an educator license, and were told to use that resource if they wanted to do research.

It was pretty cut and dry, Bliffen said. The school district provided teachers with some online resources, she said.

Bliffen said whenever there is professional development once a month, there are different sessions that teachers can go to, and one was media literacy.

“I think they did that a couple of times so that way anybody that hasn’t had the chance to go to it could go to the next one, but I think that was last year,” Bliffen said. “I don’t think any media literacy has been offered this year. Keep in mind that everybody at this point has already created lessons for it and feels confident, but last year whenever they were still figuring it out,

there were a lot of people that took the opportunity to take the media literacy class or PD.”

Bliffen said it was basic.

“It was like ‘this is what you know, these are the skills that we’re trying to teach, these are the things that you need to cover, who has questions. We’ll give you time to work on it and then look it over.’ I think at that point, I had already made my lesson and I just wanted to go to make sure I was doing everything that I should before I turned it into my department chair,” Bliffen said. “I think now this might have just been as a department that we did this because they asked the English department to follow through on it. So, I can’t remember exactly.”

In addition to the professional development, Bliffen said another teacher just completed her master’s and did a class on media literacy, so that teacher provided lessons.

“It was really open to whoever needed to talk about it or ask questions could, sort of like an open-door policy about that,” Bliffen said. “Then, once I created the lesson, I just sent it to my department chair. He looked it over, and he was like ‘yes, this meets the requirements or no it doesn’t.’ And for me it did. So, I was like ‘great.’ Then, I just kind of started teaching it once that class became a thing. I think all of the teachers are trying to incorporate media literacy in all of their lessons because they know how important it is to get our kids to be prepared for using the internet professionally as opposed to on a social level. So, that has been interesting trying to integrate that into our everyday lessons.”

Aydt said she was exposed to two professional developments.

“They were absolutely helpful,” she said. “I started noticing that the way I was presenting information started to shift a little bit. Instead of just blindly handing my kids articles, I started kind of discussing how the article was set up. Where do we see factual evidence? Where do we see opinion that could possibly come in? Then, kind of talking to my students about does this

source have bias? Is it okay to have bias? How do we intelligently consume information even when we know there is a bias? It's okay to have that bias, but consuming the information we have to know, that bias is there. So, we can kind of take this information with a grain of salt."

The Regional Offices of Education and Intermediate Service Centers

Klaisner, president of the Regional Superintendents of Schools, said that because of the lack of guidelines on implementing the media ethics requirement, "That's why we, as the ROEs, are trying to take the lead," he said.

"We'd love to have some things in place for the summer so that we could provide not only materials and resources but actually some training as well. Something that has been very interesting is that the ROEs have been very involved with social and emotional learning. Almost always, social and emotional learning lends itself toward media literacy because of the overlap with social media, that kids are being bullied over social media or they're posting things that forever will be online. So, there's a piece of your social and emotional discussion that almost immediately starts to talk about media literacy and how you use social media, what you access and what kind of information you share and so forth. So, we have found ourselves through the social emotional lens also doing some of the work."

Klaisner said up until this point, all that has been done is inform the districts of the requirement.

He said they do this on a routine basis. Following a legislative session, and into the fall, Klaisner said they make sure the districts have updates of new mandates, changes, laws, requirements.

"We're held responsible for making sure that districts are in compliance with school code and so forth," he said. "So, we frequently provide updates to our superintendents or through our

other networks and each year we have a compliance document that we update to make sure that it includes the requirements. Then, we use that mechanism to let districts know. It's typically part of a list. Media literacy did not stand on its own as one item but several items that were new or signed into law next year and so forth."

CHAPTER 4

EXCLUSIVE: A STUDENT REPORTER GETS THE FIRST LOOK AT ILLINOIS' STRUGGLING MEDIA LITERACY LAW

Illinois enacted the nation's first public school media literacy law just shy of two years ago. Since then, the press has mostly ignored it, teachers have struggled to figure out what it requires, educators have received little training and no one is checking to see if students are learning to be more media literate.

I am the first journalist who has deeply looked into how that requirement has been implemented, traveling around the state talking to educators and seeing how the new requirement is playing out in classrooms from Chicago to Mt. Vernon to Belleville.

As a first-generation college student, my academic background was unforeseen by many for a long time, me included. My family's educational background should have paved a path for me to stop after high school graduation. For some reason, it did not. I graduated with my bachelor's degree in journalism. Yet, I challenged myself further in graduate school.

Coming into graduate school with a journalistic background, I knew I wanted to approach my final project in that same respect. Thus, when I came across this project, it was a no-brainer. At this time, I was not as well-versed in media studies beyond my journalistic background. Thus, in my first year of graduate school, I expanded my knowledge of mass media through a new lens, mainly through the theories that ground many of my fellow students' and professors' work.

I connect what I have learned throughout my time in graduate school to this project through my fly-on-the-wall approach. Though a journalistic piece, I understand my input to what I experienced during this project. As a first-generation college student, this new requirement, and thus the first year of its implementation, has questioned my thoughts

about education and the system that it lies in. A lack of clarification on how to approach this new requirement has cultivated further questions that go beyond this project. Yet, it has sparked a new view of mass media for me. While in graduate school and working on this project, I was exposed to the realities that many educators and school districts face daily. What I saw in high school that never connected to my reality is now a retrospective ongoing conversation in my head as I conclude this project.

Education holds a special place in my life. It has given me a life I once dreamed of and has opened doors that I never thought would ever open, even if I were to knock. My intention in this project is to approach this new media literacy requirement as I would any other article I was assigned. I wanted to investigate and converse with the people behind this requirement while also showing the teacher's reality of this new requirement with the skills I gained in graduate school.

The remainder of this article shared an inside look into my perspective on this new requirement.

At the time I started this project – sparked by a GJR article by [Emily Olivares](#) of Columbia College, I had high hopes. I still do.

But the high hopes at the start were drastically different from what they are now.

Before starting this project, I had imagined that this new mandate would be a full semester course like that of the required computer literacy course or even government class. My thought process was that at the end of the semester, students would turn in a test that acknowledges what they learned.

That is how I saw it. But what it actually is, is vastly different.

When starting a project like this, the largest I had ever worked on, I had hoped to talk

with everyone involved with the bill, including the legislators.

That is needless to say, ambitious.

Though I spoke with a handful of legislators that had a part in this law, I had limitations to talking with some.

I had high hopes of countless visits to schools across Illinois to look at how the law is being implemented.

Very shortly, I realized how that was overly ambitious. Still, I was able to capture the reality of this new law.

What started from a shared idea turned into a mandated piece of legislation for Illinois public high schools.

Let us be honest here, the education system in the United States can use a lot of work, a lot. This mandate is no different.

This mandate lacks funding, oversight and resources.

Higher-ups as far as the president of the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools, Mark Klaisner, are still searching for ways in which their offices can better support educators across the state to implement this new requirement. Educators are still trying to approach implementing media literacy the best way they know how, regardless of whether it fits exactly what the law expresses in its language.

Media and thus media literacy is such a fluid topic. What we see from our screens often depends on the algorithms tailored to our viewing. One could chalk it up to a perspective-dependent topic.

Therefore, implementing media literacy in the classroom is never going to look exactly alike, nor will it ever be the exact same in a state like Illinois – a state that is home to a big city

like Chicago and small towns like SIU's very own Carbondale.

From my months of reporting and gathering information on the topic of media literacy, specifically in Illinois, this new requirement is an ambitious one with seemingly little oversight.

The law itself is written in a fluid way to support the versatile nature of media literacy. Media is involved at every end of our lives. The law is written so that this "unit" can fit into classes across the board, from social studies to PE.

The lack of oversight stems from the continual questioning of who is going to help regulate this mandate.

"There is no media literacy police out there that will go to every school and say 'how are you doing this?' There is no means for that," Michael Spikes, Ph.D. candidate at Northwestern University, Media Literacy Now's current Illinois chapter leader and a co-founder of IMLC. He [said](#) "Those are limitations, but I think those are also limitations imposed based on the structure of how schools are run in the state..."

With that fluidity and lack of oversight, educators are left unsure of how to proceed.

Klaisner said from his perspective, educators have not done much with the media literacy requirement.

"Frequently when I have asked, who knows about these requirements, digital literacy isn't on the top of their priority list," he said. "There are a number of other things, teacher shortage, for instance, the whole health and wellness arena, even more so social and emotional learning. A lot of people have been through a lot of trauma the last few years, and so, I've heard districts talk much more about that. If I bring up digital literacy, typically the response that I'm getting is 'we'll get around to that when we have time.' Or 'has ISBE developed specific learning standards for specific grade levels or ages that we are supposed to implement?' They are

looking for us to kind of hold their hand and guide them, and there isn't anything very substantive to help with."

The problems that are either already occurring or prone to occur stem from this lack of oversight and communication.

With multiple new requirements each school year, educators fail to know, often even at the bare minimum hear, about new requirements.

Media literacy is not going to be a "unit" in students' school days. It is going to be a continual conversation for ages to come. This new requirement, though, is a good start.

Over the last couple of decades, as the internet grew, schools addressed media literacy in a couple of different ways, Klaisner said.

"Some felt a tug of liability that said 'we have to protect our students. Put in filters, put in rules, put in policies, put in firewalls, make sure you're protecting the children, so they don't get hurt,'" he said. "And the other school of thought was, 'no, the internet is there, and as soon as a student walks out of the door, they're in that world on their smart device.' And so, you can't protect them all the time. What you need to do is teach children how to make informed decisions.

So, teaching them how to manage their space, how to stay away from harmful sites and how to correctly analyze the sources they're getting."

Klaisner said those two debates, those two camps, sometimes overlap, but typically schools and districts took one or the other.

"So now, we find ourselves with mandated media literacy, and the question there is, 'I'm not quite sure how that plays out,'" he said. "Like which of those two camps are we taking on? Personally, I think that it's relatively complicated. We know kids are on their devices until all hours of the morning. I think children are best served by helping them determine quality and set

boundaries by being careful, but we have to do some of both.”

As ambitious as this mandate may seem after witnessing it firsthand for months, at the core, it offers something all of us need to consider: How does the media influence our lives, individually and collectively? How does the information we see, hear, witness, etc., affect how we think and operate?

We are at a turning point in human history, with technologies like AI coming to the forefront.

How can media literacy better prepare us for what is to come or may already be here?

The high hopes I have today stem from the versatility of this new mandate, the determination of the teachers I spoke with and was able to observe in their classroom and the doors opening in other states.

Just a few weeks ago, [New Jersey](#) passed a new law on information literacy. Though not directly tied to Illinois, it is encouraging to see more states bring media literacy to light in their state’s education for the next generation.

Illinois’ law is ambitious because it’s in its preliminary stages.

It has the potential to be something good, but good things take time. There is still a lot more work that needs to be done before it gets to that point. Yet, there is a lot of hope for that, too.

Nick Johnson, an English teacher at Belleville West High School, said a next step for media literacy implementation at BWHS would be to develop a curriculum where there are specific objectives for how they’re met, like cognitive affirmative assessments or tests to identify concepts that teachers provide to measure students.

“There’s no unity, but I just make most of my project-based,” Johnson said. “So, I can

see that you got the concept because that should've been your end product in this 30-second video, or I understand you got the concept of viral fake news headlines because you can write a viral fake news headline. There's different things that I'm able to see through the work, but we don't have any unified curriculum at this point. I definitely think there are things you can measure. Your media literacy skills are measurable.”

Johnson said he has learned that teachers cannot assume that students consume information or news in any particular way.

“Building assignments around these assumptions doesn't work,” he said. “Taking time to learn about how students consume information and news is a really helpful entry point to approach media literacy.”

CHAPTER 5
EXHIBITS AND CAPTIONS



Figure 1. Belleville West High School in Belleville, Illinois. Image by Emily R. Cooper Pierce.



Figure 2. Mt. Vernon Township High School in Mt Vernon, Illinois. Image by Emily R. Cooper Pierce.



Figure 3. John Hancock College Prep High School in Bedford Park, Illinois. Image by Emily R. Cooper Pierce.



Figure 4. The Illinois State Capitol Building in Springfield, Illinois. Image by Emily R. Cooper Pierce.

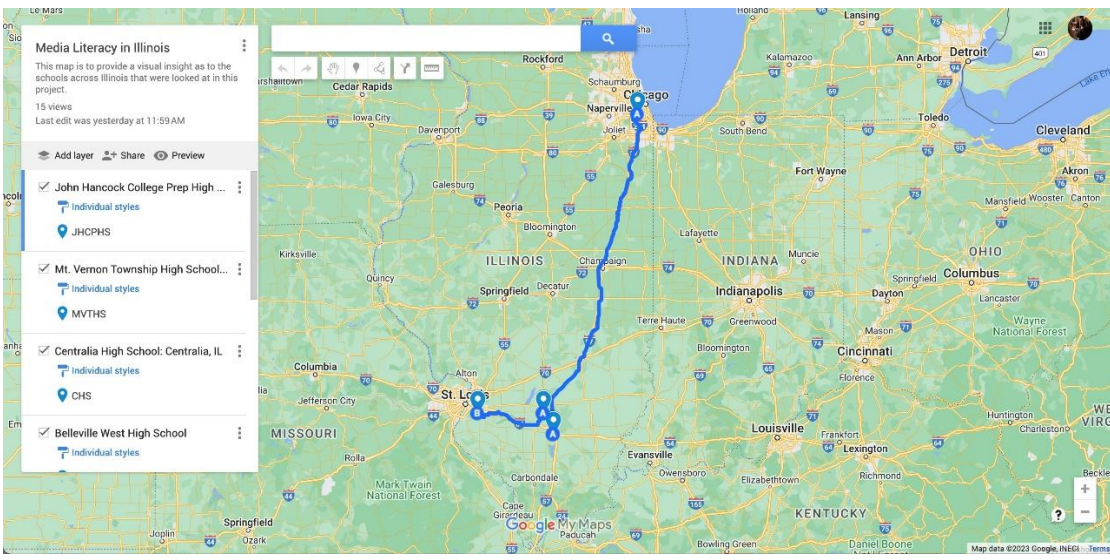


Figure 5. This map is to provide a visual insight as to the schools across Illinois that were looked at in this project. Map was created on Google Maps by Emily R. Cooper Pierce.

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