



K12 *focus*



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Fast Forward: Virtual Platforms Post-Pandemic

Illinois School Districts have returned from spring break and, for the most part, have returned to expanded in person learning in some capacity or are planning to do so in the near future. While many of our parents are breathing a sigh of relief, our administrators are talking about the benefits of the virtual platform for some students and adults and asking - how do we keep this going, even just for the kids who need it.

School Districts are currently operating their virtual platforms pursuant to Section 10-20.56 of the School Code (105 ILCS 5/10-20.56), which allows School Districts to offer e-learning in two circumstances: (1) during a gubernatorial disaster proclamation under 10-30 of the School Code (105 ILCS 5/10-30) or (2) instead of emergency days when the School District has adopted an e-learning plan that has been approved by its Regional Office of Education. Illinois currently lives under successive gubernatorial disaster proclamations that

qualify and can continue with remote platforms as long as those continue.

However, the Covid positivity rate will drop as people become vaccinated. Eventually, the disaster proclamation will lift. How do we continue the benefits of a virtual platform within our current legal framework when that happens? School Districts have options. And the options are not mutually exclusive. School Districts can use one or all of the options provided in the School Code to build the virtual option that suits them best.

Option 1: Remote Learning Plans

For the School Districts that want to offer remote learning just to those students that really thrived on that platform, the School Code has an option for developing Remote Learning Plans pursuant to a Remote Educational Program under 10-29 of the School Code (105 ILCS 5/10-29). In order to offer this program, the School District must adopt a policy that creates criteria for

participation in the program, a process for approving participation in the program, a system for determining the number of clock hours for the program, a process for developing remote educational plans, and any other procedures the School District determines necessary. For PRESS subscribers, a model of this policy can be found as Policy No. 6:185.

In addition to the policy, each student participating in the remote educational program must have a Remote Learning Plan. The plan must include:

- specific achievement goals for a student
- assessments that will be used to monitor progress
- a description of progress reports provided to the school district and the students parent or guardian
- expectations, processes and schedules for interaction between teacher and student
- a description of family responsibilities
- a description of how the plan will be delivered consistent with the student's IEP, if applicable
- a description of procedures for participation in extracurricular activities
- identification of the responsible adult who will supervise the program with an acknowledgement that they will only engage in non-teaching duties
- identification of the administrator who will oversee the remote program
- the term of participation
- the location where the program will be delivered and
- certification by the school that the program complies with all requirements of the school code.

A student's participation in the program is supposed to be limited to 12 months, but

the statute does provide the District discretion to extend that if it determines that the program will best serve the student's needs.

In the event a School District does adopt a policy under this section, they must file the policy with ISBE and provide ISBE with data regarding student participation. ISBE may, at its discretion, evaluate the remote educational programs in the State.

Option 2: Competency Based Education Pilot

For School Districts that want to expand virtual learning options beyond the individual remote learning plans in Option 1, the Competency Pilot may be an option to consider. The Competency Based Education Pilot Program is part of the Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act (110 ILCS 148/1 et. seq.) passed in 2016. While it initially only applied to high schools, ISBE worked to expand the legislation to elementary grades in 2018 so now all School Districts may participate in the pilot program.

The core principle behind a competency-based program is that a School District replaces a seat time and course-based graduation and matriculation requirement with a requirement for mastery of certain competencies. School districts that participate in the pilot program have the ability to outline those competencies based on the statute and guidance given by ISBE in the plan they submit to the State. The intended outcome of competency-based education is stronger 21st century skills for the students participating ahead of their college and career pathways.

One of the many benefits to the pilot program is that School Districts participating in the program have the ability to waive a number of School Code provisions, including the seat time requirement. A School District participating in the Competency Pilot could waive the requirement that

students participate in person and include in their plan a broader, virtual platform as part of its competency-based program. The School District could use the virtual platform exclusively, intermittently, or only for the students that most benefited from the program, depending on how the virtual platform best meets the outcomes set forth in their Competency Pilot Plan. This strategy gives School Districts the ultimate flexibility to use virtual learning to their greatest benefit.

Option 3: Alternative Learning Opportunity Programs

Article 13B of the School Code allows School Districts to develop Alternative Learning Opportunity Programs (ALOPs) for students at risk of academic failure. These programs provide a flexible, standards-based learning environment centered around innovative and varied instructional strategies. Oftentimes, in order to provide the variety of coursework to match students interests in these programs, virtual coursework is utilized. Nothing prevents a School District from incorporating a virtual platform into a student's student success plan in an ALOP.

In order to establish a SLOP, a School District either has to seek approval for an ALOP through ISBE or has to contract with a Regional Office of Education that already has approval for an ALOP. Once established, the ALOP can serve students in grades four through twelve who are considered at risk of educational failure and who demonstrate a need for educational support or social services beyond those that the regular school program provides. A student enrolled in an ALOP may participate until the age of 21.

Other Uses for a Virtual Platform

Beyond the options for establishing or expanding virtual instruction, there are a number of uses for virtual platforms that will benefit school districts as we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, home hospital instruction will benefit from the use of virtual platforms. Students on home hospital instruction may be able to Zoom into their regular classes now and have more peer-to-peer interaction than the 5 hours per week of tutoring that the School Code requires. While the School Code does not require us to increase or change home hospital instruction, parent expectations will necessitate it in a number of places. Plus, giving students this type of classroom access while homebound is good for kids and relatively inexpensive compared to paying substitutes to provide tutoring for at least five hours per week.










There are benefits to adults for virtual platforms as well. Professional development via virtual platform has been very successful this year. Teachers appreciate the ability to Zoom into professional development opportunities during planning times or after school, avoiding the cost and time of travel. IEP meetings via virtual platform have also been wildly successful. Parents and staff alike rave about the productivity of these meetings and School Districts have generally seen an uptick in parent participation in IEP development.

Regardless of the way in which your School District approaches a virtual platforms in the future, or how much Zoom fatigue we all have right now, virtual learning in some form is likely here to stay.

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