

eLEARNING DAYS

A scan of policy
and guidance

DECEMBER 2019

About the Digital Learning Collaborative

The Digital Learning Collaborative (DLC) is a membership group dedicated to exploring, producing, and disseminating data, information, news, and best practices in digital learning. Our current members include school districts, intermediate units, public agencies, non-profit organizations, and companies. Collaborative activities are supported financially by membership fees. DLC members determine the topics that we explore, via monthly web meetings and individual discussions.

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Introduction

Among the growing uses of digital learning in mainstream districts is the incorporation of eLearning days, also known as cyber days, online learning days, or virtual days, among other terms. eLearning days are used to maintain instruction during unplanned school closures most commonly due to weather (snow, ice, and extreme temperatures), natural disasters, or for other reasons including widespread illness. Some districts are using eLearning days for parent conferences and educator professional development days as well. eLearning days provide districts and their stakeholders an opportunity to continue the learning process and eliminate the need for adding extra days during or at the end of the school year for instructional and/or funding purposes.

During eLearning days, students access online instructional opportunities from home or elsewhere, but not at school. Typically, teachers use a learning management system to post digital instructional materials and assignments, as well as to refer to print materials that students have available at home. Teachers are often required to be accessible in case students have questions, and sometimes teachers conduct an online synchronous class.

eLearning days hold promise for allowing schools to continue educating students in situations in which learning would otherwise be disrupted. However, it is also the case that planning, preparing, and implementing eLearning days well requires significant effort, and without significant planning and preparation, eLearning days are unlikely to result in meaningful learning.

This report reviews emerging policy and practice to help policymakers and educators considering or implementing eLearning days.

Overview of eLearning Day Policy

We define eLearning day policies as those that:

- explicitly allow districts to use online resources and instruction for students in traditional schools, to continue instruction during an interruption in physical attendance that affects most or all students,
- allow such instruction to count towards attendance and funding, and
- are based on the district meeting certain requirements that vary significantly by state.

Many states have laws allowing either full-time online schools, the use of supplemental online courses, or both. These policies could potentially be adopted to allow for eLearning days in some cases, but this study does not address these states and policies.

For this study, we identified 12 states that have explicit policy and/or guidance allowing districts to use eLearning days to count towards attendance, and an additional four states in which at least one district is

What is an eLearning day?

For the purposes of this report, we characterize eLearning days as:

- Planned by the district as a method of continuing instruction across district schools during school closures.
- These closures may be unplanned (e.g., storms) or planned (e.g., professional learning days for teachers).
- Sanctioned by the state to count towards attendance and/or instructional requirements
- Although districts may have policies and/or programs for instruction to take place online, outside of school, we do not include them in this study if such instruction does not count towards attendance and instruction.

Note that some policies described in this report also allow for instruction with non-digital materials (e.g., textbooks).

using a state waiver or other policy means to implement such days (Figure 1). Some of these states use terms other than “eLearning.” For example, Pennsylvania uses the term “Flexible Instructional Days.” Although we believe that the states reviewed in this report include most with these policies in place, we did not conduct an exhaustive search and some others may exist. In addition, districts in some states are developing eLearning days, or something similar, in the absence of a formal policy.

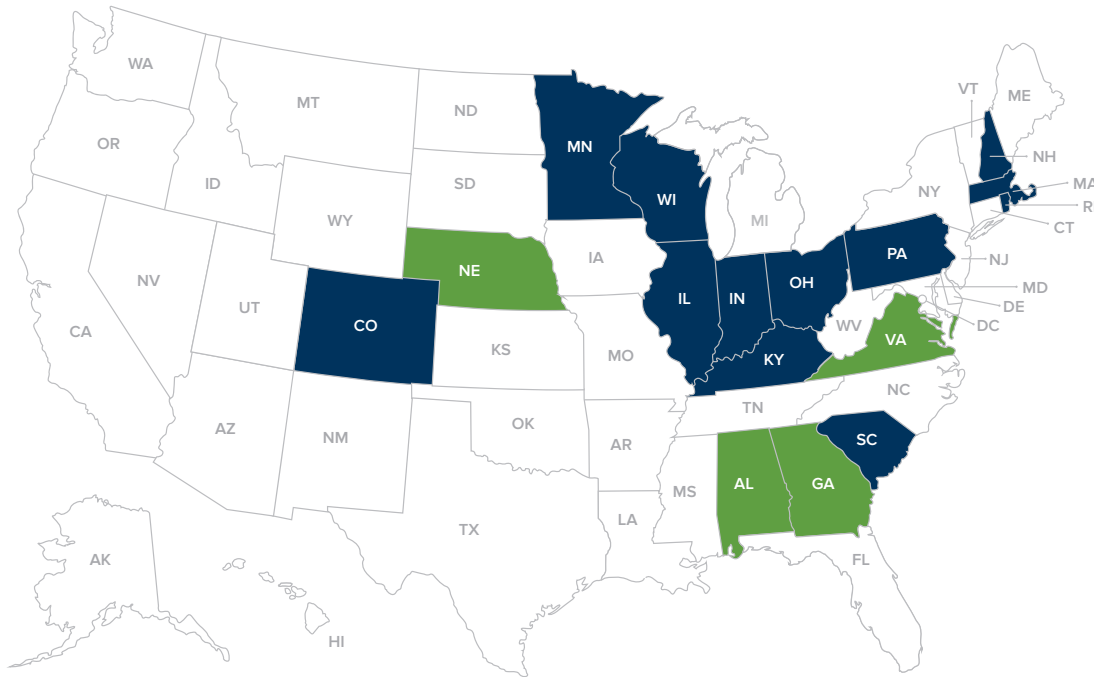


FIGURE 1 : States with eLearning day policy and states with districts using pilots, waivers, or other means to implement eLearning days



States with eLearning Day policy

- Colorado:** [E-Learning Days](#)
- Illinois:** [Public Act 101-0012](#)
- Indiana:** [IDOE eLearning Day Program](#)
- Kentucky:** [Non-Traditional Instruction \(NTI\) Program \(KRS 158.070\)](#)
- Massachusetts:** [Alternative Structured Learning Day Programs](#)
- Minnesota:** [e-Learning Days](#)
- New Hampshire:** [Blizzard bag day](#)
- Ohio:** [Blizzard bag day](#)
- Pennsylvania:** [Flexible Instructional Days](#)
- Rhode Island:** [Virtual Instructional Day Laws and Guidance](#)
- South Carolina:** [2019 memo from Education Oversight Committee](#)
- Wisconsin:** [Virtual Learning Time for Public Schools](#)



States without formal eLearning Day policy but some eLearning day activity

- Alabama:** We have not found policy explicitly allowing eLearning Days, but at least one district ([Mountain Brook Schools in Birmingham](#)) is implementing them.
- Georgia:** We have not found policy explicitly allowing eLearning Days but at least one district, [Gwinnett County Public Schools](#), is implementing them, possibly under a [law](#) allowing for strategic waivers.
- Nebraska:** A few districts have received [waivers from the state](#) to implement eLearning days.
- Virginia:** We have not found policy explicitly allowing eLearning Days but at least one district, [Virginia Beach](#), is implementing them.

Illinois

Illinois first passed a [law allowing eLearning day pilots](#), and then a second [law made the program permanent](#). The state requires that schools/districts:

- provide a public hearing to the school board with the initial proposal for an eLearning program to allow for public comment;
- attain approval from the school board for the e-learning program;
- ensure and verify at least five clock hours of instruction or schoolwork on an eLearning day;
- ensure appropriate learning opportunities for students with special needs and those who are English language learners;
- ensure and verify that instruction or schoolwork is being completed for each student participating in an eLearning day;
- ensure access from home or other appropriate remote facility for all students and teachers participating, including computers, the Internet, and other forms of electronic communication that must be utilized in the program;
- ensure students with no Internet and/or technology access have non-electronic materials available to continue their learning;
- monitor and verify each student's electronic participation, through Internet, telephone, texts, chat rooms, or other electronic communication;
- address the extent to which student participation is within the student's control as to the time, pace, and means of learning;
- provide effective notice to students and their parents or guardians of the use of particular days for e-learning;
- provide staff and students with adequate training for participation on e-learning days; and
- reflect upon and modify the program as needed.

ILLINOIS RESOURCES

Illinois State Board of Education case study: [Districts Find E-Learning Effective on Days of Non-Attendance](#)

[Ten Tips for Implementing eLearning](#), by the Leyden Community High School District #212

[Gurnee School District 56 eLearning Day Report](#) for February 9, 2018

Indiana

In 2011 Indiana became one of the first states to pass an eLearning day policy through the Indiana Department of Education's (IDOE) Flex Program. In 2014, IDOE added the Virtual Option for Inclement Weather. In the 2017–18 school year, the Virtual Option combined with the IDOE's Flex Program to become the [IDOE eLearning Day Program](#). When first implemented, IDOE required districts to apply to the state for approval to implement eLearning days; over 300 schools/districts were approved for the 2018–19 school year. As of the 2019–20 school year, IDOE is no longer requiring that approval. Consequently, the fidelity of implementation rests solely with the individual schools and districts. Out of the 3,800 eLearning days reported as used in school year 2018–19, 2,900 were in lieu of cancellation.

Guidelines for Indiana's eLearning Day Program include the following:

INDIANA RESOURCES

[State Department of Education eLearning Day Program web page](#)

[Guidance for Students with Disabilities](#)

[Sample lessons on a digital content page](#)

Webinar: eLearning Days: [Helping Teachers Get Ready](#)

- **Internet Access:** The school corporation can demonstrate access to digital learning for students and teachers away from our buildings.
- **Instructor Access:** Teachers will be directly reachable from students and parents to facilitate and support instruction.
- **Platform Experience:** All teachers and students have access to, and experience using, online platforms and digital resources for learning.
- **Learning Targets:** All students will be informed of their learning targets for the day by 9:00 a.m.
- **Work Continuity:** Student work will cover content that would have been addressed if school were in session in a traditional setting.
- **Accommodation Support:** All students who have accommodations for instruction will be provided with or have access to those accommodations.
- **Offline Support:** For students with disabilities who do not use an online platform for learning or for whom an online platform is not appropriate, teachers will provide parents/caregivers with appropriate educational materials and learning activities for student use.
- **Individual Needs:** For limited English proficient students, teachers will provide parents/caregivers appropriate educational materials and learning activities for student use per the Individual Learning Plan.
- **Work Measurement:** Students will demonstrate time on task and/or equivalent learning growth for the time.

Minnesota

MINNESOTA RESOURCES

[Memo](#) describing the state's program plan for e-Learning days

Robbinsdale Area Schools [eLearning days description](#)

Belle Plaine Public Schools [eLearning days explanation](#), including a link to frequently asked questions.

Minnesota's Program plan for eLearning days, based on [Minnesota statutes](#), allows up to five elearning days to be counted as hours of instruction each year. The policy includes stipulations for having a plan to accommodate access and equity of both technology and Internet for students as well as clear communication with parents and students throughout the school year in addition to access to teachers throughout the e-learning day.

The school board or charter is required to:

- provide accommodations for students without sufficient access to the Internet, hardware, or software in their homes;
- provide accessible digital instruction for students with disabilities under chapter 125A and meet the needs of each student's Individual Education Plan (IEP)/504 plans;
- send notification to parents and students of the plan at the beginning of the school year and, upon implementation of an eLearning day, provide at least two hours' notice prior to the normal school start time that students are to follow the eLearning day plan; and
- provide access to teachers via telephone and online during normal school hours.

Interested districts develop a plan, with key elements to include:

- They are created in collaboration between the school and the teachers and must be approved by the school board.
- They may include school- and/or grade-specific guidelines.
 - Student attendance is verified by the teacher and can include:
 - logging in to class page on the district's or school's learning management system (LMS);
 - email exchange/text exchange/phone call with teacher;
 - parent verification;
 - activity tracking in an LMS;
 - work submitted during the eLearning day; or
 - a different documentation process.
- Guidelines are included for suitable accommodations for students who do not have sufficient access to technology and/or Internet connection, which includes not being required to make up the work on another day just because they do not have access to what they need to complete the work.
- Teachers must engage in a form of instruction with students, such as through interaction, progress monitoring, and/or provision of feedback.
- Students who do not participate in eLearning days are counted as absent.

Pennsylvania

As of fall 2019, Senate Bill 440 allows districts five flexible instruction days to be used when schools have to close for inclement weather, emergencies, or other reasons. Unlike many of the other states' policies, Pennsylvania does not require an Internet connection, as districts may use paper materials instead of digital. Additionally, there are take-home assignments for when there's time for teachers and students to plan ahead.

Flexible instructional days may be used in public, private, and parochial schools and require an application to the Pennsylvania Department of Education to establish a new or renew an existing program (which needs to be done every three years). The PDE requires the school/district to:

- notify students, parents, and professional employees that a flexible instructional day is instituted;
- establish a procedure for the flexible instructional day, including the use of technology;
- provide accommodations for students and/or employees who do not have technology and/or Internet access;
- put into place clear responsibilities for students and employees for the flexible instructional day;
- establish clear indications of student participation and attendance;
- provide clear and meaningful examples of instruction for the flexible instruction days; and
- assure compliance with Individuals with Disabilities Education Act during flexible instruction days.

The PDE sends out an annual survey to get feedback on the implementation of flexible instruction days.

Teachers create lesson plans that can be completed on flex days. The plans typically include how students can use the technology that they've been given by their school/district to complete what they would normally do in their traditional school. Teachers take attendance as usual on flex days, as required by state law.

PENNSYLVANIA RESOURCES

Pennsylvania
Department of Education
Flexible Instructional
Day [website](#)

[PDE Guidance
Considerations](#)

McGuffey School
District's Claysville
Elementary School
[Flexible Instructional Day
Procedures for Students](#)

South Carolina

SOUTH CAROLINA RESOURCES

South Carolina Education Oversight Committee [press release regarding pilot districts](#)

South Carolina Education Oversight Committee [memo describing application process for districts](#)

eLearning Pilot Districts Project [evaluation report](#)

South Carolina law defines an instructional day as well as the requirements for make-up days. An instructional day for elementary students is a minimum of 5.5 hours a day while secondary students are required to complete 6 hours. The same stipulations are required for an eLearning day.

The eLearning Application (see p. 10) that districts submit to the SC Education Oversight Committee (EOC) requires the superintendent of the school district and the board of trustees of the school district to certify that the district:

1. “Meets the following minimum requirements to participate in the eLearning pilot to use eLearning to make up days missed due to inclement weather;
2. Agrees to provide data to the EOC or independent consultants hired by the EOC to evaluate implementation of the pilot. The data elements will be mutually agreed upon by the EOC and the pilot school districts; however, all data elements will be consistent across districts participating in the pilot; and
3. Agrees to facilitate the collection of online surveys as requested by the EOC to identify the successes and challenges of the pilot from the perspective of administrators, classroom teachers, students, and parents.”

Those districts interested in piloting have to get approval from the EOC. Five districts were awarded 2018 pilot, and ten more were approved for the school year 2019–20 pilot.

Districts must provide information regarding the following key components of implementation in their application:

- All schools in the district must implement eLearning days for one or more make-up days due to inclement weather.
- Provide information about how the district will notify parents and staff of eLearning day implementation.
- All students must have access to a device or application to complete all eLearning lessons.
- All students and teachers either have access to the Internet while away from school buildings or have access to the eLearning assignments.
- For those parents/guardians who do not have access to the Internet or devices, the district will work with them to provide that access and/or will allow students to work offline.
- All students will know what their targets are for their eLearning day learning prior to 9 a.m. on the eLearning day.
- Teachers will be required to upload assignments and host office hours to answer questions.
- Students and parents/guardians know what their responsibilities are for eLearning days, including how to communicate with their teacher(s) and how to make-up work as well as how incomplete work will be handled.
- Accommodations will be made for students with disabilities as well as limited English proficient students.
- The district has a learning management system.
- The district works with the EOC to monitor and document the implementation and impact of eLearning.

Key implementation issues

Policies may allow districts to implement eLearning days, but policies are rarely able to compel a person or entity to do anything well. Some state policies suggest a state oversight role by requiring that districts submit an eLearning day plan, while other policies have no formal review or oversight mechanism. As such, quality assurance and accountability rests largely, or entirely, with schools and districts.

In order to implement eLearning days that result in actual learning, districts must ensure the readiness of teachers to instruct online, students to learn online, and the many components that go into online teaching and learning. The following list of questions builds on the state-specific guidelines and provides prompts for reflection for those considering eLearning days for their learning environment.

Setting goals and expectations

- In addition to state-specific guidelines and requirements, the district must decide what its eLearning days entail.
 - Are all students expected to be online at a certain time, or by a certain time, or for a minimum amount of time in a day?
 - Are students primarily or entirely going to access materials asynchronously, or are they expected to communicate with teachers?
 - How many consecutive days does the district expect to be handled by eLearning?
 - Does the district expect eLearning days to occur with a certain amount of advance notice for teachers to prepare students?

Teacher preparation

- A teacher who has never taught online cannot be expected to shift to digital instruction—no matter how good a teacher she may be in the physical classroom. How will all teachers who are teaching online during eLearning days achieve minimum competencies to assure effective instruction?

Student expectations and training

- How will students be trained in what an eLearning program entails and what their responsibilities are?

Parents/guardians expectations and training

- How will parents/guardians be trained in what an eLearning program entails and what their responsibilities are?

Student Internet and device access

- How will the district ensure that all students have access to instructional opportunities through the Internet and devices needed? This might entail the district providing devices to some or all students, or using a combination of online and print materials.

Technology platform

- What system(s) will be used to manage learning on eLearning days?
- Will the district use a Learning Management System (LMS) or something else, and what will that entail and how will it be organized?

Lessons

- What lessons will be used in order to provide continuity with the learning that was happening in the traditional setting?
- Will clear and meaningful examples of instruction be provided?

Students with special needs

- Online content and instruction must be made accessible to all students, including students with special needs, during eLearning days. State laws and regulations vary in the specifics about how students with special needs must be accommodated. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires a multidisciplinary team obtain student data that supports the identification of appropriate supplementary aids and services necessary for a student with special needs to participate in eLearning days. The Indiana Department of Education [eLearning Day Program Guidance for Students with Disabilities](#) provides a good example of considerations for LEAs. Prior to drafting or adopting eLearning day policies, LEAs must consider its capacity to ensure equitable access to all students. It is likely that LEAs will need to provide specialized training to teachers, students, and parents in order to support students with special needs during eLearning days.

English language learners

- How will students with limited English proficiency be supported?

Communication expectations and requirements

- How will students and teachers communicate during eLearning days, if at all?
- Will teachers be expected to be available online during a specific time early in the day, or throughout the day?
- Will students be expected to be online in order to count for attendance purposes?
- Will there be variations in these expectations and/or requirements based on grade level?
- If so, what will those differences entail?

Synchronous instruction and office hours

- Will any real-time instruction be expected and/or required of teachers and students?
- Will teachers be required to be online specific times during the eLearning day?
- How will teachers need to be available for students and/or parents/guardians?

Communication with parents

- How will parents/guardians be informed about the eLearning day program?
- How will parents know if a day in which the school is closed is an eLearning day or a day without instruction?

Home as a learning space

- Online students and families report that a key component of successful learning at home is having a space that the student(s) can work that is available and conducive to learning. How will the district communicate and explain this to families?

Attendance counting

- What does the state require to demonstrate attendance, and how will teachers put this into practice?
- Is attendance based on clock hours or assignments being completed?

Work

- How will students demonstrate their learning—time on task and/or some equivalent?
- How will student work on the eLearning day be connected to regular instruction before and after the eLearning day(s)?

School staff

- What do all of the school and district staff, including positions such as food service and custodial, do on an eLearning day?

Absence

- What happens if students do not participate in eLearning days?
- Will their lack of participation be counted as an absence?
- Will they be able to make up their lack of participation?

Working with teachers' union and others as needed

- What is the process for ensuring all union-related and other guidelines are followed during eLearning day implementation?

Reflect and make changes

- Will the district formally and/or informally evaluate the implementation of eLearning days?
- What does the evaluation process entail?
- How will data be collected and reported for an evaluation?
- What process(es) will the state and districts use to reflect on what is going well and make changes where improvement is needed?

The above list of questions covers many of the details to be addressed in planning for eLearning days, but experts stress the need for extensive planning. Few of these issues can be addressed in a short period of time, particularly those that entail working time and conditions, or other issues in employment contracts. In addition, students, parents, and teachers have to become comfortable with instructional practices during eLearning days, which is likely to take time. Some schools, including in other countries that have implemented eLearning days, include a practice eLearning day in their planning, to have everyone learn the process on a planned day with plenty of preparation time.

The implementation of eLearning days is still in an early stage. As more schools implement such days, we expect further findings to emerge regarding both pitfalls and best practices.