



CHAPTER 5: Independent Study

A. What is Independent Study?

Independent study is an alternative instructional strategy, not an alternative curriculum. This means that students in independent study should be taking the same courses as students in regular classes. School districts cannot involuntarily transfer or enroll students in independent study programs; being in independent study must be voluntary in all circumstances. Independent study may be offered in both comprehensive and alternative school programs, however, there are limits to when independent study may be used.

The decision to enroll in Independent Study should be made carefully by you and your child. Some questions to consider in making your decision are:

- Does your child have a specific need to take the course?
- Is your child comfortable working on their own without classroom instruction, support of classmates or class discussions?
- Does your child have people who will be able to support him or her while in the program?
- Is your child willing to take all the time needed to complete their Independent Study courses successfully?
- Is your child organized and self-motivated? Does your child possess good study skills (for example, able to set and meet personal goals and deadlines)?
- Can your child read and understand hard text without help?

- Does your child have any special needs that may make independent study difficult for them? For instance, is English not your child's primary language? Does your child have a disability that requires additional support?

Districts must have a written policy governing their independent study program and independent study placements must follow district-adopted curriculum. Work is decided by a written agreement signed by the student, teacher, parent, and others and must be under the supervision of a credentialed teacher. Most importantly, students must be given access to all existing services and resources in the school (for example, the library, extracurricular activities, sports, dances, etc.).

The written agreement must include the following mandatory elements:

- General student information (name, address, grade level, etc.)
- Beginning and end dates of the agreement
- Time period of the agreement (not more than 1 school year)
- List of subjects/courses and learning goals
- Methods of study and evaluation
- Specific resources available to student
- Maximum length of time between date of assignment and when it is due
- Number of missed assignments before the school will have to decide if Independent Study is still an appropriate program for your child

- Statement that independent study is voluntary
- Statement that independent study may be given to a student who has been expelled/is on suspended expulsion *only if* student has the continuous choice of classroom instruction
- How to report and/or return assignments to their teacher
- Dated signatures

B. Rights of Independent Study Students

Independent Study should be the same in quality and in quantity as classroom instruction so that a student who enrolls in independent study is able to complete their education within the regular time frame for completion. Students on Independent Study must have the same access to existing services and resources as other students of the school in which the independent study student is enrolled. They are also entitled to equal rights and privileges as the students who choose to continue in the regular school program.

State law prevents special education students from going into Independent Study unless the student's individualized education plan (IEP) specifically allows it. For students who are recommended for home/hospital instruction, the law requires a recommendation from the student's IEP team and a physician/psychologist's report saying the student's condition requires home/hospital instruction and certifying that the severity of the condition prevents the student from being part of a less restrictive placement.

C. Unlawful Independent Study Placements and Disproportionate Impacts on Vulnerable Student Groups

Contrary to the law, many children are involuntarily placed in independent study programs. Data from various school districts and county offices of education suggest that vulnerable student groups, including English learner students and students with disabilities, may be more likely to be placed in independent study than other students.

According to the California Department of Education, "A district may not accept a student on independent study who will not do as well in independent study as in a classroom." Before considering Independent Study

for your child, carefully think about whether your child is likely to be successful on independent study and carefully weigh the good and bad of independent study against staying in a regular classroom.

If your child is currently enrolled in independent study involuntarily or you no longer want your child to participate in independent study, inform your child's school immediately and request that your child be reinstated in their regular school and classroom placement. Consider speaking with an attorney if you believe your child's rights may have been violated. ■