

Massachusetts



Department of  
Education

# Massachusetts Recommended Criteria for Distance Learning Courses

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**Massachusetts Department of Education**

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# Massachusetts Department of Education

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# Introduction

Distance learning refers to instruction in which the teacher and student are separated geographically. The methods used for distance learning have been evolving for nearly two centuries, beginning with the use of the postal service for correspondence courses. As new technologies such as radio, television, cable, and satellite broadcasts were developed, they became transmission modes for distance learning. Today most distance learning takes place on the Internet, making courses available in virtually any location that has a connected computer. Therefore, this document presents recommendations for evaluating online distance learning courses.

In many online distance learning courses, the interaction between the teacher and students takes place asynchronously; that is, the communication does not take place simultaneously. A teacher may post a discussion question on Monday morning, for example, and students may respond to that question at various times. In some courses, students are asked to respond within a specified time frame so that they will all be focusing on the same topic at the same time.

Because online distance learning can take place anytime and anywhere, it offers a number of advantages for students and teachers. Students can take specialized courses that their districts might not otherwise be able to offer. School districts can pool their resources, making it possible for them to afford to offer specialized courses. For teachers and prospective teachers, distance learning makes it possible to take professional development and licensure preparation courses at the times most convenient for them. Taking an online course may also be less expensive than traveling to a class in a distant location.

In addition to the practical conveniences of online courses, distance learning offers educational benefits for some learners. For those who are hesitant to speak up in a regular classroom, an online course may offer a more comfortable environment for discussion. For learners with disabilities, an online course provides flexibility, allowing them to work at their own pace and perhaps use assistive technologies to access the material. For students who have little interest in school, an online course in a topic of interest might even help to make school more meaningful.

Although distance learning offers many advantages, there are also significant challenges. Distance learning may not be effective for some learners, because it tends to require a high degree of self-motivation, as well as an ability to communicate effectively through reading and writing. Even learners who possess those qualities may have difficulty if they underestimate the amount of time an online course may take. Moreover,

many learners may find an online course frustrating if it is poorly designed or if the instructor is inexperienced.

The purpose of this document is to provide guidelines that can be used by school administrators, educators, students, and parents as they plan or select online distance learning opportunities. Recommended criteria are provided for three types of distance learning courses:

- online high school courses
- online professional development courses for educators
- online courses for educator preparation

Since the Department of Education does not approve or oversee distance learning courses, these criteria are not mandatory requirements but recommended guidelines.

# Recommended Criteria for Online High School Courses

## OVERVIEW

Throughout the nation, a growing number of students are taking high school courses online. In Massachusetts, through a federally funded Technology Innovation Challenge Grant, Hudson Public Schools partnered with the Concord Consortium, a nonprofit educational organization based in Concord, Massachusetts, to create the nation's first Virtual High School. In this program, a collaborative of high schools share resources in order to offer courses that they could not otherwise provide to their students. Virtual High School students typically attend class by reporting each day to the school library or computer lab, where they log on to their virtual course, communicate with their VHS teacher, and complete their coursework. An onsite coordinator at each school verifies students' attendance and helps them with any questions or technical problems that they have.

As the demand for online high school courses grows, school officials need to know what to look for as they consider distance learning options for students. Since the Department does not approve or oversee online courses, it is up to each school district to decide if it will allow students to take online courses, determine which students can take online courses, and evaluate the available online course offerings. The following recommended criteria can be used by districts in making those decisions.

## I. COURSE CONTENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

### A. The content of the course is aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and is equivalent in rigor to traditionally delivered courses.

1. The course objectives are clearly stated and matched to the frameworks for the corresponding content area and grade level.
2. The course description and syllabus clearly describe objectives, performance indicators, and assessment criteria.
3. The course encourages in-depth exploration and analysis of the subject area.

### B. The course makes the best use of available technologies and online resources to enrich the content. Face-to-face or other real-time meetings are provided for any content that cannot be effectively delivered online.

1. Various online technologies, such as discussion, interactive videoconferencing, online videos, simulations, and content-rich web sites, are used to promote understanding, address specific content goals, and meet the needs of individual students.
2. The methods of instruction and delivery are selected based on their effectiveness for presenting the course content. For example, if a course objective involves learning to pronounce words in a foreign language, the course needs to provide a means for students to hear the language, which can be done through face-to-face instruction, online teleconferencing, or the use of multimedia.

**C. The course provides frequent and timely interactions between the students and the online teacher, as well as among the students.**

1. The online teacher monitors student postings of work and discussions every school day and provides frequent, timely guidance and feedback on the quality of student work and mastery of the content.
2. The course requires students to participate in online group activities, including guided student-to-student discussion.
3. The online teacher sets clear expectations regarding the amount of participation required and how online interactions will be evaluated.
4. Assignments are structured to require consistent efforts and an appropriate amount of time for online interactions, study, and homework throughout the term.

**D. The course provides ways to assess students' participation and achievement of learning goals.**

1. The online teacher continually assesses student participation and mastery of the content by monitoring student participation in online discussions, the quality of student postings (comments), and completed assignments.
2. The course includes a variety of assignments appropriate to the content area and includes products such as written reports, multimedia presentations, and team-based projects.
3. Tests or other assessments administered online and/or with an onsite coordinator will be utilized as valid measures of student mastery of the content objectives.
4. Authenticity of student work is verified by appropriate means including, for example, tests proctored by an onsite coordinator and/or through the use of secure online methods.

## **II. STAFFING**

**A. The online teacher is fully qualified in the content area being taught.**

1. The online teacher has a college degree and demonstrates subject matter competency in the subject being taught.
2. The online teacher is licensed to teach the subject in high school or is currently teaching undergraduate courses in the subject area.

**B. The online teacher has been trained and is skilled in methods of teaching online.**

1. The online teacher has received training in online teaching and applies this knowledge to engage students in regular, sustained, and guided student-to-student discussion and collaboration.
2. The online teacher has the knowledge and skills needed to access the available online tools, such as discussion tools, tools for monitoring student participation, and grading tools.

**C. The school designates an onsite coordinator, who manages technical and administrative issues and serves as the primary contact person between the school, the students, and the course provider.**

1. The coordinator sets up, organizes, and supports the technical resources needed by online students and teachers.
2. The coordinator monitors student attendance and course participation as needed.
3. The coordinator provides students and teachers timely and user-friendly responses to technical questions.
4. The coordinator deals with administrative issues in a timely manner.

### **III. ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

**A. The learning environment and course materials are universally designed, making them accessible to all learners.**

1. The learning environment and course materials are accessible to students with disabilities or can be made accessible with accommodations.
2. The software used to access the course operates on any platform (type of computer), and does not require an excessive amount of memory or processing speed.

**B. The online learning environment is easy to navigate, allowing learners to focus on the content, rather than the technology.**

1. The students and teachers have easy and continuous access to online discussion groups, instructional materials, a tool for uploading assignments, email, and assessment tools.
2. The students receive training and online support (help) to aid them in navigating the online environment.

### **IV. PROGRAM MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION**

**A. The course provider has established the necessary hardware, software, Internet connectivity, and support services to deliver the program of instruction.**

1. The course provider has established effective management systems and procedures.
2. The online teacher has reliable access to all course management software.
3. The course management system provides the online teacher with data on student time online and frequency of postings.
4. The course provider supplies enrollment and credit information to the school or district where a student is enrolled or resides on a timely basis.
5. The course provider has established procedures for fees and payments and handles them efficiently.
6. The academic calendar is coordinated before the course begins.

**B. Student rights and responsibilities are recognized and upheld within the course structure.**

1. The course provider has an academic honor code, which is made available to the school, the online teacher, and the students. The provider and teacher make it clear that this code must be observed in the online course.
2. A system is in place for the school and the online teacher to deal with inappropriate student behavior and issues of discipline.
3. Policies and systems are in place to address student and parent complaints, appeals, and/or recourse if the course is not delivered as described.
4. The course provider agrees to abide by state and federal student record regulations and has in place the necessary security systems to assure confidentiality of student records or work.

**C. School personnel, parents, and students are notified in advance of course requirements (including time and participation requirements), technical requirements, and the skills needed to be successful in distance learning.**

1. The course description and syllabus are available to school personnel, students, and parents or guardians prior to registration.
2. The course provider offers information to assist school personnel in counseling students about enrollment and participation in online courses, by providing assessments or information regarding the motivation needed for success in online courses.
3. The prerequisite courses and technical skills necessary for success are clearly described.
4. Technical specifications, including minimum hardware requirements, recommended connection speed, and browser compatibility are provided in advance.

**V. EVALUATION**

**A. The course provider evaluates its courses on a regular basis to determine whether they are achieving their objectives. Improvements to the courses are made based on those evaluations.**

1. The course provider solicits feedback about the quality of the course design, content, instruction, support systems, and infrastructure from students, parents, and school administrators.
2. Feedback from students, parents, teachers, and school administrators is used to improve the courses.
3. The course provider offers a means for school administrators to monitor courses taken by their students so that the administrators can determine whether to award credit for those courses.
4. The course provider is able to communicate the results of its evaluation work to the public.
5. Information on student completion rates is part of the course evaluation.

# **Recommended Criteria for Online Professional Development Courses**

## **OVERVIEW**

Online professional development is becoming increasingly common in Massachusetts. Some educators are taking courses offered by universities and other educational organizations. Others are taking online courses taught by knowledgeable teachers in their own school districts or other districts. With the proliferation of online professional development offerings, educators need to be able to determine if these courses are of high quality.

When an educator wishes to take a course for the purpose of earning professional development points (PDPs), the supervisor should first review the course. The recertification regulations (603 CMR 44.00) require educators to obtain supervisor approval and endorsement indicating that 80% of the PDPs are consistent with the educational needs of the school and/or district. The following recommended criteria are designed to help educators and their supervisors assess online courses.

## **I. COURSE CONTENT AND IMPLEMENTATION**

### **A. The content of the course is consistent with state and local educational goals and is equivalent in rigor to traditionally delivered courses.**

1. In order to provide PDPs, the course must provide a minimum of 10 hours of online interaction focusing on a specific topic, as stated in the “Recertification Guidelines for Massachusetts Educators.” Online participation may include reading or listening to remarks made by the instructor and other participants, responding to the discussion, and viewing online presentations.
2. The course includes an end-of-course assessment, which may be an exam or another demonstration of learning, such as a written product. The time required to complete the end-of-course assessment should not be counted towards the required 10 hours of online participation, even if the work is done online.
3. The course is designed to deepen the participants’ content knowledge and to enhance their ability to improve student learning.
4. The course activities build on participants’ prior knowledge and encourage them to apply what they have learned.
5. The course description and syllabus clearly describe objectives and assessment criteria.

**B. The course makes the best use of available technologies and online resources to enrich the content. Face-to-face or other real-time meetings are provided for any content that cannot be effectively delivered online.**

1. Various online technologies, such as discussion, interactive videoconferencing, online videos, simulations, and content-rich web sites, are used to promote understanding, address specific content goals, and meet the needs of individual participants.
2. The methods of instruction and delivery are selected based on their effectiveness for presenting the course content.

**C. The course provides frequent and timely interactions between the participants and the online instructor, as well as among the participants.**

1. Participants are encouraged to take part in online discussions, work together in online group activities, and provide feedback to one another to improve their practice.
2. The online instructor sets clear expectations regarding the amount and quality of participation required.
3. The online instructor monitors participants' discussions and postings of work on a daily basis and responds to participants' inquiries within 24 hours.

**D. The course provides ways to assess participants' involvement and achievement of learning goals.**

1. The course includes appropriate pre- and post-assessments, which may include written exams or documentable products such as lesson plans and curriculum units.
2. The online instructor continually assesses participants' involvement and mastery of the content by monitoring their participation in online discussions, the quality of participant postings, and completed assignments.
3. The assessments are valid measures of participants' mastery of the content objectives.

## **II. STAFFING**

**A. The online instructor is fully qualified in the content area being taught.**

1. The online instructor demonstrates subject matter competency in the subject being taught and has the appropriate academic qualifications.

**B. The online instructor has been trained and is skilled in methods of teaching online.**

1. The online instructor has received training in online teaching and applies this knowledge to engage participants in regular, sustained, and guided discussion and collaboration.
2. The online instructor monitors participants' understanding and adjusts instruction to enable their learning.

3. The online instructor has the knowledge and skills needed to access the available online tools, such as discussion tools, tools for monitoring participation, and grading tools.

**C. The online course provider employs staff who manage technical and administrative issues.**

1. The staff provides participants and instructors with timely and user-friendly responses to technical questions online and/or by phone during after-school hours.
2. The staff address administrative issues in a timely manner.

### **III. ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

**A. The learning environment and course materials are universally designed, making them accessible to all learners.**

1. The learning environment and course materials are accessible to participants with disabilities or can be made accessible with accommodations.
2. The software used to access the course operates on any platform (type of computer), and does not require an excessive amount of memory or processing speed.

**B. The learning environment is easy to navigate, allowing participants to focus on the content, rather than the technology.**

1. The participants and instructors have easy and continuous access to online discussion groups, instructional materials, a tool for uploading assignments, email, and assessment tools.
2. The participants receive training and online support to aid them in navigating the online environment.

### **IV. PROGRAM MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION**

**A. The course provider has established the necessary hardware, software, Internet connectivity, and support services to deliver the program of instruction.**

1. The course provider has established effective management systems and procedures.
2. The instructor has reliable access to all course management software.
3. The course management system provides the instructor with data on participant time online and frequency of postings.
4. The course provider has established procedures for fees and payments and handles them efficiently.

**B. Participants' rights and responsibilities are recognized and upheld within the course structure.**

1. The course provider has an academic honor code, which is made available to the instructor and participants. The provider and instructor make it clear that this code must be observed in the online course.
2. Policies and systems are in place to address participants' complaints if the course is not delivered as described.
3. Confidential management of participant records is provided with necessary security systems.

**C. Participants are notified in advance of course requirements (including time and participation requirements), technical requirements, and the skills needed to be successful in distance learning.**

1. The course description and syllabus are available to participants before registering.
2. The prerequisite courses and technical skills necessary for success are clearly described.
3. Technical specifications, including minimum hardware requirements, recommended connection speed, and browser compatibility are provided in advance.

**V. EVALUATION**

**A. The course is evaluated on a regular basis to determine whether it is achieving its objectives. Improvements to the course are made based on those evaluations.**

1. The course provider solicits feedback about the quality of the course design, content, instruction, support systems, and infrastructure from participants.
2. Feedback from participants is used to improve the course.
3. The course provider is able to communicate the results of its evaluation work to the public.
4. Information on participant completion rates is part of the course evaluation.

# Recommended Criteria for Online Courses for Educator Preparation

## OVERVIEW

There has been tremendous growth in recent years in the number of higher education institutions offering online courses, including courses for educator preparation. Because the quality of online courses varies, it is important to have criteria to assess the various course options. This section provides recommended criteria, which align with the Massachusetts regulations (603 CMR 7.00) governing educator preparation and licensure.

It is important to note that this document deals with criteria for assessing individual *courses*, as opposed to educator preparation *programs*. It is up to the organization offering a program to decide whether to accept online courses as part of its program. The following recommended criteria can be used by these organizations to assess such courses.

## I. COURSE CONTENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

### A. The content of the course is consistent with state and local educational goals, as well as with state regulations. Also, the course is equivalent in rigor to traditionally delivered courses.

1. The course is consistent with the “Professional Standards for Teachers” and “Professional Standards for Administrators” set forth in 603 CMR 7.00, the regulations governing educator preparation and licensure.
2. If the course is addressing a content area, it is consistent with the Subject Matter Knowledge Requirements listed in the applicable section of 603 CMR 7.00.
3. The course requires participants to apply what they are learning to real-world settings through experiences such as observations/field assignments in local schools or other appropriate settings. However, the course cannot be used to satisfy the pre-practicum or practicum field requirements for licensure.
4. The course description and syllabus clearly describe objectives, assessment criteria, texts, topics/sessions, assignments, and required and additional readings.

### B. The course makes the best use of available technologies and online resources to enrich the content. Face-to-face or other real-time meetings are provided for any content that cannot be effectively delivered online.

1. Various online technologies, such as discussion, interactive videoconferencing, online videos, simulations, and content-rich web sites, are used to promote understanding, address specific content goals, and meet the needs of individual participants.
2. The methods of instruction and delivery are selected based on their effectiveness for presenting the course content.

**C. The course provides frequent and timely interactions between the participants and the online instructor, as well as among the participants.**

1. Participants are encouraged to take part in online discussions, work together in online group activities, and provide feedback to one another to improve their practice.
2. The online instructor sets clear expectations regarding the amount of participation required.
3. The online instructor monitors participants' discussions and postings of work on a daily basis and responds to participants' inquiries within 24 hours.

**D. The course provides ways to assess participants' involvement and achievement of learning goals.**

1. The online instructor continually assesses participants' involvement and mastery of the content by monitoring their participation in online discussions, the quality of participant postings, and completed assignments.
2. The course includes appropriate assessments, which may include written exams or documentable products such as lesson plans and curriculum units, and graduate level writing and research for post-baccalaureate courses.
3. The assessments are valid measures of participants' mastery of the content objectives.
4. Authenticity of participant work is verified by appropriate means including, for example, tests proctored by an onsite coordinator and/or through the use of secure online methods.

## **II. STAFFING**

**A. The online instructor is fully qualified in the content area being taught.**

1. The online instructor demonstrates subject matter competency in the subject being taught and has the appropriate academic qualifications.

**B. The online instructor has been trained and is skilled in methods of teaching online.**

1. The online instructor has received training in online teaching and applies this knowledge to engage participants in regular, sustained, and guided discussion and collaboration.
2. The online instructor monitors participants' understanding and adjusts instruction to enable their learning.
3. The online instructor has the knowledge and skills needed to access the available online tools, such as discussion tools, tools for monitoring participation, and grading tools.

**C. The online course provider employs staff who manage technical and administrative issues.**

1. The staff provide participants and instructors with timely and user-friendly responses to technical questions both by phone and online on week days, evenings, and weekends.
2. The coordinator deals with administrative issues in a timely manner.

**III. ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

**A. The learning environment and course materials are universally designed, making them accessible to all learners.**

1. The learning environment and course materials are accessible to participants with disabilities or can be made accessible with accommodations.
2. The software used to access the course operates on any platform (type of computer), and does not require an excessive amount of memory or processing speed.

**B. The learning environment is easy to navigate, allowing participants to focus on the content, rather than the technology.**

1. The participants and instructors have reliable and continuous access to online discussion groups, instructional materials, a tool for uploading assignments, e-mail, and assessment tools.
2. The participants receive training and online support to aid them in navigating the online environment.

**IV. PROGRAM MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION**

**A. The course provider has established the necessary hardware, software, Internet connectivity, and support services to deliver the program of instruction.**

1. The course provider has established effective management systems and procedures.
2. The instructor has reliable access to all course management software.
3. The course management system provides the instructor with data on participant time online and frequency of postings.
4. The course provider sends transcripts and related information to the participant and to organizations as requested by the participant on a timely basis.
5. The course provider has established procedures for fees and payments and handles them efficiently.

**B. Participants' rights and responsibilities are recognized and upheld within the course structure.**

1. The course provider has an academic honor code, which is made available to the instructor and participants. The provider and instructor make it clear that this code must be observed in the online course.
2. Policies and systems are in place to address participants' complaints if the course is not delivered as described.
3. Confidential management of participant records is provided with necessary security systems.

**C. Participants are notified in advance of course requirements (including time and participation requirements), technical requirements, and the skills needed to be successful in distance learning.**

1. The course description and syllabus are available to participants before registering.
2. The prerequisite courses and technical skills necessary for success are clearly described.
3. Technical specifications, including minimum hardware requirements, recommended connection speed, and browser compatibility, are provided in advance.

**V. EVALUATION**

**A. The course is evaluated on a regular basis to determine if it is achieving its objectives. Improvements to the course are made based on those evaluations.**

1. The course provider solicits feedback about the quality of the course design, content, instruction, support systems, and infrastructure from participants.
2. Feedback from participants is used to improve the course.
3. The course provider is able to communicate the results of its evaluation work to the public.

## Resources Used in Developing This Document

Higher Education Program and Policy Council of the American Federation of Teachers, *Distance Education: Guidelines for Good Practice*, 2000. ([http://www.aft.org/higher\\_ed/downloadable/distance.pdf](http://www.aft.org/higher_ed/downloadable/distance.pdf) )

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Virtual High School (<http://www.govhs.org/> )

# Acknowledgments

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