

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.



(Photo by Marco Verch via Flickr)

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 [the legislation](#), said asking teachers to include a unit of study makes things simpler.

“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 definition
- Five practices of media literacy
- 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 law, it names the specific media, Friesem said. Usually, nobody does that but it's for the 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:

- 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.

- 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.

- 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?”

- 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?”

- 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, 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.

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