

# Independent Study Program Toolkit

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**COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

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# I. Introduction

This document provides information that Local Education Agencies (LEAs) may use when establishing or expanding independent study programs.

Independent study allows high school students to pursue knowledge that is not offered in an existing course and with less supervision than is provided in a regular classroom setting. Successful completion of an independent study generally results in credit toward graduation.

There are no express provisions within the Pennsylvania Public School Code regarding independent study programs.

## A. Background

Independent study programs are designed to offer students an opportunity to further their knowledge in a topic that is not offered within the school's curriculum. Students elect to engage in an independent study; administrators do not mandate it as a decision of last resort. Students who choose an independent study must be self-motivated and able to meet all stated outcomes with minimal supervision. Generally, the student proposes a topic and outlines the way in which he/she will acquire and demonstrate the knowledge. A credentialed staff member is assigned to act as an advisor for the project.

State policy for independent study does not exist in Pennsylvania; however, it appears that most districts offer independent study to high school students only. Students choose independent study in lieu of attending a class. In other words, independent study is not used for scheduling purposes but rather is an opportunity for students to pursue knowledge that is not offered in an existing class. Further, independent study programs in Pennsylvania are not a full-time option nor do they override compulsory attendance requirements. Students in Pennsylvania who are unable to attend school due to health problems or other qualifying issues are offered homebound instruction<sup>1</sup>.

The number of credits assigned to an independent study is determined by the advisor or is stated in the district's school board policy. In either case, it is based on the nature and scope of the planned work.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, visit [Homebound Instruction in Pennsylvania](#)

## B. Research

Independent study is an instructional approach that puts the student in charge of his or her learning, allowing the student to select and study a topic in order to strengthen a college application, prepare for a future job, or pursue a personal interest.<sup>2</sup> Independent study responds to students' interests, aptitudes, and abilities within the confines of school board policy and allows students to learn at an accelerated or slower pace than is possible in a classroom setting. Independent study is especially appropriate for seniors who have exhausted the available course offerings in their desired area.

However, independent study is not a viable option for all students. In fact, an independent study may be more challenging than a traditional course because the student is working without peer support and is responsible for staying on track without teacher reminders or outlines. In California, where independent study is a full-time option, it "is expected to be equal or superior in quality to classroom instruction."<sup>3</sup> Those interested in pursuing independent study should ask themselves the following questions:<sup>4</sup>

1. How motivated am I?
2. Do I know what my curriculum will be?
3. Am I prepared to design my own course?
4. Do I have time to complete the work?
5. Am I able to work and learn alone?

The range of independent study topics is as broad and diverse as students' interests. The following are independent study examples from Phillips Academy Andover<sup>5</sup>:

1. English – The completion of a short novel that centers on youth, rejuvenation, and new horizons.
2. Psychology – Exploring attitudes toward eating disorders and how they adversely affect the treatment of eating disorder patients.
3. History – An examination of genocide in the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the work of those who spoke out against it, including Samantha Power.

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<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from [How to Take an Independent Study Class in High School](#), Posted on the Online SAT/ACT Prep Blog by Christine Sarikas, 4/16

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved from [California Department of Education, Introduction to Independent Study](#)

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from [How to Take an Independent Study Class in High School](#), Posted on the Online SAT/ACT Prep Blog by Christine Sarikas, 4/16

<sup>5</sup> Retrieved from Recent Examples of Student-Led Independent Study, Research and Presentations, Phillips Academy Andover

4. Foreign language – Through the reading of three novels and analysis of relevant films, tracing the concept of the prostitute in the pages of Arab literature, and the eyes of the culture itself.
5. Chemistry – Study the synthesis of organic materials and the reaction mechanisms behind the synthesis, including nucleophilic substitution, reactions involving enolates, cycloaddition reactions, and actions involving aromatic heterocycles.
6. Art – Create small-scale special effects in film, focusing primarily on Adobe After Effects, and briefly exploring the power of Autodesk Maya and/or 3D Studio Max.
7. Math/computer science – The learning of object oriented programming languages by familiarization with the programming language Objective C (the language of iPhone/iPod touch application development).

Data is unavailable to report the number of Pennsylvania students who engage in independent study each year. The six districts that were contacted for the purposes of obtaining data were unable to provide definitive numbers and reported that up to 10 students each year complete an independent study.

### **C. Policy**

Pennsylvania legislation does not address independent study programs. The development of such programs is accomplished at the local level where the school board's authority to approve the program exists. Further, it is the school board's authority to determine the credit that is awarded for the program based on students' performance.

## II. Program Guidance

### A. School-Level Implementation

This section includes information and suggestions for implementing effective independent study programs.

### B. Structuring Independent Study Programs

A review of high school independent study programs across the country indicate that the following components may be considered best practice:

1. A district's independent study program is clearly defined in writing and includes expectations, procedures, and assessment; the program has school board approval.
2. Independent study is not imposed on students; students elect to engage in this instructional approach.
3. Students propose the topic, learning objectives, and learning approach/activities.
4. The independent study is substantially equivalent to or exceeds the quality and quantity of classroom instruction. Students' work should reflect an alignment with academic standards.
5. A written agreement is developed and approved by the school board. All students engaging in independent study must complete and fulfill the agreement.
6. Independent study does not replace an existing course nor is it an alternative curriculum.
7. A credentialed staff member acts as the students' advisor throughout the independent study. If an independent study advisor is expected to have several advisees, he/she should have scheduled time to meet with each of the students or be provided with a stipend to meet with each of the students after school.
8. Students engaged in independent study should have ample opportunities to communicate with their advisor.

### C. Financial Considerations

Within Pennsylvania, there appears to be little to no cost associated with independent study programs.

### D. Student Admissions, Access, Supports

1. Fulfilling Equity Goals  
Independent study programs must be equally accessible to all students, provided they demonstrate the ability to work independently and are motivated to gain

knowledge in an area that is not offered through a school course. A written recommendation from at least one current teacher is advised. School districts should determine a minimum grade level for eligibility.

To ensure that all students have equal access, districts should sufficiently share the independent study program with parents and include it in the school's catalog of courses.

## 2. Student Supports

Students engaged in independent study have access to the existing services, resources, and equality of rights and privileges as other students. Students have ample access to their advisor as outlined in the independent study agreement that may include a combination of one-on-one meetings, email, and other forms of communication. The frequency of student-advisory meetings may be increased or decreased based on the advisor's assessment of progress.

# III. Resources

## A. Pennsylvania Program Examples

In Pennsylvania, many districts have an independent study program in place. Examples include the following:

### 1. Central York High School<sup>6</sup>

"The Independent Study Program is designed for students who have demonstrated a high degree of motivation and the ability to work independently, and who have interest in furthering their knowledge in a specific area. For a student to qualify for Independent Study, the student must have successfully completed all courses in the Core Academy, and have progressed to the Career Academy of his or her choice."

### 2. Conestoga High School<sup>7</sup>

As part of the district's "commitment to the empowerment of self-directed learners, independent study allows students to pursue topics not offered within the regular Conestoga High School curriculum. A preapproved Independent Study Agreement is a commitment between a student and a teacher that establishes learning outcomes, timeline of study and how the learning will be assessed. Typically, an independent study course is graded on an O, S, N, U basis and is awarded .25 or .5 credit.

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<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from [Central York School District Independent Study Program](#)

<sup>7</sup> Retrieved from [Conestoga School District Independent Study](#)



Students must consult a faculty member in the department from which an independent study is being sought, the school counselor, and his/her parent or guardian. It is then the student's responsibility to develop a proposal according to the outline on the back of this form. When the student has completed the proposal, an appointment must be made with an assistant principal to explain the purpose of the independent study."

### 3. Parkland School District<sup>8</sup>

Independent study programs are intended to supplement the curriculum already established by each of the major discipline areas at Parkland High School. An independent study is intended to encompass rigorous learning activities for students who have a strong desire to study a subject in depth. Students interested in securing an independent study must contact prospective teachers to collaborate on a proposed course outline including goals and objectives that must be accomplished by the end of the course. The independent study contract must also identify appropriate resource materials and define strategies by which the student can successfully master the stated objectives. The following guidelines must be followed when requesting independent study programs:

- a. Independent study programs will not be approved for courses that are already offered in the master schedule.
- b. Independent study programs will not be assigned a weighted grade unless the program being offered is an advanced placement or honors course not offered through the master schedule. Administrative approval is required for all independent study course requests.
- c. Independent study program contracts must be completed prior to the start of the semester in which the course is being taught.
- d. Only one independent study program will be approved for a student each semester.
- e. Independent study programs do not replace selected courses on a student's academic schedule. An independent study is considered an addition to the required courses needed for a complete academic schedule.

All independent study programs will operate under the supervision of a faculty member with prior written approval of the principal or counselor. Requests for independent study programs should be submitted to a school counselor during the regular registration period established for all course selections for the upcoming school year. Credit will be granted for the independent study program only if an approved contract is on file in the counseling office. Independent study program grades will be recorded each marking period and a final grade will appear on the student's high school transcript.

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<sup>8</sup> Retrieved from [Parkland School District Independent Study Programs](#)

#### 4. Pennsbury School District<sup>9</sup>

Independent study is a series of learning experiences, activities, and/or projects by self-motivated students who are eager to learn on their own with the supervision of a professional staff member. The student interested in independent study must be willing to accept responsibility, be intellectually curious, and have goals that extend beyond meeting minimum requirements in and out of school. In order to receive a grade all course work must be completed according to the course guide.

Independent study is utilized when a student has exhausted the available course offerings within the requested content area. By providing for the interest and needs of individuals, independent study allows students the opportunity to pursue topics, interests, or experiences beyond the present course offerings. In addition, independent study should broaden the students' horizons and offer them the opportunity to make valuable independent decisions.

All applications for independent study must be made by May 1. A student interested in independent study picks up the independent study information packet in the school counseling office.

Students are encouraged to discuss the independent study option with their school counselor before submitting an application. After reviewing this packet, a student completes the independent study application form and should identify the staff member being requested to serve as the mentor. The student submits the application form to his or her counselor. If the application falls within the approved parameters of independent study, the counselor forwards the form to the prospective staff member. If the counselor has concerns about the application, he or she will conference with the student.

After the application is forwarded to the staff member, he or she will decide whether to serve as the student's mentor for the independent study. Staff members are not obligated to participate in independent study and cannot be directed to provide independent study for students. If the staff member approves the application, he or she will forward the application to the curriculum coordinator for approval. Upon review the coordinator will return the application to the counselor for final review by the principal. If the application is declined at any level, the counselor will notify the student.

Students should keep in mind that because of illness, resignation, or retirements, there is no guarantee that a staff member will be able to fulfill the role of mentor in an independent study. In cases where the staff member is no longer available, the counselor will contact the student. The student will have to schedule a traditional course or pursue another mentor.

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<sup>9</sup> Retrieved from [Pennsbury School District Independent Study](#)

## B. Out-of-State Program Examples

Other states have similar independent study programs as illustrated by the following examples:

### 1. Montville Township High School, New Jersey<sup>10</sup>

The following is information taken directly from the Montville Township High School website: “The district promotes their independent study program as “an educational experience based on self-motivation, personal commitment, and in individualized approach to learning. It provides students with the opportunity to work in areas and in a depth that would be impossible in the regular classroom setting. Independent study is designed for those students who wish to pursue advanced or additional study in a particular subject area where they have exhausted all course offerings or the study of interest is not available through a course offering.” Further, independent study is available only to “students who have demonstrated academic or skill proficiencies, maturity of judgment, a strong motivation to learn, and self-reliance.” Students may engage in an independent study alone or with a group of students and the project must relate directly to at least one of the New Jersey core content standards. The following procedures are outlined for students:

- a. Students who are interested in pursuing independent study/research should discuss this with their counselor during course selection. The counselor will verify that the student qualifies for independent study by checking grades in the respective subject area. The student must have A’s and B’s (or high-performance indicators) in all related courses.
- b. The counselor will provide the student with the independent study application and explain the process.
- c. The student must recruit a teacher who is willing to advise and supervise his/her independent study. Teachers who assume this responsibility do so in addition to all their normal teaching responsibilities. This is a voluntary option for teachers and they are in no way obligated to participate. The student and teacher/advisor will work jointly to develop a plan for the independent study.
- d. The applicant and teacher/advisor will develop work and evaluative schedules in which the student’s independent study will be monitored from beginning to end.
- e. The applicant must fill out the independent study application in consultation with the teacher/advisor. The application must be typed. A copy of the plan, along with appropriate documentation, is to be given to the student’s school counselor after the application/proposal is complete with appropriate signatures (see deadline dates).

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<sup>10</sup> Retrieved from [Montville Township High School, New Jersey, Independent Study Program](#)

- f. The student must obtain the approval of his/her parents/guardians and the case manager (if applicable) before submitting to the school counselor. The school counselor will review the application to determine accuracy and that all information is complete before signing and submitting to the department supervisor. If the application is not complete and/or accurate, it will be returned to the student for revisions.
- g. The department supervisor will share the completed application with the director of school counseling for approval. Once this is done, the director of school counseling will forward the application to the principal for final approval. The student must receive written approval before starting an independent study.
- h. Approval of the Independent Study will be sent to the director of school counseling who will advise the school counselor. The school counselor will notify the student and the teacher/advisor. Approval is required prior to starting the independent study.
- i. Credits for independent study will be awarded on the following basis:
  - Semester course: 2.5 credits
  - Semester course in music during lunch: 1.25 credits
  - Full year course: 5.0 credits
  - Full year course in music during lunch: 2.5 credits
- j. Grades earned in an independent study program will not be calculated in a student's grade point average (GPA).
- k. A student may take a maximum of five credits per year through independent study.
- l. Deadline date for application submission: A completed application is due to the student's counselor on or before:
  - June 1: For full year or fall semester
  - November 1: For spring semester

Special Notes:

- a. It will be up to the discretion of the teacher/advisor and the student to work collaboratively to execute a plan to include assignments and deadline dates.
- b. Teachers/advisors are required to submit progress reports and marking period grades (and exam grades if applicable) based on regular MHS submission guidelines/timelines.
- c. The student will be scheduled for independent study during a period when the teacher/advisor has a scheduled class and feels it would be most appropriate for the student to be scheduled. The teacher/advisor will work with the school counselor and student to determine this.
- d. The independent study will be part of the 35 credits the student will be scheduled for. The music independent study during lunch will be the only exception, if the student cannot fit it into their schedule.

The Montville Township High School independent study application requests the following information:

- a. A detailed description of proposed independent study and the rationale for wishing to pursue it.
- b. Course objectives/goals including measurable performances, proficiencies and/or products/projects and the relevant New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards.
- c. Method of study, including specific activities and/or strategies, to be implemented.
- d. Resources to be used to obtain information.
- e. Timeline and important deadlines.
- f. Evaluation component.
- g. Signatures of the student, parent, teacher/advisor, and school counselor; approval by a department supervisor, director of school counseling, and principal.”

## 2. Marysville High School, Ohio<sup>11</sup>

The district provides the following information regarding its independent study requirements: “A student may undertake an independent study for academic credit under the following stipulations:

For each 0.5 academic credits to be earned (except for physical education, which by law can only be 0.25 credits), there must be at least twenty (20) hours of direct instruction, and at least forty (40) hours of independent activities performed by the student. All Independent Study classes are graded pass/fail (P/F). Normal letter grades will not be recorded, and these courses will not count in the student's GPA and class rank. Any exceptions MUST have the approval of an administrative committee prior to the start of any educational option or independent study experience.

- a. The student must be under the direct supervision of a teacher holding a valid Ohio teaching certificate.
- b. That teacher is responsible for:
  - i. Making certain that the educational option form and the related educational option (Instructional) Plan are completed and submitted for approval prior to the student beginning work on the plan.
  - ii. Providing the 20 hours of direct instruction to the student, or for making sure that a qualified individual provides direct instruction. It may be

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<sup>11</sup> Retrieved from [Marysville High School, Ohio, Educational Options](#)

required of the individual to submit credentials for inspection by and approval of an administrative committee.

- iii. Making certain that the student completes the required minimum of 40 hours of approved independent activities.
- iv. Collecting all of the completed documentation submitted by the student at the conclusion of the independent study, evaluating it, and issuing a grade for the independent study (through the guidance office).
- v. An independent study in physical education must include at least five (5) different types of activities.

### **C. Helpful Links**

The California Department of Education provides its [Independent Study Operations Manual](#) (2000 Edition).