

DAY ONE PROJECT

Digital Citizenship: A National
Imperative to Protect and
Reinvigorate our Democracy

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Summary

In his posthumous op-ed, House Representative John Lewis wrote, “Democracy is not a state. It is an act,” and challenged all Americans to “do [their] part to help build...a nation and world society at peace with itself.”¹ In our generation, where technology is integrated into virtually every aspect of public and private life, preserving the American democracy must involve ensuring that digital tools and platforms are employed in service of our communities, facilitating the productive and equitable exchange of information and opportunity, rather than being hijacked to sow misinformation and discord. In recent months, we have observed ample examples of both cases. Young Americans are using technology to raise awareness of ongoing racial justice issues, which have led to significant policy shifts.² However, at the same time, members of the public are sharing falsehoods about the COVID-19 global pandemic³, costing lives and extending economic devastation.

To ensure that upcoming generations can positively leverage online spaces and rise above the ever-present call to division, digital citizenship—encompassing the critical competencies to discern fact from fiction, navigate relationships, and use technology to champion change—must be fostered, beginning in our schools where students already engage with technology regularly.⁴ The work to develop digital citizens and future leaders is underway in several states and districts, and there exists numerous ways that the federal government can supply further momentum—setting a national vision around digital citizenship, building the capacity of educators, and strategically investing necessary funds.

Challenge and Opportunity

The current integration of digital citizenship is inconsistent from school to school and district to district, falling far short of a comprehensive vision worthy of and necessary for our future democracy. For example, state legislatures have proposed varying definitions—Utah’s definition emphasizes ethics, etiquette, and security in online spaces⁵, whereas Texas’ definition incorporates the abilities to analyze and evaluate digital communication.⁶ Furthermore, a recent survey found that educators focus primarily on cyberbullying and privacy when discussing digital citizenship.⁷ While these topics are certainly important, thinking about digital citizenship primarily

¹ Lewis, John. “Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation.” *The New York Times*, July 30, 2020. <https://nyti.ms/2Y4VPbc>

² Riess, Rebekah. “Louisville Council Passes ‘Breonna’s Law’ Banning No-Knock Warrants.” *CNN*, June 12, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/11/us/louisville-breonnas-law-no-knock-warrants-ban/index.html>.

³ Islam, Md Saiful, Tonmoy Sarkar, Sazzad Hossain Khan, Abu-Hena Mostofa Kamal, Sarkar Mohammad Murshid Hasan, Alamgir Kabir, Dalia Yeasmin, et al. “COVID-19–Related Infodemic and Its Impact on Public Health: A Global Social Media Analysis.” *The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, August 10, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.4269/ajtmh.20-0812>.

⁴ Cortez, Meghan Bogardus. “21st Century Classroom Technology Use Is on the Rise.” *EdTech Magazine*, September 3, 2017. <https://edtechmagazine.com/k12/article/2017/09/classroom-tech-use-rise-infographic>

⁵ Digital Citizenship Utah. “What Is Digital Citizenship?” 2019. <https://digcitutah.com/digital-citizenship/>.

⁶ Media Literacy Now. “Texas Legislation.” 2020. <https://medialiteracynow.org/your-state-legislation/texas-legislation/>.

⁷ Common Sense Media. “The Common Sense Census: Inside the 21st-Century Classroom: Common Sense Media,” April 18, 2019. <https://www.common Sense Media.org/research/the-common-sense-census-inside-the-21st-century-classroom-2019>.

from the standpoint of online safety is limiting and reinforces a negative view of technology, rather than one that perceives it as a tool capable of empowering students. In response, the DigCitCommit Coalition, formed from organizations focused on best practices in digital citizenship, comprehensively defines digital citizenship as being composed of five distinct competencies—digital citizens are inclusive, informed, engaged, balanced and alert.⁸

Ensuring that all students have the opportunity to build each competency requires substantial support for educators' knowledge and skills. However, recent data reveals that we have thus far failed to provide these necessary supports when it comes to the effective use of technology. Equity gaps in access to professional development for digital learning existed even prior to the pandemic.⁹ During COVID-19, less than one-fifth of districts are investing their federal education relief dollars towards professional development¹⁰, and as of September 2020, less than a third address educator training in their fall school reopening plans.¹¹

Fortunately, educators agree that digital citizenship is important for helping students make informed decisions online and to build inclusive digital communities.¹² Additionally, work is already underway in several states and districts. Virginia is updating its outdated educational technology standards and working with their instructional technology coaches to build capacity.¹³ Los Angeles Unified School District's Instructional Technology Initiative provides supports for policy and professional development.

Plan of Action

There are three core actions necessary for the Federal Government to supply momentum to the work already underway and improve digital citizenship instruction and professional development:

- (1) Set a National Vision around Digital Citizenship:** The White House, in collaboration with federal agencies responsible for cultivating civic engagement, community building, and civil discourse, can convene a national congress of stakeholders (i.e. students, parents, educators, districts, states, industry and community leaders, nonprofits) to establish a shared, national vision around digital citizenship. The DigCitCommit competencies can be used as the baseline for this process. The administration can also engage in strategic public-private partnership to develop new resources that support the effective embedding of that shared vision into classroom instruction.

⁸ International Society for Technology in Education. "DigCitCommit," 2020. <https://digcitcommit.org/>.

⁹ Purcell, Kristen, Judy Buchanan, and Linda Friedrich. "How Teachers Are Using Technology at Home and in Their Classrooms." Pew Research Center, February 28, 2013. <https://pewrsr.ch/31Wahn3>.

¹⁰ Ujifusa, Andrew. "This Survey Data Indicates How Schools Plan to Use Federal COVID-19 Aid." Education Week, June 11, 2020. <https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2020/06/schools-covid-aid-survey-data-use.html>.

¹¹ EdSurge. "What's the Plan? How K-12 School Districts Are Preparing to Resume and Reopen." August 12, 2020. <https://www.edsurge.com/research/guides/what-s-the-plan-how-k-12-school-districts-are-preparing-to-resume-and-reopen>.

¹² Common Sense Media, 2018.

¹³ Song, Ji Soo. "Digital Citizenship in the Time of COVID-19: How Can States Change the Narrative?" Education Commission of the States, May 26, 2020. <https://ednote.ecs.org/digital-citizenship-in-the-time-of-covid-19-how-can-states-change-the-narrative/>.

- (2) **Build Capacity for Both New and Current Educators:** The U.S. Department of Education should establish a new technical assistance center in partnership with national partners with digital citizenship expertise. The technical assistance center can support the implementation of the above national vision by facilitating the exchange model policies, practices, and instructional resources. The U.S. Congress should also ensure that, in reauthorizing Title II-B of the Higher Education Act, educator preparation programs are equipped to train pre-service educators on effective technology use, including digital citizenship.¹⁴
- (3) **Invest Necessary Funds to Sustain Efforts:** The U.S. Congress should pass legislation like the Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act, recently introduced by Senator Amy Klobuchar, which would create new funding sources for states and districts in supporting digital citizenship instruction.¹⁵ Congress should fully fund programs under the Every Student Succeeds Act, such as the Student Support and Academic Enrichment grants authorized under Title IV, part A, which are regularly used by districts to fund professional development in the effective use of technology.¹⁶

¹⁴ International Society for Technology in Education. "ISTE's Higher Education Act Reauthorization Priorities and Recommendations," 2018. [https://cdn.iste.org/www-root/PDF/advocacy-pages/ISTEs%20Higher%20Education%20Act%20Reauthorization%20Priorities%20and%20Recommendations%20\(002\).pdf](https://cdn.iste.org/www-root/PDF/advocacy-pages/ISTEs%20Higher%20Education%20Act%20Reauthorization%20Priorities%20and%20Recommendations%20(002).pdf).

¹⁵ Klobuchar, Amy. "Klobuchar Introduces Legislation to Educate Americans about Misinformation Online, Prevent the Impact of Foreign Influence Campaigns," July 26, 2019. <https://www.klobuchar.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2019/7/klobuchar-introduces-legislation-to-educate-americans-about-misinformation-online-prevent-the-impact-of-foreign-influence-campaigns>.

¹⁶ Title IV-A Coalition. "Summary of the 2019 National ESSA Title IV-A Survey," July 2, 2019.

https://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Policy_and_Advocacy/Resources/ESSATitleIVSummaryofFindings-070219.pdf.

About the Authors



Joseph South is the chief learning officer at the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) and a national educational technology leader focused on evidence-based learning transformation. He formerly served as the director of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Educational Technology. In this role, he was an adviser to the secretary of education and developed national policy, including policy to advance educational technology in teacher preparation. He also formed public-private partnerships to assist state and local education leaders in transitioning to digital learning. He is a strong proponent of the active use of technology by learners. He holds a doctorate in instructional psychology and technology from Brigham Young University.



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About the Day One Project

The Day One Project is dedicated to democratizing the policymaking process by working with new and expert voices across the science and technology community, helping to develop actionable policies that can improve the lives of all Americans, and readying them for Day One of a future presidential term. For more about the Day One Project, visit dayoneproject.org.