

Minnesota Adult Basic Education (ABE)

# Distance Learning Policy

**Policy Development Date: July 1, 2008**

**Policy Implementation Date: October 1, 2008**

**Latest Policy Revision Date: May 31, 2017**

# Policy Overview

## Background

*National Reporting System Implementation Guidelines, July 2007*:

“Distance education is a formal learning activity where students and instructors are separated by geography, time or both for the majority of the instructional period. Distance learning materials are delivered through a variety of media including, but not limited to, print, audio recording, videotape, broadcasts, computer software, web-based programs and other online technology. Teachers support distance learners through communication via mail, telephone, e-mail or online technologies and software.”

Distance learning programs have become popular, in part because they are often a better fit for non-traditional students’ schedules. They may hold particular potential for students who live some distance from the nearest Adult Basic Education (ABE) program, those with irregular work schedules that make regular class attendance difficult, and students in classes who want to further study on their own.

Studies and experience are demonstrating that ABE students participating in hybrid distance learning, which combines face-to-face with distance learning, show increased NRS achievement over those participating only in one of these components. This model thus shows great promise in facilitating more rapid student achievement.

Digital literacy, including basic computer skills and information literacy, is integral to distance learning. Students need the ability to access online resources, and to effectively assess and evaluate a broad range of information. The state has adopted the Northstar Digital Literacy Benchmarks as state standards, and passing the core assessments is required for the Minnesota Adult Diploma. Integrating digital literacy instruction into a wide range of ABE courses is encouraged.

Minnesota ABE views distance education as an opportunity to increase access to and participation in ABE programming throughout the state. We anticipate that offering more distance learning opportunities in ABE will result in an expansion of programming and the recruitment of the currently unengaged eligible ABE population, as well as provide an additional option for students we are already serving. Distance learning programs have the potential to raise state enrollment rates and improve access to education and training, which will in turn increase participants’ earnings and employment rates. In addition, digital literacy and distance learning skills are essential to success in the workplace and in higher education. Building the capacity to offer more distance education opportunities across Minnesota ABE programs in an equitable fashion is one of the primary goals identified by the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) – ABE Office.

## Overview and Philosophy of Distance Learning in the State

Intake, orientation, and pre- and post-testing for ABE students accessing distance learning must be provided face-to-face. Training requirements for ABE staff to deliver distance education vary according to the different approved distance education curricula. Only agencies that have completed required training(s) on the distance learning tools, curriculum and/or implementation established by the developer and/or the MDE – ABE Office will be allowed to count reimbursable proxy hours for their students.

For the majority of approved platforms, Minnesota has chosen a mastery approach to assign credit for work accomplished. Mastery is defined as achieving or demonstrating skills sufficient for a learner to move from one unit to the next. “Proxy Contact Hours” is the term for how time spent on distance learning outside the classroom is countable for students completing curriculum units and/or passing quizzes assessing lesson comprehension and completion. Proxy Contact Hours are not equal to seat time or to time spent working online. Proxy hours are established based on pilot studies showing the average student time required to master specific material, with an allowance for staff time needed to manage student use of the platform material. Some students will require less time to complete a curriculum unit while others will require more time to complete the same unit.

ABE programs must maintain records of proxy contact hours to meet both state and federal reporting requirements. ABE Program Guidelines for Determining Proxy Contact Hours (PCH) for approved curricula can be found on the Minnesota ABE Distance Learning Website (www.mnabe-distancelearning.org). Proxy hours must be recorded in the ABE data system in classes with titles that include the name of the distance learning curricula and the words “proxy hours,” for example: “Skills Tutor Proxy Hours” or “i-Pathways Proxy Hours.” Note that programs must also maintain records for each student that denote the specific unit/lesson/module completed along with the corresponding proxy hours. Specific information about required documentation can be found in the section *ABE Auditing Requirements* (on page 4) and in Table 3 (on page 9).

An ABE consortium will have first “right” to serve distance education students residing within the consortium’s geographic area as defined by the member school district attendance areas. If a consortium chooses not to provide distance learning, than students in their geographic area may access distance learning services through other consortia. Please see the ABE Consortium Membership and Operations Policy for additional information.

# General Distance Learning Requirements

## ***Professional Development***

Professional development designed to facilitate effective DL delivery is a key component of DL in Minnesota ABE.

*DL Basics* is an online course developed to provide an overview of DL essentials for managers, instructors, and support staff. It is available at the [Minnesota Literacy Council’s Online Course Catalog](http://online.themlc.org/login/index.php) (http://online.themlc.org/login/index.php). It reviews state DL policy, provides information on DL student recruitment, screening, assessment, instruction, and evaluation, and defines proxy hours and attendance requirements. **As of May 1, 2015, DL Basics is required for all ABE staff providing DL programming.**

1. a) Staff must complete the course within three months of beginning to work in the area of DL (existing staff) or within three months of employment (new staff).
2. b) If a consortium has already completed *DL 101* and has a current DL plan (see below), new staff who have not participated in DL 101 must still complete *DL Basics*.

*DL 101* is a comprehensive course for DL teachers and managers. This includes an in-person fall kick-off followed by six webinars over six weeks, through which programs develop a comprehensive DL plan incorporating Best Practices. Monthly webinars support local implementation of these plans January-May. **DL 101 is strongly recommended for all consortia offering DL.**

1. If a new staff person working in the area of DL joins a program that has already completed DL 101, s/he must complete *DL Basics* within three months of employment.
2. Completion of *DL Basics* is not required apart from participation in *DL 101 (participants do not need to also complete DL Basics).*

*DL 102* includes more advanced study of actual DL delivery. Courses for managers and teachers are available for those who have completed *DL 101*. Participation is encouraged but not required.

An online course, Digital Literacy Integration in the ABE Classroom, is available at <http://online.themlc.org/login/index.php>. This is not required, but provides excellent resources for all ABE teachers.

## ***Counting Distance Learning Contact Hours***

Classroom hours and Proxy Contact Hours (PCH) will be recorded as separate classes in the state data system.

There are two possible “types” of contact hours involved in distance education:

1. Synchronous Hours: occur in distance learning for orientation, pre- and post-testing, supplemental classroom instruction, live webinars, etc.; and

2. Asynchronous Hours: instruction is provided when a student works independently in complete instructional units using one or more of the state-approved distance learning tools/curricula listed in the Minnesota ABE Distance Learning Website (www.mnabe-distancelearning.org) This could happen off-site or on-site, as long as in-class contact hours are not being counted. Off-site asynchronous hours could be completed at a learner’s home, at a public library, or any other location a learner is completing a distance learning curriculum. An example of on-site asynchronous hours includes a learner working in an ABE programs computer lab after class, when this time is not being counted as in-class contact hours.

For all synchronous hours, Minnesota ABE programs will follow the ABE Contact Hour Policy.

For asynchronous hours, the manner in which proxy hours are determined will vary depending upon the curricula used. For information on proxy hours assigned to specific approved DL platforms, please refer to the Minnesota ABE Distance Learning Website (www.mnabe-distancelearning.org).

Proxy Contact Hours can only be granted once per ABE student per distance learning curriculum unit. Once Proxy Contact Hours have been counted for a learner completing a distance learning unit, the learner cannot be given credit for the same unit again at a future time. This means a learner can go back and review units, but he/she cannot generate additional Proxy Hours for that same unit. In terms of local program accountability, going back one month in DL platform reports is adequate to document non-duplication of lessons.

More recently, some DL platforms provide dynamic matching of content from an extensive list of resources to the needs of individual learners. These platforms do not lend themselves to pre-set proxy hours. Instead, clock time (time on task as reported in the data management portion of the platforms) is used to record proxy time. These requirements are detailed by platform at http://mnabe-distancelearning.org/approved-dl-platforms

## Assessing Students Using Distance Learning Curriculum

Distance learners must be assessed under the same guidelines as all adult learners in the state and ABE programs must adhere to the Minnesota ABE Assessment Policy. ABE programs must schedule on-site pre- and post-testing for all distance education students. For distance learners enrolled in a blended/hybrid or an in-class course, assessment will be scheduled as part of the classroom hours for the course. Post-testing needs to be scheduled corresponding to the appropriate number of hours of instruction for post-testing as indicated by local consortium post-testing policies and on page 7 of the state’s assessment policy. All assessment must occur in secure, proctored settings.

## i-Pathways Availability and Student Assessment

i-Pathways (formerly named GED-i) is currently subsidized by the Minnesota Department of Education – ABE Office. Consortia are expected to either offer online i-Pathways programming for interested and eligible students or to establish a referral relationship with a consortium that is providing i-Pathways online. ABE consortia that do not provide online i-Pathways programming must conduct pre- and post-testing for students residing in the consortium who are participating in i-Pathways programming with another consortium.

## Instructional Delivery Models

There are 3 instructional delivery models using distance learning curricula:

A. Distance Education – Students are able to work independently at a distance or in a site’s computer lab and have strong computer literacy skills

B. Hybrid – This is a blended instructional delivery model for students who receive some in- class pre-teaching, but are able to work independently at a distance and have strong computer literacy skills

C. In-Class – Students receive in-class guided instruction and have strong computer literacy skills

Proxy hours may be counted in models A and B above when the following conditions are met:

1. The ABE program is using one of the approved curricula found on the ABE DL website, http://mnabe-distancelearning.org/approved-dl-platforms.
2. Students are working independently at a distance.
3. Students may work independently on the on-line curriculum in an ABE computer lab; if proxy hours are counted for that work, regular ABE contact hours may not be collected for that same lab time.
4. Students meet requirements for distance learning curricula used, such as the minimum test scores for entry and complying with intended product use, as defined by the distance learning curriculum developer and the Minnesota Department of Education - ABE Office. (For more information on ABE program guidelines for determining online education student eligibility, go to the Minnesota ABE Distance Learning Website (www.mnabe-distancelearning.org).)
5. Proxy hours may not be counted for in-class work, which generates contact hours.

## ABE Auditing Requirements

For auditing purposes, programs must keep documentation proving a student’s distance learning achievements and proxy hours claimed. Some acceptable measures of documentation include:

* Printed student screen shots;
* Printed software-generated reporting tables; and
* Teacher-signed student logs.

The documentation must:

* Include the name of the distance learning product;
* List the specific unit(s) the student completed or mastered;
* Show that a student completed and/or mastered the unit according to standards; and
* Include a date of completion.

In the case of an audit, if a program cannot provide the distance learning documentation for proxy hours entered, the program may be required to pay back state and federal money earned through the undocumented proxy hours.

For specific documentation requirements by distance learning curricula, go to the Minnesota ABE Distance Learning Website (www.mnabe-distancelearning.org).

## Approved Distance Learning Curricula

### There are three categories of approved DL platforms available to Minnesota ABE:

* Those paid for and supported through state funding.
* Those that are free but without state support.
* Those that have a cost that is paid by ABE programs wishing to use these platforms, but without state support.

A current list of approved DL platforms can be found at Minnesota ABE Distance Learning Website (www.mnabe-distancelearning.org).

# For More Information

Distance Learning resources can be found online at the [Minnesota ABE Distance Learning Web Site](http://www.mnabe-distancelearning.org) (http://www.mnabe-distancelearning.org/).

This policy, along with other ABE policies and resources, can be found online at the [Minnesota ABE LINCS Web Site’s page for Law, Policy and Guidance](http://www.mnabe.org/program-management/law-policy-guidance) (http://www.mnabe.org/program-management/law-policy-guidance).

If you have any questions about the Minnesota ABE Distance Learning Policy, contact Brad Hasskamp, (651) 582-8594 or brad.hasskamp@state.mn.us.

If you have any questions about distance learning data and reporting requirements, please contact Todd Wagner, (651)582-8466 or [todd.wagner@state.mn.us](mailto:todd.wagner@state.mn.us).