Independent Study Learning Network
Summary Brief

July 2023

During and since the pandemic, schools and educational authorities have expanded their measures to support Independent Study (IS) as an alternative to classroom-based learning. These include online platforms for accessing learning materials, virtual classrooms, video conferencing for teacher-student interactions, and digital submissions of assignments. Many local educational agencies (LEAs) made a substantial effort in providing students and families with resources such as textbooks, laptops, and/or internet access to students.

Independent Study is an alternative education program that offers students the opportunity to pursue their academics outside of the traditional classroom setting. LEAs have the flexibility to structure their independent study program based on the needs of the students they are serving by offering:

1) **Personalized Learning:** IS allows students to tailor their education to their specific needs.
2) **Flexible scheduling:** IS programs often provide flexibility in terms of scheduling.
3) **Individualized Support**: While IS encourages self-directed learning, students typically have access to a teacher who provides guidance, support, and feedback. These educators often meet regularly with students to monitor their progress, answer questions, and provide additional resources.
4) **Variety of learning resources:** IS programs can incorporate a wide range of resources to support learning, including textbooks, online resources, educational software, and other materials relevant to their curriculum.

The California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) was established by the California State Legislature and the Office of the Governor as part of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) legislation that redesigned California's school

funding formulas to ensure that additional resources could be allocated to support the needs of historically underserved student groups. The statutory charge of the CCEE is to "advise and assist" school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools achieve the goals and objectives in their Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) and to support local educational agencies identify and address gaps in student performance.

In the Fall of 2021, based on feedback and input that CCEE was receiving about the impact that COVID-19 was having on Independent Study programs across the state, CCEE invited interested districts to engage in a series of facilitated discussions to capture the questions and need for clarification around the interpretation of statute guiding Independent Study in California.

Independent Study Background
Independent Study is provided as an alternative instructional strategy to serve students whose needs preclude regular classroom attendance (California EC 51744-51749.6). Per the California Department of Education (CDE) Independent Study Program [Summary](#), Independent Study was originally designed to serve child actors, aspiring Olympic athletes, and other pupils whose schedules precluded regular classroom attendance. Following the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, many families chose alternative options such as Independent Study to ensure the safety and well-being of their children. Independent Study provided a way for students to continue their education remotely while reducing the parents safety concerns due to the COVID virus. In the 2022-23 school year, CDE created additional flexibilities such as, short term independent study (EC 51747 and EC 51749) in the way that districts could offer Independent Study as an alternative pathway to providing classroom instruction to students.

Many districts throughout the state of California had questions and concerns with implementation of Long Term and Short Term Independent Study. This created an opportunity for the CCEE to take an active role in bringing together practitioners in a professional learning network to collaborate, exchange ideas, and learn from one another. The Professional Learning Network would be a place to share best practices, address challenges, and share strategies for effective implementation of Independent Study to best meet the needs of our students and families.

Independent Study Professional Learning Network Overview
The Independent Study Professional Network (ISPLN) meetings demonstrated CCEEs commitment to continuous improvement and recognition of the unique

needs and challenges faced by counties, districts, and charter schools. During the 2021-22 school year, CCEE brought together thirteen participants comprising county, district, and charter personnel who were leading the Independent Study program within their organizations. By 2022-23, our participant numbers had more than doubled as a result of our recruitment activities, recommendations, and referrals from existing participants. Our ISPLN meetings provided participants with:

- A safe space that focused on collaboration, created a sense of community, mutual trust, sharing of ideas, highlighting effective implementation, and enhancing the implementation of Independent Study Programs.
- Opportunities for collaboration between like-minded peers, where they were able to engage in discussion, and share valuable program insights.
- Regular (monthly) meeting spaces, after which notes, references, and relevant resources were disseminated

Participants in turn, used the knowledge and information gained with the personnel from within their district to make necessary adjustments to their Independent Study implementation.

Our approach to examining the issue of Independent Study is grounded in CCEE's theory of action, which examines capacity building through the lens of change practices impacting knowledge (e.g., new content, information, tools, and processes) and shifts in mindset (e.g., beliefs, values, and implicit biases) to change the way systems do things (outputs) and ultimately improve outcomes for students

Statewide Implications
Although the participating districts had different levels of implementation and unique needs, common themes emerged in both the challenges they were experiencing as well as some of the best practices that they were implementing to better serve student needs:

- **Independent Policy Updates**: There appeared to be inconsistencies with understanding and interpreting the policy recommendations. For example, IS participants had questions regarding how best to implement some of the policy recommendations from Assembly Bill AB 130. Assembly Bill AB 130 addresses changes to independent study requirements such as, IS offering requirements, a provision for waivers of the offering requirements, as well as required parent notification, pupil-parent-educator conferences, and additions to board policies and written agreements.

- **Offer Quarterly Independent Study CDE Meetings** so that district leads can receive information, recommendations, and guidance from a State representative. These quarterly meetings could provide district leads the opportunity to interact with CDE representatives to ensure clear understanding of policy updates and be given the opportunity to ask clarifying questions. These meetings could also provide opportunities to share and align district resources, education networks, and professional organizations focused on independent study.
- **Encourage the sharing of information** by developing a list of local Independent Study contact information, in order to use it as a resource to collaborate and to build relationships with nearby districts. By developing and sharing a list of local Independent Study contact information, districts can create a valuable resource for building relationships and facilitating collaboration among nearby districts. It serves as a starting point for initiating conversations, sharing best practices, and addressing common challenges, ultimately leading to improved outcomes for all districts involved.
- **Implement Outreach Campaigns** so that appropriate county, district, charter school independent study leads can be informed on updated policy changes and impact at a local level.
- **Continue building partnerships across the state**, including with county offices of education, to create a statewide professional learning infrastructure around Independent Study. This includes support in engaging with locales that have not yet been able to participate in learning activities, identifying their barriers to doing so, and providing thought partnership to address those barriers.
- **Collect feedback** from Independent Study county, district, and charter school leads across the State to identify opportunities to share best practices, areas of growth for the quality of individual IS programs as well as Independent Study as a statewide initiative,

Using the strategies above to focus on understanding variabilities in the implementation and quality of programming available through Independent Study programs across the State will be a priority in moving this work forward. By leveraging and promoting best practices currently occuring in the field of Independent study, we can facilitate its replication and contribute to the overall improvement of all independent study programs.