

ELEMENTS OF EXEMPLARY INDEPENDENT STUDY

For many students, independent study is the educational option that enables them to most fully realize their potential. This alternative instructional strategy offers the flexibility to meet individual student needs, interests, and styles of learning. Independent study, however, is not an alternative curriculum and independent study students are expected to meet the same educational objectives as all other students. By law, independent study education is to be equal in quality and quantity to classroom instruction.

Whether students in independent study are able to achieve the same educational objectives as other students, and whether the education they receive is equal in quality and quantity to classroom study, depends on whether some fundamental elements are in place. The following outline summarizes those fundamental elements and indicates the characteristics of exemplary practice. These elements also form the basis for evaluating applicants for the Exemplary Independent Study Recognition Award.ⁱ

- 1. Local education agency (LEA)ⁱⁱ support.** The LEA is committed to offering independent study that is at least equal in quality and quantity to classroom study.ⁱⁱⁱ This means that:
 - a. Independent study is fully funded at a level comparable to classroom-based education^{iv} and receives its proportionate share of categorical funds.
 - b. The LEA-adopted curriculum is used in independent study.^v
 - c. Students may only enroll in independent study on a voluntary basis and may not be “assigned” to independent study; enrollment in independent study is continuously voluntary.^{vi}
 - d. Teachers may teach in independent study only if they have volunteered to do so.^{vii}
 - e. The LEA provides multiple educational options for students so that independent study is not the only alternative to the traditional classroom.

- 2. Teacher quality.** Independent study teachers meet at least the same professional requirements as classroom-based teachers:
 - a. The independent study student-teacher ratio is not higher than the student-teacher ratio in the classroom^{viii} or, for charter schools does not exceed 25-to-1,^{ix} based on average daily attendance (ADA). A ratio of not more than 25-to-1 is recommended to give teachers adequate time to meet the individual needs of their students. This includes providing:
 - i. The direction and resources necessary for the student to meet academic goals while working independently.

- ii. Additional assistance, including direct instruction and counsel, as determined to be necessary for individual student success.
- b. Independent study teachers are appropriately credentialed and have demonstrated subject matter competence in all core academic subjects they teach, as required by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.^x
 - i. At the secondary level, independent study teachers specialize in their area or areas of expertise to provide direct instruction to students whether in classes, small groups, labs, or individually; such instruction is provided either on-site or virtually.^{xi}
- c. Independent study teachers have access to, and participate in, comparable professional development, and receive comparable ongoing instructional assistance and support, as classroom-based teachers.
- d. Independent study teachers participate in comparable LEA committees as classroom-based teachers—for example, curriculum development committees and other subject/grade level collaboration.
- e. Independent study teachers possess the attributes that allow them to develop close bonds that foster student success.
- f. Independent study teachers are knowledgeable about their students' learning styles, interests, and needs and use this knowledge to shape their instructional strategies.
- g. The terms and conditions of employment for independent study teachers are the same as for the LEA classroom-based teachers; this includes being compensated on a comparable basis.

3. Student admission to, and support in, independent study. Schools appropriately assess each student's potential to be successful in independent study.^{xii}

- a. The school recognizes that the characteristics of successful independent study students include the motivation, commitment, organizational skills, and academic skills necessary to work independently. As necessary, the school assists motivated and committed students in strengthening their organizational and academic skills so they can work independently. Elementary students' success requires that parents play a significant role as knowledgeable teaching assistants.
- b. The school admits students who are not working at grade level to independent study ONLY if it provides appropriate support to enable the student to be successful in independent study and to reach grade level performance. Support includes such measures as:
 - i. The use of supplemental interventions.

- ii. On-site assistance—tutoring, math and reading labs, computer-assisted learning, and small group direct instruction.
 - iii. Counseling.
 - iv. Ongoing diagnostic assessments.
 - v. The availability of differentiated materials that meet state standards and the district’s adopted curriculum.
- c. Students have regularly scheduled meetings with their teachers on a sufficiently frequent basis for the teachers to provide needed instruction, adequately judge student progress, and make appropriate modifications; at least weekly interaction on student progress, whether in person or by electronic means, is recommended.^{xiii} Teachers are available to students between regularly scheduled meetings as-needed to ensure student success, whether on a drop-in basis on site, by phone or e-mail, in labs for tutoring, etc.
 - i. High School students taking courses subject to the University of California a-g policy for independent study spend at least one hour per week per course engaged in interactive instruction and/or academic tutoring/advising, either on-site or by virtual means.^{xiv}
- d. The school provides supports for parents/guardians, and other responsible adults who work with independent study students.
- e. All students have access to counselors and/or other personnel and services that meet their academic, social, career, and emotional needs. The school provides needed support to secondary students when parents/guardians are not available or do not play a supportive role in the student’s life.
- f. All students have assistance with a personal learning plan to prepare them to meet their academic, personal, and school-to-career goals.
- g. Special education students admitted to independent study continue to receive the supports outlined in their individualized education programs.

4. Standards-aligned curriculum and materials. Courses and materials are aligned to state content standards, and textbooks are those most recently adopted by the State Board of Education or, in the case of high school, by the LEA.^{xv}

- a. Independent study lesson plans are standards aligned and developed by subject matter experts.
- b. The pacing of instruction enables students to cover the LEA’s adopted standards-aligned curriculum.
- c. The curriculum and materials used enable students to perform well on state assessments and to pass the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE).

- i. Students performing below the “proficient” level on the California Standards Tests are provided additional interventions and supports to enable them to succeed.
 - ii. For schools with high school students, students are supported in their efforts to pass the CAHSEE.
- d. Supplemental materials may be used to respond to individual student interests and learning styles, but materials that are sectarian in nature are not used.^{xvi}
- e. Independent study teachers participate in staff development focused specifically on state content standards and, for schools with high school students, assisting students in passing the CAHSEE.

5. Assessment of student academic achievement. Teachers and administrators understand that assessment is an integral, vital element in educational delivery. As part of the ongoing assessment of student achievement by highly qualified and committed teachers, a student-level data system is utilized, and student academic progress and achievement are frequently assessed.

- a. Both teachers and the school monitor student academic progress and use state assessment data and other measures to shape and modify the school’s instructional program in a timely manner.
- b. Modifications to instruction are also based on individual student need.
- c. The school identifies students who are struggling (e.g., missing assignments, missing appointments, not making adequate progress, etc.) and provides early interventions and supports that enable students to succeed.
- d. When appropriate, the school successfully transitions students out of independent study and back to the traditional classroom or another educational option.
- e. All students participate in required state testing, unless specifically exempted under state law or regulation. At least 95 percent of students complete state tests.

6. School leadership. The school principal is knowledgeable about independent study and is effective in maintaining support for independent study as a valued and high quality option within the LEA. In addition, the school leadership team:

- a. Provides the vision and strategies to promote high expectations and achievement for all students.
- b. Provides the vision and strategies to promote a positive and supportive school climate.
- c. Employs a wide range of strategies to encourage parental and community involvement, such as an advisory council.

Parents/guardians are encouraged to be involved in their student's education including:

- i. Parents/guardians are supported in sharing a sustained interest in their student's performance, and assure that the student has a home environment conducive to independent learning.
 - ii. Parents/guardians are encouraged to be actively involved in supporting the school.
 - iii. At the elementary level, opportunities for parent/guardian education are provided.
- d. In collaboration with all stakeholders, evaluates the effectiveness of the school's program, determines areas for improvement, and makes needed changes.

7. School culture. The school culture is positive and supportive and contributes to student achievement because:

- a. The staff and students make up a learning community that cares about and nurtures its members; everyone is treated with mutual respect and appreciation.
- b. The expectations about how the members of the learning community will treat one another are clearly articulated and shared.
- c. Students feel a sense of belonging and feel that the school offers a safe environment, both physically and emotionally.
- d. The staff works together cooperatively and is dedicated to the excellence of the whole school.
- e. The entire learning community shares the expectation that all students will meet the goals they have set for themselves and develop their individual talents, and students are provided with the guidance to help them to set and meet their goals.

8. Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) accreditation (for schools with high school students). The school is accredited through WASC.

9. A-G requirements (for schools with high school students). The school's courses have been approved to meet the University of California and California State University's a-g subject requirements, or the school has submitted a course list for approval or has been certified as eligible to submit a course list.^{xvii}

If not all courses can be offered through independent study, provision is made for students to take needed classes through other means including in the classroom at the comprehensive schools, at community colleges, or through online learning.

10. Legally compliant program. Independent study is operated in compliance with state legal requirements for independent study, as reflected in the annual audits of the school.^{xviii}

ⁱ Information on the Exemplary Independent Study Recognition Award, including the application, is available at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/eo/is/>.

ⁱⁱ Throughout this document, "LEA" should be read to include direct-funded charter schools.

ⁱⁱⁱ *California Code of Regulations, Title 5 (5CCR) 11701.5*. "Consistent with the statutory authorization to offer independent study as an alternative instructional strategy to meet the educational needs of pupils or adult education students,

(a) the independent study option is to be substantially equivalent in quality and quantity to classroom instruction, thereby ensuring that a pupil or adult education student who engages in independent study on a full-time basis, or on a part-time basis in conjunction with part- or full-time classroom study, will be enabled to complete the district or county office of education adopted course of study within the customary time frame for completion of that course of study."

^{iv} *California Education Code (EC) Section 58507* ". . . Any alternative school shall be maintained and funded by the school district at the same level as other educational programs for children of the same age level operated by the district."

^v *California EC 51745(a)(3)* ". . . Independent study shall not be provided as an alternative curriculum."

^{vi} *California EC 51747(c)(7)* ". . . independent study is an optional educational alternative in which no pupil may be required to participate."

^{vii} *California EC 51747.5(a)* and *California EC 44865*.

^{viii} *California EC 51745.6(a)* "The ratio of average daily attendance for independent study pupils . . . to school district full-time equivalent certificated employees responsible for independent study . . . shall not exceed the equivalent ratio of pupils to full-time certificated employees for all other educational programs operated by the school district . . ."

^{ix} *5CCR 11704*.

^x No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (20 U.S.C. 9101(11), (23)).

^{xi} University of California (UC), "Policy on Non-Site-Based Independent Study Schools: Conditions under which Non-Site-Based Independent Study Schools would be Eligible to Establish and Maintain an A-G Course List," adopted November 2007. See http://www.ucop.edu/a-gGuide/ag/content/iss_policy_statement.doc.

^{xii} *5CCR 11700(d)(1)(B)* "school districts or county offices of education that do offer independent study are not obligated to permit a pupil . . . to engage in independent study if school officials given responsibility for the decision determine that independent study is not an appropriate alternative for the pupil . . ."

California EC 51746(b) "The services of qualified personnel to assess the achievement, abilities, interests, aptitudes, and needs of participating pupils to determine each of the following:

(1) Whether full-time independent study is the most appropriate alternative for the pupil being referred."

^{xiii} *5CCR 11701* "In setting policy . . . the local governing board shall consider . . . factors bearing specifically on the maximum realistic lengths of assignments and . . . Adopted policies shall reflect an awareness that excessive leniency . . . can result in pupils falling so far behind their age peers as to increase . . . the risk of their dropping out of school."

^{xiv} UC, loc. cit.

^{xv} Charter schools have flexibility regarding textbook adoption.

^{xvi} *California Constitution* Article IX, section 8.

^{xvii} UC, loc. cit.

^{xviii} Alternative Schools of Choice should also comply with the requirements of *EC 58500-58512*.