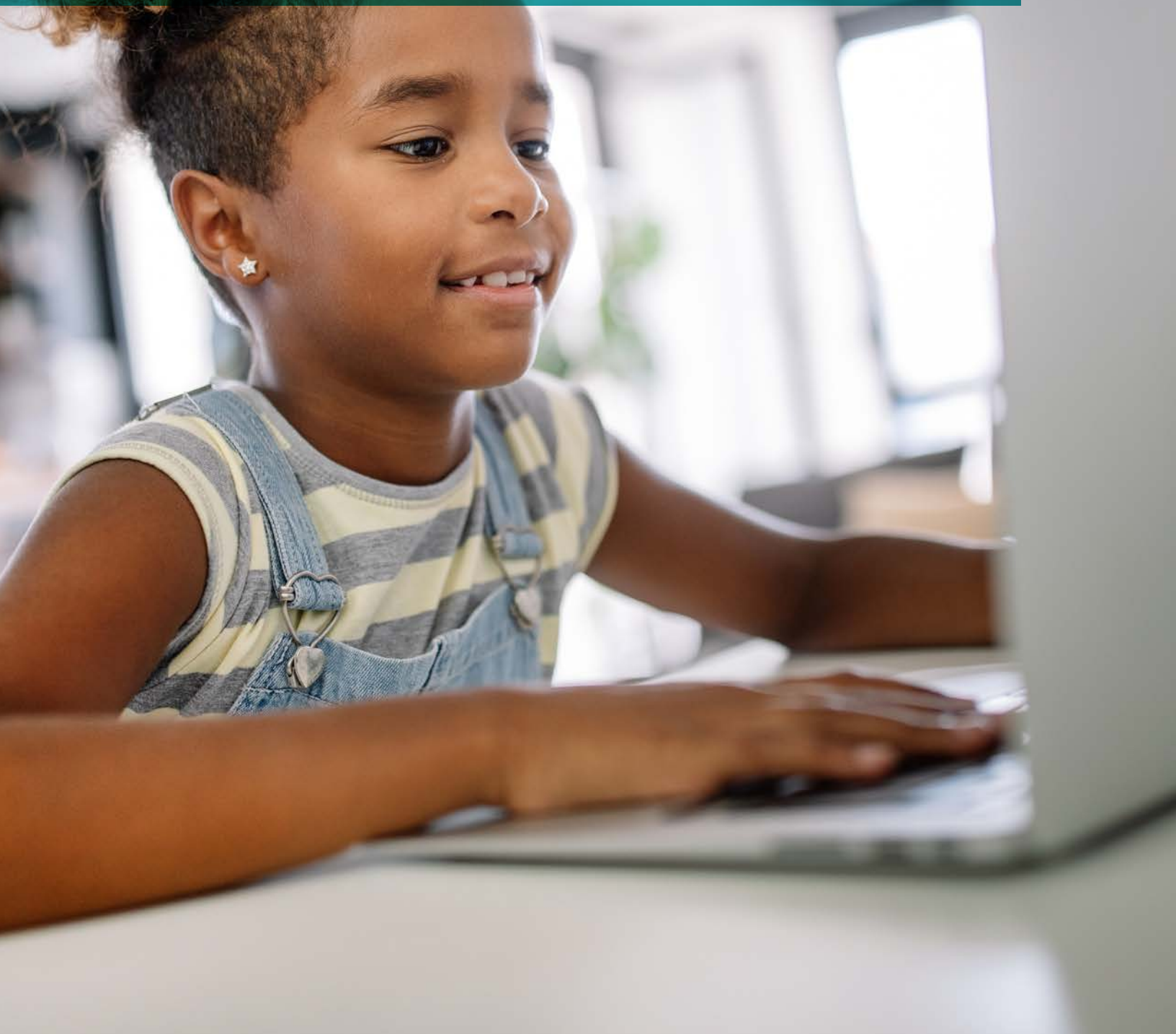# Four Ways to Improve Digital Citizenship Education

A new survey reveals key challenges and opportunities in teaching this critical topic

"Digital citizenship — using technology responsibly to learn, create, and participate in the world — is an essential foundation for digital learning."

KELLY MENDOZA, SENIOR DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION PROGRAMS, COMMON SENSE EDUCATION

Digital citizenship skills are essential, and that's particularly true now that many students are learning online during the pandemic. Yet, a *School Library Journal* survey of K-12 educators and librarians across the United States suggests that schools aren't focusing enough attention on teaching students how to become responsible digital citizens.

All 282 respondents to the survey, which was developed in coordination with Infobase, agreed that students should learn effective digital citizenship — and only 6 percent said their schools don't teach these critical skills. However, students are most likely to receive digital citizenship instruction on a monthly basis (33 percent) or in just one class per semester (32 percent), the survey revealed.

This isn't nearly enough time for students to learn the wide range of skills they need, most experts would argue — skills such as how to stay safe online, act ethically and appropriately with technology, and manage one's digital footprint.

This paper explores the survey results in more detail. It examines how schools are currently teaching digital citizenship and the key challenges standing in the way, including what appears to be a disconnect between how school librarians and classroom teachers regard each other's roles in teaching these skills. Finally, it offers four key suggestions for how schools might approach digital citizenship instruction more effectively moving forward, based on key takeaways from the survey.

WHY STUDENTS NEED TO LEARN DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP SKILLS

Today's students learn and communicate much differently than students just a generation ago, with much of this activity now happening online. Teaching students how to navigate these digital spaces safely, ethically, and responsibly is fundamental to helping them develop and preparing them for success in life.

"Digital citizenship — using technology responsibly to learn, create, and participate in the world — is an essential foundation for digital learning," says Kelly Mendoza, senior director of education programs for Common Sense Education. "Without educating students in digital citizenship skills and habits of mind, they can fall into ethical fault lines while communicating and collaborating using technology."

Digital citizenship instruction has taken on even greater importance now that many students are learning remotely, survey respondents believe. The survey asked participants to rate their level of agreement with this statement: "Teaching students digital citizenship skills is more important when students are learning remotely and spending more time on devices."

Nearly half, 49 percent, gave the highest rating of "Completely Agree" — and the average rating was 5.0 on a six-point Likert scale.

In fact, respondents shared a number of examples of inappropriate online behavior they've witnessed since remote learning began this past spring, suggesting the need for more emphasis on digital citizenship instruction in schools.

A Tennessee librarian wrote: "In using our online platforms for education, there were instances of students posting inappropriate content — some of it racially charged, pornographic, and harmful to classmates." A California librarian reported a spike in online cheating in her district since the pandemic began, and a North Carolina librarian wrote that students have been "spamming the Zoom chat box [during remote classes] to be annoying or get attention."

"We have students who have little experience communicating and collaborating online for learning and who [now] are participating in video meetings, using new digital tools, doing online research without direct support from a school librarian, and are on their screens for most or all of the school day," Mendoza says. "For distance learning to be effective, teachers need to include digital citizenship and create a positive culture around technology use."

THE STATE OF K-12 DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP INSTRUCTION

The good news is, 94 percent of schools are teaching digital citizenship in some capacity, according to the survey. The bad news is that there's no consistency in how this subject is being taught or assessed in the nation's schools.

Here's what the survey results reveal about the state of digital citizenship instruction in U.S. schools.

Who teaches digital citizenship?

According to the survey, classroom teachers, librarians, and technology specialists all play a role in teaching this topic — and frequently within the same school or district:

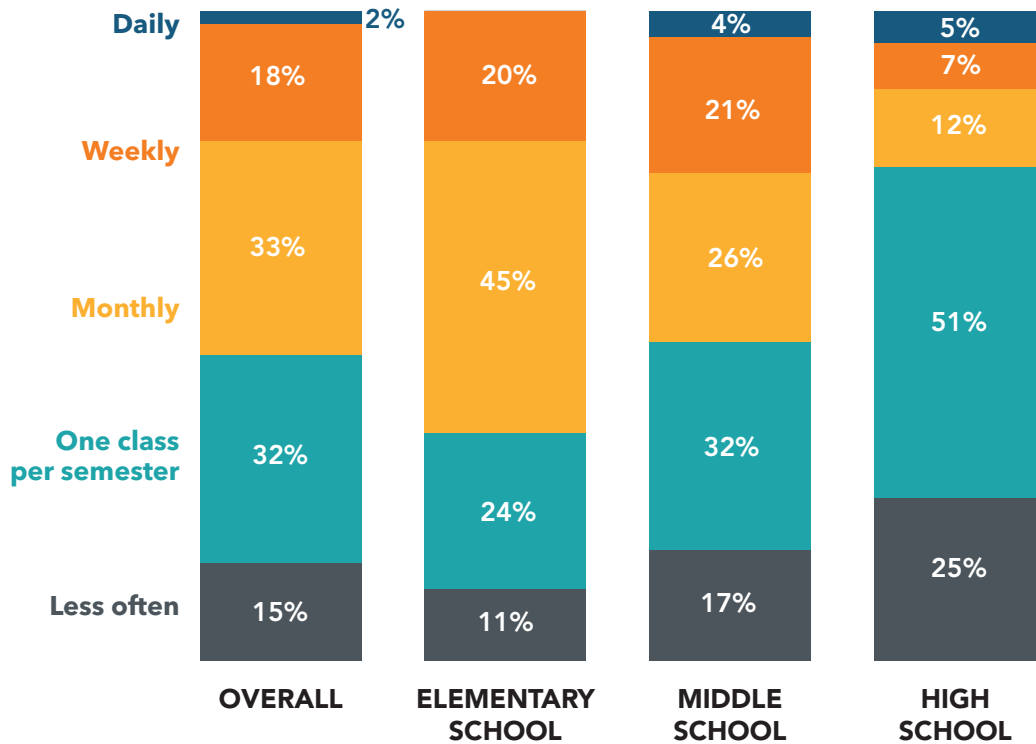|	
Librarians	72%
Teachers	51%
Tech specialists	31%
Other	9%
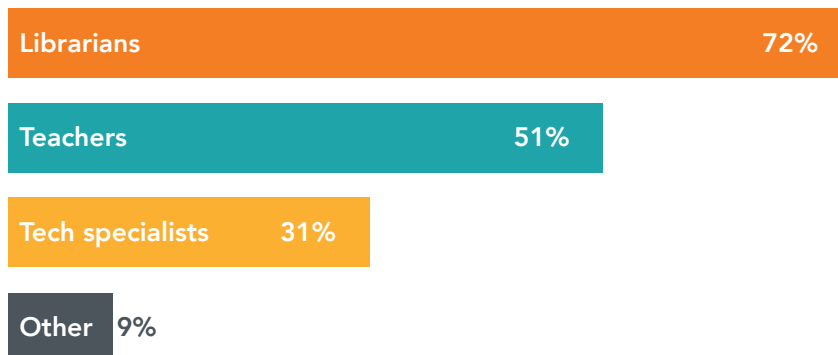
What is digital citizenship?

There are many aspects to effective digital citizenship, including knowing how to stay safe and protect one's privacy online, understanding how to critically evaluate digital information, and being respectful of others on social media.

Common Sense Media has identified what it calls "six core topics of digital citizenship":

- **Media balance and well-being:** Helping students find balance in their digital lives.

- **Privacy and security:** Making sure students care about their own digital privacy and everyone else's.

- **Digital footprint and identity:** Establishing a responsible persona online.

- **Relationships and communication:** Teaching students the power of their words and actions.

- **Cyber bullying, digital drama, and hate speech:** Teaching students to be kind and courageous online.

- **News and media literacy:** Ensuring that students are critical thinkers and creators, not just consumers, of digital media.

Is it a part of the curriculum?

Nearly two-thirds of respondents (65 percent) said digital citizenship instruction is part of their school's curriculum. However, this was more likely at elementary schools (68 percent) than high schools (56 percent).

	OVERALL	ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	MIDDLE SCHOOL	HIGH SCHOOL
Daily	2%		4%	5%
Weekly	18%	20%	21%	7%
Monthly	33%	45%	26%	12%
One class per semester	32%	24%	32%	51%
Less often	15%	11%	17%	25%

How often is it taught?

The survey suggests that digital citizenship is addressed no more than monthly in 80 percent of schools. What's more, this subject is taught only once per semester or less in nearly half of schools overall (47 percent) and in three-fourths of high schools:

When is it introduced?

Although it isn't taught consistently, digital citizenship instruction does begin early. Nearly half of respondents (49 percent) report that their school district first introduces the concept of digital citizenship to students in kindergarten. By the end of first grade, 68 percent of school districts have introduced the concept of digital citizenship to students.

How is it being taught?

Schools use a wide variety of resources to teach students about digital citizenship, including videos (74 percent), print materials (53 percent), databases (44 percent), and apps (32 percent). About 8 percent of respondents said they use Common Sense Education's free digital citizenship curriculum.

Is it being assessed?

Assessment of schools' digital citizenship instruction also varies widely. About a third of schools (34 percent) use informal assessments to gauge students' digital citizenship skills. Only 10 percent use formal assessments — and 37 percent don't assess students' skills at all.

Where is digital citizenship not being taught?

While only 6 percent of respondents said digital citizenship is not taught at their school, urban schools (12 percent) were more than twice as likely to lack digital citizenship instruction as suburban schools (4 percent) or rural schools (5 percent).

KEY CHALLENGES

If digital citizenship isn't taught in school, the primary reasons given were that it's not part of the curriculum and that respondents have limited experience teaching digital citizenship. Other key hurdles include a lack of support from administration, a lack of time, and a lack of resources:

Not part of the curriculum	59%
Limited experience	35%
Lack of support	29%
Lack of time	24%
Few resources	18%
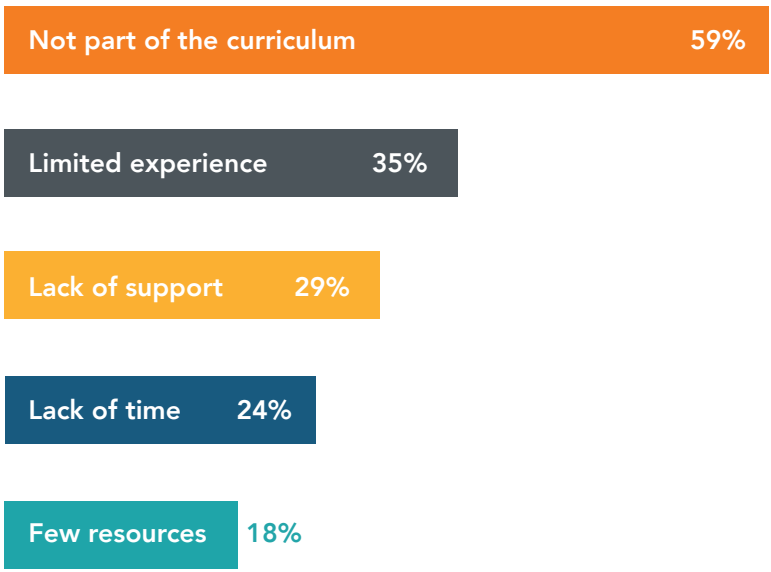
These same barriers also limit the amount of time spent on digital citizenship instruction in schools.

Nan Powell, a teacher/librarian at Blair Elementary School in Wilmington, N.C., said she went into this school year hoping to take a more structured approach to teaching digital citizenship in collaboration with classroom teachers. However, a lack of time and opportunity has hampered her plans.

"Unfortunately, with COVID-19 again forcing us into remote learning for the beginning of the year, we did not get to meet and discuss this as I had planned," she observes. "I still hope to do it when teachers are not struggling to teach remote and face-to-face students at the same time. Our staff is working very long days trying to adjust and serve all of our students' needs, and it is simply overwhelming."
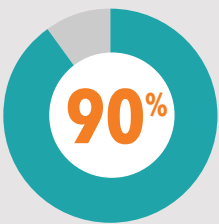
In her librarian role, Powell teaches digital citizenship to students herself — but she only sees each student for 40 minutes per week. During this time,
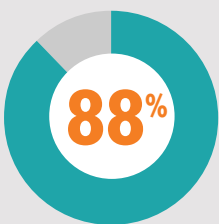
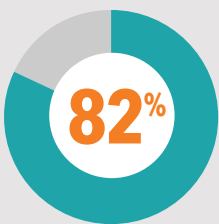## What librarians think parents' role should be in teaching digital citizenship

97%
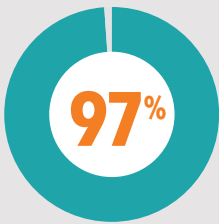
Would like parents to remind their children about internet safety

90%

Think parents should set limits on device usage

88%

Think parents should regularly check students' devices

82%

Think they should set privacy controls on children's devices

she also has many other topics she's trying to cover, such as media and information literacy, as well as basic literacy skills, how to use the library, and fostering a love of books and reading. As a result, the amount of time she's able to spend on digital citizenship is, admittedly, limited.

"I do an intro in the fall and more extensive unit in the spring," she says. "So, two class periods in the fall and about four in the spring."

A DISCONNECT BETWEEN TEACHERS AND LIBRARIANS?

Although 72 percent of survey respondents said librarians help provide digital citizenship instruction at their school, there was a significant disconnect between the percentage of librarians (80 percent) and teachers (37 percent) who said this — which suggests teachers might not always be aware of the support that librarians provide in teaching these skills.

If that's true, there appears to be a key opportunity for schools to promote the support their librarians provide in teaching digital citizenship — and for educators and librarians to work together more closely in teaching these critical skills.

"It could be that librarians and teachers at the same school are simply unaware that each of them are teaching digital citizenship," Mendoza says. "This is a missed opportunity for librarians to support teachers, and vice versa."

This is already happening in about half of schools. The survey asked respondents how their school library provides digital citizenship instruction. Eighty-four percent said it's provided during library orientation and instruction. Fifty-five percent use digital resources on the library's website, 50 percent collaborate with classroom teachers, and 49 percent offer instruction one-on-one with students as needed.

THE ROLE OF PARENTS

The survey asked respondents what they think parents' role should be in teaching their children digital citizenship — and there was widespread agreement that parents should play a key role.

Nearly all respondents (97 percent) would like parents to reinforce digital citizenship instruction by reminding their children about internet safety. Nine in 10 think parents should set limits on device usage. Eighty-eight percent think parents should regularly check students' devices to see what websites they've visited and messages they've sent, and 82 percent think they should set privacy controls on children's devices, particularly in the lower grades.

Open-ended comments indicate that educators would like parents to be more involved in checking students' online work and to act as role models for their children.

In a perfect world, "parents would be a huge partner in this with their children," one respondent noted. Another wrote: "It's difficult to teach something that is often not modeled by adults in the community."

OPPORTUNITIES MOVING FORWARD

What lessons can K-12 leaders learn from the survey? Clearly, digital citizenship instruction needs to assume a larger priority at all grade levels, and especially high school. Based on what teachers and librarians had to say, here are four key takeaways that can help schools achieve this important goal.

1 Top-level leadership is critical in establishing the right culture.

Administrators should set the tone by talking about the importance of digital citizenship instruction and making sure educators have the skills and knowledge they need to teach this essential topic. If digital citizenship isn't emphasized from the very top levels of school and district administration, then it's easy for educators to focus only on core subjects instead.

"Though we do see the lone librarian or teacher teaching digital citizenship, in order for the culture to change in a school, principals need to support it and the district needs to provide training and support for teachers," Mendoza says. "We've seen a shift in schools and districts that now have digital citizenship as a part of their technology vision or policies."

Jennifer Sharp, a librarian at John Overton High School in Nashville, Tenn., describes how leadership has been instrumental in establishing a culture of digital citizenship education in her district.

"Here in Nashville, our school district has implemented digital citizenship curriculum this year," she says. "Each grade level has designated lessons that librarians cover with students either on their own or in collaboration with content-area or grade-level teachers. While virtual instruction and other pandemic-related factors have made this rollout a bit more challenging than we anticipated, I appreciate that our district leaders are being intentional and thorough with how we approach digital citizenship."

> "Digital citizenship curriculum should be vertically aligned so that students experience a progression and a gradual deepening of understanding as they age."
>
> **JENNIFER SHARP, LIBRARIAN, JOHN OVERTON HIGH SCHOOL, NASHVILLE, TN**

2 Digital citizenship should be integrated into the curriculum across all subjects and grade levels.

K-12 leaders should integrate digital citizenship into the formal curriculum if they haven't already. They should define goals and standards for what students should learn about digital citizenship at each grade level, as well as goals for how to assess what students have learned, so that students receive a more uniform experience that is not dependent on which teachers they end up with in class.

"Digital citizenship curriculum should be vertically aligned so that students experience a progression and a gradual deepening of understanding as they age," Sharp says. "Adding new digital citizenship skills each year helps students to grasp things in a developmentally appropriate way, and it also

allows students to learn as these issues come up naturally in their own lives. As students become more independent and aware of the world around them, they will need to know more about navigating the landscape of technology, social media, and digital literacy."

In addition, digital citizenship instruction should be ongoing, not just experienced periodically as a stand-alone presentation. Ideally, it should be integrated seamlessly within the curriculum across all subject areas, so that students are learning and reinforcing digital citizenship skills in the course of their core learning.

"In my experience," Sharp says, "students engage the most when skills and concepts are presented in an authentic way rather than in isolation. As relevant discussions come up in ELA, social studies, and so on, that is the most natural and effective time to incorporate and address digital citizenship skills. If we try to teach digital citizenship skills in isolation, it can feel forced and lack relevance for students, but providing real-world context helps students to see the purpose behind learning these skills and increases engagement."

Mendoza agrees: "We hear from teachers that these skills and behaviors need to be consistently reinforced and revisited. Yet the reality is, teachers are strapped for time, and subject-area curriculum is [their first] priority. That is why weaving in digital citizenship into ELA, social studies, and even science and math is an effective way to increase instruction, while at the same time supporting subjects. For instance, news and media literacy lessons can be woven into any online research project, and cyber bullying and hate speech lessons can be woven into group projects to discuss norms of respectful, effective communication, or when looking at issues of race and social justice in our society."
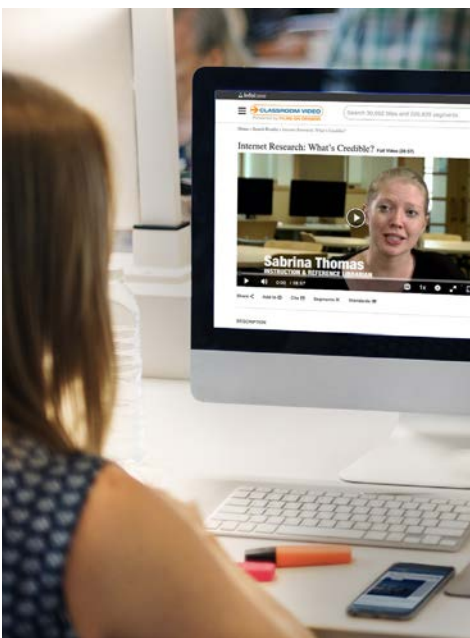
③ Digital citizenship instruction should be a total team effort.

Teachers and librarians should collaborate more effectively in delivering digital citizenship instruction. For instance, librarians can help teachers design high-quality curriculum experiences that teach and reinforce good digital citizenship practices — and K-12 leaders should build opportunities for teacher-librarian collaboration into the school schedule, such as during professional development days or common planning time.

"We recommend that schools use a team-based approach to digital citizenship. A team could include a digital citizenship lead, which might be the librarian, tech coordinator, or a teacher on special assignment, who works with a team of teachers, counselors, and parent coordinators on a comprehensive plan," Mendoza says. "The more students are learning from and being supported by a team of faculty in the school, rather than the 'lone wolf' librarian or teacher, the easier it is to create a culture of digital citizenship."

"I believe librarians can play a critical role in creating this type of environment by finding connections between digital citizenship instruction and existing school and district priorities," Sharp adds. "Librarians can also identify opportunities in existing subject-area curriculum so that teachers can see the benefit of integrating digital citizenship despite their already full plates. This requires librarians to have an intimate knowledge of their school's expectations from the highest level (district goals and priorities) to the most detailed (subject-area standards). But this awareness will pay off, as it will allow librarians to tailor their approach for each stakeholder."

4 School systems should involve parents as full partners as well.

Schools should invite parents to help in this process. Educators, librarians, and administrators should help parents teach and reinforce digital citizenship lessons at home by providing ideas and examples for how to do this effectively.

"There is no doubt that digital citizenship education requires a home-school effort," Mendoza says. "Parents and caregivers look to schools for advice on guiding their children online. And when schools require students to use devices at home, they should also be supporting parents in managing the use of those devices."

"**"There is no doubt that digital citizenship education requires a home-school effort,"**

KELLY MENDOZA, SENIOR DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION PROGRAMS, COMMON SENSE EDUCATION

About the Survey

SLJ's digital citizenship survey was developed in coordination with Infobase, a provider of authoritative content, digital tools, and technology for K-12, academic, and public libraries. A survey invitation was emailed to a list of 11,000 U.S. K-12 school librarians and classroom teachers in August 2020. The survey closed with 282 responses. Seventy-eight percent of respondents were school librarians, and 15 percent were classroom teachers. Fifty-three percent work in elementary schools, 31 percent in middle schools, 16 percent in high schools, and 10 percent in K-8/K-12 school districts. Ninety percent work in public schools.