



Flexible Learning in Education Guidance

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Introduction and Purpose

Introduction

As educational landscapes evolve, the need for flexible, student-centered learning models has never been more critical. Flexible learning offers a valuable opportunity to extend access, personalize instruction, and accommodate diverse learning needs by providing adaptable pathways that support varying paces, styles, and circumstances of learners. By emphasizing best practices in engagement, accessibility, and instructional design, this guidance supports school districts and charter schools in making informed decisions that reflect their unique goals and the needs of their communities.

We define flexible learning as an adaptable educational approach that allows for varied learning paths, pacing, and environments including digital asynchronous, non-digital asynchronous, digital synchronous, and hybrid modalities.

Purpose

This guidance is designed to empower Delaware school districts and charter schools by providing them with the tools and resources to build and refine their flexible learning plans, offering best practices for maximizing engagement, accessibility, and learning outcomes in flexible learning environments. It supports educators, students, and administrators in navigating both opportunities and challenges across varied learning modalities.

It is important to note that implementation decisions are discretionary at the local level, allowing school districts and charter schools the flexibility to adapt these recommendations to their unique contexts and needs. Ultimately, this guidance aims to foster an educational ecosystem where flexible learning can thrive and support diverse student needs across Delaware.

Key Terms and Definitions

Federal Laws

- **Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA):** U.S. federal law requiring schools and libraries receiving federal funding to implement content filters that protect students from accessing harmful or inappropriate online material. This also includes providing internet safety instruction and developing Internet Safety Policies (ISP) at the district and charter school level.
- **Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA):** U.S. federal law designed to protect the privacy of children under the age of 13. COPPA is required by all school systems. It requires websites, apps, and online services to obtain parental consent before collecting, using, or sharing personal information from children.
- **Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA):** U.S. federal law that protects the privacy of student education records. It gives parents (or eligible students over 18) the right to access, review, and control the disclosure of their educational information. Compliance often requires clear written agreements with third-party vendors to maintain direct control over data.

Flexible Learning Modalities

- **Asynchronous Learning:** Flexible educational approach that allows students to engage with courses, learning materials, and activities at their own pace, outside of real-time interactions (Rabenn & Brandt, 2024).
- **Digital Asynchronous Learning:** Learning that allows students to engage with courses, learning materials, and activities at their own pace, outside of real-time interactions using digital technologies without requiring real-time, simultaneous interaction (Pellerin, 2023). Examples are email, online discussion forums, message boards, blogs, podcasts, digital learning activities and assignments, etc., posted to an online learning management system (e.g., PowerSchool’s Schoology Learning Management System).
- **Digital Synchronous Learning:** Online learning in which the participants interact at the same time and in the same digital space, usually involving live, scheduled classes or meetings (e.g., utilizing virtual conferencing software).
- **Flexible Learning:** An adaptable educational approach that allows for varied learning paths, pacing, and environments including digital asynchronous, non-digital asynchronous, digital synchronous, and hybrid modalities.

- **Face-to-Face:** When two or more people meet, learn, or work together in person.
- **Hybrid Learning:** Learning that combines in-person with online instruction that can be flexible to a learner's time, pace, path, and/or place. Hybrid learning can occur synchronously, asynchronously, or can include both modalities.
- **Non-digital Asynchronous Learning:** Learning that allows students to engage with course/learning materials and activities at their own pace, outside of real-time interactions using printed and other low/no-tech instructional materials.

Learning Locations

- **Asynchronous Online Learning Environments:** Provide students with designated online spaces where they have opportunities to engage with their academic experience at their own pace that can be within a designated time frame (Barbour, 2012).
- **Brick and Mortar Schools:** Refers to a traditional school campus or traditional school building, as contrasted with online school environments.
- **Content Repository:** A digital venue for saving and sharing content. A digital content repository is an online space dedicated to saving and sharing digital content (e.g., PowerSchool's Schoology Learning Management System).

Definitions sourced from Wicks, M. (2010). [A National Primer on K-12 Online Learning. Version 2. International association for K-12 online learning.](#)

Implementation and Design Considerations

Introduction

Effective flexible learning requires a thoughtful design that balances adaptability with structure. It offers students meaningful engagement opportunities while providing educators with clear implementation guidance. Successful flexible learning environments prioritize variety and choice, empowering students to access learning through diverse pathways that accommodate their unique needs and preferences. By implementing various learning options, educators can ensure that students have multiple avenues to demonstrate understanding while remaining engaged with substantive, rigorous work.

Creating such environments demands planning designed explicitly for flexible contexts. This includes carefully considering curricular materials, adequate planning time, and targeted professional development around appropriate resource selection and implementation. Effective flexible learning also embraces format diversity, offering both digital and physical materials to accommodate varying access and learning needs.

Structural consistency across subjects and grade levels, established at the district or charter school level, provides a framework for success. These structures should incorporate essential lesson components, including learning objectives, well-defined criteria for success, engaging learning activities, thoughtful questions, and regular checks for understanding. Flexible learning allows for asynchronous or synchronous pacing in an environment outside of brick and mortar school buildings while providing reasonable flexibility in how and when students submit evidence of learning to demonstrate mastery of academic standards.

Implementation Considerations

Planning and Preparation

Effective flexible learning requires comprehensive preparation across multiple domains. Thoughtful planning must address teachers' professional development needs, student readiness, family support structures, and equitable access to digital and specialized physical materials. School districts and charter schools can create flexible learning environments that foster student engagement and achievement regardless of time or location constraints by establishing robust systems for instruction, communication, and emergency contingencies.

- **Flexible Learning Modalities:** There are various types of flexible learning modalities, each with unique characteristics and advantages. By integrating these modalities, educational institutions can foster learner autonomy, increase engagement, and ensure the continuity of education across diverse contexts, adapting effectively to the evolving needs of school districts, charter schools, and their learners.
 - **Digital asynchronous:** A self-paced online learning method where students engage with digital technologies to support flexible learning without requiring real-time simultaneous communication.
 - **Non-digital asynchronous:** A self-paced, offline learning method where students engage with printed or physical instructional materials, such as instructional texts, reading assignments, journals, projects, etc. without real-time teacher input or electronic devices.
 - **Digital synchronous:** An online learning method that takes place in real-time, where participants engage simultaneously in a shared digital environment, typically through scheduled live classes or meetings using virtual conferencing tools.
 - **Hybrid:** A learning method that integrates a combination of digital and non-digital asynchronous and synchronous instruction that can be flexible in when, how, where, and at what pace learners engage with content.
- **Educator Training:** Effective flexible learning starts with well-prepared educators. Teachers and instructional support staff need targeted professional development in instructional design that focuses on structuring lessons for self-paced learning, creating engaging content, and providing timely, constructive feedback. Training should also include best practices for using digital tools, assessing learning without real-time interaction, and supporting diverse learners in a remote environment. Equipping educators with strategies for building clarity, consistency, and interactivity into both asynchronous and synchronous instruction helps to ensure that students can access meaningful learning experiences.
- **Student Readiness:** Student success in flexible learning relies heavily on their ability to manage time, stay organized, and self-direct their learning. Before implementation, school districts and charter schools should provide structured support to help students build these essential skills. Lessons on goal-setting, media literacy, and navigating learning platforms can ease the transition. Younger students may need more scaffolding and check-in routines, while older students can benefit from digital planners and self-monitoring tools. Cultivating independence early prepares students to thrive in a self-paced environment.

- **Family Support Structures:** Families are critical partners in flexible learning, especially for younger students or those who need additional support. Providing family orientation sessions, live or recorded, can help caregivers understand expectations, platforms, and how to help without doing the work for their student. Resources can include user guides, FAQs, and suggested daily routines, as well as providing resources that are available in multiple languages. Clear communication about how, when, and where families can seek support increases confidence and builds collaboration between home and school.
- **Technical Infrastructure:** Reliable technical infrastructure is the backbone of any successful digital flexible learning model. School districts and charter schools must ensure students and staff have consistent access to devices and secure learning platforms. Technical support channels, such as help desks or online ticketing systems, should be established and clearly communicated. Accessibility features and tools that support differentiated instruction must also be integrated. Regular system checks, platform training, and contingency plans for outages are essential to prevent disruptions in the learning process.
- **Learning Materials Distribution:** A plan for distributing learning materials, including specialized materials (e.g., musical instruments, PE resources, etc.), is essential. Flexible learning goes beyond screens. Hands-on, specialized materials must also be accounted for. School districts and charter schools should have clear plans for distributing physical materials such as textbooks, art supplies, musical instruments, and physical education kits (please note that state mandated physical education assessments need to be implemented in a synchronous modality). Distribution schedules, pickup locations, and communication must be organized and accessible to all families. Schools should also consider how to provide alternatives or digital supplements for students unable to collect materials in person, ensuring equitable access to all learning experiences.
- **Support for Community-Based Child Care Providers:** Strategies to work with community-based child care providers on best practices in student learning environments are essential components of a flexible learning plan. Partnerships with community-based child care providers can strengthen support for students learning either asynchronously or synchronously, especially in households where caregivers work outside the home. School districts and charter schools should collaborate with these providers to share best practices for setting up structured, supportive learning environments. Providing training, resource toolkits, and communication channels allows child care providers to align with school expectations and better assist students. These partnerships expand learning support beyond the home and ensure students are engaged and supervised in any flexible learning modality.

- **Instructional Design for Planned Breaks and Varied Screen Time:** Flexible instructional design should balance screen use with offline activities to reduce fatigue. Planning should include clear pacing guides incorporating regular breaks, movement, and non-digital tasks. For example, lessons alternate between online videos and hands-on assignments or provide offline reading and reflection prompts. Schools should offer enrichment opportunities that deepens academic engagement while supporting social-emotional learning and well-being.
- **Planning for Emergency Flexible Learning Plans:** Just as teachers prepare emergency sub plans for unexpected absences, flexible learning environments require emergency plans that maintain instructional continuity. These pre-planned learning activities should include self-contained lessons that students can access independently, complete with clear instructions, embedded resources, and directions for submitting completed work. Schools should also prepare backup communication procedures and designate support contacts in case of teacher illness or sudden disruptions. Having these plans in place ensures learning continues with minimal interruption.
- **Collaborate with Employee Bargaining Units:** Collaboration with employee bargaining units is recommended to ensure equity in work hours and responsibilities across all staff. Establishing fair and transparent expectations helps sustain a supportive and balanced environment for educators and learners.

Communication Strategies

Implementing effective communication strategies in flexible learning environments requires intentional planning to ensure that information is accessible, timely, and comprehensive. Unlike traditional models, where real-time clarification is possible, flexible learning depends heavily on the clarity of initial communications. Districts and charter schools must utilize a combination of digital platforms, consistent messaging, and proactive outreach to keep students, families, and staff aligned and engaged, despite differences in schedules and interaction times.

- **Communicating Logistics to Students and Families:** In flexible learning environments, communicating logistics, such as assignment deadlines, learning management system (LMS) navigation, submission procedures, and support availability is critical to student success. Families and students must be able to reference this information easily, so it's essential to provide it in written, visual, and recorded formats, and to ensure it is housed in a central location like a learning management system or website. Clear labeling, consistent formatting, and timely updates can significantly reduce confusion and help families support students at home.

- **Communicating Logistics to Staff:** Staff working in flexible learning environments also require clear, ongoing communication regarding instructional expectations, student monitoring responsibilities, and deadlines. Without the benefit of daily in-person interactions, digital tools such as shared calendars, email threads, and internal discussion boards become vital for alignment. These tools should be supplemented with virtual staff meetings or recorded updates to allow for flexible access and to accommodate varying schedules. Structured communication helps maintain cohesion and ensures instructional consistency across teams.
- **Feedback Channels:** In flexible learning settings, feedback becomes a cornerstone of continuous improvement. School districts and charter schools can use surveys, discussion forums, or scheduled check-ins to gather feedback from students, families, and staff. Ensuring these tools are available in print and digital formats, mobile-friendly, accessible, and available in multiple languages enhances participation. Communicating how feedback is used to improve logistics and instructional practices reinforces trust and encourages continued engagement.
- **Support Request Processes:** Flexible learning environments require clear and accessible pathways for students, families, and staff to request help when needed. These supports should be prominently displayed on platforms where users are most active, and responses should be timely and tracked.
 - **Staff:** Educators in flexible environments must be empowered with tools and support to manage communication effectively. Training in digital communication strategies, content delivery, and feedback practices is essential. Staff should be equipped to anticipate student and family needs, present information clearly, and follow up with empathy and consistency.
 - **Students & Families:** Clarity and predictability in communication are paramount for students and families navigating flexible learning. Supporting multiple types of communication (e.g., voicemail, email, LMS messaging, etc.) and providing tutorials for navigating platforms can bridge gaps and help all students and families stay engaged and informed.
 - **Stakeholder Support Request Process:** Establishing clear processes for requesting support is necessary to the success of flexible learning. These processes should be accessible to all stakeholders and tailored to meet the distinct needs of internal stakeholders, such as teachers and staff, and external stakeholders, including students, families, and community partners. School districts and charter schools should develop streamlined systems, such as online request forms, designated support contacts, or virtual office hours, that ensure timely and appropriate responses to questions or concerns. Clear communication about how to access support fosters trust, promotes collaboration, and helps address challenges efficiently.

Data Privacy and Security

Protecting student information in digital environments is vital to fostering trust and safety in flexible learning. All digital tools and platforms used in educational settings must comply with rigorous data privacy and security standards to safeguard personally identifiable information (PII). School districts and charter schools hold the responsibility for ensuring full compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and related federal regulations when implementing digital learning systems. To support safe, equitable, and legally compliant learning environments, schools must:

- **Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA):** Implement content filters and safeguards to protect students from exposure to harmful online content.
- **Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA):** Ensure technologies that collect personal data from children under 13, such as learning platforms and digital tools, obtain verifiable parental consent before use.
- **Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA):** Maintain strict control over access to student education records and ensure that any platform handling such data complies with consent requirements.

Clear communication regarding how student information will be used, stored, and protected is essential. Establishing protocols for obtaining and documenting consent helps ensure transparency and builds trust with families participating in asynchronous learning.

Support and Equity Considerations

Ensuring equitable access to effective flexible learning requires addressing significant barriers that can prevent full participation and achievement for many students. Research indicates that approximately 30 percent of students in the United States have limited device or internet access at home, making consistent participation in digital learning environments challenging or impossible without appropriate accommodations (McFarland, 2024). These access inequities extend beyond technology, including disparities in learning environments, availability of basic learning materials, and varying levels of support.

- **Strengthening Support Systems:** Students with diverse learning needs bring valuable perspectives and approaches to their education. In flexible environments, these students thrive when provided with adaptable, responsive supports that promote autonomy and engagement. Strengthening connections between students and instructors, through thoughtful design and timely feedback, can foster a greater sense of belonging and focus, which supports persistence and success (Tate & Warschauer, 2022). Additionally, families offer unique strengths and insights that enrich the learning experience. By recognizing and building on these strengths, while providing accessible resources and guidance, educational systems can more effectively partner with caregivers to support student learning.

- **Support Services:** Planning to provide support services is critical in flexible learning environments, particularly for specialized services that may be required in synchronous formats. School districts and charter schools must develop clear protocols for how various specialists will deliver services, including:
 - Occupational Therapists
 - Physical Therapists
 - Speech Language Therapists
 - School Psychologists
 - Behavior Analysts
 - Interventionists/Specialists
 - Instructional Coaches
 - School Counselors
 - School Social Workers
 - Contracted Consultants
 - Paraeducators
 - Related Arts Educators (Physical Education, Visual/Performing Arts, STEAM, World Language)
 - Library and Media Specialists

Telehealth permission for related services (e.g., Occupational Therapists, Physical Therapists, Speech Language Therapists) is not limited to non-district, non-charter employees. Due to licensure requirements, telehealth permission is required.

- **Remote Technical Support:** Remote technical support plays a vital role in supporting successful flexible learning experiences. As technology becomes an integral part of instruction, school districts and charters have the opportunity to strengthen their systems to ensure timely, effective responses to technical issues related to platforms, assignment access, and user experience. By proactively addressing these challenges and offering accessible alternative solutions when needed, schools can help maintain continuity of learning and support equitable access for all students (Bouchrika, 2025).
- **Social Emotional Learning (SEL) supports:** SEL requires particular attention in flexible environments where students may experience isolation or disconnection. Effective SEL integration includes building community despite physical separation, addressing isolation concerns, implementing wellness check systems for students, and designing SEL activities specifically for asynchronous delivery. Research suggests that students often perceive asynchronous activities as more individualistic and less cooperative. This perception may lead to negative emotional effects and a decreased sense of belonging compared to synchronous learning experiences (Fabriz et al., 2021). To counteract this, educators should intentionally design collaborative asynchronous learning opportunities that foster peer interaction and shared goals. Strategies such as

discussion boards, peer feedback loops, and co-created projects can help promote connection and community in flexible learning environments.

Design Considerations

Communication Strategies

Effective communication is vital to the success of flexible learning environments. Educators should establish clear expectations to support student engagement and achievement by providing explicit guidelines for participation and assignment completion. Regular updates should be built into the learning design to ensure consistent communication with students and families, helping them stay informed and connected. In addition, timely and constructive feedback on student progress is critical to support learning and promote continuous improvement. While these communication strategies are important in the short term, they become even more crucial during extended periods of flexible learning, where maintaining a strong connection between home and school helps ensure sustained student engagement and academic success.

Content Development

When developing content for flexible learning, it is important to create materials that reinforce and extend classroom instruction. These materials should offer students meaningful opportunities to practice and deepen their understanding of key skills outside regular instructional time. All instructional materials should include clear and comprehensive directions that allow students to work independently without additional explanation.

To support ongoing formative and summative assessment, content should incorporate built-in, varied methods for students to demonstrate their understanding and mastery of standards. It is also essential to provide alternate versions of materials, that include specific accommodations, to meet the diverse needs of all learners.

Given the unique demands of flexible learning, careful attention should be paid to workload management, including strategies to help students and teachers organize, track, and submit assignments effectively. Finally, content should be designed to engage students through varied delivery methods helping to foster interaction, critical thinking, collaboration, and a sense of community.

Monitoring and Accountability

Monitoring and accountability are crucial components of effective flexible learning. Schools and educators must implement reliable methods to verify student attendance by

identifying clear participation indicators, such as completed assignments or engagement in designated learning activities. Teachers should consistently track student engagement in and completion of flexible learning tasks to ensure that participation is accurately reflected and aligned with attendance requirements. To support this, school districts and charter schools should utilize approved learning management systems, such as Schoology or other district/charter school approved and designated platforms, to manage assignment submissions and streamline tracking processes. Timely and constructive feedback from teachers to students is also critical, serving as a learning support and a means of ongoing communication. Additionally, educators should use available tools to monitor student progress toward learning goals, including platform engagement data when applicable, to ensure accountability and guide instructional decisions.

Technology Integration

Institutional capacity and student needs must be considered when selecting platforms for delivering and managing content. Digital tools should be chosen specifically to support learning objectives keeping varied student needs at the forefront of decision making and the selection of technology tools.

Incorporating collaborative elements, such as discussions and assignments, can promote valuable peer interaction and instructor support. Providing low-tech alternatives for students with limited access to technology is essential to ensure equity, thereby maintaining educational quality across diverse technological environments.

Time Management Strategies

Guidelines for students to manage their learning pace must be explicit and supportive, recognizing the increased responsibility placed on learners in flexible learning environments. Systems for monitoring progress should provide meaningful data without creating undue surveillance or pressure. Instructional design for planned breaks and varied screen time duration supports student well-being and sustained engagement. Time-efficient activities optimize independent completion, respecting student and family time constraints while maintaining educational integrity.

Additional Supports

Access Equity Issues

To ensure equity in a flexible learning environment, school districts and charter schools should be prepared to provide all students with necessary devices, digital materials, physical/print materials, materials in accessible formats, and technical support while also considering students' abilities and family capacity to support learning. Addressing these factors helps bridge digital divides and ensures all learners can engage meaningfully in the flexible learning environment.

Accommodations for Diverse Learners

School districts and charter schools should ensure that diverse learners, including those with special education needs and multilingual learners, receive appropriate support and access when planning for flexible learning. Students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP) and 504 plans may require adaptations, including synchronous instruction, to meet the specially designed instruction and related services outlined in their plans. For students with complex disabilities, additional planning is needed to address significant support needs. Instructional teams should be supported with time, resources, and guidance to develop accessible instructional materials and synchronous and asynchronous content, including materials that are language-appropriate and available in multiple formats to accommodate students experiencing various disabilities. Families and caregivers may also require resources to implement differentiated materials and modified learning activities at home. Proactive planning in these areas ensures equitable access and meaningful participation for all students.

Support Systems

Establishing clear expectations and guidance for family or caregiver involvement is essential to supporting effective flexible learning. Whether students learn at home or in childcare or community settings, caregivers should be provided with structured information on supporting student learning in these environments. Additionally, school districts and charter schools should offer virtual office hours during which educators are available to provide timely academic assistance and guidance to students.

To ensure ongoing communication and support, school districts and charter schools should implement accessible channels through which students can request help or clarification on assignments. It is also critical to maintain the direct and consistent delivery of specialized services, including counseling and other related services to

meet students' individual needs. Social and emotional learning (SEL) supports should be integrated into the flexible learning experience to promote student well-being and engagement.

Conclusion

The Delaware Flexible Learning Guidance serves as a comprehensive resource for Delaware school districts and charter schools committed to advancing flexible learning. By offering a range of tools, strategies, and best practices, it aims to support the thoughtful design, implementation, and continuous refinement of flexible learning plans. As education continues to evolve, the ability to adapt to diverse student needs, leverage multiple learning modalities, and ensure equitable access to high-quality instruction is more important than ever. Through collaborative efforts and intentional planning, schools can create dynamic learning environments that foster engagement, resilience, and long-term success for all learners.

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