

Using an MTSS Approach to Promote Students' Digital Well-Being

Why *Digital Well-Being* Matters for *Student Well-Being*

Digital media and technology are embedded in every aspect of students' lives. Most adolescents use social media regularly, and digital tools shape how students learn, socialize, seek support, and express themselves. In addition, initial studies are also showing the fast uptake of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools among students.^{1,2} These experiences do not remain outside of school—students bring their online interactions and stressors into the classrooms.

Digital media use is associated with both benefits and risks for young people. Positive outcomes include social connection, creativity, identity development, and access to information and support.^{3,4,5} At the same time, heavier or more problematic patterns of use—including excessive social media use, negative online interactions, and cyberbullying—are associated with higher levels of adolescent depression, anxiety, emotional distress, and sleep disruption, although these effects are generally small and vary across individuals and contexts.^{6,7,8} These risks are not evenly distributed. Students with existing mental health needs, trauma exposure, or social marginalization may be more vulnerable.

Because digital experiences shape students' well-being and learning, schools play an important role in promoting healthy and positive media engagement across developmental stages. Digital well-being can be defined as a positive state of mental, physical, and social-emotional health pursued through intentional, authentic, and balanced engagement with technology and interactive media.⁹

This fact sheet offers evidence-based strategies that educators can use within a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework to promote digital well-being among students.

What is Multi-Tiered Systems of Support?

MTSS is a systemic, data-driven framework organized across three tiers for helping schools promote student well-being and address varying levels of need.

See this [fact sheet](#) to learn more.



Digital well-being: A positive state of mental, physical, and social-emotional health pursued through intentional, authentic, and balanced engagement with technology and interactive media.



Tier 1: Universal Supports to Promote Digital Well-Being (All Students)

Within an MTSS framework, Tier 1 focuses on universal strategies that establish shared expectations, supportive environments, and skill-building opportunities that promote healthy digital behaviors for all students. Evidence-based Tier 1 strategies include:

Schoolwide Personal Device Policies

Clear, age-appropriate limits on personal device use during the school day can reduce distractions and support engagement. Recent reviews of research on school smartphone policies indicate that comprehensive restrictions are associated with modest improvements in classroom engagement, reductions in multitasking and distraction, and positive effects on school social climate, while evidence for academic outcomes is mixed.^{10,11} Research and policy guidance emphasize that device restrictions are most effective when paired with instruction that helps students use the technology responsibly and manage its use well.

Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Education

Integrating digital citizenship and media literacy into the curriculum supports students' ability to navigate online spaces safely and responsibly. A study evaluating a popular digital citizenship curriculum found improvements in students' online safety knowledge and self-efficacy for responding to online challenges.¹² Other research reviews of school-based initiatives suggest that curricula emphasizing skill development, reflection, and real-world application are more effective than one-time or awareness-only approaches.¹³

Embedding Digital Well-Being in SEL and Health Education

Connecting digital well-being to existing social-emotional learning (SEL) and health education helps students apply core skills—such as emotional regulation, empathy, and responsible decision-making—to digital contexts. These competencies are relevant to both online and offline interactions and may help mitigate negative online experiences when explicitly addressed.¹⁴

Positive School Climate and Online Behavioral Norms

Whole school efforts that promote kindness, inclusion, and shared expectations can extend to online behavior. A strong sense of school belonging and positive school climate are associated with lower depressive symptoms and better emotional well-being among adolescents.^{15,16} Schools can reinforce positive norms through collaboratively developed expectations for digital behavior, codes of conduct, and consistent messaging across in-person and digital settings.

Additional Approaches with Emerging Evidence

Some schools choose to implement strategies such as periodic phone-free days or student-led digital wellness campaigns. While these approaches may increase awareness and engagement, there is currently very limited peer-reviewed research evaluating their impact on student outcomes.¹⁷

Identifying Students Who May Need Tier 2 or Tier 3 Supports



While Tier 1 strategies aim to promote digital well-being for all students, Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports are intended for students who show elevated or significant risk related to their digital media use, including emotional distress, behavioral changes, academic impacts, or safety concerns. Effective MTSS implementation depends on early identification and clear referral pathways, with multiple members of the school community playing a role.

- **Teachers and School Staff:** Educators are often the first to notice changes in students' behavior or functioning, such as falling asleep in class, withdrawal from peers, irritability when separated from devices, declining academic performance, or distress following online interactions. Training staff to recognize indicators of problematic digital media use or cyberbullying—and to follow established referral procedures—supports timely intervention.
- **Parents and Caregivers:** Families may observe concerning digital behaviors at home, such as late-night device use, mood changes after going online, or increased secrecy. Schools can support early identification by sharing warning signs with families and providing clear guidance on when and how to contact school-based support staff.
- **Peers (Bystanders):** Peers may be aware of problematic online behavior, including cyberbullying or posts expressing distress. When peers intervene or seek help for a targeted student, outcomes improve, including reductions in anxiety and emotional distress. Schools can encourage a culture in which students feel safe reporting concerns to trusted adults.
- **Students:** Building students' self-awareness and help-seeking skills is critical. Through digital literacy and social-emotional learning, students can learn to recognize when their technology use is negatively affecting their well-being and seek support. Schools should reinforce that asking for help is appropriate and encouraged.

Referral to Support

Once a concern is identified, prompt referral is essential. School counselors, psychologists, or designated student support teams typically serve as the entry point for Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports, providing school-based interventions and facilitating referrals to community services when needed. Clear referral protocols help ensure timely support and prevent students from falling through the cracks.



Tier 2: Targeted Supports for Students at Elevated Risk

Tier 2 supports address the needs of students who are beginning to experience difficulties related to digital media use. Examples include:

Small-Group Skill-Building Supports

Targeted small-group interventions can strengthen skills such as time management, coping with online stress, and navigating peer conflict. Although few interventions focus exclusively on digital media, research supports adapting evidence-based SEL and behavioral group interventions to address online experiences, given the overlap between digital challenges and broader social-emotional difficulties.¹⁸

Integrating Digital Topics into Existing Student Supports

Schools can embed digital well-being into existing Tier 2 programs, such as anxiety management or social skills groups. Many mental health and peer challenges have online dimensions, and addressing these explicitly can improve the relevance of supports.¹⁹

Peer Mentoring and Cross-Age Supports

Peer mentoring programs have demonstrated benefits for social skills and connectedness.^{20,21} Adapting these models to include guidance on healthy digital behaviors may extend benefits to online contexts, though formal evaluations of digital-specific adaptations remain limited.



Tier 3: Intensive Supports for Students with Significant Needs

Tier 3 supports serve students whose digital media use is associated with significant mental health concerns, functional impairment, or safety risks. Examples include:

Individual Counseling and Mental Health Treatment

Problematic interactive media use often co-occurs with anxiety, depression, ADHD, or trauma and requires individualized, comprehensive treatment approaches that address both digital behaviors and underlying mental health needs.²²

Referral to Specialized Services

When school-based supports are insufficient, referrals to specialized providers—such as clinics focused on internet or gaming disorders—may be necessary. Evidence from clinical settings highlights the importance of coordinated care and family involvement for students with severe digital media-related problems.²³

Safety Planning and Monitoring

For students experiencing online harassment, self-harm ideation, or other safety concerns, individualized safety planning is essential. Professional guidance emphasizes that digital environments can exacerbate crises and should be addressed directly in risk assessments and intervention plans.²⁴

▶ Getting Started: Action Steps for State and Local Education Agencies

Where to start? Here are five practical steps that districts can use to implement an MTSS approach to digital well-being:

- 1. Establish Leadership and Collaboration:** Integrate digital well-being into existing MTSS or student support leadership structures.
- 2. Inventory Current Policies and Practices:** Review device policies, curricula, professional development, and supports across MTSS tiers.
- 3. Develop a Multi-Year Action Plan:** Set clear goals, timelines, and indicators aligned with MTSS.
- 4. Align Policies, Curriculum, and Professional Development:** Pair device policies with instruction and staff training that support healthy digital behaviors.
- 5. Use Data for Continuous Improvement:** Incorporate data on student well-being and digital behavior into MTSS decision-making. See: [Using Data to Inform MTSS Efforts to Promote Student Well-Being](#).

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