

# Introduction to Independent Study

**I**ndependent study is an alternative to classroom instruction consistent with a school district's course of study and is not an alternative curriculum. It provides individual students with a choice of ways to acquire the values, skills, and knowledge all students\* should gain as verified in a written agreement. Independent study can be part of, be separate from, or be in addition to a regular classroom program.

## **A** Overview and Purpose

Independent study is an *instructional strategy* (not a categorical program) that responds to an individual's needs and styles of learning. A contractual agreement is drawn among the certificated teacher as the general instructional supervisor, the student, and, if a minor, his or her parent, guardian, or caregiver\*\* and any other persons who may be directly involved in the student's learning program. The written agreement sets educational objectives and addresses activities and personnel to be involved, resources to be used, and a method to

evaluate successful completion of the agreement. The agreement must adhere to school board policy and legal requirements.

Independent study is an optional educational alternative, available to students from kindergarten through high school, that is meant to respond to the student's specific educational needs, interests, aptitudes, and abilities within the confines of school board policy. As a recognized alternative to regular classroom study, *the independent study option is expected to be equal or superior in quality to classroom instruction.*

\*In this manual, no distinction is made between pupils and students. However, in legal references, the term *pupils* generally refers to persons enrolled in kindergarten through grade twelve, and *students* generally refers to persons enrolled in adult education.

\*\*The term *caregiver*, used throughout this manual, is defined at Section 6550 of the *Family Code* (see Appendix A, A-20).

Instruction through independent study:

1. Allows students to study at their own pace within the limits of compulsory attendance requirements
2. Creates a bridge between the school and the community
3. Challenges each student to excel in his or her area of special interest and abilities
4. Provides an alternative for students to achieve competency and mastery in basic skills
5. Allows children to be educated at home
6. Encourages the student’s resourcefulness
7. Facilitates the student’s active participation in his or her own education
8. Offers real flexibility in the design of an educational program, including the grouping of independent study students to focus on common educational objectives
9. Offers effective educational choices to students and families

Participation in independent study must be *voluntary*: a choice made by the student, parent, guardian, or caregiver, and the teachers—not an administrative decision of last resort (see Appendix A, *Education Code* Section 51747(c)(7)). Attendance records are based on a student’s work within the terms and conditions of his or her written agreement and not on traditional “seat-time.” In independent study the student’s performance, measured by the terms in the agreement, is converted by the supervising teacher into school days. The computed school days are reported as if the student were physically in attendance. (See Chapter 8 for a detailed explanation.) Therefore, in addition to the requirements of compulsory school attendance, independent study must be the voluntary choice of each student, and each student must be motivated to study on his or her own as prescribed by the agreement. These are essential components for a student’s progress and educational success.

## **B** Legal Basis in California

For easy reference Appendix A cites the relevant sections of the *Education Code* and the *California Code of Regulations, Title 5*, that autho-

rize independent study. Legal references are also included in context, but the basic references are noted below:

### *Education Code*

17289	Exemptions for facilities used for independent study; requirements; duration of exemption
44865	Qualifications for home teachers and teachers in special classes and schools; consent to assignment
46300(e)	[Authority for claiming independent study ADA]
46300.1	Independent studies; school district apportionments for certain pupils prohibited
46300.2	Community school and independent study ADA apportionment of funds; residence requirements
46300.4	Independent study pupils; eligible adult education coursework
46300.6	Restrictions on apportionment on funds for independent study program pupils
46300.7	Permission of parents or guardians of independent study program pupils; requirements
47612.5	Independent study in charter schools
48340	Legislative intent; proposals and procedures [pupil attendance]
48663	Minimum school day; attendance credit; calculation of additional funding
48916.1	Educational program requirements for expelled students
51225.3(b)	Mandated alternative
51745–	
51749.5	Article 5.5, Independent Study: basic reference
51745	Independent study authorized; curriculum; restrictions
51745.1	Report on pregnant and parenting teens exemption
51745.6	Ratio of independent study pupils to certificated employees responsible for independent study
51746	Services and resources
51747	Apportionments for independent study pupils, policy requirements
51747.3	Restrictions on apportionments
51747.5	Coordination, evaluation, and supervision of independent study; apportionment credit
51748	Written records for apportionments
51749	Statewide profile of independent study pupils
51749.3	Rules and regulations

52000(e)	Improvement of K–12 education: legislative intent
52015	School improvement plan components
52017	Secondary schools: additional components
52206	[GATE] Program approaches; minimum time; academic component
52522	Alternative [adult] instructional delivery; approval; expenditures; regulations
52523	Adult education as supplement for high school curriculum; criteria
56026	Individuals with exceptional needs

*California Code of Regulations, Title 5*

11700	Definitions (independent study)
11701	District responsibilities
11701.5	Equitable Provision of Resources and Services
11702	Requirements for agreements
11703	Records

## **C** Independent Study: A Response to Student Needs

The effort to make public schools in California more responsive to each student’s needs has led to the development of a number of optional and mandated alternatives to traditional classroom instruction, including full-time independent study as a permissible form of school attendance. The Legislature has taken initiative in this effort as indicated in *Education Code* Section 51225.3(b). Together with parents, students, community members, school board members, and educators, including especially the California Consortium for Independent Study—the professional association of educators concerned with independent study—the California Department of Education has been assisting in that effort by fostering growth and quality.

## **D** Independent Study Activities

In full-time independent study, students may work alone, in a group, or in some combination of group and individual work. Instructional strategies may include high school or college courses in the classroom or laboratory, work as an intern or participation in some other form of experience-based learning program, and what are normally

deemed extracurricular activities. These can include the purposes identified in *Education Code* Section 51745(a)(1–5) and others as follows:

1. In-depth research in a specific area of interest
2. Special assignments extending the content of a regular school subject
3. Instruction in a subject not currently available in the regular school curriculum (This option may help to meet graduation requirements, to extend the traditional curriculum, or to resolve scheduling problems.)
4. A home independent study option (home study) in which parents and students enter into an agreement with a school for independent study
5. One-on-one study through high school courses sponsored by university extensions or other authorized sources
6. Individualized instruction for persons who experience difficulty in adapting to or attending a regular school
7. Additional instruction for students having difficulty in meeting district proficiency standards
8. Participatory and life-skills experiences associated with career or employment preparation
9. Academic experiences directly associated with community-based situations in which the student applies and demonstrates his or her academic skills, knowledge, and understandings
10. Continuing and special study during travel, including travel during vacations, travel for temporary employment, and travel for curricular purposes
11. Volunteer community service programs that support and strengthen the student’s achievement
12. Involvement with individuals in the community or at home which supports and strengthens the student’s achievement because of the willingness of those persons to participate

## **E** Forms of Independent Study

Because of the flexible nature of independent study, each school authority has the opportunity to develop independent study options in its own way.

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Parents and students may also develop alternative forms of independent study and propose them to the responsible educator or school board. The options are based on the kinds of students being served. The following are some of the ways in which independent study is organized:

1. School-within-a-school
2. District or county alternative in a community location
3. School-based independent study offered part-time and full-time
4. Countywide home-based independent study offered by the county superintendent of schools
5. District dropout prevention centers at selected community sites
6. Curricular enrichment options offered to high school students with special abilities and interests, scheduling problems, or individual needs that cannot be met in the regular program
7. Alternative school-based independent study, on- or off-site
8. Some combination of the above

Independent study can be operated on a traditional school calendar, with a summer school option for eligible students, or on a year-round calendar within a year-round school. Students must have the option of a classroom setting for a full program (not just one period or part of a day) at the time independent study is made available. This option must be continuously available (not just at the time independent study is chosen) should the student decide to transfer from independent study. The classroom setting option can be offered by the county office of education if the district and county have a formal agreement that has the effect of providing the student with a program that is equivalent to what is offered in the school of residence.

## **F** Students Who May Benefit from Independent Study

The primary aim of independent study is to offer a means of individualizing the educational plan for pupils whose needs may be met best through study outside the regular classroom setting. All

pupils who are motivated to achieve educationally as well as or better than they would in the regular classroom may choose independent study.

Independent study is not for everyone. It is not necessarily appropriate for every pupil because some do not possess the prerequisites for success in independent study. The prerequisites for a pupil's success in independent study include factors such as the ability to receive instructions and information from an instructor who may not be present. Usually that means the ability to read quite well or to have someone who can read well close enough to help when needed.

Another prerequisite is possession of sufficient self-discipline or self-direction to remain focused on a learning task long enough to reach specific, agreed-on objectives, such as a study assignment. This kind of self-discipline is a fairly complex behavior that reflects both aptitude and acquired skills and attitudes. However, for small children who are using the home study option of independent study, direction may have to be supplied by a parent or recognized parent-substitute.

Independent study is especially appropriate for students who are characterized by certain learning styles and modalities, particularly those that are not common in a highly structured classroom situation. Consequently, certain student assessment and counseling services must be available for the wise and appropriate selection of students. California law mandates the following:

- No pupil shall be required to participate in independent study (*Education Code* Section 51747(c)(7)).
- Not more than 10 percent of the students enrolled in an opportunity school or program, or a continuation high school, shall be eligible for independent study. A student who is pregnant or is a parent and primary caregiver for one or more of his or her children shall not be counted within the 10 percent cap. (*Education Code* Section 51745(b)).
- No individual with exceptional needs, as defined in *Education Code* Section 56026, may participate in independent study unless his or her individualized educational program (IEP) specifically provides for that participation (*Education Code* Section 51745(c)).

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- No temporarily disabled pupil may receive individual instruction pursuant to *Education Code* Section 48206.3 through independent study (*Education Code* Section 51745(d)). However, if the temporarily disabled pupil’s parents and the district(s) agree, the pupil may receive instruction through independent study instead of the “home and hospital” instruction provided pursuant to *Education Code* Section 48206.3.

The parents, guardians, or caregivers of pupils requesting independent study should recognize that independent study at the elementary level must emphasize a commitment on the part of the pupils’ parent(s), guardians, or caregivers. At the secondary level the pupil must make the major commitment, assisted or supported as necessary by parents and others who may assist directly with instruction. Adults in adult independent study must make the major commitment themselves.

Refer to Chapter 3 for further identification of the kinds of students who may benefit from engaging in independent study.

### Suggested Resources

The following California Department of Education publications will be useful to anyone

considering whether or not to establish independent study or seeking to improve existing services. All items may be obtained from the Educational Options Office, Education Support Systems Division, California Department of Education, (916) 322-5012.

- Self-Assessment of Independent Study: Legal Compliance. (See Chapter 13 of this manual.)
- Quality Indicators for Alternative Education Programs in California Public Schools. This document is in the form of a rating instrument usable in program self-assessment.

Assistance and information may also be obtained from the California Consortium for Independent Study through the members of its board and regional representatives. Current contact information about the incumbents may be obtained from the CCIS Web site at <http://www.ccis.org>; or the CCIS Executive Assistant at telephone and FAX (916) 683-6316; or e-mail: [ccisexec@xi.netcom.com](mailto:ccisexec@xi.netcom.com).

Assistance on legal matters may be obtained from the Legal Office, Department of Education, at (916) 657-2453. Assistance on attendance accounting issues may be obtained from the School Fiscal Services Division at (916) 327-0857.