

INDEPENDENT STUDY: WHY AND WHAT

CHAPTER 1



INTRODUCTION

At Benjamin Charter High School* in Philadelphia, Carlos and Lara are learning from life experience—and earning academic credit for it. Through an Independent Study option, they are using afterschool time to develop and implement an academic learning project that builds on their interests and experiences in the wider world. Carlos' project is expanding his knowledge of coaching strategies for a minor league soccer team. Lara is researching different areas of community service and creating a photo PowerPoint® project to demonstrate her findings. At Espinosa Charter High School*, Krystale is applying her experience of working in a pizza shop to learning more about running her own business one day. With the Independent Study Project, they are logging their time, reflecting on their learning, conducting research, and making a presentation, all documented and reviewed in an Independent Study Portfolio.

Young people entering college and today's workforce face challenges requiring skill sets that include, but go far beyond, standards-based academic preparation. Whether seen through the lens of 21st century skills, high school transitions, college readiness, or career and workforce development, young people must be able to think creatively, plan their time accurately, follow through, gather information, analyze, and present conclusions to varied audiences. They need to take responsibility for their learning, and become skilled in using a range of technology and media to communicate their knowledge and thinking. They need to lead, follow, work in teams, and work efficiently and effectively on their own.

As educators, we have the responsibility to teach and deepen these skills, equipping young people to succeed throughout high school, higher education, and into the global marketplace.

The Independent Study Project provides out-of-school staff, classroom teachers, and students with a structure to:

- Develop an applied learning project that builds on interests and activities students engage with outside the classroom, such as clubs, jobs, talents, community service, or special topics
- Capitalize on out-of-school time for expanded learning opportunities
- Enrich the learning through reflections and record-keeping
- Deepen knowledge through research
- Demonstrate learning
- Create a portfolio for documentation and assessment
- Earn Independent Study or senior project credit

No matter what the specific topic, overarching objectives for Independent Study include:

- Experiencing the excitement of learning more about an interest area
- Learning to learn, explore, and deepen knowledge in varied ways
- Becoming responsible for self-directed work
- Learning strategies for handling complex tasks
- Developing work and study skills of time management, tracking, and accountability
- Applying critical thinking to developing topics, assessing progress, and making revisions
- Applying critical thinking to rationales, explanations, and critique

* True events, but names have been changed for privacy.



GETTING STARTED WITH INDEPENDENT STUDY

Leading an exciting and effective Independent Study calls for preparation on three levels.

1. **You, the out-of-school staff,** need to be ready and prepared to actively engage with students as an Independent Study (IS) Coach. Help them find and follow their passion! Commit to supporting them as they learn to work on their own. Know that your support makes it work—or not. Students don't have a lot of opportunities to see themselves as inquiring, engaged, and successful learners. This is your chance to build those skills and show them that learning something they're interested in is fun!
2. **School administration and teachers** must be on-board and clear about the value of Independent Study. They are key to reinforcing the message that applied learning and independent work, when well-done, truly "counts." Before launching Independent Study with students, you must have explicit and written agreements with teachers about the type and amount of school credit students may earn, and the documentation and standards that will apply for awarding credit. Chapter 2—Laying the Groundwork with School—details this further.
3. **Students** need to see Independent Study as an exciting opportunity to prepare for college work, build skills, and earn credit by applying and expanding knowledge. Students tend to be a bit jaded about school. It's up to the out-of-school staff and classroom teachers to show Independent Study as a great out-of-school option that will help students advance.

The role of the out-of-school leader is to:

Interest, motivate, and engage students in Independent Study

Serve as a communication link with the classroom teacher as needed

Support students' work by:

1. Guiding them through the planning, so they create a solid work plan
2. Meeting weekly (or as arranged) to check in, trouble-shoot, review progress, revise if needed
3. Guiding them to more help or additional resources as needed. This may be:
 - Forming study groups with other students for peer support
 - Pairing students
 - Helping students connect with relevant teachers
 - Helping students locate outside resources for more information or support
 - Bringing in speakers
 - Asking teachers to make presentations or recommend resources



All staff leading and facilitating Independent Study should become familiar and comfortable with the parts and pieces.

1. Look through this **Leader's Guide**.
2. Read the **session plans and handouts** in Chapter 3—Guiding Independent Study with Students—for leading the process with students. You'll see that the detailed sessions provide a solid base for guiding students into and through Independent Study.
3. Review the documentation for students' **Portfolio of Work**—Chapter 4. Typically, this would include some or all of the following:
 - Independent Study Planner, showing initial brainstorming, thinking, and planning processes. This may be printed and handled as a full document, or as a series of handouts.
 - Independent Study Contract, showing students' commitment to a project, and their ability to clearly define the project, allocate time, specify tasks and activities, and understand requirements and accountability.
 - Time Log, showing actual hours spent, with sign-offs as appropriate, demonstrating effort, reliability, and consistency, as well as accountability.
 - Reflections showing development and extension of learning beyond the doing of the activity, as well as ability to think critically about progress and revisions, if needed.
 - Research component, with evidence of deepening the learning, and demonstrating ability to find reliable and relevant sources of information.
 - Mid-point Assessment documenting a review meeting, and showing student's self-assessment of progress, critical review with others of the project and the quality of work, and the ability to receive and use feedback.
 - Assessment Rubric showing application of judgment criteria to the student's work.
 - Other items selected by student to demonstrate learning or skills, or required by the school for the awarding of credit.
4. Lead sessions: **Opening Session through Session 5**.
5. After the sessions, work with students to complete the **Independent Study Contract**.
6. Meet with students weekly to review **time logs, research, and student reflection pieces**.
7. Meet for a **mid-point Portfolio review**
8. Schedule **presentation** times for students to demonstrate their learning for the program group, teachers, family, or others.
9. Maintain regular **communication** with teachers and others in the school.

