

Frank Baker House Testimony

TESTIMONY TO THE SC HOUSE PW & EDUCATION CMTE, WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 5,
2020

Good afternoon. My name is Frank Baker. For more than 20 years I have been teaching media literacy as an education consultant. I am proud to have been called on previously by our State Dept of Education to assist in the writing of teaching standards for English Language Arts as well as Visual & Performing Arts. I've also written supporting documents for teachers and conducted hundreds of workshops with educators. I thank you for the opportunity to be here today to share my thoughts.

Background: in 1999, I conducted a comprehensive study—searching for elements of media literacy in all 50 states teaching standards. The results were published in an op-ed I co-authored for Education Week. We found media literacy in every state's teaching standards including South Carolina. But now 21 years later, those gains have been wiped out...first by Common Core..and when SC abandoned CC, our state also failed to bring media literacy along with it.

Teaching all of our students to read and write are important steps to their success. But most of what they are taught today involves PRINT, not media. Media —photos, radio, TV, ads, movies—are also texts, but are not given equal time in instruction.

Today's students are often referred to as “digital natives” but many studies have confirmed: they are not necessarily media literate—they don't tend to think critically about the media they consume.

We're at a pivotal point NOT ONLY in American history, but in the history of American education. What we do NOW or what we fail to do, will have long term consequences.

As a long-time media literacy educator, I am concerned because I see little to NO evidence that current teaching standards in South Carolina include “critical thinking about media messages.”

Our education system has failed and there is widespread evidence. I am here to call attention to the failings and hope to persuade you that your voice and action are desperately needed.

With the proliferation of fake news and disinformation available today, it is imperative that our education system recognizes that we must better prepare students for a world where media and manipulated information, video and photos have become the norm. [If you read ANY news story about fake news in the last three years, you no doubt also came across the phrase “media literacy” and calls for education systems to provide students with background on how to think critically about what they read, see and hear.]

Our education system has failed to acknowledge that media ARE also texts.

Media texts are designed to be read, analyzed, created and re-created. But when one hears or reads the word text OR LITERACY today, it is PRINT that comes to mind, not the media. That’s problematic.

This is important because in for the past 3 years– the state Department of Education’s evaluation of SC Ready (student test results) recommended that more instruction time be spent in both middle and high schools because those students have been shown to be weak at: “evaluating sources for relevance, credibility, and validity.” (2017) and weak in the 2018 standard “Gather information from a variety of primary and secondary sources and evaluate sources for perspective, validity, and bias.” And in (2019) weakness in the students’ abilities to gather information from a variety of sources and evaluate those

sources for perspective, validity and bias. 1 Previously years indicated that students were weak at understanding bias and propaganda.

Those shortcomings were amplified by a 2019 National Center for Education Statistics study which found that “more than one-third of eighth-graders in the U.S. say they “rarely” or “never” learn how to judge the reliability of sources”, 2

In December, The Center for American Progress issued a report calling for stronger civics standards, and for the first time media literacy was recommended as one of the 5 strands that they recommend be taught. 3

Let me be clear: **we are NOT seeking to add yet another subject to teachers’ already crowded instruction.** But rather we seek to insure that MEDIA LITERACY IS INCLUDED IN ALL CURRICULUM AND that all teachers are adequately prepared to teach 21st century critical thinking media literacy skills.

Media literacy HELPS PEOPLE SEE THE BIG PICTURE by encouraging people to ask questions such as: who is the author; who is the audience; who benefits; who or what is omitted and why; what techniques are used to make a message credible. In today’s social media saturated world, these are the questions young people should know and be tasked with asking and researching, but I see little evidence that this is happening.

Evidence DOES exist that students nationwide are lacking in their thinking about what they consume online. In November of last year, a survey of four thousand high school students by Stanford University’s History Education Group (SHEG) found that more than **96 percent** failed to consider that ties to the fossil fuel industry might affect the credibility of a website about climate change. 4

The Stanford group had previously issued an alarming report in late 2016 after studying the habits of 8000 middle, high

school and college students. Among the findings:

- **82%** of middle-schoolers couldn't distinguish between an ad labeled "sponsored content" and a real news story on a website
- **More than two out of three** middle-schoolers couldn't see any valid reason to mistrust a post written by a bank executive arguing that young adults need more financial-planning help
- **nearly four in 10 high-school students** believed, based on the headline, that a photo of deformed daisies on a photo-sharing site provided strong evidence of toxic conditions near the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant in Japan, even though no source or location was given for the photo. 5

The researchers described (today's) student's abilit(ies) to access information sources as "dismaying," "bleak," AND "[a] threat to our democracy." 6

Recent recommendations from the Reboot Foundation urged education organizations to do more with school requirements. 7

PROFILE OF THE South Carolina Graduate

WORLD-CLASS KNOWLEDGE

Rigorous standards in language arts and math for career and college readiness

Multiple languages, science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM), arts and social sciences



WORLD-CLASS SKILLS

Creativity and innovation

Critical thinking and problem solving

Collaboration and teamwork

Communication, information, media and technology

Knowing how to learn

LIFE AND CAREER CHARACTERISTICS

Integrity • Self-direction • Global perspective • Perseverance • Work ethic • Interpersonal skills

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Adopted by: SC Arts Alliance, SC Arts in Basic Curriculum Steering Committee, SCASCD, SC Chamber of Commerce, SC Commission on Higher Education, SC Council on Competitiveness, SC Education Oversight Committee, SC School Boards Association, SC State Board of Education, SC State Department of Education, TransformSC Schools and Districts



The “Profile of the South Carolina Graduate” graphic (above) specifically cites MEDIA as one of the WORLD CLASS SKILLS all students need. But the producers of the graphic provided educators with NO elaboration or accompanying documentation, thus educators have no guidance in what it means for students to be skilled in media.

Upon reviewing the current media literacy legislation, SDE representatives cited several standards they claim already cover much of what the bill is asking them to do. I’m here today to refute that claim:

1. The current Computer Science & Digital Literacy standards have ONLY two references that I would say are relevant: (“interpret and analyze data and information”; AND “Analyze various ways to visually represent data”.) It LACKS verbiage like: analyze the techniques used to create infographics and other visual representations of information; and identify how

information can be misrepresented or misinterpreted. Social media is referenced ONLY twice. [According to the SDE: during the 2019-2020 school year only 2200 students were enrolled in this course which is only 10% the of 9th-12th graders who are eligible to take it.]

2. Most of what are English Language Arts (ELA) standards are all print based.

The standard document does use a phrase like “multi-media” but most teachers think of computers here, not THE MEDIA.

The ELA standards lack specificity, which teachers want and need. Thus the words media, TV, radio, movies, advertising are mostly missing. These are THE non-print texts which NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) recommends that all students have opportunities to analyze in instruction.

Communications are included as part of ELA , but are not standards so they are not assessed. Teachers primarily teach those standards which are assessed. This could and should be changed.

ELA standards also omit “techniques of persuasion” which is an oversight.

3. The current Social Studies standards do include “primary source documents” which include photos, for example. Even though PROPAGANDA is mentioned, it’s confined to high school and only centered around the two World Wars. What about CURRENT CONTEMPORARY PROPAGANDA? The current SS standards also do not include “evaluate the role of media in politics” as recommended in the national US Civics Standards. That’s a huge oversight considering current events.

4. The current Visual & Performing Arts standards are to be commended because, among other things, they include BOTH “media literacy” and “media arts” (production). Unfortunately, the majority of art teachers in our state have

not had sufficient training in either area.

5. The current Health education standards are EXCELLENT: they include several items which contain elements of “media literacy.” For example in high school, students “Examine ways that media messages and marketing techniques influence the use of ATOD, including e-cigarettes.”

6. KUDOS to the school library media specialists in our state—many of whom DO teach students how to conduct proper online searches, and locate reliable, trustworthy information. But when we lay off media specialists, which has been a growing trend, we eliminate an important ally in the fight for better media literacy students.

We have an opportunity to STRENGTHEN media literacy education in our schools, but only if we act now. It begs the question: have we forgotten and are we NEGLECTING the fact that today’s young people read more from SCREENS than from PRINT?

I’m going to repeat what I said in my opening. We’re at a pivotal time NOT ONLY in American history, but in the history of American education. What we do NOW or what we fail to do, will have long term consequences.

I conclude with a quote from the recent Stanford study: It is a WAKE UP CALL

“Reliable information is to civic health what proper sanitation and potable water are to public health,” “We need high-quality digital-literacy curricula, validated by rigorous research, to guarantee the vitality of American democracy.” 8

THANK YOU

Citations

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Frank W Baker

media literacy education consultant

Awarded the 2019 UNESCO Global Media & Information Literacy Award for life time service to media literacy education

Homepage Media Literacy Clearinghouse www.frankwbaker.com

Author: Close Reading The Media (Routledge); Media Literacy
in the K-12 Classroom, 2nd Ed (ISTE)

Blogger: MiddleWeb