

In Support of Adoption of an Independent Study Program by Mill Valley School District

June 2020

As part of its return-to-campus planning, Mill Valley School District needs to reinstate an **Independent Study program** to give families the choice and control they need to manage health risks of on-campus schooling while SARS-CoV-2 is circulating in the community and how to best cope with the mental health and learning impacts of schools' drastic but necessary measures of risk-management during the pandemic.

The Independent Study program is provided for, and its implementation detailed, in California Education Code California Education Code [EC] sections 51745–51749.3.

In an Independent study program, students remain enrolled in the district and follow the district curriculum. The district collects ADA apportionment (funding) for students as usual. It provides for individualization in instructional approaches.

Independent study students work independently, according to a written agreement and under the general supervision of a credentialed teacher or teachers. While independent study students follow the district-adopted curriculum and meet the district graduation requirements, independent study offers flexibility to meet individual student needs, interests, and styles of learning.

(Quoted from <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/eo/is/isprogramsummary.asp>)

Adoption of an independent study program occurs through School Board approval, and Board members are largely responsive to the recommendation of the superintendent.

An overview and details of the state's Independent Study program option are here:

California State Board of Education

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/eo/is/isprogramsummary.asp>

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/eo/is/index.asp>

Adoption of the Independent Study program by the district is needed for the following reasons:

1. The new realities of school life during COVID, including physical distancing, PPE, not touching, close monitoring of student movements, stringent routines and procedures and, inevitably, heightened emotions and an atmosphere of vigilance are likely to have negative emotional impact on some students such that anxiety and distress interfere with students' ability to learn on campus.
2. If, as is likely, students return to school in two cohorts and alternate periods of on-campus and off-campus attendance, it is likely that some students will experience

significant challenges with this model. This alternating model, in which all routines, settings, instructional approaches, etc., alternate back and forth, is likely to interfere with some students' ability to learn.

3. CDC and county departments of public health do not and will not maintain that returning to campus is "safe". Rather, these agencies make recommendations regarding the management of inherent risks of contracting SARS-CoV-2 in schools and the community. Ultimately, however, each family must make its own determination as to managing risk in light of their own vulnerabilities and other considerations. Without an Independent Study option that allows children to participate in schooling from home, families may have to leave the district (e.g., homeschool; attend a charter school) in order to manage their health risks. Families and the district would suffer in this scenario.
4. Inevitably, significant instructional time will be lost to the necessary risk-mitigation measures schools taken to make on-campus instruction possible. Exercising an option to engage in school entirely from home enables families to assure that their students will not experience loss in instructional time.
5. Every family should be offered by the district a well-structured, standardized approach to remaining at home for schooling. Without an Independent Study program, families with asthma, immunocrompromise, and other health conditions that entail greater risk associated with community spread of SARS-CoV-2 will feel they need to leave the district in order in order to exclusively distance-learn or, if the district is willing to negotiate an at-home scenario, families be burdened with the task of raising the communicating the need,negotiating with the district and individual teachers and administrators for individual programs of home study on their own.
6. There is a question as to whether districts that do not offer an Independent Study option will face risk-management issues pertaining to liability for exposure to SARS-CoV-2.
7. When the pandemic is over, there will be pent-up demand among families to travel: to reunite with loved ones, to participate in rituals of marriage and death, and the like. An Independent Study program enables the district to support these human needs for in-person connection.

MVSD should not only adopt an Independent Study program but also provide educational flexibility and support to families who need or choose to use the Independent Study program during the pandemic. Examples of flexibility and support from schools and the district could include the following:

- Be sensitive, accommodating, and supportive to single-parent families and families with two working parents and, most of all, families with children who have learning challenges

and families who are struggling with illness, loss, stress, reduced financial circumstances, or hunger;

- Provide ample work-assignment credit and recognition for teachers supervising students in the Independent Study program;
- Facilitate families' formation of learning groups or cohorts among students who are engaged in independent learning programs from home, in order to increase peer interaction in support of learning and student wellbeing;
- Allow for and promote the use of curriculum enhancements by families to accomplish differentiated instruction, under parents' guidance and with supervising teachers' approval;
- Facilitate independent-study students' interaction with specialists that the district would normally provide to the students if attending school on-campus;
- Support the formation of a parent-school partnership to support students using the Independent Study program and access to the program for parents who want it but face barriers;
- Facilitate fundraising by parents to channel financial support to the Independent Study Program, if needed.

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