

Distance Learning Workgroup Meeting Notes
May 27, 2021
Via Zoom

The initial committee for the Distance Learning Workgroup convened online via Zoom on May 27 for an opening discussion regarding the future of distance learning in South Dakota. Dr. Kevin Lein moderated the participants that worked in small group breakout rooms on Zoom to discuss a variety of topics. Some of the topics included:

- Does the current definition of “distance learning” by codified law fit our state and needs?
- Can distance learning be effective for all learners? What barriers may exist?
- What is the current and/or needed capacity for learners, guardians, staff, and schools?
- How do we define equity regarding distance learning?
- What are best practices?
- How do we assess in a distance learning environment?
- How do we define and how are we actionable regarding accountability?
- Discussions regarding governance, revenue/resources, and technology

Generally, groups indicated that while current laws may be adequate, more clarification of terms may be helpful. In addition, groups identified that many barriers currently exist in distance learning, including equity for students with diverse needs, equity in access to technology (e.g. bandwidth at home), lack of consistent capacity or motivation for guardians and learners that are learning outside of the school environment, and lack of resources of socio-emotional supports.

Groups noted that capacity for learners and guardians as well as capacity for staff and schools could benefit from clarity of expectations, clear accountability mechanisms, and orientation to high-quality practices for learning in a digital environment. However, a strong opinion to allow local schools to determine accountability for faithful implementation of processes was expressed.

Assessment for distance learning is novel in many ways and must be designed with the maintenance of accountability and integrity in mind. Professional development in this area for staff and schools would be key.

Many governance issues would need further discussion, such as local school board policies, protocols for changes in technology, defining e-learning days in cases of inclement weather, SDHSAA considerations, etc. Fiscal concerns, such as fairness in cost and reimbursement procedures, would also need to be defined. More discussion would need to be had regarding how distance learning was reflected in school accreditation cycles.

From a technology perspective, the issue of learning management systems (LMS) was discussed, with members noting that one LMS for all districts may be more advantageous as an issue of equity. In addition, it is not clear that all locations in South Dakota have equal access to bandwidth and load capacity. Some indicated that a statewide platform may be needed as well as training around these infrastructure issues.

In conclusion, group discussions indicated widespread support for distance learning that is driven by statewide guidance, but left to flexible, local control. Some students are served best by distance learning, but many socio-emotional needs and needs of diverse learners are not met by distance learning.