



Misuse of 'distance learning' terminology can cause real problems for districts

"Online learning," "virtual school," "distance learning," "blended learning." Don't these terms really mean the same thing? And during the COVID-19 pandemic, does it really matter if educators use them interchangeably?

In a confusing time, "term confusion" can make life even more muddled for both educators and parents of students with disabilities, according to Jennifer Baldassari, a school attorney with Lozano Smith in Walnut Creek, Calif. "Distance learning," for example, is a broad term that can include online learning. But it can also refer to or include low-tech options, such as delivering instruction via a packet dropped off at a student's home.

"Confusion over legal terms of art matters," says Baldassari. "Folks are using the terms 'online learning,' 'distance learning,' 'virtual school,' and 'digital learning' interchangeably when they really mean distance learning -- an umbrella term referring to learning that occurs when the teacher and student are in different locations."

Transparency with use of terms builds trust and confidence across the board. Term confusion, on the other hand, can lead to disputes over parental participation and erode trust. But according to Baldassari, it can create larger equity and access issues.

"If the school district is explaining a distance learning model to its parent communities, but is using the term 'online learning' instead of distance learning, some families without access to technology or internet services may feel they are unable to access education for their child during a school closure," Baldassari says.

But how do you get educators to use the right terms? It comes down to good communication and making sure everyone is on the same page, Baldassari explains. Staff training is one opportunity for bringing clarity. "School districts are being asked to provide professional development on the fly ... but it can be a great platform to ensure all staff and employees are up-to-date on the appropriate terminology to cut down on confusion when speaking with parents or members of the community." Districts can use e-learning to provide that needed professional development.

Below are some of the most common phrases that are subject to term confusion, along with definitions.

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Online learning

According to guidance issued by the U.S. Education Department's Office of Educational Technology, "online learning" refers to a wide range of programs that use the internet to provide instructional materials and facilitate interactions between teachers and students and in some cases among students. Online learning can be fully online or combined with face-to-face interactions in what is known as blended learning. *Understanding the Implications of Online Learning for Educational Productivity* (OET 2012).

Distance learning

"Distance learning" is generally understood to refer to situations in which the student learns remotely -- that is, the student and instructor are in different locations. It may incorporate both online and off-line options, such as instruction via conventional phone calls or dropping off assignments at a student's home and then following up with a phone call. Or it may consist solely of low-tech options.

Virtual school

ED defines "virtual school" to mean: "A public school that offers only virtual courses: instruction in which children and teachers are separated by time and/or location. In addition, interaction occurs via computers and/or telecommunications technologies, and the school generally does not have a physical facility that allows children to attend classes on-site." *Dear Colleague Letter*, [68 IDELR 108](#) (OSERS/OSEP 2016).

Blended learning

According to the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, "blended learning" means a "formal education program that leverages both technology-based and face-to-face instructional approaches that include an element of online or digital learning combined with supervised learning time, and student-led learning, in which the elements are connected to provide an integrated learning experience; and in which student are provided some control over time, path, or pace." [20 USC 7112](#) (1).



Digital learning

"Digital learning" is defined by ESSA as: "Any instructional practice that effectively uses technology to strengthen a student's learning experience and encompasses a wide spectrum of tools and practices, including ... blended learning, which occurs under direct instructor supervision at a school or other location away from home and, at least in part, through online delivery of instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path, or pace; and access to online course opportunities for students in rural or remote areas." [20 USC 7112](#) (3).

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