

## Terminology for Instruction During COVID-19

During this time of school closure, a variety of terms are being utilized to describe the types of instruction offered by schools and school districts. The terms can range from distance learning, remote learning, online learning, and virtual or digital learning. For example, Governor Steve Bullock's March 19, 2020, March 24, 2020, and April 7, 2020, Directives reference "remote learning" in discussion of school closures. (See e.g., <http://opi.mt.gov/Portals/182/COVID-19/Extension%20of%20Directives.pdf?ver=2020-04-07-160549-143>)

The terminology used to describe the delivery of instruction can be confusing for students, parents, families, and educators. Given the uniqueness of Montana's geography and one's accessibility to internet service, not all children and families may have access to devices or high-speed internet for "online learning." Therefore, "distance learning," which encompasses other types of instructional opportunities, for example, instructional mediums which are not internet based, has a broader meaning and is less likely to result in confusion for all.

For consistency, OPI Special Education guidance, utilizes the term "distance learning" throughout. **Distance learning** means "instruction in which students and teachers are separated by time and/or location with synchronous or asynchronous content, instruction, and communication between student and teacher. This instruction may consist of learning opportunities provided through online (Internet-based) and other emerging technologies." ARM [10.55.602](#) (12).

The Administrative Rules of Montana further define the following as:

**"Digital content provider"** means an entity, organization, or individual registered pursuant to ARM [10.55.907](#) offering K-12 educational content for distance, online, and technology-delivered programs and courses. ARM [10.55.602](#) (11).

**"Online learning"** means educational activity in which instruction and content are delivered primarily via the Internet and through emerging technologies. Online learning is a form of distance learning. ARM [10.55.602](#) (31).

**"Technology-delivered learning"** means instruction and content delivered via digital technologies (e.g., online, CD-ROM, DVD-ROM, or learning experiences that involve primarily the use of computers). ARM [10.55.602](#) (47).

**"Offsite instructional setting"** means an instructional setting at a location, separate from a main school site, where a school district provides for the delivery of instruction to a student who is enrolled in the district. MCA [20-1-101](#) (14).

**Terminology defined by the United States Department of Education or in the United States Code includes, in part:**

The term “distance learning” was recently utilized by the United States Department of Education IDEA guidance of March 21, 2020, stating:

The Department released new information clarifying that federal law should not be used to prevent schools from offering distance learning opportunities to all students, including students with disabilities.

This new resource from the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) explains that as a school district takes necessary steps to address the health, safety, and well-being of all its students and staff, educators can use distance learning opportunities to serve all students.

The Department further used the term “distance instruction” to include “virtual or online education.” <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/idea-files/supplemental-fact-sheet-addressing-risk-covid-19-preschool-elementary-secondary-schools-serving-children-disabilities-march-21-2020/>

“Virtual school” means: “A public school that offers only virtual courses: instruction in which children and teachers are separated by time and/or location. In addition, interaction occurs via computers and/or telecommunications technologies, and the school generally does not have a physical facility that allows children to attend classes on-site.” (*Dear Colleague Letter*, OSEP, August 5, 2016)  
<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/memosdcltrs/dcl-virtual-schools--08-05-2016.pdf>

### **Online Learning**

“The term *online learning* can be used to refer to a wide range of programs that use the Internet to provide instructional materials and facilitate interactions between teachers and students and in some cases among students as well. Online learning can be *fully* online, with all instruction taking place through the Internet, or online elements can be combined with face-to-face interactions in what is known as blended learning (Horn and Staker 2010).” (*Understanding the Implications of Online Learning for Educational Productivity*, U.S. Dept of Ed., Office of Ed. Technology, Jan. 2012)  
<https://tech.ed.gov/files/2013/10/implications-online-learning.pdf>

### **Blended Learning**

According to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, the term “blended learning” means a formal education program that leverages both technology-based and face-to-face instructional approaches—(A) that include an element of online or digital learning, combined with supervised learning time, and student-led learning, in which the elements are connected to provide an integrated learning experience; and (B) in which students are provided some control over time, path, or pace. (20 USC § 7112(1)).

## **Digital Learning**

"Digital learning" is defined by ESSA as: any instructional practice that effectively uses technology to strengthen a student's learning experience and encompasses a wide spectrum of tools and practices, including— (A) interactive learning resources, digital learning content (which may include openly licensed content), software, or simulations, that engage students in academic content; (B) access to online databases and other primary source documents; (C) the use of data and information to personalize learning and provide targeted supplementary instruction; (D) online and computer-based assessments; (E) learning environments that allow for rich collaboration and communication, which may include student collaboration with content experts and peers; (F) hybrid or blended learning, which occurs under direct instructor supervision at a school or other location away from home and, at least in part, through online delivery of instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path, or pace; and (G) access to online course opportunities for students in rural or remote areas. (20 USC § 7112(3)).

While the terms above are not an exhaustive list of instructional mediums, being cognizant of the various terms used in describing "distance learning" instruction, can decrease the potential confusion for students, families, and educators.