

Online Learning & Distance Education Programs Local Policy Issues and Procedural Questions

As public school districts implement online learning/distance education programs, there are numerous policy issues that need to be addressed on the local or regional levels. Due to the wide variety of approaches to distance education programs throughout the country, school districts must pay careful attention to relevant State statutes and policies. In some States, some of the questions below may be addressed at the State level. The policies and questions below are intended as a starting point for developing policies and practices. This is not intended as an exhaustive list.

A. Policies and procedures for ensuring equitable access to technology and learning for all students who wish to participate in the distance education program.

Overview

Typically, any public school program is required to provide equitable access to the learning that the program provides. Along with the important and ever-present equity issues of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other demographics, equity issues involving special education, English-Language Learners and socio-economic status (SES) become particularly critical in distance education programs. In addition, a school must provide non-academic services to its students, which can add other challenges for the district as it strives to equitably provide all services to distance learners.

- How will you insure equitable access to computers, internet, and the program as a whole?
 1. Will you supply home computers and internet access to students that do not have it?
 2. If not, what solutions for equity of access will you make available (e.g. public library, school computer labs, lending of computers)?
 3. What transportation needs might such solutions require?
- Particularly if students are taking online courses nearly full-time, how will you provide student support services, including academic counseling and social work services?
- As always in the case of special education students, IEP teams must make instructional decisions that are appropriate for each particular student's abilities. IEP teams should be aware that there is currently no federal law that prohibits Special Education students from participating in online learning or distance education programs. Similarly, there seems to be no federal law that prohibits electronic interactions with teachers from counting as teacher contact time. What policies will you have in place to ensure well-informed IEP teams and equitable access for special education students?
- How will distance education students access library materials? Will the distance education program include access to online multimedia libraries?

B. Policies and procedures for evaluating the quality and appropriateness of distance education materials before students participate in the distance education program.

Overview

The selection or creation of online learning or distance education course materials can be one of the biggest challenges of program start-up. A wide variety of products and providers, different instructional models, and different program designs create a complex landscape. In some

cases, the desire to use multiple providers for differing student needs must be balanced against pricing models that favor larger purchases from a particular vendor. On the other hand, course creation requires a significant investment in professional development and writing time to develop even an initial draft of a course. At its best, course creation requires a team approach using at least a teacher, an instructional designer and a web designer. Commercial vendors generally spend upwards of \$100,000 to develop their courses. Although school districts spend far less than that, they usually end up with a less rich and engaging learning experience for the students, at least at the beginning. Vendors now have a variety of pricing models, such as perpetual licensing of customizable courses that makes the “make or buy” question even more challenging.

In addition, courses must be developed or revised (as many licensing models allow) to match state and local standards. The amount of time and effort to do this must be considered in the cost of the program and the intended pace of its growth.

- How will you determine which courses your program will offer? What “market research” will you do?
- Will you create your own courses, purchase courses, or use a combination? If you purchase, which of the numerous of course providers will you use? Will you select one provider or pick and choose the best courses from a variety of providers? Will you review all courses from a provider or just a sampling?
- What technology or blend of technologies will you use in the distance education program (e.g. online learning, ITV, video/audio streaming)?
- What quality control methods will you use? Will you use the same curriculum review processes that you use for textbooks? What committees will be involved?
- How will you determine alignment with any relevant state or local standards? Who will customize the course, if necessary, to meet such standards?

C. Policies and procedures for evaluating the success of the distance education program.

Overview

A rigorous program evaluation is critical to determine if your program is meeting its objectives. Evaluation questions should be catered to the original goals of the program and include multiple data sources. Evaluations can help not only to demonstrate if – and how – a program is meeting its objectives, but also how a program might be enhanced. An evaluation may also include an updated needs assessment to determine new directions that the community may want for the program.

- What program goals will you measure? Are there unanticipated or new goals that you will include in your evaluation?
- What data will you use to determine the student course completion, student achievement, or student/parent satisfaction in your program?
- Will you use an external evaluator? If not, who will be responsible for developing your assessments and surveys?
- Who will be responsible for collecting and analyzing the data? How will the data be used to improve the program?
- How will the information from the evaluation be communicated to stakeholders?

D. Policies and procedures for assuring substantial interactivity between the teacher and the students and among the students.

Overview

Interactivity is essential for keeping students motivated, ensuring learning and building a community in your distance education environment. Without substantial interactivity, online learning and distance education become nothing more than high-tech correspondence courses and may lack the learning and accountability you expect. Interactivity has also been shown to reduce attrition and increase student course completion. In most cases, a combination of face-to-face instruction and electronic interaction can create the most engaging and motivating course.

- What methods of electronic interaction will you use (e.g. synchronous online learning, asynchronous online learning, telephone, ITV, audio/video streaming)?
- How will face-to-face interactions enhance the electronic interactions? Will face time be required?
- Will there be a maximum number of courses a student can complete through distance education (or a minimum number of classroom-based courses)? Per year? Per semester?

E. Policies and procedures ensuring appropriate enrollment of students in the online learning/distance education program.

Overview

For most students and teachers, online learning and distance education still represents a new approach to learning. Even with a significant and meaningful orientation program, not all students will respond well to this new learning environment. At the same time, well-meaning teachers and administrators may be tempted to enroll at-risk students in the program as a last resort, even if it may not be appropriate for that student. Careful enrollment policies will help manage student expectations for the program and help maintain program quality.

- How will you select students for participation in the online learning/distance education program? What students are eligible to take online courses?
- How will you advise students, the student's parents or guardians, or both, of the appropriateness of the program for the student?
- Will the school limit opportunities to particular grade or ability levels?
- Will parent permission or participation be required for participation in an online course?
- Under what circumstances (e.g. homebound/hospitalbound) will you allow students to take an online course when a similar course is already being offered in your school?
- Will you ever place students in an online program? If so, will parent or guardian approval be required? How will you insure that your online program does not become a "dumping ground?"

F. Policies and procedures for supervising students participating in the online learning/distance education program and providing for adequate safety and security.

Overview

Student supervision is critical for both legal and educational reasons. Online learning and distance education programs should consider three-way agreements between the school, parent and student that include the role expectations for each. In addition, communities often have expectations regarding filtering software and other internet safety issues. A program must be attentive to State and Federal laws, which are still evolving in this area.

- Can students take the courses from home or other location outside the school? If so, how often will you require contact with a licensed teacher? What responsibilities will parents have, and how will you ensure those are being met? How will attendance be measured?
- How will students be supervised while participating in the program in the school? Will there be a special computer lab, study hall or classroom space set aside? Who will monitor that space?
- How will student work be monitored to insure academic integrity? What will be the consequences for plagiarism in online courses?
- How will you handle school liability for internet use or general student safety while involved in school activities away from school?
- If you supply computers, how will you monitor the filtering software, security, and other safety features of those machines?
- What will be the disciplinary consequences for student violation of appropriate use policies and other rules?

G. Policies and procedures that address teacher contract issues.

Overview

Perhaps no area of online learning/distance education policy creates more concern in a traditional school than teacher contract issues. Although this concern is sometimes based on misconceptions of interactive online teaching (“computers will replace me!”), most school district contracts, like other school policies, are written based on traditional assumptions of the school building, day and calendar. In most cases, existing contracts do not prevent online instruction, but few allow teachers and districts to realize the full benefits of the flexibility that is possible in a distance learning environment. In addition, traditional measurements of workload may not apply to this new environment. Teachers must interact with each and every student individually, so each student adds significantly to the teacher’s load.

- Will the traditional, contracted work day and work year apply to teachers teaching in an asynchronous online learning program, or can they – like the students - work on an asynchronous basis? If such flexibility is allowed, how will work be monitored?
- For online classes, what is the appropriate class size? Just like in a face-to-face environment, the ideal class size from a learning perspective may not be possible from a financial perspective.
- If a teacher is teaching some face-to-face classes and some distance education classes, what is the appropriate (and politically palatable) number and balance of classes that creates a workload comparable to a full-time classroom teacher?
- If the students take courses from within the school, how will the district make the staff available to assist (e.g. media center supervision, study halls, in a classroom)? How will that impact the staff workload, and how will they be compensated?
- The potential to sell or charge tuition for online courses increases the stakes for intellectual property issues for teacher-created materials. If teachers are developing online courses, and the district is paying them to do so, typically the district then owns the courses with the right to sell them to other districts or even to a commercial provider. This should be made explicit in the contract, and any exceptions should be carefully articulated. Does the teacher share in ownership and therefore see a portion of any district profits from the course? How might this apply if students are attracted to enrolling in the district due in some part to the online course (and therefore the district sees increased enrollment and corresponding dollars)? How does this apply if a teacher develops the course as part of a graduate class they are taking (The teacher pays tuition, but the district increases pay for that class on the “steps & lanes” system. Are they being paid indirectly to develop the course?)?

H. Policies and procedures for providing professional development targeted on the tools and techniques of internet-based instruction for local teachers who supervise, instruct, or create materials for students in the web-based program.

Overview

High-quality job-embedded professional development for the teachers and administrators in your online learning/distance education program is a critical factor in the success of the program. At the current time, it is still true that the great majority of teachers have never taken an online course. If they have never experienced online learning from a learner’s perspective, it is exceedingly difficult to appreciate the challenges of teaching and learning in such an environment. If teachers are expected to develop online courses, an even greater commitment to professional development is required, and such professional development must include significant training, as well as the time required to actually write course content and work with the course development team. Ideally, school would provide to their teachers both initial training and ongoing online mentoring from experienced online teachers.

- What are the professional development needs of your staff related to online learning?
- How will you educate your teachers as to the role they will play in online courses, even if those courses are purchased from a commercial provider?
- If your teachers are teaching courses online, how will they get training in online teaching techniques? How will the needs of online teachers be incorporated into the site and district staff development plans?