

INDEPENDENT STUDY ESSENTIALS

A Complete Guide for Educators on
Program Design and Success



School
Pathways



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01

KEY QUESTIONS TO OUTLINE YOUR INDEPENDENT STUDY PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Independent Study (IS) and flexible learning environments have become an integral part of education as the space continues to evolve and innovate in response to learner needs, environmental variables, and new educational approaches. Even more so, in California specifically, almost every district in the state now has an Independent Study option to offer some variation on remote or hybrid learning.

As defined by the [California Department of Education](#), it is important to note that Independent Study is “an alternative to classroom instruction consistent with a local educational agency’s course of study and is not an alternative curriculum.” That second part is key; IS is not a secondary or simpler path but an equitable alternative learning option—not without its unique challenges either.

Thus it is crucial that administrators, educators, and other key stakeholders design and evolve their Independent Study and online programs to deliver the best learning environment for their students.

That's why School Pathways has created this Independent Study Essentials series to address the biggest topics we get questions about in the field of IS, virtual, and hybrid learning.

In each segment, we will share advice from educators who are deeply versed in Independent Study, and we hope this series can serve as a resource for others creating or updating their own IS programs. Our first topic covers five questions to help you devise your own program-wide structure and organization for Independent Study.

Subsequent parts will focus on the onboarding process for IS and virtual learning, curriculum planning and selection, and maintaining student engagement and re-engagement intervention practices.

We would also like to give a special thanks to the educators who helped inform this series and are featured throughout: Dr. Lesley Clifton, CCIS Co-Executive Director and Principal at Escondido Charter High School; Machele Kilgore, CCIS Co-Executive Director and Alternative Education Principal at Orange County DOE; J.J. Lewis, Superintendent & CEO of Compass Charter Schools; Justin Lim, Online Learning Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA) at El Monte Union High School District; and Dave Meyer, Chief Academic Officer at The Classical Academies.

Turning Tides and Continued Growth Post-Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a spark for the growth of Independent Study and virtual learning by introducing more students and families to alternative schooling models. When distance learning was instated as an emergency measure in 2020, many viewed virtual learning as temporary. Still, as more time has passed, many students have decided to stay in IS programs because of the support and flexibility it provides. With these additional groups joining the many learners enrolled in Independent Study programs even before the pandemic, we are seeing a new wave in non-traditional learning.

The opportunities and customization within IS can seem endless, which is both exciting for students and parents and sometimes overwhelming for educators. Understanding the history of IS in California can be a helpful starting place to gauge how and why virtual and hybrid offerings have evolved and what components will be most relevant for your program—because every program will be different.

History of Independent Study in California

According to the California Department of Education (CDE), the first laws allowing Independent Study were enacted in 1976. IS was initially intended to serve students whose specialized activities or medical necessities kept them from attending the physical classroom day in and day out. This included child actors, aspiring Olympic athletes, and families on the move for a parent or guardian's work. Although some of the students who participate in IS still fit these criteria, the range of students currently enrolled in IS has greatly diversified as Independent Study programs have evolved in terms of what they offer and how they run.

Now, many students are enrolling because they benefit from the personalized pacing, to expand beyond subjects usually taught at their school, or because the traditional five days a week, in-person just doesn't work for them. With Independent Study today, students can have multiple teachers for different subjects, participate in club activities and social electives, and sign up for concurrent enrollment within a community college. Some programs even have tracks that allow students to attend physical school several days a week while the structure of the courses and how they learn are still built around the IS model.

On top of the natural school-led changes to arise within Independent Study, many laws and regulations have been introduced in the last forty-six years that mandate adjustments to these programs. One notable update was the implementation of [AB 130](#) in the fall of 2021, followed by AB 167 and AB 181.

These bills mandate more regulated opportunities for live interaction and synchronous instruction, tracking specific variables that indicate chronic disengagement from students, an outlined plan for executing tiered re-engagement with learners and their guardians, updates to master agreements, and more. While aspects of these policies help direct programs to think about their students on an individual level and monitor engagement, they've also brought administrative burdens that influence workflows within any given program.

Questions to Help Define Your Own Independent Study or Virtual Program

Many people with limited Independent Study experience have the misconception that it is just one student full-time at home, supervised by one teacher. Even though this is the case for some, it's not for everyone. The CDE has outlined the fundamental [Elements of Exemplary Independent Study](#) with requirements on teacher quality, course materials, and admission processes. Following these guidelines is an essential baseline checklist and will make it easier for educators to have a starting point in defining their programs. Yet beyond that, there are a number of crucial questions to ask oneself when building or updating an IS program in order to tailor it to your specific community.

1. Who makes up the population of students and families/guardians that you will serve?

Every community is unique, and it's important to understand who will be enrolled in your program to design a system that will work for those individuals. Many educators recommend evaluating both student needs and parent and family needs. This is key because many students rely on at-home support to help guide them through schoolwork. So if those parent or guardian needs are not being met it can negatively impact the learner.

Do you have many students that work professionally alongside schooling? Do you have learners with specific IEPs? What students might be entering your program needing to catch up to their grade level? What about learners who may not have the at-home support mentioned above? Honing in on these answers will go a long way toward designing a program that caters to student and teacher success.



2. What is your school's learning philosophy or style?

Every school or program has a central learning philosophy, whether it's sticking to the A-G requirements or charting a newer path. It's essential to have that central approach clearly identified and outlined in order to instill those values in your teachers, staff, and student base. For example, Dr. Lesley Clifton, Principal at from Escondido Charter HS, shares how her school is classically inspired. Students enter an initial grammar stage, which consists of building their memorization skills and learning the background for everything they will learn in the future. Then comes the logic stage, when students begin to have some pushback and start to question what they are being taught. This allows students to build their critical thinking skills and learn on a deeper level. Finally comes the rhetoric stage, where students take everything they've learned and apply it in the classroom and in real life.

Another prevalent philosophy is project-based learning. This is often taught in high-tech schools where students are given more hands-on experience from which they ask questions and find answers through doing. Or again, other schools are more in alignment with Common Core. The point being that every program should have a central learning style from which curriculum, learning settings, and communications grow.

3. How will your staff support the number of students that are enrolled?

While it may seem like a simple question, having an honest assessment of your program's scope and learner capacity is a key early step in setting the scene for your program. This involves surveying your staff and teachers, subject matter experts, and physical location (if relevant) to understand how much you're trying to tackle and thus how you will be able to do it.

For example, offering a variety of learning opportunities is extremely beneficial to students, but you don't want to overstretch to the point where execution gets compromised. Certain teachers will likely need to become experts in several curriculum sources in order to help guide students in their learning. Identifying a dedicated staff member to continuously look into best practices and pay attention to how you can improve student learning is also something you can instate to help continually assess and evolve your program.



4. Is your program completely virtual, hybrid, or some combination, and what will those options look like?

There are benefits to different models and combinations when it comes to Independent Study. Are you looking to provide maximum time flexibility for students to partake in work or extracurricular activities? How much do you want or need to offer one-to-one guided support from teachers through an in-person class or drop-in hours? The important thing to know about Independent Study is that it doesn't just have to be one student with one teacher on a computer screen all the time. As long as 80% of a student's work is done in an Independent Study setting, programs can offer other things, including classes on campus, tutoring, mentoring, extracurriculars, and more.

Educators may also adjust the support they provide based on the different circumstances that students are experiencing. For example, if many students' parents tend to work late hours, then a program might also provide more in-person support on campus after school hours. Or if courses that are more difficult for families to support at home, like science or math, are being covered, you can plan to provide tutoring or partner with other local learning centers to fill that need.

Again, the answer will often boil down to what your students might need and prefer and what options you can provide to cast a net to catch different variations.

5. Which curriculum is the best fit, and how will it be deployed?

Most schools utilize a Learning Management System (LMS) or digital content provider to deliver content and assignments to students. Justin Lim, Online Learning TOSA at El Monte Union High School District, also prioritizes access to physical textbooks, noting that different formats work for different learners, and it's important not just to assume that online and paperless are always better. Partnering with a local community college can be another way to broaden course topics and class styles.

Finding your balance between digital and traditional curriculum also helps determine whether the IS program in question is entirely virtual or hybrid.

Again, this both touches on the idea that you need to understand your student population in order to provide what works for them. It also acknowledges that no matter who you serve, it will include a diversity of learning styles, so having options for your learners is always a benefit. We will touch more on curriculum options in part three of this series.

Key Takeaways

The history, laws, and different variables that make up the Independent Study landscape are helpful touchstones to ground any IS, virtual or hybrid program. When it comes to further defining or evolving your Independent Study program, you must also understand the unique population of learners you teach, instill a central learning philosophy, get grounded about how to allocate staffing and resources, and know that there are still a number of in-person and human-to-human components you can incorporate into your program as a whole.





02

HOW TO ONBOARD STUDENTS, FAMILIES, AND STAFF FOR VIRTUAL LEARNING

In this second chapter of School Pathways' Independent Study Essentials Series we will discuss principles and best practices for designing an onboarding process for Independent Study, virtual, and hybrid learning.

Why Onboarding is Essential—Especially with Virtual Learning

Having an onboarding plan when preparing for a new school year plays a vital role in ensuring collective success for students, teachers, and schools as a whole. Whether someone is brand new to a program or just entering a new grade, they won't have all the tools and information to get going on their own. Introducing how your IS program will work, outlining what students can expect throughout their learning journey, and building person-to-person connections will allow all parties to understand expectations, effectively organize, and become comfortable asking questions and seeking guidance.

Therefore it is important to plan activities grounded in deliberate strategies that will make the onboarding process as beneficial as possible and start everyone off on the best foot. While it may not be one-size-fits-all you can apply general best practices and principles on different scales.

Setting Expectations Even Before Enrollment

Part of addressing student needs includes having a clear description of your program's operations from the start. This lets interested parties know what is expected of them even before signing up. The enrollment application should present students with a document that fully describes the program and includes information such as how content will be delivered and relevant online providers that will be utilized.

Beyond logistics, understanding your program goals and the key qualities you would like to encourage in students is another step to help you get ahead even before the learning begins. J.J. Lewis, Superintendent & CEO of [Compass Charter Schools](#), explains how his organization truly dug into outlining its vision for scholars in order to communicate that to prospective students. To start, Compass partnered with the [Learner-Centered Collaborative](#), an organization that works with educators “to define whole-learner outcomes, design meaningful learning experiences, and create the enabling conditions for their unique journey to inclusive and equitable learner-centered education.” The schools also created scholar profiles so that prospective students can envision their paths as scholars.

Lewis' staff engaged in an ideation process with their Scholar Leadership Council and Parent Advisory Council, after which staff settled on a set of profiles. Now, when someone new joins campus, they're going to have a clear understanding of what it is Compass hopes they'll take away from their learning experience.

Even without that level of time and resources, creating a structured understanding of the scholar experience is an excellent way to set a roadmap for staff to understand their mission and relationship with students and for potential students to better envision what their time at school will bring.

Preparing Teachers and Staff in an Independent Study Environment

When onboarding for the new school year, it is just as important that staff members feel as supported as incoming students. Machele Kilgore, CCIS Co-Executive Director and Alternative Education Principal at Orange County DOE, recommends talking to other educators during the onboarding process and throughout the school year to create a sense of community and support. That could look like an internal mentor for a new staff member or reaching out to people in a similar position at other schools across your state to see how they are successfully running and managing their own IS programs. Kilgore also recommends that programs conduct weekly staff meetings for teachers to discuss the student trends they're seeing and come up with ways to accommodate and guide students who might be struggling. Again, these meetings kick off before the school year even begins.

Programs should also prioritize creating opportunities for teachers and staff to meet with students one-on-one prior to the start of the school year. More on that to come, but it's important to note the significance of strong human-to-human relationships. Manageable roster sizes also enable educators to invest in building connections with students and their at-home support network.

Onboarding Students for Virtual Learning

One benchmark best practice that many Independent Study programs do to help facilitate student onboarding is holding a beginning of the year event. This can start with some essentials, as Dr. Lesley Clifton explains. Students may meet an intake coordinator to get the basics and a tour, followed by administrator and principal introductions to learn more about the program philosophy and expectations, then meet with teachers to actually break down the student handbook, class setup, and further details. This is a great way to ensure that students, parents, and educators are on the same page and no parties are left out of the loop.

Beyond that, Dave Meyer, Chief Academic Officer at [The Classical Academies](#), shares about their new school year conference, “Jumpstart.” Students and families get to attend breakout groups spanning logistics like curriculum-specific how-tos and pedagogy-based instructional practices like how to differentiate between two children in one home or students with different learning needs.

Similarly, two weeks before classes begin, Compass Charter Schools host their “Weeks of Welcome.” In addition to topics focused on the academic programs, they hold specific sessions highlighting different support programs such as their engagement department, counseling services, and special education. Through these breakout meetings, staff members are able to do a deep dive into specific support options for scholars and families that might otherwise go unnoticed. Regardless of scale, this type of orientation allows students and families to get a further overview of the program, ask questions, and meet teachers and administrators to start building individual relationships. These are also [recorded and shared with families](#) who may have missed the session or who enroll later in the school year.

Another excellent tip for preparing the student body before the school year begins is sending periodic summer emails with educational information and resources. This is a great way to make sure those expectations are set in the lead-up to an orientation event.



Face-to-Face Introductions and Onboarding At-Home Support Systems

Clifton also emphasizes that providing opportunities for students and guardians to interact with staff prior to beginning an Independent Study program greatly increases the chance of student success.

Connecting a face to their teacher establishes a relationship beyond a teacher name that assigns grades through a screen. We know that relationship building may be tricky based on the size of your program, but offering anything from one-on-one meetings to breakout sessions that detail support systems and facilitate face-to-face hellos will go a long way.

Parent/guardian teacher conferences are another great tool to get specific about at-home support systems. For Independent Study students, especially those in lower grade levels, it's important for those at-home support systems to really understand their contribution to this equation. Families sometimes act as part-time instructors themselves; even if not, they play an essential role as coaches and mentors throughout a student's educational career. So when you conduct meetings to break down the courses, syllabus, and master agreement, make sure the parents or guardians are present and engaged. You can even schedule dedicated time to meet just with the relevant guardians.

Ensure that students and parents understand all of your accountability systems and what may happen if they start falling behind and need assistance. In most learning environments, but especially with Independent Study, virtual, or hybrid— the presence of an at-home support system will significantly impact a learner's success. So it's essential to treat onboarding as a holistic and integrated process with all parties involved.



Key Takeaways

Deliberate effort during the onboarding process can lead to night and day results for setting expectations and preparing students, staff, and family members. The idea of onboarding starts even before enrollment, and hosting in-person events prior to the school year proves especially beneficial for an independent study, virtual, or hybrid program.





03

CURRICULUM EVALUATION AND PLANNING FOR INDEPENDENT STUDY

In this third section of School Pathways' Independent Study Essentials Series, we will cover how to plan and select the right curriculum for your programs, including a deep dive into the different curriculum formats and providers most relevant to virtual and personalized learning.

The Importance of Curriculum Planning

Without a designated learning structure tied to goals and outcomes, classes would just be a bunch of odd facts and non-sequiturs that learners likely wouldn't even understand. Thus an intentional and core curriculum is needed to fuel the cumulative growth and understanding at the root of education. As highlighted in Learning Forward's 2020 report "Do Your Materials Measure Up?" curriculum plays an especially impactful role in independent study, remote, and hybrid learning settings. With less constant oversight by an instructor, the benefits (or detriments) of particular content get amplified.

Yet one can approach curriculum planning in a myriad of ways. As we've continued to emphasize in this series, the right approach will vary from program to program depending on your staff, resources, and student needs. So what's involved in that evaluation process?

Working with Physical and Digital Curricula

When developing your curriculum plan, one of the biggest questions will be about the format of content delivery: physical or digital? The instinct for many new programs may be to veer toward digital delivery, but the right content fit will vary depending on the turnaround time for rolling out the curriculum, student learning preferences, and overall quality.

Digital curriculum, however, is often a more customizable collection of resources where you can mix and match videos, images, audio, interactive media, and online practice problems. Some benefits of using digital curriculum are that it allows educators to provide more personalized education, prepares students to be familiar with the digital world we live in, and, for some, can increase learning engagement.

It is often advantageous to use a combination of physical and digital resources to offer a full suite of learning and practice options for students. For example, The Classical Academies used to have courses accessed and delivered solely online in their Learning Management System (LMS) Schoology.

Yet many families wanted the option to work without logging on to a computer. So Classical worked with curriculum writers to create unit documents made up of daily lessons for each unit that can still be done in Schoology but can also be printed and completed in a workbook format. Having this physical option allows students to reduce the time they have to spend on a screen. It also provides flexibility for working outside their home, like learning at a park. The daily lessons will even still list out or link to additional digital resources if students want practice beyond the core curriculum—it's all about that blend and providing options.

Evaluating The Best Approach for Curriculum Selection

Justin Lim, at El Monte Union High School District, shares that a great way to start evaluating your curriculum plan is by asking: what are the must-haves? For example, any curriculum must comply with the board policy for your school or district. It is also a requirement that the education offered through Independent Study is equitable to other classroom-based tracks, so if the traditional schooling offers University of California (UC) approved courses, those also need to be available in IS. You will also need highly qualified, credentialed teachers for each subject, so your immediate staffing may dictate what courses are internally led versus supported through external resources. Whatever that list of “must haves” may be, it will help you rule options in or out right off the bat and will help direct whether you need to go with an out-of-the-box solution that can deliver on the must-haves with a shorter turnaround versus a longer-term plan to build your own home-grown curriculum and check each of those boxes over time.

While not a must-have, another critical component that Lim outlines is the usability and physical accessibility of any given coursework. With Independent Study especially, so much of a student's success comes down to building personal good habits and discipline because there is less oversight from an instructor with the student working some percentage of the time independently. So leaning toward the options your students most respond to from a practical standpoint goes a long way— even more so than whether specific curricula types might be considered “more engaging” or interactive. Yes, you want a class to be interesting and exciting, but if you can't get your students to regularly log on to a given platform and click to locate a video, they are going to drop off. Lowering that initial barrier to opening a book or getting to your destination in as few clicks as possible will translate to learner success.

Selecting an Out-of-the-Box Provider to Meet Your Program Needs

The most significant benefit to using an out-of-the-box curriculum provider is that it should be able to check your must-haves off the list right out of the gate. The content will comply with state standards, and you can filter by offerings that meet the types of courses that you need. Using a content provider also takes the weight off your program creating curriculum, which may not be feasible given staff resources or the implementation timeframe. That's why these programs have become popular with many Independent Study programs. Common names among IS programs are Edgenuity, Edmentum, Apex Learning, Odysseyware, Accelerate Education, and Florida Virtual School. There are, of course, also more traditional curricula providers like Pearson, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and McGraw Hill who offer a mix of physical textbooks as well as eTextbooks and study tools.

Some curricula providers will better fit your teacher's and student's needs than others. J.J Lewis shares that Compass has found success by using curriculum review committees of staff members to make selections. These committees evaluate different providers, looking at the objective pros, cons, and requirements and applying a subjective lens of their specific program's learning style, goals, and functionality as well as factoring in the team members tasked with facilitating the courses. The committee then makes a final recommendation on what provider(s) to use. As they roll out each provider, there's also a feedback loop for evaluating progress which may lead staff to add other supplemental platforms, products, or services.

Developing Your Own Custom Curricula

Developing your own curriculum or supplementing an out-of-the-box provider with custom materials also has its benefits. Dr. Lesley Clifton, Principal of Escondido Charter High School, believes that a huge value-add to creating your own curriculum is allowing students to see their teachers on-screen instead of learning solely through a second-party provider. This facilitates relationship-building between students and teachers, which helps nurture long-term success. Creating custom curriculum also helps ensure their IS program is fully aligned with their classroom-based programs.

Again, the goal is to ensure the curriculum is equal in quality and quantity to what is taught in the classroom. Building it yourself allows for a more customizable and granular approach to achieve that.

When starting the process of creating your own curriculum, Clifton suggests sitting down in departments (like grade level teams or however your program is structured) to build a framework. What do you want to teach each student in each grade level over the course of the year? What are the topics, the skills students will need, and the objectives for what they walk away with? Aligning that framework with common core standards, or whatever standards your school aligns with, will be necessary, but, because you're creating your own curriculum, you can also add and mix up the order of things to fit your school's unique learning philosophy. Each grade's framework should also account for what is taught in the grade levels before and after to make sure that the learning flows.

From there, you break the framework into a sequence of specific units representing an estimated number of hours students will spend in each unit. Clifton notes that a backward design model can be helpful here where educators start with an essential question for each unit, identify what assessment will be given to make sure a student meets that overall goal, and then proceed to map out what activities and instruction will be completed to get the learners to the goal. Keep in mind that if you're making your own videos, the scripting and production will take extra time—so plan ahead.

For example, Dave Meyer, explains that nine of their teachers are currently creating over 900 video lessons that focus on guiding students through math. These daily instructional videos consist of teachers going over the key points of each lesson in 10-12 minute long clips and are being made available this year to families and students to refresh their knowledge outside of the core curricula.

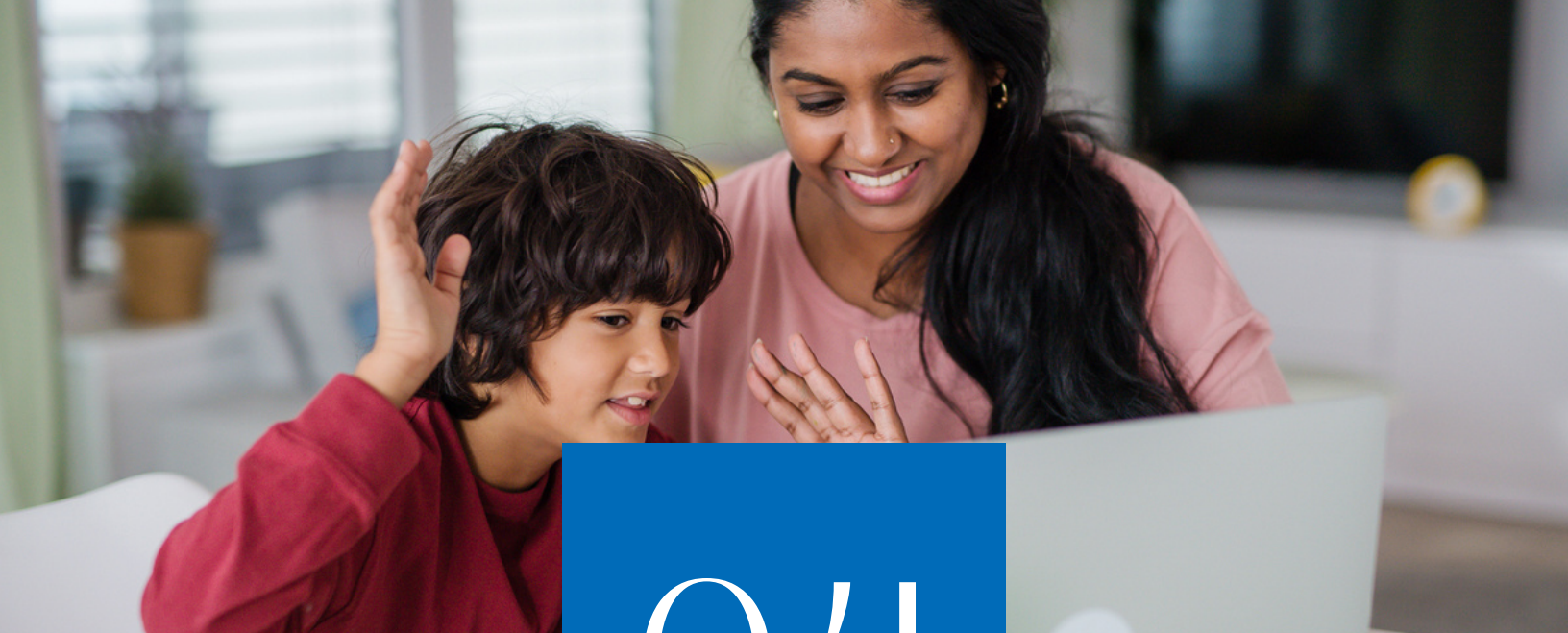
Picking an LMS is also key for housing your curriculum and facilitating organized access for students. Providers like [Google Classroom](#), [Canvas](#), [Schoolology](#), and [Agilix Buzz](#) allow you to upload all of your custom course materials like videos and pdfs and structure each unit with introductions or overviews before diving into the content.

Once you are in a place where you feel that your curriculum is ready to go, make sure to monitor students during the school year through assessments and tests to see if they are effectively taking in the information. If you notice students struggling to grasp concepts, do not hesitate to make adjustments to your curriculum plan.

Key Takeaways

You can go in multiple directions with curriculum planning and provider selection. Still, the biggest key will always be catering to your program's specific students and educators. If it feels too complex or cumbersome for students to access the curriculum, then you've already lost. So cater formats and delivery—spanning physical and digital—to what your students will actually use and find engaging. An out-of-the-box provider can be a great way to get up and running fast while ensuring that you're meeting common core standards. Building your own curriculum allows for deeper customization to fit your learning philosophy and personalization like showcasing your actual teachers and school identity.





04

FOSTERING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND INTERVENTION PRACTICES IN IS AND ONLINE LEARNING

In the fourth and final chapter of School Pathways' Independent Study Essentials Series, we will discuss how to foster student engagement and dive into intervention practices you can utilize if students begin to fall behind.

Challenges of Student Engagement in a Virtual Setting

Maintaining high student engagement is important in any classroom setting, but a virtual learning environment requires that students and educators take it to the next level. According to the [Online Learning Consortium](#), student engagement increases student satisfaction, enhances the motivation to learn, reduces feelings of isolation, and improves student performance in online courses.

It's no surprise that there are a lot of challenges when it comes to keeping students engaged when they are not physically in the classroom full-time. Since there is less constant oversight from teachers and other school officials, it can be easier for students to become disengaged and fly under the radar if the proper processes are not in place. This is why evolving regulations and recent bills in the last two years—namely California's [AB 130](#)—have specifically addressed requirements for tracking engagement and initiating re-engagement.

Even with these new regulations and laws, they are just a starting point for virtual and IS programs. Schools still need to outline their processes and be deliberate about proactively fueling engagement, tracking engagement to know when students need check-ins/support, and how to follow up and re-engage a learner (thus setting them up for success).

How to Fuel High Engagement Among Independent Study Students

There are many ways to be proactive about keeping students tuned in, having fun, and thriving to avoid disengagement. One avenue is developing multiple channels for supplemental support and learning outside of the core coursework and curriculum. Dave Meyer shares how his schools (The Classical Academies) developed a new offering known as WIN (What I Need) time. This actually began as a teacher-led project at one specific campus and has spread to other programs based on its success. The schedule for WIN time depends on the school and the student's schedule.

Still, it's typically a time built into the student's weekly schedule (sometimes even daily) where the students get to vary their learning based on either the teacher's recommendation or the student's selection. So the time can be used for supplemental support. For example: if one teacher is having the highest success with a particular subject, students who might be struggling and are typically with other teachers can report to that teacher to relearn those areas of weakness. Conversely, if a student is already doing well, WIN time can be used to further stretch their learning and provide enrichment through an extra challenge.

Similarly, Compass Charter Schools has developed a Learning Lab program that consists of interactive group sessions led by their instructional staff. J.J. Lewis elaborates that their Learning Labs are conducted via Zoom, asking scholars to have cameras on, and utilizing breakout rooms, as appropriate. Scholars show up to the Learning Lab having learned at their own pace, so it's not necessarily about rehashing curriculum. It's about supplementing concepts from a unit and engaging scholars in authentic, live learning by doing different prompts and activities to check for understanding through AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) strategies. Lewis explains that options like this ensure that Independent Study and virtual learning don't feel like a siloed experience. A commitment to communal opportunities and more hands-on learning like this correlates to overall student engagement.

Another avenue to support students and help them stay engaged is offering virtual support as a proactive option for students or families to reach out when they get stuck instead of getting discouraged and dropping off. Classical Academies, for example, is starting a virtual helpline for math in particular. The plan is to have a virtual teacher online during key times of the day and evening so that a parent who might be struggling to teach a specific concept to a student can click the helpline button and launch them into a live Zoom room where they can get immediate help with the task at hand. J.J. Lewis adds that having support outside of typical school hours can also be beneficial since Independent Study and virtual learning naturally means that a substantial portion of learners may complete their coursework in the evenings or over the weekends. Partnering with a third-party tutoring provider can be a good way for programs to offer this type of off-hour support.

Not every engagement tactic has to be a larger-scale initiative. Machele Kilgore, Alternative Education Principal at Orange County DOE, shares that one simple yet effective strategy is teaching and implementing “Zoom etiquette”. At Kilgore’s program, students must have their cameras turned on while in class unless they have a specified excuse, students are expected to contribute to the discussion if called on, and if students are late more than three times, they may lose grade points or lose the ability to be in that class. Communicating and following this etiquette helps keep students alert for immediate learning success and builds helpful habits for success moving forward in their education journey. As always, it’s also essential to check in with students about how they are accessing their coursework and their understanding of their learning technology (like how even to submit assignments) to resolve any more straightforward practical blockers before they become a sustained issue.

How to Recognize and Surface Unengaged Students

Educators should consistently monitor student engagement levels during the school year so they can recognize when outreach or intervention is needed. It’s important to note that disengagement can take many forms beyond a student simply not showing up for a class or completing an assignment. For example, disengagement can look like a student no longer participating in class by not asking or answering questions or speaking in group settings. Another example could be a student’s scores decreasing over time. Perhaps that’s because they’re not understanding the material even though they’re showing up and putting in the time. Some good indicators that will help you recognize these trends are: how long it takes students to complete a task, whether assignments are being completed at all, if students are making academic progress, and whether the camera is often turned off during virtual sessions. If you start to notice that any students are falling behind in one or several of these categories, it is typically time to intervene.

Software solutions can be especially helpful in tracking student engagement and surfacing disengagement. For example, School Pathways’ Personalized Learning System (PLS) provides a centralized database of student engagement and activity data for teachers, including completed assignments, time spent in an LMS, synchronous instruction occurrences, and live interactions.

An at-a-glance roster view makes it easy for teachers to determine which students are actively progressing and which are tuned out and need more assistance in the class. PLS also automatically populates a [Tiered Reengagement List](#) based on criteria from recent trailer bills. This view includes an outline of re-engagement steps to be followed once a student is added. Teachers can even send re-engagement emails directly through the platform to alert families and students of missed work and lack of engagement.

Effective Re-engagement and Intervention Practices

The first core principle of effective re-engagement is clear communication. It's important to ensure students and families understand the accountability systems that are in place long before any related triggers get pulled. Dr. Lesley Clifton, explains that her program shares a Google spreadsheet with parents to give them access to everything they need to know about their student's progress, the potential types of notifications they might receive throughout the school year and what each would mean. When guardians are familiar with the steps in tiered-reengagement before anything comes up, it helps them register the call-to-action down the line. Meyer emphasizes that the parent communication piece is especially vital for younger students because of their more prominent role in facilitating learning. He explains that schools need to actively listen to and support those at-home care providers to make sure they, in turn, can support the students in getting re-engaged.

Along this line, Justin Lim, Online Learning Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA), makes sure to impart the value of empathy and personalized care in communications. Understandably, teachers themselves have hard days, and it can sometimes feel frustrating when dealing with a student or family who has been unresponsive. Lim says it's important to remember that many students have found themselves in Independent Study because they come from families of high need. They've often had negative experiences with schools and teachers in the past, which may contribute to current resistance and hesitation.

That's why it's extra important that any outreach conducted to unengaged students needs to fulfill a high level of trust, positive intent, and empathy – giving students and families the benefit of the doubt and fostering the best possible scenario to promote re-engagement and not alienation. Nothing exists in a vacuum when it comes to education, especially not virtual and hybrid learning, so approaching intervention practices from a holistic view will always be a benefit.

Schools can further support students by using a multi-tiered system of support, also known as MTSS. A multi-tiered system of support is “a framework with a tiered infrastructure that uses data to help match academic and social-emotional behavior assessment and instructional resources to each and every student's needs.” Every school can create its own components for the MTSS framework. Tiered Reengagement mandated by AB 130 addressed one level of engagement tracking and a starter outreach plan. Still, many schools and districts are beginning to implement MTSS in their programs because it addresses the needs of a wide variety of students and recommends outreach on a more granular level. The goal is to ensure that no one will be left behind if they are struggling to adjust to an IS program. Lower stages of interventions might include email outreach or a quick phone call checking in and prompting the student to update their activity or jump back in. A middle level might be setting an individual plan for improvement and a parent conference. In more extreme cases where interventions don't lead to improvement, schools may need to reassess if Independent Study is the right fit for learning or if the student might do better in a different setting.

When it comes to planning those specific interventions, Kilgore illuminates that her program conducts weekly staff meetings where teachers discuss student trends, what engagement levels they're seeing, and what they can do to accommodate any current issues. In addition to staff meetings, they will also hold specific student intervention team meetings for any disengaged learners. During this meeting, the staff develops a personalized action plan to help the student in that unique moment. A meeting with the student then occurs where educators relay the plan, provide any new accommodations, and set up later evaluations to track improvement over a set period of time.

J.J. Lewis also explains how Compass brought additional tutors on staff to support the three tiers of MTSS. He notes that while working with third-party tutors is an option and may be the best course depending on a school's resources, having tutors be on staff adds an extra level of personalization and relationship building. Compass now has a Scholar Success Coordinator to help facilitate tutors to match the needs of their tier one and tier two MTSS support levels.

Justin Lim also encourages using SMART Goals, where educators set specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-sensitive goals. The benefits of this practice are that teachers can assess progress, adjust their efforts for each student, and decide to give more or less autonomy based on individual student engagement and needs. Lim also makes the goal setting a collaborative process with the student, so the student walks away really feeling like the goal is a match. Having that initial buy-in from the student on a goal that meets all the SMART qualifications will better ensure follow through and act like a domino effect starting the path toward improvement.

Final Takeaways

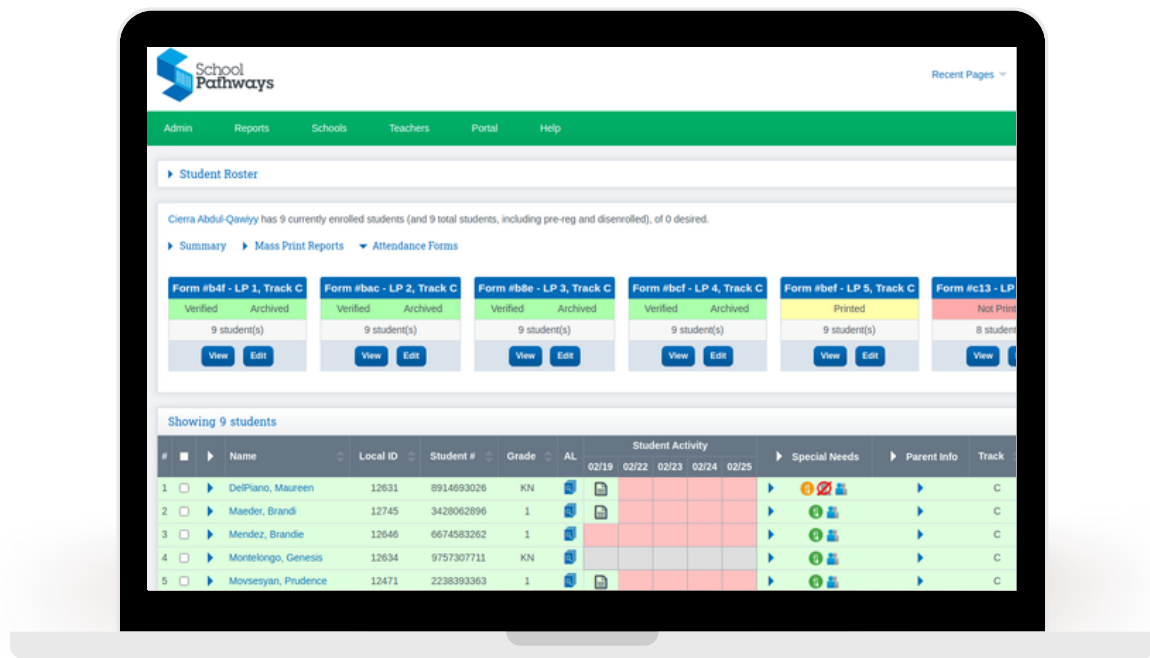
Maintaining student engagement throughout the school year can be difficult, but it is all made possible if you break it down into individual factors. Knowing the right time to intervene and how to best do so is especially crucial to a student's success. So when going about re-engagement, make sure that students, families, and staff are communicating with a mutual understanding and know the proper steps to take.

Thank you for reading our guide to Independent Study Essentials. We've covered the process of outlining your IS program, onboarding students and staff for success in virtual learning, curriculum planning and assessment, and best practices for student engagement and intervention.



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