



Hon. Miguel Cardona
Secretary, U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona,

We write in response to your invitation for public comment on proposed priorities related to the American History and Civics Education grant program - specifically on *Proposed Priority 2 - Promoting Information Literacy Skills*.

Since 2003, Common Sense has been the leading source of entertainment and technology recommendations for families and schools. Every day, millions of parents and educators trust Common Sense reviews and advice to help them navigate the digital world with their kids. Our team supports more than 60 percent of K–12 schools with everything educators need to empower the next generation of digital citizens through our free Digital Citizenship Curriculum, related professional development, expert advice, and ratings of educational technology. Our vision is that students thrive as learners, leaders, and citizens in the digital age and we work together with policymakers, educators, industry leaders, and global media partners to build a better digital world for all kids, their families, and their communities.

Importance of Information Literacy

At Common Sense, while we believe students possessing basic knowledge of government and its structures and functions is critical, we are in complete agreement with the U.S. Department of Education that robust civics education must go further to ensure students are prepared with skills in information literacy. We applaud the Department for leveraging the limited funding attached to the American History and Civics Education grant program to support prioritization of information literacy skill development. We agree that schools and educators play a critical role in shaping the future health of our democracy through cultivating civically-skilled students with the abilities to think critically, find and use reliable evidence, and to identify and navigate an increasingly complex world of misinformation and disinformation.

As the Department acknowledges, children are growing up with the power of digital media and technology to explore, connect, create, and learn in new ways. With this power, young people have great opportunities, but they also face challenges and dilemmas. Schools are dealing with the ramifications. To address these issues, schools and educators must be supported with resources to develop a positive culture around media and technology that supports students in being civically engaged, both face-to-face and in the digital world.

Suggested Improvements on Proposed Priority 2 - Promoting Information Literacy Skills

Schools can, and must, play a leading role in empowering students to become responsible users of digital resources in an increasingly complex communications environment. At Common Sense, we have studied and seen in the use of our free online resources that students largely engage in civic learning and the processing of information in digital environments using online tools and resources. In light of this, we urge the adoption of two improvements to *Proposed Priority 2 - Promoting Information Literacy Skills*:

Inclusion of Digital Citizenship as a Component of Civics and Information Literacy Programs:

Digital citizenship is the responsible use of technology to learn, create, and participate. More specifically, digital citizenship is a set of skills for thinking critically, behaving safely, and participating responsibly in the digital world. It includes appropriate, responsible behaviors in areas such as online safety, privacy, identity, communication, collaboration, copyright, creativity, and skills around finding and evaluating trustworthy information online. In addition, digital citizenship includes the deliberate, age-appropriate use of digital tools to have a positive impact on personal, family, school, social, and community life. Digital citizenship therefore is a necessary prerequisite and accompaniment to robust information literacy development.

All students need digital citizenship skills to participate fully in their communities and make smart choices online, including the ability to navigate through digital information resources. The grant program should be updated to:

1. Include Digital Citizenship as an explicit component of a comprehensive Civics education; and
2. Include as a competitive priority those projects that address how they will support students and educators with 21st century skills in becoming digitally literate citizens through training and recognition, professional development, and other activities.

Sample programs could improve student understanding and educator training around what we at Common Sense have identified as the six core topics of a robust digital citizenship program:

- Media Balance & Well-Being: Supporting students in using technology in a way that feels healthy and in balance with other life activities (family, friends, school, hobbies, etc.).
- News & Media Literacy: Ensuring students develop a broad set of skills related to how to understand, evaluate, and create media messages.
- Privacy & Security: Supporting student and educator practices that keep young people's private data secure and protects them from risk.
- Digital Footprint & Identity: Enhancing students in their exploration and self-expression as key developmental tasks for young people as they move from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood, particularly as students develop their identities with access to digital media as spaces to express, curate, broadcast, and record their lives.
- Relationships & Communication: Helping students build positive relationships in the digital world and helping them understand the benefits and drawbacks of digital media when it comes to relationships, addressing risky disclosure behaviors such as oversharing, setting boundaries with close friends, and building positive relationships.

- Cyberbullying, Digital Drama, & Hate Speech: Developing student skills in being kind, respectful, and civil when communicating online.

Inclusion of Competitive Preference for Programs that Support Families in Preparing Information Literate Students:

We urge the Department to add to Priority 2 criteria that would make eligible those institutions - nonprofit organizations, and programs - that support families in engaging their students with enhanced information literacy skills development. While support for classroom educators, librarians, and media specialists must also be maintained, we know families are critical partners in supporting their students as they navigate online - particularly as more students are able to access the internet at home or outside of school. Parents recognize the value of technology, but also need support and resources - including training - to support their development as co-educators of information literate students. Adding this language into the priorities would also aid schools and organizations in taking a whole-community approach to information literacy and engaging parents and caregivers, and demonstrate how all education stakeholders are critical partners in supporting students develop these necessary skills.

Thank you for your focus on these important issues and the inclusion of information literacy skill development in these proposed priorities. At Common Sense we believe that digital citizenship is a foundational skill for learning and life. As the lines between digital life and real life merge, we must prepare young people to harness the power of technology for responsible participation and active engagement. We must ensure educators and parents are provided the requisite training and skills in preparing students to think critically, be civically knowledgeable and engaged, and to navigate and use the public sphere of information to contribute to a healthy democracy. Thank you for the invitation to provide public comment and for your consideration of our suggested changes.

Sincerely,

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