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**POLICY AND PRACTICE GUIDANCE LETTER:  
DISTANCE AND BLENDED LEARNING FOR ADULT EDUCATION  
Effective 2022-2023**

**[PPGL-2201 – Revised 5/10/2022]**

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Summary**

The Rhode Island Adult Education Distance Learning Policy defines distance learning and other common modalities for delivery of Adult Education and establishes the need for distance learning in the state's Adult Education programming. The first section addresses programmatic requirements for implementation of distance and blended learning programs at the local level, including staff professional development and learner assessments. The second section of the policy addresses accountability requirements for programs implementing distance and blended learning, including reporting contact hours, data entry, and federal reporting. The final section of the policy includes helpful resources to support local programs in planning for implementation of distance learning.

### **1.2. Definitions of Educational Modalities**

Distance education is a broad term that covers all aspects of programming and instruction that allows for learning outside the traditional classroom setting. The [National Reporting System \(NRS\)](#) defines distance education as formal learning where learners and instructors are separated by geography, time, or both for the majority of the instructional period. Within distance education, there are two primary instructional modalities:

- Distance learning (DL) is instruction delivered entirely at a distance. Local programs can deliver distance learning materials through a variety of media, including but not limited to, print, audio and video recordings, videotape, live broadcasts, digital and online software. Teachers can support distance learners through communication by mail, telephone, e-mail, or online technologies and software.
- Blended learning (BL), also referred to as hybrid learning, is defined by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology as learning that occurs online and in person, augmenting and supporting teacher practice. This approach often allows learners to have some control over time, place, path, or pace of learning. In many blended learning models, learners spend some of their face-to-face time with the teacher in a large group, some face-to-face time—either virtual or in-person with a teacher and some time learning with and from peers.



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- The hybrid flexible, or HyFlex, model is a form of blended learning that combines in-person and online learning. Each class session and learning activity is offered both in-person and synchronously online. Learners also have the option to work asynchronously offline. Learners can decide how to participate.

### 1.3. State Context and Need for Distance Learning Policy

Digital literacy, including basic computer skills and information literacy, is foundational to adults' full participation in the workforce and postsecondary education, and to building their ability to support their families and to engage with the larger community. All Rhode Islanders need the skills to locate and access online resources, and to effectively assess, evaluate, and use a broad range of information. The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act section of Rhode Island's Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Combined State Plan establishes the expansion of distance learning as one of the key investment priorities to ensure the success of all learners.

The Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (RIDE) and local Adult Education providers have a shared responsibility to ensure that Adult Education activities support development of the digital skills required to fully participate as a member of the workforce, a family member, and a community member. Rhode Island Adult Education can help to close the digital equity gap by intentionally integrating instructional technology and digital literacy skill development throughout program design.

Additionally, distance and blended learning - whether computer- or paper-based - are key strategies to expand access to educational activities for adults. They hold particular potential for learners with work schedules or other logistical barriers that make fully in-person class attendance difficult, and learners who want additional, independent practice outside of class time. Distance and blended learning activities have been critical to ensuring continuity of instruction during pandemic lockdowns when in-person service delivery was not possible.

These modes of instruction will continue to be important tools for programs to increase student engagement and access. Studies and experience demonstrate that adult learners participating in blended learning, which combines face-to-face instruction with distance learning, show more federally reportable outcomes compared with those participating in only one of these components. Blended learning's combination of instructional modalities shows great promise in facilitating learner achievement. RIDE encourages all local Adult Education providers to leverage distance and blended instructional strategies to ensure continuity of services, expand access, and deepen learning for all adult learners.

This policy addresses programmatic and accountability requirements for Adult Education providers delivering distance and blended learning. Other RIDE documents related to technology and digital literacy topics can be found on [www.riadulted.org](http://www.riadulted.org).



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## 2. Programmatic Requirements

### 2.1. Professional Development

RIDE does not require Rhode Island practitioners to complete Professional development (PD) specific to distance learning at this time. It is recommended that adult education program managers review the general PD requirements for RIDE-funded adult education agencies in the [Professional Development Guidance Letter for Adult Education Practitioners](#) from July 1, 2016.

For PD support, the [Rhode Island Tech Hub for Adult Education](#) provides professional development responsive to practitioners' needs including training on specific technology tools and research-based teaching strategies. One-on-one and group training is available on demand. Scheduled PD events can be found on the [riadulted.org calendar](#).

### 2.2. Accessibility

Distance and blended learning can increase access for learners with logistical barriers. However, in designing programs, it's important for programs to carefully consider how to ensure equitable access for all learners participating in distance and blended activities, and to intentionally build in supports for learners whose access to services may be affected by distance or blended modalities of instruction. Affected populations may include learners without access - or with limited access - to technology (whether due to lack of skills, or device or internet access) or differently-abled learners. Local providers have a responsibility to ensure that expanding access for some learners by implementing distance or blended services does not inadvertently create barriers for others.

Providers should have a process for identifying and addressing potential barriers to access distance and blended programming. Course designs should accommodate the use of assistive technologies such as screen readers. All course materials and tools need to be accessible to learners with disabilities, so that learners can successfully complete the course and fully participate in course activities. Programs have a responsibility to help learners identify potential access support needed (whether related to technology and devices or differences in ability) early in the intake and enrollment process to allow for the development of accessible content and necessary accommodations.

### 2.3. Distance Learning Curricula

As with in-person instruction, local providers are expected to use curricular resources that are aligned with RI's standards for Adult Education ([College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education](#) and/or [English Language Proficiency Standards for Adult Education](#)) for instruction delivered at a distance.

### 2.4. Approved Digital Resources

RIDE looks to digital and online curricular resources that have been approved by [the Innovating Distance Education in Adult Learning \(IDEAL\) Consortium](#) member states to identify resources for use by local RI providers. The [RIDE Approved DL Curricular Resources List](#) is a subset of resources approved by IDEAL Consortium member states, which have been vetted for quality of instructional



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content, and have been reviewed for appropriate assessments, proxy hour reporting, and compliance with federal accessibility standards.

When budget allows, RIDE allocates funds to purchase software licenses or learner seats that are distributed to local providers. Information on current RIDE-funded resources available to local providers can be found on [RIAdultEd.org](http://RIAdultEd.org).

## 2.5. Other Resources

In order to meet learners' needs and skill levels, local providers may choose to use other digital or online resources not included on the [RIDE Approved DL Curricular Resources List](#), or may use hard copy resources to deliver instruction at a distance. Hours tracking considerations for each are as follows:

- DL hours using digital/online resources that are not included on the [RIDE Approved DL Curricular Resources List](#) must be reported using the Teacher Verification Model for proxy contact hours. If a digital resource does not appear on the RIDE approved list, DL hours using the resource cannot be reported using the Clock Time or Learner Mastery models (for more information on the Teacher Verification Model and proxy contact hours, see section 3 of this document).
- DL hours using hard copy resources must be reported using the Teacher Verification Model for proxy contact hours (for more information on the Teacher Verification Model and proxy contact hours, see section 3 of this document).

## 2.6. Assessing Learners using Distance Learning Curriculum

Distance learners must be assessed under the same guidelines as all adult learners in the state and local providers must adhere to the [RIDE Adult Education Assessment Policy](#), which can be found on the [Adult Education page of the RIDE website](#).

## 3. Accountability Requirements

### 3.1. Reporting Contact Hours

Contact hours or seat time are not among the outcome metrics that RIDE uses to evaluate local providers' performance or to determine local providers' funding allocations.

Local providers should track distance and blended learning contact hours to meet federal and state reporting requirements. Accurate tracking of distance learning instructional hours - which the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) calls proxy contact hours (PCH) - is necessary for establishing appropriate post testing intervals for learners participating in distance or blended learning. Tracking PCH is also useful to a program for the purposes of understanding learner engagement and overall program operations.



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### 3.2. Proxy Contact Hour Models

OCTAE defines three models for tracking PCH that may be used to report time learners spend on distance learning activities:

- **Clock Time Model** assigns contact hours based on the elapsed time that a participant is connected to, or engaged in, an online or stand-alone software program that tracks time.
- **Teacher Verification Model (TVM)** assigns a fixed number of hours of credit for each assignment based on teacher determination of the extent to which a participant engaged in, or completed, the assignment. This model is appropriate for use with computer-based curricula that do not track time, or for paper-based distance learning activities.
- **Learner Mastery Model** assigns a fixed number of hours of credit based on the participant passing a test on the content of each lesson. ... A high percentage of correct answers (typically 70%–80%) earns the credit hours attached to the material. This model is appropriate for use with computer-based curricula that do not track time.

### 3.3 Reporting Hours Tracked by Approved Digital Resources

Learning hours earned on any of the resources on the [RIDE Approved DL Curricular Resources List](#) are reportable for RI. The type of PCH earned will vary by resource. If you have questions about hours reporting for a specific resource, please contact RIDE using the contact email listed in section 4.1.

### 3.4. Reporting Hours Not Tracked by Approved Digital Resources

The Teacher Verification Model (TVM) allows programs flexibility to capture DL activities that use hard-copy resources, or that use digital or online resources that do not fall into the Clock Time category (or the Learner Mastery model). RIDE does not require approval of adult education curricula when instruction is delivered in person; similarly, teachers' expertise is at the core of validating instructional hours using TVM.

#### *3.4.1. Using the Teacher Verification Model (TVM)*

**In TVM, the teacher reviews work completed at a distance, and assigns PCH based on experience with the same or similar material in the classroom. For example, if learners are working independently on a paper assignment (such as a worksheet), or using online content which is not on RI's approved list of DL resources, the teacher can validate student time on task, allowing it to be counted as proxy hours for NRS reporting.**

- Teachers draw on their classroom experience to determine the number of PCH for an assignment. For example, an activity that takes 2 hours to complete in class can be assigned 2 hours of PCH when completed at a distance.



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- If the student is doing a DL activity for which the teacher does not have classroom experience, the teacher can work with the student ahead of time to estimate the time needed to complete the work. The student then keeps track of the time it takes to actually complete the assignment. After the assignment is completed, the teacher reviews the work to ensure that the estimated time and work completed align with teacher expectations, and assigns PCH ([please see Ed Tech Center's example from NH](#)).

**Some states require practitioners to complete a training in order to implement TVM ([please see Ed Tech Center's example from AZ](#)). RI does not require practitioners to complete a training in order to implement TVM.**

### 3.5. Data Entry for Distance Learning Hours

There are two categories of instructional contact hours in the state data system:

1. **Instruction - Synchronous:** this category is used to capture time spent in personal interaction between instructor and learner, whether in-person or at a distance, e.g. in person class meetings, or instruction delivered by phone, virtual class meeting on a webinar, or active chat or text engagement.
2. **Instruction - Asynchronous:** this category is used to capture proxy contact hours during which an instructor and learners are not interacting. Hours are determined through one of the three NRS-approved models: clock time, teacher verification model, or learner mastery. Homework hours can be included in asynchronous instruction hours entered in LACES if the hours are determined through one of the three NRS-approved PCH models.

Programs are required to enter attendance hours - whether synchronous or asynchronous - in the state data system at minimum every two weeks (for a table illustrating instructional categories for different distance learning activities, see section 4.4 of this document).

### 3.6. Participant Status for Federal Reporting

OCTAE's DAEL requires states to have a policy that defines how blended learning participants will be classified for federal reporting, since learners can only be counted as either a Distance Education participant or as a classroom participant for federal reporting purposes. States can count a participant only once per Period of Participation, either as a Distance Education participant or a traditional classroom participant.

For NRS reporting purposes, RIDE has defined Distance Education participants as those Adult Education participants with at least 50% of their annual participation generated via proxy or asynchronous hours. Distance Education participants are reported by RIDE to the U.S. Department of Education annually on Table 4C (Measurable Skill Gains by Entry Level for Participants in Distance Education).





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## 4. Additional Resources for Local Programs

### 4.1 RIDE Email

If you have questions, or for more information, email Sophie Tan at [sophie.tan@ride.ri.gov](mailto:sophie.tan@ride.ri.gov)

### 4.2. Definition of Terms

**Asynchronous (instruction):** this category is used to capture proxy contact hours during which instructor and learner are not interacting. Hours are determined through one of the three NRS-approved models: clock time, teacher verification model, or learner mastery.

**Blended learning (BL)**, often referred to as **hybrid learning (Hybrid)**, is defined by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology as learning that occurs online and in person, augmenting and supporting teacher practice. This approach often allows learners to have some control over time, place, path, or pace of learning. In many blended learning models, learners spend some of their face-to-face time with the teacher in a large group, some face-to-face time —either virtual or in-person with a teacher and some time learning with and from peers.

**Distance Education (DE):** A broad term to cover all aspects of programming/instruction that allows for learning outside the classroom. The [National Reporting System \(NRS\) NRS](#) defines distance education as formal learning where learners and instructors are separated by geography, time, or both for the majority of the instructional period.

**Distance Learning (DL)** is instruction delivered entirely at a distance. Local programs can deliver distance learning materials through a variety of media, including but not limited to, print, audio and video recordings, videotape, live broadcasts, digital and online software. Teachers can support distance learners through communication by mail, telephone, e-mail, or online technologies and software.

**The hybrid flexible, or HyFlex model** is a form of blended learning that combines in-person and online learning. Each class session and learning activity is offered both in-person and synchronously online. Learners can decide how to participate. All learners also have the option to work asynchronously offline.

**Synchronous (instruction):** this category is used to capture time spent in personal interaction between instructor and learner, whether in-person or at a distance, e.g. in person class meetings, or instruction delivered by phone, virtual class meeting on a webinar, or active chat or text engagement.

### 4.3. Local and Federal Guidance

- [Handbook of Guidelines for Distance and Blended Learning](#): This handbook offers administrators and educators guidance towards structuring and fine-tuning essential elements of their distance education (DE) programming.



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- [RIDE Approved DL Curricular Resources List](#): The RIDE list of approved resources is a subset of resources approved by IDEAL Consortium member states, which have been vetted for quality of instructional content, and have been reviewed for appropriate assessments, proxy hour reporting, and compliance with federal accessibility standards.
- [RIDE Technology Policies & Guidelines](#): This page of the RIAdultEd.org website compiles RI Adult Education-specific technology-related information, including RIDE policies related to Chromebooks purchased by the state for use by local Adult Education Staff, sample documents related to purchasing and lending devices, and a sample of the RI Adult Education Technology Certification form signed by local providers on an annual basis.
- [EdTech Center @World Education - Ideal Consortium website](#): The Innovating Distance Education in Adult Learning (IDEAL) Consortium is an initiative of the Ed Tech Center at World Education. IDEAL supports member states in establishing and improving innovative distance and blended learning programs by offering professional development, providing technical support, and facilitating a network of education leaders from across the country.
- [Participants in Distance Education: Requirements for NRS Reporting](#): This slide deck of an NRS webinar in April 2020 reviews NRS definitions of distance education participants, how to determine participants status and count contact hours; and policies on distance learning assessment and reporting.
- [Adult Education Participants in Distance Education](#): This NRS Tips sheet offers definitions of distance learning participants and summarizes how to establish participant status, record contact hours and posttesting guidance for distance learning participants.
- [Technical Assistance Guide for Performance Accountability under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act](#): This is a comprehensive guide to the NRS, the primary indicators of performance, measure, data collection and reporting.





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#### 4.4. Tracking Distance Learning (DL) Hours in LACES

Example of DL Activity	NRS Contact Type	LACES Hours Type
Phone call	Contact Hours	Instruction - Synchronous
Video chat		
Webinar		
Time in interaction by email		
Time in interaction by text		
Time in interaction by chat app		
Time tracked by a program on the <a href="#">RIDE Approved DL Curricular Resources List</a> .	Proxy Contact Hours Clock Time Model	Instruction - Asynchronous
Time on a program <u>not</u> on the <a href="#">RIDE Approved DL Curricular Resources List</a> . Hours are verified by a teacher (TVM).	Proxy Contact Hours Teacher Verification Model (TVM)	
Time spent on a paper assignment completed remotely, for example a worksheet. Hours are verified by a teacher (TVM).		