

Media Literacy for Middle Level Students:

An Important Curriculum Component

Sue Swaim

Executive Director

National Middle School Association

Columbus, OH



Sue Swaim is Executive Director of the National Middle School Association based in Columbus, Ohio, U.S.A. She is a former middle level language arts, social studies, and reading teacher and middle school principal. She may be reached at: sswaim@nmsa.org

- On average, children see more than 20,000 commercials a year on television.
- The typical American child watches 15,000 hours of television by the time he or she graduates from high school compared to 11,000 hours spent in school.
- According to Teenage Life Online, a report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 71 percent of American teenagers (ages 12-17) relied mostly on Internet sources for the last big school project they did.

Those statistics should leave little doubt as to why it is important for young adolescents to be savvy consumers of media in all its varied forms. Today's middle school students are bombarded with messages, both good and bad. Now more than ever, they need the tools to help them make sense of all the information they are seeing and hearing.

A definition of media literacy shared in NMSA's October, 2001 *Classroom Connection* says, "Media literacy is the ability to access, interpret, analyze, evaluate, and use all forms of media from direct mail pieces to newspaper articles and television advertisements to Internet content. Media literacy includes understanding that because different people interpret messages in different ways, the media often change their message about the same product or issue to fit their intended audience."

It is clear that media literacy isn't an isolated special class or a three-week unit of study. Media Literacy is an important educational imperative to be integrated throughout the curriculum so that every student has an opportunity to become actively engaged in learning about it multiple times and in multiple ways throughout each school year.

If one uses this definition as a starting point for curriculum decisions, it becomes clear that media literacy isn't an isolated special class or a three-week unit of study. Media literacy is an important topic to be integrated throughout the curriculum so that every student has an opportunity to become actively engaged in learning about it multiple times and in multiple

At National Middle School Association (NMSA) we have given considerable attention to media literacy as part of our continuing effort to provide timely and practical professional guidance to middle level educators and parents. We know that young adolescents interact with television, computers, radio, magazines, books, music, movies, and video games on a daily basis. According to a 1999 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, the typical American child spends close to five-and-a-half hours a day consuming media outside of school. The time spent being a media consumer adds up to over 38 hours a week, almost equivalent to a full time job.

Now consider the following statistics:

- According to Judge Baker's Center, a nonprofit research organization at Harvard University, U.S. businesses spend 20 times more money—\$12 billion annually—to pitch products to children today more than they did 12 years ago.

ways throughout each school year. Some states have begun to incorporate media literacy standards into their curricula. Examples of state standards can be accessed by visiting the Media Literacy Clearinghouse at www.med.sc.edu:1081/statelit.html.

There are many opportunities to address media literacy throughout the school day whether in language arts, science, social studies, or math classes or through art, computer technology, or health and physical education classes. Spending faculty professional development time to discuss media literacy and its impact on your students as well as appropriate ways to address it within your school's curricula would be especially worthwhile. Considering media literacy as an important partner to the many things already being taught instead of an add-on to the curriculum might be a useful lens to use for faculty discussions.

If you're a member of a middle level teaching team and engaged in integrative curriculum design, media literacy becomes a natural link based upon your students' interests and the importance of building critical thinking skills. For example, ask students to research a topic of pertinent interest to them. Have them review and critique news articles or other

sources of information about the pros and cons of the issue. Let them write some articles of their own demonstrating the way media can present different viewpoints. Are there opportunities to critique or develop their own media campaigns on the issue? Could they design a website around the topic or devel-

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op images to be seen in advertisements, billboards, or mailings geared to influencing a person's opinion? Can they use their math skills to conduct research on the effects of a particular

product on consumers? The challenge will be to keep the work focused on helping students understand what is behind every message they receive and how to use that knowledge and their critical thinking skills to form well-rounded opinions and to become better informed consumers of media messages.

As educators, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to use media literacy as one of our key strategies for helping students develop critical thinking skills. It is an area that is relevant and meaningful to every one of them as they encounter media input on a daily basis. Educating young adolescents for the 21st century goes beyond the traditional curricula of the last 30 to 40 years. In today's world, media literacy may be on its way to becoming a basic skill. •