TITLE 200 – BOARD OF EDUCATION

CHAPTER 20 – COUNCIL ON ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

SUBCHAPTER 10 – ACADEMIC STANDARDS, PROGRAMS AND OPERATIONS

PART 5 – Virtual Learning in Rhode Island

5.1 Definitions

A.   As used in this Part, the following words and terms have the following meaning, unless the context indicates another or different meaning or intent:

1.   "Acceptable use policy" or "AUP" means a policy that outlines the responsibilities of students, teachers, staff and others as they use the computers, software applications, and Internet when using the school or district computers or internet connections. AUPs also outline the consequences for failure to adhere to this policy.

2.   "Asynchronous learning" means communication exchanges that occur in elapsed time between two or more people. Examples are email, online discussion forums, message boards, blogs, podcasts, wikis, etc.

3.   "Blended learning" means learning opportunities in which a student learns, at least in part, at a supervised brick and mortar location away from home and, at least in part, through online delivery with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace.

4.   "Brick and mortar site" means the physical location where teachers and students are interacting and the location for some of the computers that students are using to connect to the Internet and online sources.

5.   "Commissioner" means the Rhode Island commissioner of elementary and secondary education.

6.   "Common core standards" means standards adopted by a majority of states, including Rhode Island, that are robust and relevant to the real world, reflect the knowledge and skills that young people need for success in college and careers, and provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn.

7.   "Course" means a connected series of lessons and learning experiences that:

a.   Establish expectations defined by recognized standards;

b.   Provide students with opportunities to learn and practice skills, and

c.   Include assessments of student knowledge and skills adequate to determine proficiency at the level of academic rigor required by relevant content standards.

8.   "Dual enrollment" means the concurrent earning of college credits while enrolled in high school.

9.   "High-speed broadband Internet access" means infrastructure that provides reliable connections to the Internet which allows transfer of large quantities of complex digital content at sufficient speeds to ensure fast and reliable delivery of data and content.

10.   "Individual learning plans" or "ILP" means a planning and monitoring tool that customizes and directs students' goals and development in three domains: academic, career, and personal/social.

11.   "Online (or distance) learning" means education in which instruction and content are delivered primarily over the Internet.

12.   "Online courses" means a course in which more than half of the content is delivered by a teacher from a different location than that of the student.

13.   "Online school program" means programming delivered by a school district or cooperative of school districts, and provides an online, comprehensive and sequential program of courses or grade-level coursework and instruction in which more than half of the program is delivered online and more than half of the instruction is delivered online by a teacher from a different location than that of the student.

14.   "Open enrollment" means opportunities for students to enroll in online content and programming outside of those online opportunities provided by the district of residence.

15.   "Synchronous learning" means online learning in which the participants interact at the same time and in the same space.

16.   "Virtual learning" means learning opportunities that make use of technology to enhance the teaching and learning experience.

5.2   Authority, scope, and purpose

A.   The Council on Elementary and Secondary Education (Council) pursuant to its delegated statutory authority under the R.I. Gen. Laws Chapter 16-60, promulgates these Regulations of the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education Governing Virtual Learning Education.

B.   The Council recognizes that a variety of learning options, including online courses and programs, are critical for 21st Century learners. The Council also recognizes that online learning provides opportunities for students to access curriculum and specialized courses in a flexible learning environment that might not otherwise be available.

C.   The purpose of this Part is to establish comprehensive and coherent policies governing Virtual Learning Education in Rhode Island. These Virtual Learning Education Regulations promote and support customized learning experiences for all learners through quality and engaging online content and programs and by allowing learners some element of control over the time, place, pace, and path of their learning.

D.   This Part will help ensure that future technologies and innovative online learning activities can be integrated into existing practices in ways that continue to empower both educators and learners. The Virtual Learning Education Regulations are framed around four regulatory principles:

   1.   All learners in Rhode Island will have access to high quality, rigorous, and relevant online learning opportunities;

   2.   Virtual learning education in Rhode Island will support all learners in meeting academic and career goals;

   3.   Rhode Island will support reliable access to the Internet and technology tools necessary for virtual learning; and,

   4.   The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) will coordinate these Virtual Learning Education Regulations with policies developed by higher education institutions and other state agencies.

5.3   Roles and responsibilities

5.3.1 RIDE responsibilities and functions

A.   The responsibilities of RIDE include but are not limited to:

   1.   Ensuring that existing and future state policies do not limit or prohibit students from engaging in online learning opportunities;

   2.   Ensuring open enrollment for all learners to provide greater access to quality online content;

   3.   Promoting state policies to support a move to competency-based learning;

   4.   Reviewing and communicating the national standards that will guide the development or purchase of quality online content, instruction and programming;

5. Providing information to the educational community relating to online learning content, instruction, programming and other online resources;

6. Promoting flexible student funding that supports access to online learning opportunities;

7. Supporting statewide efforts to ensure adequate resources for bandwidth and infrastructure; and,

8. Supporting opportunities for statewide efficiencies to increase access to technology and online learning.

5.3.2 LEA responsibilities and functions

A. LEAs shall support student access and engagement in a variety of online learning opportunities such as online courses or online programs suitable for meeting the unique learning needs of individual students. Responsibilities of LEAs include but are not limited to:

1. Ensuring that all online content, regardless of the source, is rigorous, of high quality, and, where appropriate, aligned to adopted state and LEA standards;

2. Providing professional development on the utilization and integration of virtual learning opportunities into curriculum and instructional strategies;

3. Ensuring appropriate placement of students in online learning programs or courses;

4. Communicating the criteria and procedures for enrolling and remaining enrolled in online learning opportunities;

5. Communicating to students and parents or guardians acceptable online course work that will meet state and local graduation requirements;

6. Clearly identifying online coursework opportunities that meet post-secondary, college, or military enrollment requirements;

7. Ensuring the safety of all students in the online environment by adopting and upholding acceptable use and internet safety policies or protocols; and,

8. Creating and adopting a local virtual learning policy that provides all students with access to online learning and that clearly communicates all of the above and any other LEA procedures related to virtual learning education.

B.   Recognition of which virtual learning opportunities fulfill coursework graduation requirements is a local decision and shall be predicated on alignment to State-adopted standards and other relevant national and industry standards.

C.   Local graduation policies must not limit access or prohibit approved online coursework from fulfilling graduation requirements.

5.4   Customized learning

5.4.1   Personalized learning opportunities

A.   Technology can address the issues of relevance and engagement by providing a highly personalized learning experience that builds upon learning styles, interests, and abilities and allows students to work at their own pace. LEAs should incorporate online learning opportunities as part of a comprehensive and personalized learning experience to meet student interests, goals, and needs.

B.   Individual Learning Plans

1.   The Council Secondary Regulations, the Basic Education Program, and the Council Career and Technical Regulations require each student to engage in the development of learning plans that reflect his or her academic and career goals. Individual Learning Plans (ILP) and the ILP process are designed to help each student reach his or her academic and career goals. Quality online learning allows students to meet these goals through a wide variety of courses, instructional strategies, curriculum, and relevant content. LEAs shall utilize appropriate technology and online learning opportunities to help student achieve their goals and prepare them for success in college and careers. Individual Learning Plans should reflect each student's engagement in virtual learning opportunities.

C.   Elements of student control

1.   All learners should be given the opportunity to choose a learning experience that supports their learning style and allows them to progress at their own pace. Technology and online learning programs provide students with some control over their learning because they can engage in online content anytime, anywhere and can progress through the content at their own rate. LEA virtual learning policies shall provide some level of flexibility for student choice and shall allow for students to demonstrate achievement in self-paced online coursework based on proficiency level rather than seat time.

D.   Online delivery models

1.   Digital learning programs can be offered synchronously and/or asynchronously to customize the learning environment that meets learner needs and learning styles. The level of teacher involvement in these

programs varies as well; with teachers playing supporting roles in some courses and taking more direct instructional roles in others.

E.   Role of teachers

    1.   The role of teachers and the level of teacher involvement with their students vary depending on the delivery model in use. In the blended learning classroom, the roles of teachers and students are often quite similar to their roles in a traditional classroom. As learning becomes more student-centered, the roles of teachers and students often change and teachers become facilitators of learning and students gain some control and choice over their learning experiences. Instructional technologies and quality online content enable educators to develop customized learning experiences for students.

F.   Spectrum of delivery models

    1.   There are several models for delivery of online learning ranging from blended learning models that integrate online learning with face-to-face instruction in a brick and mortar school to fully online learning experiences. This Part does not limit the use of other models for online learning. LEAs retain the flexibility to choose appropriate online delivery models.

    2.   Blended learning occurs in a variety of venues and models and may incorporate online content in the form of a lesson, a single course, or an entire curriculum. A blended classroom or course provides flexibility and availability of programming that expands learning beyond the day or school year. In a blended learning environment, teachers facilitate students' learning with direct instruction.

    3.   Virtual charter schools represent a more extensive online learning experience where students may complete most of their course work online at locations other than a school building. Virtual charter schools may also allow students to complete all required coursework online. Virtual charter schools must adhere to the Council Regulations Governing Rhode Island Public Charter Schools.

    4.   The intent of this Part is to ensure that all students have access to quality online learning opportunities and to support LEAs in their role of identifying the online learning activities that best meets each student's needs and goals.

5.4.2   Access and Opportunity

A.   The advent of digital learning requires investments in computer hardware, communication networks, and technical support services. Decisions regarding spending on infrastructure and quality content at both the state and LEA level

shall be made with these needs in mind, ensuring access to quality online learning for all learners.

B. Access to quality content, instruction and programming

1. LEAs shall have flexibility to make decisions regarding the development, adoption or purchase of quality online content and programming based on local data and information about student needs. § 5.4 of this Part contains details regarding quality assurance for content, instruction and programming.

C. 24/7 access

1. Online learning opportunities provide the flexibility necessary for instruction and learning to occur anytime and anywhere. Providing anytime, anywhere access to online coursework will meet the needs of students who, for a variety of reasons, may not be able to "fit" their learning into a traditional school schedule. Local policy shall not prevent student access to quality online learning that occurs both within and outside of the traditional school setting.

5.5   Quality assurance

A. Learners in Rhode Island are assured access to quality instruction and learning opportunities through these Virtual Learning Education Regulations as well as, the Rhode Island Basic Education Program (Part 1 of this Subchapter), the Council Secondary Regulations (Part 2 of this Subchapter), Regulations Governing Career and Technical Education in Rhode Island (Part 3 of this Subchapter), the Rhode Island Teaching Standards (§ 20-1.3.2 of this Chapter) and the Education Evaluation Program (Subchapter 20 Part 3 of this Chapter). The Council Regulations for Virtual Learning Education will complement and enhance existing regulations by promoting students access to quality online learning opportunities as part of each student's pathway.

B. Nationally recognized, research-based standards and best policy and practices will form the basis of RIDE developed guidance to LEAs and other educational organizations to ensure the quality of online content, instruction and programming. RIDE shall regularly review and revise guidance documents as necessary to reflect promising practices and technology advances and innovations.

5.5.1   Content

Online content is the high quality academic material delivered through technology. It is what students learn and ranges from new engaging, interactive software to classic literature delivered through video lectures and games. All content whether online or in print must be aligned to common state standards,

national and/or technical standards and reflect the guaranteed and viable curriculum available for all students. Online content shall also reflect the scope, rigor, and depth of quality content available through more traditional means. Online content shall be evaluated for effectiveness and LEAs seeking to adopt online content should require data on the effectiveness of that content including information such as student completion and achievement. Locally developed content must be aligned to state adopted standards and should follow nationally recognized standards for quality online content.

5.5.2 Instruction

A.   To ensure that learners have access to quality online instruction, teachers or instructors who teach directly in online courses, as well as those who support students in a blended learning environment, shall be appropriately trained and/or certified as described in this section.

B.   Certification

1.   In order to ensure that appropriately qualified or certified instructors are providing online credit-bearing coursework, instructors shall meet one of the following requirements:

a.   K-12 teachers providing online instruction directly to students in an online environment shall be content certified in the state from which they are providing the online content; or

b.   K-12 site-based teachers who are responsible for supervising students participating in credit-bearing online coursework that is not provided directly by an online instructor shall have appropriate Rhode Island content certification; or

c.   Instructors providing instruction for dual enrollment courses, which are identified as credit-bearing courses, shall be appropriately qualified from an accredited post-secondary institution.

2.   Supplemental online materials adopted as part of LEA or school curricula or course materials do not require special certification or qualifications for the teacher or instructor using such online instructional material. Teachers using such supplemental materials, as one of many sources of materials or activities to support their curricula, shall be appropriately content certified for all Rhode Island site-based teachers.

C.   Training

1.   To ensure that teachers are effective in supporting student success in online learning opportunities, whether through a blended learning model or a completely online model, teachers must be knowledgeable in online instructional strategies and pedagogy. Technology and online resources

provide tools to support teachers in developing engaging, relevant and customized learning opportunities. Training and professional development opportunities focused on effective online instructional strategies and pedagogy through a coordinated K-12 and higher education effort are critical to better prepare teachers to support students in online learning environments. Virtual Learning Education guidance documents will provide educators and administrators with national models of teacher training and preparation programs that are effective in preparing teachers for online learning.

5.5.3 Programming

It is expected that LEAs will embrace new technologies and virtual learning opportunities to develop innovative blended learning models. As LEAs develop online learning programs, they shall utilize nationally recognized best practices such as those included in RIDE Virtual Learning Education guidance. Development of effective programs will include at a minimum descriptions of online program leadership, instruction, content, student support services and evaluation for effectiveness. Program design considerations must be made to ensure equity and access.

5.6 Systemic supports for virtual learning education

This Part seeks to promote collaboration with higher education and state agencies to establish connected and coherent statewide policies. Higher education, cross agency and business partnerships can more effectively secure sufficient resources to ensure necessary technology infrastructure and to promote virtual learning opportunities for all learners in Rhode Island.

5.6.1 Statewide policy

Building a high quality education system is an investment in the future of all Rhode Island students and in the future of Rhode Island's economy. Virtual Learning Education is a long-term strategy that will support a quality education system, preparing students for post-secondary education and successful entry into the workforce. The development of a coherent statewide system for online learning will require a coordinated statewide effort with higher education and other state agencies. This Part authorizes the Commissioner to coordinate RIDE's efforts with higher education and other state agencies to ensure the establishment of coherent statewide virtual learning policies and to promote collaborations that result in efficiencies of scale that support those policies.

5.6.2 Resourcing, support, coordination, and articulation

A. The potential and inevitable impact of online learning across K-12, adult education, higher education, and workforce development necessitates that resources and supports be coordinated across the state. The Commissioner shall

ensure that RIDE continues to seek new and innovative funding solutions to ensure all learners have access to quality online content.

B.   The Commissioner shall ensure that RIDE participates in statewide efforts to support Virtual Learning Education with a focus on ensuring all students have access to quality online learning opportunities and ensuring efficiencies gained by coordinating resources. Coordinated statewide efforts can ensure purchasing power to maintain necessary infrastructure and acquire regular upgrades and negotiated lower costs for devices and online content and programming. Publicly available information regarding quality providers will support educators, administrators, families and students to make informed judgments about online content and programs. This information must be coordinated between RIDE and higher education to ensure that families and students are aware of acceptable course work that meets both graduation requirements and higher education acceptance and dual enrollment credit recognition.

C.   The Commissioner shall ensure that RIDE coordinates its efforts with higher education, the legislature, and other key stakeholders to ensure the development of a comprehensive statewide policy framework and to coordinate resources focused on providing all learners access to quality online learning opportunities.