



## eye on RESEARCH

## MEDIA LITERACY & CORE CURRICULUM

Initial results from the evaluation of a new media-literacy program funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

The United States remains the only developed English-speaking country in the world without a consistently and widely taught media-education component in its standard school curriculum. There is widespread consensus in the education and policy communities that media literacy encompasses a crucial set of skills that empowers students to be fully literate and successful members of their communities. Yet the integration of media-literacy programs has been slow to take place in the school curriculum. Not surprisingly, there are few scientifically based longitudinal studies to show demonstrable academic improvement in students exposed to media-literacy curricula. This lack of evidence showing the educational benefits of media literacy is, in turn, unquestionably one important reason for the sluggish integration of media literacy into K–12 environments.

The Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA) has partnered with San Francisco-based Just Think to create an innovative program designed to address this gap. The media-arts education program is funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The Michael Cohen Group (MCG), a New York-based research and evaluation firm specializing in education and youth media, is implementing a quasi-experimental research design to evaluate the program's impact on

students' academic performance.

The pilot project is being implemented in two San Francisco middle schools, both serving low-income youth. Neither school had a media-arts or -literacy program prior to implementing the AMLA/Just Think curriculum. Two additional San Francisco middle schools have been recruited to serve as control-condition schools.

The pilot project runs for three years. During Year 1 (2003–2004), curriculum materials were developed and teachers were trained in media literacy and production techniques. Year 2 (2004–2005) was the first year of actual curriculum implementation—teachers designed and implemented lesson plans in their respective core curriculum subjects that incorporated media-literacy concepts. Year 3 (2005–2006) will focus on improving the curriculum delivery and evaluating student achievement. Given the increasing expectation that educational programs be able to demonstrate meaningful effects on student academic performance, our evaluation focuses on measuring the outcomes in student acquisition

of knowledge in core curriculum areas. In addition to tracking students' progress in core subjects, we are utilizing two standardized tests to measure students' reading and writing skills and their creative thinking. The analysis of student data is expected to be completed by

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[www.justthink.org](http://www.justthink.org)

the end of Year 3, yet interviews with teachers and classroom observations allow us to draw the following preliminary conclusions.

### EMERGING FINDINGS

• • • **Teachers do not view media literacy as an end in and of itself—rather, as a means for improving students' critical-thinking skills as well as academic performance.**

The program's approach to integrating media literacy into the middle-school curriculum sets it apart from other interventions. Media literacy is being harnessed as a tool to improve students' critical-thinking skills, their knowledge in core-curriculum subjects, and their overall academic performance and enthusiasm for learning. With teachers' instructional priorities increasingly framed by the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, they likely would have balked at another intervention that offered no promise of improving test scores in core subjects. Instead, teachers in participating schools have readily embraced a program that strategically employs media-literacy concepts to deliver core curricula. In addition, teachers were put in charge of integrating the media-literacy component in the classroom, as opposed to the more traditional mode of student instruction by outside experts. As a result, teachers were empowered to unleash their creative energies in designing lesson plans and student projects that best meet their educational goals while utilizing the power of a media-literacy curriculum.

• • • **Teachers use media literacy as a hook to get kids more engaged with the core curriculum.** Children have always been excited by popular media and technology, but today more than ever, media and digital technologies are incorporated into the most basic fabric of children's daily lives. The media-arts program implemented by AMLA and Just Think affords teachers a means of exploiting this fascination with media and technology to the end of improving academic achievement. Teachers have quickly learned that the media-arts program is a great way of increasing students' attention to their subject matter. Students who previously had difficulty focusing on and seeing the utility of their core



Photo by Jeff Shere, [www.cicommunity.org](http://www.cicommunity.org)

subjects have been drawn into lessons that utilize novel production techniques or evaluation of media messages. Several teachers state that media-literacy concepts have helped them bring their subject matter to life. Students who regarded math as arcane and irrelevant, for example, recognized its applicability to real-life situations when presented with math lessons incorporating media-literacy concepts. Teachers unanimously agree that media-literacy concepts and assignments have positively affected students' active involvement with the subjects they are studying.

• • • **Teachers' grasp of and commitment to media literacy is crucial for its successful integration into the middle-school curriculum.** In order to ensure that attention to media literacy assumes a permanent place in the school curriculum, teachers have to be enlisted as agents of change. AMLA and Just Think recognized early on that training teachers is a means of ensuring that the program will have long-term and sustainable effects. Consequently, the program's structure is two-tiered: first, teachers are trained in media-literacy skills; subsequently, they teach students media-literacy concepts in the context of their respective core-curriculum subjects. The training component of the program is also one of its biggest challenges: the teachers are also initially learners. For most teachers participating in the project, this constitutes their first exposure to concepts of media literacy. At the end of Year 2, most teachers in the program report significant improvement in their grasp of the subject and ability to teach media literacy, but it

is still relatively new terrain for them, and they are learning along with their students.

• • • **Students learn media-literacy concepts better through hands-on experiences.** All participating teachers have embraced a constructivist approach to teaching media-literacy concepts. They have found that students are more responsive to hands-on experiences than to receiving instruction passively. As a result, the program focuses substantial attention and energy on training students to use media tools to produce their own media. Teachers report that students seem to better comprehend and retain core curriculum material as a result of the production process. Teachers attest that their students have enjoyed and been successful in completing projects that utilized skills in digital photography, graphic design, and production of slide shows and videos. For example, students have created music videos, travel brochures, and a mural (accompanied by a student-created slide show about public art and a video documenting the process of creating the mural).

Participating classrooms have also created their own blogs, which have encouraged students to write as part of the online journaling process, as well as to learn about web-site design and creation. In another assignment, sixth-graders studying the hominid ancestors of contemporary humans developed “Wanted: Early Humans” posters as part of their social-studies, geography, world-history, and ancient-civilizations curricula. All of these various assignments included examination of media-literacy concepts, deconstruction and critical evaluation of media messages and ads, and composition of text and nontext messages. All teachers participating in the intervention condition agreed that their students’ media-production and technology skills improved as a result of their exposure to the new curriculum.

However, teachers are always pressed for instructional time, and finding a balance between teaching media-literacy concepts and introducing technology skills can be a challenge. This challenge is compounded by the fact that teachers are on less-sure footing with media-literacy concepts—it is easier to fall back on the inherently more exciting production techniques and media tools. As teachers become more media literate themselves, they will no doubt find it easier to leverage the power and excitement of the technology and media-production skills without sacrificing the media-literacy component of the curriculum.

## IMPLICATIONS

Assessment of the impact that this pilot program has had on student academic achievement is still under way,

but preliminary findings point to the important role media literacy can play in improving student performance in core-curriculum subjects. The AMLA/Just Think program has set out to meet an ambitious agenda and, not surprisingly, has faced several challenges. Before the new curriculum could hope to even begin achieving its ultimate goal—improving students’ academic achievement—the teachers had to be trained and inspired to integrate media-literacy concepts into their daily lesson plans. Moreover, not only does the program aspire to help students achieve proficiency in entirely new areas (e.g., media literacy, various forms of technologically assisted creation and production), but it also aims simultaneously to improve academic performance by getting students more engaged in their schoolwork. And all of this takes place, of course, in the context of under-resourced public schools that serve disadvantaged populations and are under great pressure to perform.

We consider the initial results very encouraging. Even in these challenging circumstances, teachers have learned new skills and have deployed them in the classroom to spark students’ interest and enthusiasm. It seems clear that implementing the new curriculum in a way that helps teachers and students meet mandated academic goals has been important to its success so far. Conceptualizing media literacy not only as a new subject area, but also as a tool to help teachers teach and students learn in their core curriculum areas, appears to hold promise as a strategy for integrating media literacy into school curricula. • • •

## RESOURCES

### **Alliance for a Media Literate America.**

[www.amlainfo.org](http://www.amlainfo.org)

**Galician, Mary-Lou.** “High Time for Dis-Illusioning Ourselves and Our Media: Media Literacy in the 21st Century, Part I: Strategies for Schools.” *American Behavioral Scientist*. Volume 48, No. 1.

**Hobbs, Renée and Richard Frost.** “Measuring the Acquisition of Media Literacy Skills.” *Reading Research Quarterly*. Volume 38, No. 3.  
[www.reading.org/publications/journals/rrq/v38/i3/abstracts/RRQ-38-3-Hobbs.html](http://www.reading.org/publications/journals/rrq/v38/i3/abstracts/RRQ-38-3-Hobbs.html)

**Just Think.** [www.justthink.org](http://www.justthink.org)

**Swan, Karen.** “Nonprint Media and Technology Literacy Standards for Assessing Technology Integration.” *Journal of Educational Computing Research*. Volume 23, No. 1.