

STATE GUIDANCE FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

Definitions

Distance learning is formal learning activity in which participants and instructors are separated by geography, time, or both for the majority of the instructional period. Distance learning materials come in a variety of media, including, but not limited to, web-based programs, print, audio recordings, videos, broadcasts, computer software, and other online technology.

Instructors support distance participants using methods including, but not limited to, communication via mail, phone, email, online software, and through face-to-face instruction.

Distance education models are further defined in [Defining Distance Education in Texas AEL](#).

Distance Education Models: Texas Style

Texas has reviewed evidence-based learning models to construct a framework for how it defines Distance Learning activities. Texas understands that adult students need flexibility to connect to services, however, we also desire AEL providers across the state maintain the rigor and high-quality instruction adult students deserve and desire. As we worked through the many models of instruction, we landed on two distinct approaches:

- **Synchronous Learning:** Learning where instructors and students gather at the same time and (virtual or physical) place while interacting in “real-time”. Synchronous learning results in direct hours. Examples of Synchronous Learning in Distance Education include video conferencing, WhatsApp, Facebook Group or Messenger, Texting (on the REMIND app or phone), and interactive webinars. (Stanford School of Education)
- **Asynchronous Learning:** Learning where students access materials at their own pace, time, and place while interacting with each other and their teacher over longer periods. Examples of Asynchronous Learning in Distance Education include studying approved distance learning software or printed materials, watching supplemental videos from home, and participating in online discussion boards. Asynchronous learning results in proxy hours when using an approved DL curriculum. (Stanford School of Education)

Distance Learning in the Classroom

There are several ways that a student can utilize both synchronous and asynchronous options to ensure their instructional goals are being met. They should be able to participate in a variety of ways in order to earn the instructional time needed to make educational progress.

We have researched evidence-based practices across the country to codify some terms that we will use when identifying an instructional approach under Distance Education.

Blended Learning: A formal learning activity that involves a tight integration of synchronous instruction delivered online and in class. It combines in-class learning with online instruction as a collective whole. Blended Learning allows instructors to base in-class instruction on online observations and base online assignments on in-class observations (EdTech Center @ World Education, 2022)

Flex Learning: A formal learning activity that gives participants the choice of attending a synchronous class in person or virtually for direct class hours. Flex Learning allows instructors to include students to participate virtually or in-person. It allows students the flexibility to either attend face-to-face class or attend that same class virtually. (Christiansen Institute, 2022)

Hybrid Learning: A formal learning activity that involves synchronous face-to-face or remote class plus distance learning curriculum. The two components are NOT fully aligned, and students are NOT required to participate in both. Hybrid Learning allows students to not only participate in synchronous classes, but also gives them the option of working on distance learning curriculum outside of class time. (EdTech Center @ World Education, 2022)

Remote Learning: A formal learning activity that involves a group of participants engaging with an instructor at the same time. This is often referred to as synchronous learning. Remote Learning is delivered through the use of tools such as video conferencing, live chat, webinars, etc. (EdTech Center @ World Education, 2022)

Distance Learning Participant Descriptions for Federal Reporting

A “distance learner,” for federal reporting purposes, is a participant, with at least 12 direct hours, in distance education and who has more proxy contact hours than direct contact hours at the end of the PY. These participants are reported annually on relevant NRS reporting tables.

A “participant with proxy contact hours” is a participant who engages in distance learning and has completed at least one proxy contact hour. A participant with proxy contact hours will not be counted as a distance learner unless the total number of proxy contact hours exceeds the total number of direct contact hours.

A “non-distance learner” is a participant who has fewer proxy contact hours than direct contact hours or no proxy hours at all.

Testing Distance Learning Participants

Participants enrolled in distance learning classes must be tested according to the same policies and procedures as participants who are not enrolled in distance learning classes, as outlined in the Testing Guide. Tests for distance learning participants must be administered face-to-face or through virtual/remote proctored exams following the test publishers' guidelines, unless an Alternative Placement is being used.

NRS Posttesting

All participants engaged in distance learning courses who were pretested with an NRS-approved test will be posttested after the same amount of instructional time as other participants, as outlined in the Testing Guide. Both direct contact hours and proxy contact hours are counted to calculate the amount of instructional time required before posttesting.

AEL providers can administer pre-and posttests to measure MSG of distance education participants for NRS reporting in two ways: in person, at a secured, proctored program site that meets the requirements of this Testing Guide, or through virtual proctoring. Programs that choose to use virtual proctoring can use only NRS-approved tests for which the test publisher has established procedures for virtual administration of the test. The test publisher procedures on virtual proctoring will address such topics as the proper identification of the student, test security, training requirements for test proctors, technology requirements, and procedures for retesting should virtual administration of the test be interrupted.

Requirement for Direct Contact Hours

Participants in distance learning must have at least 12 hours of direct contact hours before they can be counted for federal reporting purposes. Direct contact hours involve interaction between the participant and program staff in real time. Direct contact hours can be a combination of direct face-to-face contact as well as contact through phone, video, teleconference, or online communication in which the identity of the participant and the amount of time expended on the activity can be verified. Live online discussions, telephone conference calls, and live video broadcasts to remote locations are examples of direct contact hours that are reportable under this definition.

Proxy Contact Hours

In addition to direct contact hours, programs may also report proxy contact hours to track time participants spend in distance learning activities. Proxy contact hours differ from direct contact hours in that the identity of the participant and/or the exact amount of time spent on a learning activity cannot always be verified. Proxy contact

hours are tied to an approved curriculum for distance learning and are entered into TEAMS separately from direct contact hours. All proxy contact hours must be documented using the method described by the approved distance learning curriculum.

Distance Learning Curriculum Models

To determine a participant's proxy contact hours, a program must use an approved distance learning curriculum that employs one of the following models:

1. **Clock Time Model**—Assigns proxy contact hours based on the time that a participant is connected to or engaged in an online or stand-alone software program that tracks time.

Clock time model curricula electronically track the time the participant spends interacting with instructional material and stops counting idle time after a preset period of inactivity.

2. **Teacher Certification Model**—Assigns a predetermined number of proxy contact hours for each activity completed at an acceptable level of proficiency, as verified by the instructor.

Proxy contact hours for teacher certification model curricula are awarded based on the teacher's certification of participant's completion of assignments. Teachers may award full proxy hour credit if the assignment is completed and demonstrates competence in the teacher's professional judgment. Teachers may award half of the full proxy hour credit if the assignment is only partially completed but still demonstrates competence in the teacher's professional judgment. Assignments that do not demonstrate competence must be resubmitted by the participants to be counted for proxy hour credit.

3. **Learner Mastery Model**—Assigns a predetermined number of proxy contact hours based on learner mastery of each lesson or unit in the distance curriculum.

Proxy contact hours for learner mastery model curricula are awarded based on a passing score on a content test for a particular assignment, lesson, or unit. The passing rate is set at a minimum of 70 percent unless otherwise recommended during the curriculum approval process.

Distance Learning Provider Curriculum Approval Process

Each distance learning curriculum must be approved by TWC before implementation and before proxy contact hours can be reported. The [list of distance learning curricula](#)

[authorized to enter proxy hours in TEAMS](#), with associated models used for calculating proxy contact hours, is posted on the [TCALL website](#).

Distance Education curricula for which proxy contact hours are to be calculated must first meet criteria established by TWC. Curriculum providers must complete the [Distance Learning Curriculum Survey](#) first, and then must conduct a pilot for the distance learning curriculum approval committee. Once TWC accepts the pilot results and curriculum survey, the distance learning curriculum is added to the list of TWC-approved distance learning curricula authorized to enter proxy hours in TEAMS.

Distance learning curricula that employ the clock time model must stop counting time after a specified number of idle minutes. TWC will approve the number of minutes that is allowed before the program stops counting time.

Approval for distance learning curricula that employ teacher certification and learner mastery models will require a pilot to determine recommendations for the number of proxy contact hours that can be awarded to distance learning participants.

Entering Distance Learning Classes and Hours in the Data Management System (TEAMS)

All required NRS data elements must be recorded in TEAMS for distance learners and participants with proxy contact hours. For data to be reported on NRS federal reporting tables, 12 or more direct contact hours and a test are required.

When creating a distance learning class in TEAMS, it is necessary to identify the curriculum and the model used for calculating proxy contact hours. Once identified as a distance learning class in TEAMS, participants can be assigned, and both direct contact hours and proxy contact hours can be recorded.

If curricula following the teacher certification model or learner mastery model are deployed, direct contact hours may not be counted for lessons or activities taken directly from the content of the curriculum, since total proxy contact hours are preassigned for these lessons or activities. However, any direct contact hours for activities outside the curriculum may still be counted, including registration, posttesting, and face-to-face instruction that is supplemental to the distance learning curriculum.

Reporting Instructional Hours

Providers must report all instructional hours in TEAMS. Classes that have been identified as distance learning classes in TEAMS will permit programs to record proxy contact hours and direct contact hours separately.

Distance Learning Program Plan

All AEL providers offering distance learning classes must develop and maintain a distance learning plan, which must be available for review at TWC's request. Providers may have a single plan that includes subcontractors and partner agencies, or they may oversee multiple program plans that consortium members and subcontractors develop themselves.

The distance learning plan is first developed during participation in Module 3 of the Distance Learning Academy. Program leadership must maintain the plan, with revisions as necessary, to accommodate changes in the delivery of distance courses, including the addition of new distance learning curricula, new sites, new technology, and/or new distance learning providers.

A copy of the Distance Learning Plan can be found on the [TCALL website](#).

Grantees may serve individuals who reside outside of their service area if specifically identified in their Distance Education Plan and agreed upon through coordination with area Grantee(s) in which the student resides. Duplicated enrollments will be monitored closely by TWC.

Required Training for Distance Learning Staff

As part of the professional development requirements outlined in the [Staff Professional Development Requirements](#) section, Module 1 of the Distance Learning Academy is required for key administrative staff, teachers, and support staff members who are engaged in distance learning, including any instructor assigned to a class that reports proxy contact hours in TEAMS.

Module 1 is an introductory course that explains the state guidance for distance learning in Texas and how distance learning is tracked, documented, and entered into TEAMS. Module 1 must be completed before engaging in distance education.

Module 2 of the Distance Learning Academy is not required but is highly recommended before selecting an approved distance learning curriculum.

Module 3 covers best practices for developing and implementing a distance learning program that is specific to the needs of AEL customers. By the end of Module 3, participants will have completed either a detailed analysis of their current distance learning plan or a draft of a new plan. Module 3 is required for all Distance Learning Leads or others who develop, modify, or are otherwise responsible for the professional development plan.

Module 4 is recommended for all staff members who collect, enter, or use distance learning reports and remit proxy hours into TEAMS.

TWC also recommends taking the Professional Development Portal Training, AEL Fundamentals: Overview of Distance Learning in Texas, and TEAMS Overview.