

April 22, 2014

# Independent Study

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LEGISLATIVE ANALYST'S OFFICE

Presented to:  
Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 2 on Education Finance  
Hon. Al Muratsuchi, Chair





## Background

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### **Independent Study (IS) Is an Alternative to Traditional Classroom-Based Instruction**



#### **How Does IS Work?**

- Students work independently under a written learning contract and the general supervision of a credentialed teacher.
- Daily attendance at school is not required.
- Student participation is voluntary.



#### **What Are Some Examples of IS Programs?**

- Programs delivering instruction online (“virtual learning”).
- Programs combining online and classroom instruction (“blended learning”).
- Programs incorporating internships, off-site projects, or work experience.
- Programs assisting parents with homeschooling their children.



#### **Why do Students Enroll in IS Programs?**

- Make up missed credits.
- Gain additional flexibility in their schedules.
- Take courses not offered at their schools.
- Learn in a more individualized setting.



## Background

*(Continued)*

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### **How Extensive Are IS Programs?**

- About 1,900 schools (20 percent of all schools) offered IS in 2012-13.
- About 165,000 students (3 percent of all students) took at least one IS course in 2012-13.
- Two-thirds of IS students were in charter schools and one-third were in district schools.
- Two-thirds of students were in grades 9-12 and one-third were in grades K-8.



### **What Special Rules Apply to IS?**

- A teacher must equate each student assignment to an equivalent amount of classroom “seat time.”
- The student-teacher ratio in an IS program is capped at the school district’s average student-teacher ratio.
- A special fiscal review applies to charter schools offering IS programs. This review generally requires charter schools to demonstrate that a specified percentage of their budget is devoted to instruction, among other criteria, or risk losing a portion of their state funding.



## Common Concerns Related to IS

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- Recordkeeping Requirements for Teachers Are Extensive**
  - A teacher must assess the amount of seat time represented by every individual student assignment.
  - A teacher must maintain a detailed paper file for every student containing student work samples and information about completed assignments.
  
- Learning Contracts Are Unwieldy**
  - Must be renewed every semester.
  - Cannot be stored electronically.
  
- Student-Teacher Ratios Are Restrictive**
  - Student-teacher ratio caps based on the districtwide average may not make sense for all programs.
  
- Charter School Special Fiscal Review Has Several Issues**
  - Some aspects of the fiscal review are very prescriptive.
  - Process generates many appeals, creating additional state and local workload.



## **Governor's IS Proposals**

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- Governor Has a Package of Proposals to Address Concerns With IS**
  
- Creates a New, Optional Set of IS Funding Rules With Fewer Recordkeeping Requirements**
  - Local governing boards could certify an entire IS course (rather than individual assignments) as equivalent to a specific amount of seat time.
  - Students would be required to make “satisfactory academic progress” in the course, as determined weekly by a supervising teacher.
  - Learning contracts could last up to one year and be stored electronically.
  - Programs serving students in grades K-8 would be limited to providing instruction at a school site.
  
- Modifies Student-Teacher Ratios to Be More Flexible**
  - Computes student-teacher ratio caps separately for separate grade spans.
  - Allows districts to collectively bargain over the student-teacher ratio caps.
  
- Exempts Charter Schools Using New IS Rules From Special Fiscal Review**



## Assessment and Recommendations

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- Adopt the Governor's Basic Proposal to Create a New Set of Funding Rules for IS Courses**
  - Would allow teachers to spend more time on instruction.
  - Involving local governing boards in approval of courses would increase transparency and accountability for IS programs.
  
- Reject New Site-Based Requirement for K-8 Students**
  - Would result in less flexibility for K-8 students than afforded by existing IS rules.
  
- Adopt New Rules for Student-Teacher Ratios**
  - Would allow school districts to gain additional flexibility while limiting the likelihood of unreasonably high student-teacher ratios.
  
- Reject Proposal to Exempt Charter Schools From Special Fiscal Review**
  - Governor treats charter schools that use the new IS rules differently from those using the existing rules without justification.
  - Recommend the Legislature make broader changes to the special fiscal review that address outstanding oversight issues and treat similar charter schools similarly.