



About Distance Learning

This brief is one of a series that accompany the Distance Learning Planning and Implementation Guide. These resources are designed to help State/Territory decisionmakers increase the capacity of their professional development (PD) systems by providing additional access to distance learning. For more information visit <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/distance-learning-planning-and-implementation-guide-0>.

This brief outlines definitions of distance learning (DL), why DL matters to the EC and SA workforce and the PD systems that support them, and key messages about DL.

DEFINITIONS OF DISTANCE LEARNING

[The California Distance Learning Project](#) defines “distance learning” as an instructional delivery system that remotely connects learners with educational resources. Several key features define DL, which apply equally to high- and low-tech approaches:

- Separation of teacher and learners in space and/or time during at least part of the learning experience
- The use of educational and social media to unite teacher and learners and to carry course content
- The provision of two-way communication between learners and teacher, tutor, or training/educational agency
- Control of the learning pace by the learners rather than the instructor

The U.S. Department of Education defines “distance education” in this way:

Distance education means education that uses one or more of the [following] technologies listed to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor, synchronously [participation occurs at the same time] or asynchronously [participation does not occur at the same time]. The technologies may include:

1. The internet
2. One-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices
3. Audio conferencing
4. Video cassettes, DVDs, and CD-ROMs, if used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed [previously]. ([Code of Federal Regulations, 2012 Annual Edition](#))

WHY IT MATTERS

Delivering PD via technology—commonly referred to as DL—provides access to members of the EC and SA workforce who face obstacles in participating in face-to-face courses or training including those who:

- Work full time
- Live in rural or other areas with limited options for higher education and training
- Want a specialization, such as infant/toddler, SA, or administration, for which availability of coursework or training may be limited

In addition, DL is increasingly offered as an option for meeting preservice or entry-level training requirements, such as training required by child care licensing regulations or [Head Start Program Performance Standards and the Head Start Act of 2007](#). DL is also often a preferred option for many current and future members of the workforce.

In today's rapidly changing environment, policymakers and other leaders are working to leverage and incorporate DL technologies—such as eLearning, mobile learning, and other Internet-based resources—into PD systems. When considering DL, these leaders want to ensure learning content, delivery, and assessment of learning outcomes are associated with improved practice and program-quality improvement. Incorporating DL into PD systems requires intentional planning and implementation. Leaders want PD systems to use synchronous, asynchronous, or blended modes to deliver PD through DL that is geographically accessible, reflects the diversity of learners, and is comprehensive and cost-effective.

KEY MESSAGES

- Most Americans use DL technology in their daily life and increasingly use mobile devices and applications (apps)
- Technology changes rapidly. Recent innovations in mobile learning and apps are changing the information we have, as well as how we can use and share it with others
- Effective PD systems include DL opportunities that meet the workforce's needs and match their access to technology
- DL technologies can increase PD capacity in isolated areas, sparsely populated areas, and specific topic areas, such as infant/toddler, SA, or administration
- National standards and criteria can inform best practices in developing, approving, delivering, and tracking DL offerings
- Technology selection must match stated learning objectives and assessment processes
- DL is most successful when students, trainers, faculty, and institutions are informed, prepared, and continually supported
- Scholarships, career advising, and peer and academic support contribute to successful DL experiences
- DL offerings can facilitate reciprocity within and across States/Territories
- DL offerings are an integral part of PD systems when they are coordinated, approved, tracked, and they support entry into the field and movement on a career pathway, including attainment of degrees and credentials