

# Rhode Island Distance Learning Policy

In June 2007, The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, received approval from the Office of Management and Budget to collect and report demographic, enrollment and outcome data on distance education learners. Subsequently, the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (RIDE), Office of Adult and Career and Technical Education, authorized its local programs to offer distance learning (DL) effective January 1, 2009, and to report these students in the Comprehensive Adult Literacy Information System (CALIS) for inclusion in Rhode Island's submission of data to the National Reporting System (NRS).

The Rhode Island Distance Learning Policy includes a series of written policies to guide local implementation of distance learning programs. This document is structured as follows:

1. **State Context** includes an overview describing the need for and purposes of the policy in the Rhode Island context.
2. **General Distance Learning Requirements** defines distance learners, identifies the methods to be used for assigning contact hours and proxy hours, defines curricula and materials that may be used at a distance, and specifies assessment requirements for distance learners.
3. **Application and Approval Procedures to Operate a Distance Learning Program** explains what local agencies will need to do in order to offer RIDE-approved and RIDE-supported distance learning opportunities.
4. **Funding for Distance Learning Programs** describes how distance learning will be funded.
5. **Training Requirements** describes what training is required or recommended for agencies and teachers offering distance learning.

## 1. State Context

Rhode Island has been actively seeking alternatives to traditional classroom programs to reach more adults in need of educational services and to expand learning options for learners. RIDE has supported distance learning in several pilot programs for over five years and has found that distance learning can be an effective way to serve learners who are on waiting lists, learners who wish to accelerate skills development, learners who are unable to come to regularly scheduled classes at our provider agencies, learners who prefer to learn independently availing themselves of technology-based learning options,

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and learners who need to temporarily withdraw or “stop out” due to changes in work or life circumstances. It seems to be a particularly attractive option for younger students. Thus, distance learning appears to be providing a useful option for both reaching new learners and better serving those who are already in our classes.

Distance learning, however, can vary greatly in quality and effectiveness. RIDE, at this time, is interested in effective or promising practices regarding staff-facilitated distance learning options. These are some important lessons learned about distance learning:

- Prior to enrolling students in distance learning, an orientation and pre-assessment need to take place to ensure students will have an appropriate learning experience. In addition, it is important to make sure that students are self-motivated, committed to, and sufficiently self-disciplined for distance learning that is predominantly self-directed. Finally, the setting of goals or establishing an individual learning plan is as meaningful for distance learning students as it is for classroom-only students.
- Once students are enrolled, staff assisting students must ensure that learners are provided access to distance learning resources that are appropriate for the educational functioning level at which they currently operate based on test scores on approved tests. In addition, students can benefit from staff guidance in completing assignments. Giving all assignments/modules to students and allowing them to work freely has proven less promising than providing access in a managed fashion. Furthermore, distance learning appears to work well when staff contact students at least weekly to discuss and make notes regarding progress, questions, and issues.

States which have successfully integrated distance learning into their traditional offerings and tracked progress of associated learners report key elements crucial to DL success.

- Student affiliation with local program

Learners who received a combination of face to face and distance learning opportunities were most successful in achieving educational gains. California found that ESL learners who received blended instruction, that is, a combination of in person and DL, had higher gains than in person instruction alone.<sup>1</sup>

Learners should receive a complete intake, including orientation to distance learning and local options, pre-testing, and discussion of learner goals and how DL can assist them.

- Follow Up

Distance Learners who were most successful also received periodic support in the form of teleconferences with instructors and e-mail contact.

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In Ohio, educational gains increased from a rate of 26% completions in 2005 without extensive follow up to 56% in 2007 with such support. <sup>ii</sup>

- Access to Distance Learning

Smaller local programs which do not have the infrastructure or personnel to support DL programs affiliated with larger, or “hub” programs. Their learners could then access both local face to face educational opportunities as well as DL. The local program is responsible for intake (including pre-testing), face to face contact, and post-testing, while the hub program for orientation to DL, recording proxy contact hours, and remote contact such as e-mail and teleconferences.

Resources from Ohio, California, and OVAE appear at the end of the document.

Rhode Island’s distance learning program requires all students to complete intake, orientation, and pre- and posttesting. All adult education providers will be given the opportunity and will be required to participate in a distance learning training session that will allow them to provide distance education. *Only agencies that have completed the training will be allowed to offer distance learning to their students.*

Programs will maintain records of proxy contact hours for both state CALIS and federal NRS reporting requirements following the formulas in the Appendix.

## **2. General Distance Learning Requirements**

This section includes general policies that apply to all distance education students in these six areas:

- 2.1. How are distance education programs and distance learners defined?
- 2.2. What curricula may be used for distance education?
- 2.3. How can local programs select curricula?
- 2.4. How are contact hours defined?
- 2.5. How should contact hours be reported?
- 2.6. What is the assessment policy for distance learning students?

### *2.1. How Are Distance Education and Distance Learners Defined?*

***Definition of Distance Education.*** The State of Rhode Island has adopted the definition of distance education provided in the *National Reporting System Implementation Guidelines, July 2007*:

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Distance education is formal learning activity where students and instructors are separated by geography, time or both for the majority of the instructional period. Distance learning materials are delivered through a variety of media including, but not limited to, print, audio recording, videotape, broadcasts, computer software, web-based programs and other online technology. Teachers support distance learners through communication via mail, telephone, e-mail or online technologies and software.

***Defining Distance Learners.*** Rhode Island has defined distance learners as those learners who take a distance learning course only or who take a distance learning course and a traditional classroom-based course during the same academic or fiscal year. If a student only takes a distance learning course during the year, then he/she is automatically classified as a distance learning students. If the student takes both distance learning and classroom-based courses during the year, then a student is classified as a distance learning student if 61% or more of the hours he or she attended were in a distance learning course. These two provisions accommodate the study patterns of adult learners, which suggest that adult learners are likely to move between distance and classroom-based programs, depending upon their needs and their life circumstances.

All hours earned in both distance and classroom courses must be reported for all students, whether they are classified as distance or classroom learners. On-Site classroom hours and proxy contact hours will be recorded in separate classes in the state data system. The decision about the student's status as a classroom or distance learner will be made at the end of the year based on where 61% or more of the student's hours were earned. The student's hours in both distance and classroom programs will be included in the NRS report.

It is important that the distance learner follow the RIDE policy for intake, enrollment and persistence. This would include intake, orientation and goal setting. Appropriate topics for orientation could include technology training needed to use applicable programs, time management skills and communication.

### ***2.2. What Curricula May Be Used for Distance Learning?***

At the present time there are a limited number of curricula either designed specifically for, or easily adaptable to, distance learning for adult education students. This is likely to change over time as more commercial curricula become available for distance learning. These are the curricula RIDE has approved for use at a distance:

- *Skills Tutor* for Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Adult Secondary Education (e.g., GED) students.
- *GED Connection* for Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Adult Secondary Education (e.g., GED) students.

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- *Workplace Essential Skills* for Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Adult Secondary Education (e.g., GED) students.
- *Lexia Learning Systems, Reading Strategies for Older Students* for Adult Basic Education (ABE) students.
- *Fluent Reading Trainer* for Adult Basic Education, Adult Secondary Education, and Transition to College students.
- *My Reading Coach* for Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Adult Secondary Education (e.g., GED) students.
- *Symphony Math* for Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education (e.g., GED) students, and English as a Second Language (ESL) students.
- *English for All* for English as a Second Language (ESL) students.

*Crossroads Café* for English as a Second Language (ESL) students.

*RIDE expects to add and delete programs, as new or improved, preferably web-enabled and research-based applications become available. For instance, RIDE is currently monitoring the development of or reviewing early versions of USA Learns for English as a Second Language (ESL) students (web enabled), Reading Analysis and Prescription System (a web-enabled diagnostic for decoding, fluency and comprehension to be released late this fall), Lexia Quick Reading Test (not yet web-enabled but expected to be web-enabled in 2009), and Lexia Cross Trainer (not yet web-enabled).*

### *2.3. How Can Local Programs Select Curricula?*

Programs can select the approved curricula for distance learning as listed above. Choices should be made according to the type, level and goals of the distance learner. In addition, as teachers become more experienced and skilled at delivering distance learning, they are likely to draw from multiple sources to best support their students, as they do in the classroom.

In the event the program wishes to offer or use a different distance learning program and if the program wishes to enter the hours associated with this program in CALIS for inclusion in NRS reporting, then the local provider must submit in writing a request for approval to RIDE. Examples of other programs could include the development of distance learning courses using existing course management system (e.g. Blackboard), instructional software or video. This request must include a detailed description of the program, as well as any evidence that this program is research-based or evidence from rigorous evaluations that demonstrate the program is appropriate for use with adults and is effective. Upon approval of the program, RIDE will revise its distance learning policy and add this program as a RIDE-approved option that all RIDE-funded programs can use. RIDE holds the right to reject any requests for program approvals if it deems the

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description or evidence insufficient. RIDE may further amend this policy at any time to add distance learning curricula it deems appropriate and effective.

### *2.4. How Are Contact Hours Defined?*

Measuring contact hours for distance learners is more difficult than measuring contact hours for classroom learners, where the learner is physically present. Distance learners must have at least twelve hours of contact with the program before they can be counted as a distance learner for state and federal reporting purposes. These twelve hours can be a combination of actual contact (such as in-person classroom or one-on-one or small group instruction) and contact through telephone, video, teleconference or online communication, as long as these communications have an instructional focus. These twelve hours must be verifiable and local programs must ensure they have the proper documentation of these twelve hours on file and must enter these twelve hours in CALIS.

### *2.5. How Should Contact Hours Be Reported?*

If a student engages in distance learning, then RIDE requires that all distance learning contact hours be reported. RIDE has further chosen that Rhode Island will be reporting proxy hours in CALIS and in NRS.

The NRS guidelines state that proxy contact hours must be developed using one of three specified models: clock time, teacher verification or learner mastery. As these models are appropriate for different type of curricula, RIDE has chosen to use more than one proxy contact hour model. These models have adopted validated formulas for calculating proxy contact hours for the specific curricula it has approved.

Local programs are required to follow the Proxy Contact Hour Model in the Appendix for each approved curriculum.

### *2.6. What Is the Assessment Policy for Distance Learning Students?*

Distance learners must be assessed under the same guidelines as all adult learners in the Rhode Island. Students must be pre-tested using any of the RIDE-approved and NRS-compliant tests (i.e., CASAS, Best Plus, and BEST Literacy). All students must be posttested after the appropriate number of hours of instruction specified by the test developer, at the end of the semester, or upon completion of defined curricula. The RIDE Adult Education Assessment Policy, in other words, applies fully to distance learning students and no distance learning students will be included in state and federal reporting that do not have assessment results arrived at by following the state's assessment policy.

This means that all assessment of distance learning students must occur in secure, proctored settings, but it permissible to arrange for remote testing locations that are more convenient for distance learners as long as all other state requirements concerning assessment are met. Distance students must follow all existing assessment policies for

administration, scoring and interpretation of test results. The NRS Guidelines state that distance students “should be posttested after the same amount of instructional time as other students, according to the state’s approved NRS assessment policy.” Rhode Island has adopted a proxy hour model, which means that this model must be used to determine when to posttest. Using the guidelines in the Appendix, programs will determine when distance learning students have reached the minimum hours of instruction required for post testing and will make arrangements for distance learners to be post tested in a proctored environment

### **3. Application and Approval Procedures to Operate a Distance Learning Program**

All RIDE-funded adult education providers may offer distance learning options for students when two conditions are met. First, the local provider must identify the staff person responsible for coordinating the distance learning activities and must make this information available to RIDE. Second, this person must successfully complete the RIDE distance learning training module to ensure that the distance learning component is implemented in a way that is consistent with this policy and to make sure that the program understands the associated CALIS data collection and data entry requirements.

### **4. Funding for Distance Learning**

RIDE allows local adult education providers to include all expenditures for equipment, supplies, and staff time required for the implementation of a successful distance learning program in the budgets of the local applications submitted by adult education providers. No specialized distance education grants are offered. No special or additional funds will be available for distance learning. However, agencies will receive a stipend to cover the cost of travel and participation in the required distance learning training sessions.

### **5. Training Requirements**

RIDE realizes that distance learning is sufficiently different from classroom teaching that it requires classroom teachers to develop new skills. Therefore, RIDE requires the training of at least one administrative and one instructional staff person from each agency that opts to provide distance learning options to students. This training will consist of a 12-hour workshop, which will be offered in three four-hour segments. The course will have a distance learning component to it and associated assignments to be completed between workshop sessions. Participants in this workshop must attend all twelve hours and must demonstrate in the post-assessment of the workshop that they understand and know how to set up and implement a distance learning program that is consistent with this policy and NRS requirements and guidelines. RIDE will notify each program after completion of the training as to whether the program will be authorized to offer distance learning options or not. Programs that do not obtain this authorization and choose to offer distance learning options anyway are advised that no expenditures for this unapproved program will be allowed and no data entry into CALIS will be accepted.

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**Contact Information.** If you have any questions about this state distance learning policy or any of the requirements for reporting data about distance learners, contact Deborah Anthes at 401 222-8949 or via e-mail at [Deborah.Anthes@ride.ri.gov](mailto:Deborah.Anthes@ride.ri.gov).

APPENDIX

The NRS guidelines state that proxy contact hours must be developed using one of three specified models: clock time, teacher verification or learner mastery. The clock time model may only be used with curricula that track the time the student interacts with the curricula and which also contain a mechanism to log students out of the program after a specified period of inactivity. One hour of clock time will be reported as one proxy contact hour. Both the teacher verification model and the learner mastery model are appropriate for use with curricula that do not track time.

The chart below specifies which models must be used for what curricula by Rhode Island adult education providers. These models specify the formula for calculating proxy contact hours.

### Proxy Contact Hours and Model Used for RIDE-Approved Distance Learning Curricula

Curriculum	Model	Criteria for Awarding Proxy Contact Hours	Proxy Contact Hour Credit	Validation by
Crossroads Café*	Mastery	Passed unit test @ $\geq 70\%$	10 hours per unit; total possible PCH = 260	North Carolina
English for All	Mastery	Passed unit test @ $\geq 70\%$	6 hours per unit; total possible PCH = 120	North Carolina, based on research done in California
GED Connection**	Teacher Verification	Video: student self-report to teacher Workbook: teacher determines % of work completed Internet Activities: teacher determines work completed Internet Module: teacher validates w/questioning whether student has engaged Practice Tests: online and print based	Video: .5 hrs Workbook: $\geq 75\%$ of activities completed = 4 hrs; 50-74% = 2 hrs Internet Activities: 1 hr per activity; total possible PCH = 43 Modules: 3 hrs per module; total possible PCH = 15 Tests: 1 hr per; total possible PCH = 22	Project IDEAL
Lexia Learning Systems: Lexia Strategies for Older Students	Clock	System must track time and log out students after 15 minutes of inactivity.	Recorded time in system as validated by Lexia Usage reports.	N/A+
Fluent Reading Trainer	Clock	System must track time.	Recorded time in system as validated by Fluent Reading Trainer Attendance and Time Reports	N/A+
My Reading Coach	Clock	System must track time.	Recorded time in system as validated by My Reading Coach Attendance and Time Reports.	N/A+
SkillsTutor	Clock	System must track time and log out students	Recorded time in system.	N/A+

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<b>Curriculum</b>	<b>Model</b>	<b>Criteria for Awarding Proxy Contact Hours</b>	<b>Proxy Contact Hour Credit</b>	<b>Validation by</b>
		after preset period of inactivity		
Symphony Math	Clock	System must track time and log out students after six minutes of inactivity.	Recorded time in system as verified by Symphony Math Usage Reports.	N/A+
Workplace Essential Skills**	Teacher Verification	Video: student self-report to teacher Workbook: teacher determines % of work completed Internet Activities: teacher determines % of work completed Preview and Review Tests: print based	Video: .5 hrs Workbook: $\geq 75\%$ of activities completed = 2 hrs; 50-74% = 1 hrs; total possible PCH = 48 Internet Activities: $\geq 75\%$ of activities completed = 2.5 hrs; 50-74% = 1.5 hrs; total possible PCH = 60 Tests: 1 hr per; total PCH possible = 8	Project IDEAL

\*Proxy contact hours for these curricula could also be determined by the teacher verification model.

\*\* Proxy contact hours for these curricula could also be determined by the mastery model.

+Validation is not an issue because these curriculum track time within the program.

<sup>i</sup> California:

<http://www.cdlponline.org/tutorial/nutsbolts.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Ohio:

Powerpoint Presentation to 2008 State Directors of Adult Education

<http://www.optimalsolutionsgroup.com/sdm2008/PPT/Ohio%20ABLEs%20Distance%20Education%20Initiative.ppt>

<http://www.optimalsolutionsgroup.com/sdm2008/PDF/HarnessingTechnology-080410sm2.pdf>

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NRS

<http://www.optimalsolutionsgroup.com/sdm2008/PDF/DistLearningPolicyGuidance.pdf>

<http://www.optimalsolutionsgroup.com/sdm2008/PDF/NRSGuidelinesforDistanceEducationfinal.pdf>