



OFFICE OF Educational Technology

Students of Color Online: 10 Questions to Promote Digital Health, Safety, and Citizenship

As outlined in the [2024 National Educational Technology Plan](#), digital health, safety, and citizenship skills reflect the full set of knowledge and habits students need to use technology appropriately, responsibly, and safely. For schools and districts, creating the conditions for those skills to develop includes policies regulating the use of school-provided technology or access to personal devices at school as well as anti-bullying policies or standards for responsible interactions online. While digital health, safety, and citizenship are important for everyone, students may experience digital spaces and the school policies regulating them differently based on their personal identities. School policies and cultures that meet the needs of every student may require additional considerations for students of color based on this context, particularly in areas such as transparency and trust, parent or caregiver engagement, monitoring or surveillance, and discipline.

“Digital health” refers to the skills and practices necessary in maintaining a healthy and balanced relationship with technology and the digital world. It recognizes the benefits of technology as well as the potential negative impacts of excessive or unhealthy technology use, including strategies to help promote physical, mental, and emotional well-being in the context of digital usage.

“Digital safety” focuses on skills and practices to avoid online risks and ensure privacy and security while using digital technologies. It involves measures to safeguard personal information, avoiding cyber threats, and prevent unauthorized access to sensitive data. Digital safety also encompasses educating individuals about online dangers, such as phishing scams, identity theft, cyberbullying, and online harassment, and promoting responsible digital citizenship.

“Digital citizenship” refers to appropriate, responsible behavior when using technology. It encompasses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to navigate the digital world respectfully and responsibly while engaging positively and constructively in online communities. Prepared digital citizens possess good digital literacy and critical thinking skills.

The amount of time teens report spending online varies significantly by race and ethnicity – with 55 percent of Hispanic and 54 percent of Black teens reporting being on the internet almost constantly, compared with 38 percent of white teens.¹ The reasons for these different usage rates vary. Black and Latino young people are more likely than white youth to use social media to learn about professional or academic opportunities, express themselves creatively, connect with family, and find information and

¹ Pew Research Center, December 2023, “Teens, Social Media and Technology 2023”
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2023/12/11/teens-social-media-and-technology-2023/>

resources about mental health and well-being.² At the same time, Black and Latino youth are also more likely than White youth to have taken a temporary or permanent break from a social media account due to harassment or other negative experiences online³ – reinforcing the idea that social media can have both helpful and harmful effects on mental health and that those effects accrue differently for different users.⁴

According to the CDC⁵, “Being bullied online has distinct, harmful psychological impacts; youth who are targets of online bullying are more likely to report being anxious and depressed and engage in intentional self-harm.” The CDC also found online bullying is associated with offline violence and negative academic outcomes, especially for many adolescents of color (Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian/Pacific Islander adolescents).

Improved efforts to support digital health, safety, and citizenship can disrupt these patterns and help young people maintain healthy relationships with themselves and others.⁶ Vulnerable student groups, including students of color, also experience greater harms from student surveillance technologies – like student communications-, document-, and social media-monitoring products or facial recognition technology – than the average student.⁷

To support the well-being of students of color, the U.S. Department of Education (Department) recommends school leaders – including superintendents, school principals, and other district leaders – consider and address the following questions as they establish school policies and build cultures that are inclusive and supportive of students of color with respect to their digital health, safety, and citizenship:

1. **Does your school or district have a clearly articulated vision of digital health, safety, and citizenship for students at all levels and does it account for possible risks related to student demographics?** Because some students, including students of color, experience heightened bullying and abuse online and vast impacts from school surveillance technologies, consider specifically addressing those population-specific risks and harms in equity statements, policies, and planning.
2. **How are you collecting data and evidence to better understand the digital health, safety, and citizenship needs of students, families, and employees of color within your district or schools (e.g., needs assessments, climate surveys, incident reports)?** Given the data and evidence of students of color’s disproportionate experiences with bullying and disciplinary actions nationwide⁸, consider available data to better understand if these patterns exist within your school or district and how your students of color’s digital experiences, health, or safety may mirror those

² Madden, M., Calvin, A., and Hasse, A. (2024). A Double-Edged Sword: How Diverse Communities of Young People Think About the Multifaceted Relationship Between Social Media and Mental Health. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense and HopeLab. https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/research/report/2024-double-edged-sword-hopelab-report_final-release-for-web-v2.pdf

³ Madden, Calvin, and Hasse, Double-Edged Sword, 33.

⁴ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2024). Social Media and Adolescent Health. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/27396>.

⁵ [“Experiences of Online Bullying and Offline Violence-Related Behaviors Among a Nationally Representative Sample of US Adolescents, 2011 to 2019”](#)

⁶ [“Hollywood Bureau Industry Report: The Black Executive”](#)

⁷ ACLU. (2023). Digital Dystopia: The Danger in Buying What the EdTech Surveillance Industry is Selling. <https://www.aclu.org/publications/digital-dystopia-the-danger-in-buying-what-the-edtech-surveillance-industry-is-selling>

⁸ [2020-21 Civil Rights Data Collection Student Discipline and School Climate in U.S. Public Schools \(ed.gov\)](#)

patterns. Needs assessment, climate survey, and incident report data disaggregated by race, racial subcategory, and/or ethnicity⁹ can help establish a starting point to improve digital health, safety, and mental well-being outcomes for specific populations. Clear policies should be in place to ensure that data or insights collected about students' racial or ethnic identities are not used for surveillance or threat assessment purposes, which can impact students differently along lines of racial or ethnic difference. The Department's Student Privacy Policy Office has a [Know Your Rights resource](#) on the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)'s protection for student records to maintain privacy while collecting data and evidence.

3. **What measurable goals have you established for the digital health, safety, citizenship and mental well-being of students?** When establishing goals, consider both reduction in negative incidents against students of color as well as increases in proactive measures and positive outcomes. Take into account that personal and community experiences with technology or digital platforms may differ along racial or ethnic lines (e.g., a history of surveillance may cause students and their families to avoid engaging in school-based communication platforms, which impacts the students' academic experiences). Student data disaggregated by race, racial subcategory, and/or ethnicity can help establish targeted goals that have universal benefits.**How are students and families included in assessing needs, setting district and school goals, and designing learning opportunities?** Students' and families' experience with digital spaces may vary depending on race, racial subcategory, and/or ethnicity. While assessing needs and developing strategies to improve digital health, safety, and citizenship, consider a co-design process informed by the perspectives and cultural norms of students, parents, and caregivers.¹⁰ Students of color are also more likely to be important influencers in their families on the adoption of new technologies¹¹; learning and training opportunities should respect this dynamic and support students and families to build intergenerational digital health, safety, and citizenship.
4. **What supports are necessary and do you have in place to ensure key staff (e.g., administrators, school counselors, social workers, educators) have an adequate understanding of and capacity to respond to the unique needs involving support of student digital health, safety, and citizenship?** Because students of color may experience heightened bullying and abuse online¹² and disciplinary actions in school, consider increasing staff awareness about how to identify and disrupt these harmful patterns. Staff should also have adequate training to ensure they do not use data or insights to replicate harmful patterns that disproportionately surveil or discipline students of color.¹³ Digital health and safety are built upon a foundation of trust and transparency with students of color and their families, and staff should be equipped to explain how digital tools used will improve outcomes while maintaining safety and security for all students.
5. **What emergency resources, procedures, and supports are in place to support in moments of crisis regarding digital health and safety?** Depending on the demographics of your school, virtual spaces may also offer critical lifelines for students of color; preparing them to leverage those spaces in healthy, safe ways requires robust media and digital literacy guidance and protocols to notify school staff if there is a crisis or emergency. Conversely, digital safety for students of color is threatened when they are unfairly viewed as threats and disciplined as such.

⁹ ["A Vision for Equitable Data Recommendations from the Equitable Data Working Group"](#)

¹⁰ Co-Designing Schools Toolkit. (2020). <https://www.codesigningschools.com/>

¹¹ Turner-Lee, Nicol, New Internet Users and Online Privacy Perceptions (March 31, 2012). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2032823>

¹² [Teens and Cyberbullying 2022 | Pew Research Center](#)

¹³ Venet, A.S. (2023). Equity-Centered Trauma-Informed Education (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032677989>

6. **What curricular, extra-, or co-curricular inclusion supports can be or have been established to support student digital health, safety, and citizenship?** Any curricular activities involving engaging with media or technology should be paired with digital literacy resources to ensure students of color navigate online spaces effectively and in ways that support their health, safety, and citizenship and positive identity development.
7. **What external partnerships can be or have been established to augment school and district capacity to promote student digital health, safety, and citizenship?** Such partnerships may include community-based or other non-profit organizations with expertise supporting students of color, local or national civil rights or culturally specific organizations, or national organizations focusing on digital health, safety, and citizenship or positive identity development. Consider whether possible partners may need additional training in legal protections for student privacy, your school or district’s digital ecosystem, and the specific needs of students of color in your community. Additionally, the Office of Educational Technology’s July 2024 “[Designing for Education with Artificial Intelligence: An Essential Guide for Developers](#)” asks developers of products and services for use in educational settings to partner more closely with education stakeholders to promote safety, security, and trustworthiness.
8. **How do you plan to build community awareness and support of these needs, goals, and efforts?** School leaders should consider how to share information with students of color and their parents and families about how to protect their safety online and build community-wide awareness of the challenges students of color can face online. This information should be accessible and available through multiple platforms in the appropriate languages. It is also critical to implement transparent practices about how new technologies or platforms will be procured and implemented, including how any student data will be used and how typical risks will be actively mitigated. Additionally, the Office of Educational Technology’s October 2023 “[Empowering Education Leaders: A Toolkit for Safe, Ethical, and Equitable Integration](#)” urges educational leaders to establish task forces within their institutions to assist in providing specific guidance and support on responsible technology use that is aligned to each institution’s priorities.
9. **What ongoing funding sources (e.g., Title II, Title IV grants) can or will you leverage to support these efforts?** Th As you consider sustainable funding for meeting the digital health, safety, and citizenship needs of all students, including students of color, the [Department’s DearColleague Letter](#) on the use of federal funds for educational technology may be a helpful resource. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education’s [guidance on using Title II, Part A](#)¹⁴ funds to support educator professional learning on technology may be relevant. This guidance, along with resources and technical assistance from the [National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments](#), can help you address these critical needs.

For general resources on supporting students of color, consider the Department’s [“Free to Learn” initiative](#).

LICENSING AND AVAILABILITY

This report is in the public domain and available on the U.S. Department of Education’s website at <https://tech.ed.gov>.

¹⁴ US Department of Education. (Dec. 2024). “[Using Title II, Part A Funds to Strategically Support Educator Recruitment, Retention, Professional Learning, and Improved Student Outcomes](#).”

HOW TO CITE

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