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## Online and Blended Learning Opportunities for Students for 2021-2022

### Purpose

With Vermont's transition out of a state of emergency and as supervisory unions and districts (SU/SDs) plan and prepare for the 2021-2022 academic year, this document serves to answer questions regarding online and blended learning pathways for students available through Vermont Virtual Learning Cooperative to SU/SDs for the coming academic year.

### Statutory and Regulatory Framework

State statute requires public schools to be "maintained and operated for ... 175 student attendance days," with at least 51% of the student body "recorded ... as in attendance" per day (16 V.S.A. § 1071(a)). State Board of Education rules establish the minimum number of hours that "constitute a school day" as being between 2 and 5.5 hours, depending upon grade level (Rule 2312.1). Alternatively, a cumulative total of between 10 and 27.5 "hours of instructional time" in a calendar week constitutes five school days (Rule 2312.1).

16 V.S.A. §941 describes Vermont's Flexible Pathways Initiative created to:

- (1) to encourage and support the creativity of school districts as they develop and expand high-quality educational experiences that are an integral part of secondary education in the evolving 21st Century classroom;*
- (2) to promote opportunities for Vermont students to achieve postsecondary readiness through high-quality educational experiences that acknowledge individual goals, learning styles, and abilities; and*
- (3) to increase the rates of secondary school completion and postsecondary continuation in Vermont.*

Additionally, State Board of Education rules establish that (bolded emphasis added):

*Schools must provide students the opportunity to experience learning through flexible and multiple pathways, including but not limited to career and technical education, **virtual learning**, work-based learning, service learning, dual enrollment, and early college. Learning must occur under the supervision of an appropriately licensed educator. Learning expectations must be aligned with state expectations and standards. Students must be allowed to demonstrate proficiency by presenting multiple types of evidence, including but not limited to teacher-or student-designed assessments, portfolios, performances, exhibitions and projects. (Rule 2120.2)*

However, the ways in which a district meets legal requirements related to student attendance might vary depending upon the mode of instruction or flexible learning pathways students

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engage in. For example, although 16 V.S.A. § 166(b)(6) prohibits paying public tuition funds to a fully online independent school (approved distance learning program), a school district may decide to supplement its academic offerings through online providers such as the Vermont Virtual Learning Cooperative that support high-quality instruction from licensed Vermont educators.

## **Student Attendance**

Schools will follow the normal regulatory framework for determining student attendance and student days. Attendance is generally determined by a student's physical presence in a school building's classroom for a certain number of hours.

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The Secretary of Education may “permit alternate methods of counting the cumulative instructional hours” provided that students do not lose instructional time and “related” educational programs, and the alternate method is “otherwise in the interests of the students and the district” (Rule 2312.2(b))

This regulatory flexibility for *whole school operational status* was utilized during the pandemic to support the implementation of hybrid learning. Specifically, the Agency provided an alternate method of counting student attendance through remote means, which in many cases allowed a minimum student contact to count as full attendance for the school day. This flexibility was legally possible only under the Governor's emergency order due to the pandemic at that time. Without an emergency executive order in place, the state is legally obligated to revert back to standing statutes and regulation. Accordingly, LEAs should not expect to receive this broad degree of flexibility during the 2021 school year.

In addition, during the pandemic districts were permitted to count inclement weather days as "attendance" days if remote learning was implemented, in accordance with the pandemic attendance guidelines. This will no longer be the case for the fall – inclement weather days such as snow days will need to be made up later in the year if necessary.

## **Remote Learning versus Online/Blended Learning**

During the emergency response districts moved to remote and hybrid teaching as an operational stance. While remote and hybrid operational dispositions are no longer all-school operational modes available to districts, remote and hybrid learning should be understood to be

distinct from the pre-existing flexible pathway of online/blended learning (also referred to as virtual learning).

### **What's the difference between remote learning and online/blended learning?**

Remote learning occurs when the district transitions the delivery of an on-campus course to an off-campus course, conducted through online learning or paper packets where necessary, due to an interruption of the delivery of face-to-face instruction (e.g., global pandemic). An online or blended course, however, has been purposely designed for online teaching using online learning design principles and teachers trained in the delivery of online instruction. ([Centre for Innovation in Teaching and Learning: Remote vs. Online Instruction](#))

### **Flexible Pathways**

Online/blended learning was utilized prior to the pandemic under the normal regulatory framework (e.g., flexible pathways) and may be utilized in the 2021-2022 academic year in accordance with normal rules and regulations. The pandemic has advanced the use of technology in our education system, and expanded State support of online and blended learning which is consistent with implementing our student-centered learning framework to promote a world-class public education system. For example, the Vermont Virtual Learning Cooperative (VTVLC) has expanded its capacity during the pandemic and will continue to offer continue to offer full-time and supplemental online/blended learning opportunities through its normal cooperative model. Through substantially expanded State funding support, every secondary school, CTE and AEL provider in the state has 10 free enrollments as a Partner School (without having to provide a teacher). Those secondary schools who choose to become Teaching Partner Schools and provide anywhere from at least 0.2 FTE teacher to 1.0 FTE teacher can earn an additional 30 to 190 enrollments, respectively. Elementary schools who choose to be Teaching Partner Schools who minimally offer 0.5 FTE teachers can support up to 10 full-time students. Specific details and program descriptions can be found on this [VTVLC programs overview](#) and through consultation with VTVLC.

### **Student-Centered Learning and Multi-Tiered System of Supports**

Student-centered decision-making for all students will be critical in district recovery planning efforts. For most students, returning to in-person learning will be a critical re-engagement strategy. However, SUs/SDs and schools should not ignore data and student/family reports on the efficacy of virtual learning for some students—virtual learning can both be a re-engagement strategy for some students and *sustain* student and family engagement over time.

Online and blended learning has been an historical flexible pathway in Vermont that has proven highly successful for certain students. There are a plethora of tools available to districts and schools to support a systemic process for [communicating and supporting flexible pathways](#) such as virtual learning, as well as to communicate and [evaluate student expectations and readiness](#) to participate in flexible pathways. School leaders and teams (e.g., ESTs) can offer students access to learning pathways supported by entities such as VTVLC that use licensed Vermont educators to deliver an array of instructional programming, and are encouraged to

continue making student-centered, data-informed decisions when preparing for, and during, the 2021-2022 school year.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### Q1: What options are available for K-6 and 7-12 students through VTVLC for the 2021-2022 school year? Is the CSO option available this year?

This year VTVLC learning options return to the previous [VTVLC cooperative model](#), with a few improvements such as a fulltime online option that schools can make available to their students and families who may need or benefit from it. These learning options do not require the same staffing structure as CSO, however those schools that are Teaching Partner Schools do have increased enrollments available to them which can be found on this [VTVLC Program Overview](#).

### Q2: But what about ADM if a student participates in this learning option?

In all cases, unless the family chooses to enroll in Home Study, ADM will stay with the school/SU. Depending on the status of the school as a teaching partner, the school/SU retains most of the ADM, including up to 100% for those schools/SUs who use earned partner seats. This makes offering full time learning options equitable, fair, and a win-win for SUs/schools, students, and families.

### VTVLC Figure: Example – Ninth Grade Student Comparison for Springfield SD

	On-Campus	Teaching Partner enrolled in VTVLC full time (using earned partner seats)	Teaching Partner enrolled in VTVLC full time (not using earned partner seats)	If school was a Non-Teaching Partner enrolled in VTVLC full time	If Student Became Home Study
ADM Stays with School	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
VTVLC Fees	\$0	\$0	\$2,400/yr	\$5,000/yr	\$6,500/yr
Equivalent Tuition Retained	\$18,700	\$18,700	\$18,700 - \$2,400 = \$16,300	\$18,700 - \$5,000 = \$13,700	\$0

### Q3: If schools are interested in offering this flexible learning pathway for their students, are they required to provide a full-time teacher or teachers?

VTVLC has lowered the barrier of entry for students to access online learning. It does NOT require the full-time investment of school or district teachers, or CSO Coordinators. However, Teaching Partner schools and districts (versus Non-Teaching Partner schools) that can contribute as little as a 0.2 FTE educator to the cooperative will have a significant advantage and access to free enrollments for their students. Again, please visit this overview of [VTVLC program offerings and cost structure](#) for specific details.

**Q4: Is this option available to all students?**

Online/Blended learning is considered one of many “flexible pathways” in Vermont. Consistent with our student-centered learning framework for education in Vermont, and new lessons learned through COVID, this pathway should be available to those students who benefit from the learning model for a multitude of potential reasons. As you reflect on your student data, and speak with students and families, this learning model may be identified as the best avenue for individual students’ success and as part of a personalized learning planning process. As you consider how to support individual student planning consistent with regulatory issues related to student attendance, prioritizing this option for students who may have health/medical vulnerabilities, have experienced improvements socially/behaviorally, and/or who have experienced academic gains or the benefits of a virtual experience previously or during COVID, are all examples of how this learning option could be an effective tool for schools and districts to support student-centered learning and engagement strategies and maintain compliance with existing statute and regulation.

**Q5: Aren’t all students required to be on campus/in-person in the fall?**

No. Consistent with Act 77, the Education Quality Standards, and based on the new learning that COVID has afforded us, schools and districts should make decisions and differentiate, as much as is practicable, based on what is best for individual students. (Districts need to be mindful that they remain obligated to meet ADM requirements and act accordingly, by tracking attendance in activities that are not in-person/on-campus, for example.).

**Q6: Are we required to offer a virtual option?**

No, but SUs/SDs and schools are required to provide to Vermont students “substantially equal access to quality basic education” ([16 V.S.A. §1](#)). The State has made a considerable investment to support schools and districts in offering online/blended flexible pathways to those students who need it to access their education and thrive. By restructuring the VT VLC model for the 2021-2022 school year -- in addition to the State covering the cost of annual partnerships for the second year in a row -- teaching and non-teaching partner districts can offer this learning option to those individual students who need it without the 100% staff contribution of the CSO model. This is a significant resource that SUs/SDs could leverage when contemplating the myriad demands on their systems and staff.

**Q7: Can my district use remote learning as a strategy to prevent loss of learning for students who are required to quarantine?**

Yes, so long as the provisions regarding attendance for the school as a whole are satisfied, as explained above. Districts should be mindful, as they have been throughout the pandemic, of inequitable access to fully online learning (as one remote learning option) when planning for this contingency.