Iowa Adult Education and Literacy

COVID-19 FAQs Sheet

Introduction

As questions arise from the field, the Iowa Department of Education (Department) continues to update this frequently asked questions (FAQs) document on Adult Education and Literacy (AEL). These updates are indicated by a "New (5-13-20)" or "Updated (5-13-20)" label. These questions are grouped around the following areas:

   I.   Funding and Financial Management,
   II. Program Operations,
   III. Distance Education,
   IV. Grant Management and Performance, and
   V.   HSED Testing (High School Equivalency Diploma).

I. Funding and Financial Management

I.1. Can the AEFLA grant reimburse costs for staff to have paid leave or to work remotely in providing services to participants?

The OMB Uniform Guidance cost principles that ordinarily govern the allowability of compensation and fringe benefits under federal awards continue to apply with respect to compensation and leave paid to employees during COVID-19 closures. Refer to the cost principles in Subpart E of the OMB Uniform Guidance. This includes those at 2 CFR 200.430 Compensation—Personal Services and 2 CFR 200.431 Compensation—Fringe Benefits, as well as those that apply more generally to all costs including (but not limited to) conditions for costs to:

- Be necessary and reasonable for the performance of the award and allocable thereto (2 CFR 200.403(a)),
- Conform to limitations or exclusions set forth in these cost principles or the award (2 CFR 200.403(b)),
- Be consistent with policies and procedures that apply uniformly to both federally-financed and other activities of the entity (2 CFR 200.403(c)),
- Be accorded consistent treatment as a direct or indirect cost (2 CFR 200.403(d)), and
- Be adequately documented (2 CFR 200.403(g)).

In considering whether a cost is reasonable, consideration must be given to factors described in the cost principles, including (but not limited to) consideration as to whether the entity significantly deviates from its established practices and policies regarding the incurrence of costs such that the deviation unjustifiably increase the award's cost (2 CFR 200.404(e)). Similar provisions exist in the State's Uniform Grant Management Standards (UGMS).

In considering the referenced cost principles, pandemic-related paid leave that is charged to the AEFLA grant award must be made pursuant to an official decision by the grantee's leadership that applies uniformly to all activities of that entity. For example, if an entity's leadership officially decides to pay all full-time

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personnel but not part-time personnel, the AEFLA grant can be used to pay the grant's allocable share of paid leave for full-time personnel but not part-time personnel.

The amount paid must be consistent with the entity's policies and be uniformly applied to both grant-financed and other activities. If an entity's leadership decides to pay leave due to the pandemic to part-time personnel, the amount charged to the AEFLA grant award for the award's allocable share of such payments cannot exceed what would be reasonable considering the number of hours ordinarily worked by the part-time personnel.

Additionally, where necessary and reasonable health and safety precautions do not permit normal face-to-face interaction between participants, it is encouraged that grantees offer remote access to services where possible.

I.2. What are permissible uses of instructor time and effort while working remotely? Is it acceptable that instructor time and effort look different by including more classroom prep?

The Department does not provide guidance on acceptable work as it relates to staff time and effort. Staff time though should reflect effort that supports or provides AEL activities that fulfill the mission of the grant and can be deemed necessary and reasonable.

I.3. Do we have authority to purchase more laptops and related computer supplies to expand our distance education services?

Yes, AEFLA grantees may make budget amendments to move funds within their budgets to the appropriate line items that will best assist them in purchasing materials necessary for the provision of distance education which may include purchasing laptops, computers, tablets, or WIFI hotspots and similar items as well as associated licensing fees or seat allocations for distance education curriculum. Prior approval requirement regarding equipment having a per-unit acquisition cost of $5,000 or more continues to apply and grantees must follow their procurement policy.

I.4. Can AEFLA grantees purchase cleaning supplies and protective gear masks and gloves to address the pandemic?

Necessary and reasonable cleaning supplies and protective masks and gloves that are purchased for use by healthy AEL provider personnel who are reasonably required to have contact with participants during the pandemic are eligible grant costs. Grantees should complete a budget amendment if funds need to be allocated to appropriate line items.

I.5. Do expenses related to the pandemic need to be tracked separately in the claims for AEFLA funds?

While it is noted in I.1 Q and I.4 Q many expenses related to serving individuals and providing AEL activities are allowable expenses, good practices would indicate the following recommendations would assist in the tracking of COVID-19-related emergency protective measure costs:

- Identify and keep funds and expenditures separate by creating an independent account for this "incident" to enable clear tracking of expenditures;
- Properly procure everything, including documenting phone calls with vendors to later help with justifying costs and demonstrating adherence to procurement rules;
- Continue to document control/scan all supporting information and keeping them in a centralized (electronic) file system; and
- Track and document equipment use during the response phase (what, who, how, and duration of use) and be as specific as possible.

This information will allow grantees to indicate on future claims how funds have been used during the response phase.

Added (5-13-20): I.6. How does the recent waiver to extend the period of availability of Fiscal Year 2018 funds received by the Department from the Office of Career Technical and Adult Education impact providers?

Pursuant to section 3511 of Division A of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), Pub. L. No. 116-136, 134 Stat. 281 (Mar. 27, 2020), the Iowa Department of Education (Department) and its subgrantees have been granted a waiver to extend the period of availability of Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 funds for programs in which the Department participates as the eligible agency until September 30, 2021.

This waiver was sought primarily for providers awarded Section 243, Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) funds, or providers who have been engaged in Integrated Education and Training activities authorized by Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Unexpended federal funds are reported in the [Adult Education and Literacy Annual Report](). It has been noted, that providers might not be able to obligate funds timely, or as originally planned, due to extensive interruptions in scheduled workforce training activities. These disruptions have been in response to extraordinary circumstances to protect the health and safety of students, staff, and our communities and has resulted in closed campuses and temporary closures of businesses, where many of the IET activities occur. The extended time will allow providers to adjust their plans for virtual offerings or allow time to reopen classrooms and labs. A notice and opportunity for [public comment]() is available on the Department's website until May 24, 2020.

II. Program Operations

II.1. Will requirements for orientation and enrolling new participants in AEL be allowed to be done from a distance?

Requirements have not changed, at their discretion, grantees can conduct orientation virtually. For information on documenting the required 12 hours of contact time refer to [III.1 Q](). For information on pre-assessment testing refer to [II.4 Q]().

II.2. With the inability to enroll new participants how will this impact funding or monitoring for continuous improvement?

The Department anticipates demand for AEL services among new participants will be impacted and altered as programs move to distance learning options. Additionally, demand may begin to increase as a result of growing unemployment. The Department is operating under the following general principles during this period:

- The Department anticipates that performance on many measures is likely going to be impacted by COVID-19 and efforts to slow its spread;
- It is too early to know what that impact is going to be;
- AEL performance indicators will be monitored to determine what the appropriate recommendations are; and
- Those recommendations will be informed by what the data shows.

II.3. Will the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) waive the requirement to pre/post-test for determining a Measurable Skill Gain (MSG) under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)?

OCTAE is aware that local programs may not be able to conduct in-person testing of participants enrolled in distance learning programs during program closures due to the pandemic.

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If local programs are unable to conduct in-person testing, a grantee may be able to report MSG using other measures available to AEFLA under the MSG indicator, such as credit completion (by tracking the completion of a Carnegie unit of instruction) or high school completion.

II.4. What flexibilities will OCTAE allow in terms of assessment, as it relates to education practices? Will grantees be given the option to conduct virtual pre/post-assessment testing? Is there any possibility that the U.S. Department of Education can waive the progress testing requirements and, if not, how will everyone handle testing?

The inability to test participants may adversely impact the number of MSGs Iowa would normally report. CASAS will be adding a field in TOPSpro Enterprise to indicate participants who were not tested due to an inability to conduct in-person testing due to the pandemic.

CASAS is actively exploring the feasibility of several options that may be possible for remote pre- and post-testing of CASAS standardized tests used in WIOA programs. In the meantime, programs are not permitted to do any remote CASAS testing. A proctor must be physically present to administer all CASAS tests.

Any approved virtual test proctoring will require the following procedures:

1. The student who is testing must be properly identified;
2. Any approved test (i.e., any test determined suitable for use in the NRS) that is used is properly secure; and
3. The testing environment is deemed secure by the test publisher.

This FAQ will be updated as information becomes available.

New (5-13-20): II.5. Will the Department amend the distance education requirements in the published PY19-20 Iowa Assessment Policy Guidelines?

Using the authority granted by OCTAE's Program Memorandum 20-4, Iowa's Assessment Policy Guidelines on Assessment of Distance Learners (page 30) will be modified effective March 1 through June 30, 2020. The following tracked changes are provided below:

Iowa Policy: *All eligible individuals for adult education and literacy, including distance education participants must be assessed in accordance with the Iowa Assessment Policy Guidelines, as modified due to COVID-19 from March 1 to June 30, 2020.*

- *Priority should be that a~~All eligible individuals have a~~ pre-and post-assessment ~~must be~~ administered in a proctored, face-to-face or virtual setting.*
- *All eligible individuals ~~must~~ that are able to be pretested ~~prior to 12 hours of instruction~~ should be done in only one modality (Reading, Math or Listening) as soon as scheduling will allow.*
- *Distance education participants are subject to the same post-test instructional hour intervals as traditional learners.*
- *Any eligible individual that is unable to meet the technical requirements for virtual testing will be exempted from the assessment requirements for pandemic related purposes, providers will be required to report this in the data management system.*

New (5-13-20): II.6. Will the Department allow NRS approved assessments to be administered remotely?

The Department has been working with approved vendors piloting the remote administration of NRS approved assessments and is satisfied that if the vendor guidance is followed that all providers will be able to offer remote testing now and in the future. Each provider will need to submit a signed Testing Agreement and have proctors complete the required remote administration training. Once those steps are complete and

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based on the ability to meet the technological requirements for proctor and test taker, remote testing will go live May 4, 2020. Additional guidance on remote testing of NRS approved assessments will be updated here.

New (5-13-20): II.7. If we are unable to administer an NRS approved pre-test for a potentially eligible individual, how do we complete a new record in the data management system?

A test is not required to create a participant record in TopsEnterprise (TE®). Eligibility for adult education and literacy (AEL) services remains the same during this pandemic time, an individual may be served with AEL funds if one of the three criteria listed in Iowa Administrative rule 281-23.5 are met. If the eligible participant is enrolling based on "lacking sufficient mastery of basic educational skills," which is normally determined through the use of an NRS approved assessment, providers must use a combination of standardized participant self-attestation that should include an interview and/or informal skill assessment. All new participants enrolled remotely must:

- Complete an enrollment form including all required PIRL elements (in a manner that protects Personally Identifiable Information (PII) is aligned with Iowa's Assessment Policy Guidelines and the Iowa Data Dictionary). Key data elements that will assist in determining eligibility may include the following:
    o Age, listed as the individuals date of birth;
    o The School Status at Program Entry, Highest School Grade Completed, and Highest Educational Level Completed (this can serve as a proxy for basic skills deficiency eligibility and/or lack of high school completion); and
    o If the individual indicates they are an English language learner.
- Complete a Release of Information form.
- Complete an age verification form (if applicable).
- Schedule a time to review technical requirements for remote NRS assessment.
- Document that conducting a NRS approved assessment is not a viable option.
- Complete an intake interview/informal skill assessment.

NOTE: *The enrollment form and release of information can be completed and signed online or through a one-to-one interview with the student in a manner that protects PII.*

If eligibility is determined and the participant does not have an NRS approved assessment, the participant record must indicate in the "Force Majeure" data field that this is COVID-19 related. Additional guidance on EFL determination through self-attestation will be updated here.

Class assignment, tracking instructional hours, and reporting Measurable Skills Gain (MSG) via credit completion (by the completion of a Carnegie unit of instruction) or high school completion must be completed in TE®. Participants enrolled in this manner, without an NRS approved pre-test will be federally reported and part of Iowa's performance measures.

New (5-13-20): II.8. If we are unable to administer an NRS approved post-test for eligible participants, should we exit them from adult education and literacy?

Providers should continue to offer services to participants based on their need and must continue to exit participants in accordance with the definition of "exit" in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) joint final rule (34 CFR § 463.150(c)(1)). That definition requires that there be no plan to provide a participant with future services. Providers have a few options for serving and exiting AEFLA participants, despite challenges caused by the pandemic. These options include the following:

- Continue to provide services through distance learning.
- Schedule future planned services for participants whose services have been disrupted. For example, if a local program temporarily suspends adult education classes but plans to resume classes in the

summer, the summer classes for these participants can be considered "future planned services," and the program would not have to exit the participant.
- Exit participants who no longer are in need of services and do not have ongoing services or future planned services.

New (5-13-20): II.9. For intaking new participants or working with current participants remotely, what are the suggested best practices to ensure personally identifiable information (PII) is kept secure?

Policies regarding the protection of PII apply with full force while working remotely. All documents, computers, and electronic storage containing PII must be secured from unauthorized review at all times.

When not actively in use, PII must be in a secured location. For persons working at home, a secure location may be a closet, box, or drawer that is within the control of the remote worker at all times. In the control of the remote worker at all times means all exterior doors are locked when the remote worker is not at home or that the information is kept in a locked container (locked office), sealed envelope, or taped box. If another person has access to the PII without the remote worker being present, it is not in a secure location.

Personally-owned computers shall not be used to download, save, store, or host PII. Use of a personally-owned computer through an authorized method of connecting to PII information such as a VPN is permissible. Screen shots or other local storage of PII is forbidden.

In the event of loss, misuse, or theft of PII, the remote worker agrees to immediately (no later than 24 hours) report the loss, misuse, or theft to their supervisor.

III. Distance Education

III.1. Is it possible to waive the requirement of 12 hours of "contact with the program before they can be counted as a distance learner for state and federal reporting purposes" (pg. 29, Iowa Assessment Policy Guidelines)?

All eligible individuals receiving services under AEFLA must complete at least 12 hours of instruction to be considered a "participant" under 34 CFR 463.150. Program closures due to the pandemic have resulted in placing participants in distance learning settings, and those participants may be in various stages of completing the initial 12 "contact hours" needed for them to be considered a participant.

One category of participants who have been transferred from classroom-based instruction to distance learning services have already completed the initial 12 contact hours needed to be considered a participant. These individuals do not need to complete another 12 contact hours, as they have already met the 12-hour threshold.

Another category of participants who have been transferred from classroom-based instruction to distance learning services have not yet completed the initial 12 contact hours needed to be considered a participant. These individuals may continue to accrue the required 12 contact hours through telephone, video, teleconference, or online communication, where participant and program staff can interact and through which participant identity is verifiable.

Participants newly enrolled in distance learning programs and who were not receiving classroom instruction before COVID-19-related program closures must meet the 12-hour requirement before being considered an AEFLA participant. The 12-hour enrollment requirement for distance learners can be met by accruing contact hours through telephone, video, teleconference, or online communication, where participant and program staff can interact and through which participant identity is verifiable.

III.2. What is the difference between contact hours and proxy hours as defined in the Iowa Assessment Policy Guidelines?

Contact hours are defined as time spent in "real time" interacting with the participant. Often referred to as synchronous instruction, it involves learning where a group of students are engaging with an instructor in learning activities (intake, orientation, assessment, goal setting, counseling, and classroom-based skills training) at the same time whether in-person or virtual. The instructor and students communicate in real time using virtual means (web conferencing tools, phone, instant messaging, live chat, webinars, video conferencing, etc.). Contact hours can be a combination of actual face-to-face contact and contact by these virtual means as long as it is happening in real time where participants and staff are able to interact and through which learner identity is verifiable.

This could include but are not limited to: roll call document signed by instructors, print outs of who logged into webinars and/or video conferencing, or use of personal log on numbers provided to students (access codes) that can be tracked by facilitators/moderators indicating that the student is participating in the instructional activities.

Proxy hours are defined as the time distance education participants spend engaged in learning activities. Distance education is a formal learning activity where participants and instructors are separated by geography, time, and/or both for the majority of the instructional period. This is instruction that is not occurring in "real time." Learning activities can be delivered through a variety of media including, but not limited to, print, audio recording, videotape, television broadcasts, computer software, web-based interaction, and other online technologies but is done so asynchronously. Distance education must be done by a verifiable learner with the hours for each activity calculated using one of three models: clock hours, instructor verification, or learner mastery.

Providers must ensure that they update their local standard operating procedures to include acceptable documentation for above referenced proxy hours that adheres to "identity verifiable" documentation. The verification of a participant's identity varies based on the delivery method of the distance learning but often includes a secure, unique login and password using a FERPA compliant procedure such as encrypted transport methods (predominantly HTTPS). The documentation of participant names should also include class name/number, date, time in/out, and instructor name. *Please ensure that you are not implementing processes that jeopardize and/or contradict guidance in keeping participant information confidential. A social security number should not be used as a unique identifier for logging onto a distance education platform.*

III.3. Can academic packets or course materials be used to count the hours as direct hours or as proxy hours for participants in AEL?

Distance learning can be delivered through a variety of media including, but not limited to, print, audio recording, videotape, television broadcasts, computer software, web-based interaction, and other online technologies (pg. 28, [Iowa Assessment Policy Guidelines](#)). If the work being done on the "academic packets" is in "real time" then is needs to be recorded as direct contact hours as detailed above.

If the time spent on the course materials is asynchronous, then the proxy hours needs be calculated using one of three models: clock hours, instructor verification, or learner mastery. As detailed above, learning must be done by a verifiable learner and academic packets completed by distance learning could include matching signed tracking sheets with the learner's signature on file.

III.4. With so many free apps and digital resources becoming available, do these still need to be approved options to count as participation hours?

If the apps and/or digital resource is being used in a synchronous learning activity the hours will be counted as contact hours and there is no requirement for the distance education curriculum to be approved by the Department.

If the apps and/or digital resource is being used in an asynchronous learning activity then it should be coming from the list of approved distance education curriculum (Appendix O, Iowa Assessment Policy Guidelines) that will be tracking proxy hours by the clock method. This is to ensure that the content being used is aligned with Iowa's AEL Instructional Standards. If the app and/or digital resource is not currently on the list or if the method of tracking hours is by instructor verification or learner mastery, AEL grantees may pilot the resource to review its alignment and count the hours as proxy hours for the remainder of Program Year 2019-2020.

IV. Grant Management and Performance

IV.1. What steps will OCTAE and the Department take in to account a decrease in state and/or local performance in Program Year (PY) 2019-2020 because of extended program closures during the pandemic? Will there be penalties for performance issues?

The U.S. Departments of Education and Labor will not make any determinations of performance success or failure based on PY 2019-2020 performance data, submitted by October 1, 2020. OCTAE Program Memorandum 20-2 states that the first year for which performance success or failure can be determined for some indicators applies to PY 2020-2021; this data is reported by October 1, 2021.

The Iowa Department of Education will continue to closely monitor the effect of the COVID-19 outbreak and its impact on services and performance outcomes as it relates to performance-based funding.

IV.2. What are the Department's plans for scheduled monitoring during the pandemic?

All virtual monitoring will be scheduled to review the two identified AEL Program Standards.

For those five grantees selected for an on-site monitoring, these will be rescheduled as virtual meetings. Partners that typically participate face-to-face can provide written statements of support for submission or, if their schedule allows, be invited to attend the virtual meeting. While all six standards will still be reviewed, the requested documentation for the on-site indicators will be condensed by approximately 60% and targeted to specific areas of focus that would typically be covered during the face-to-face. In addition, the participant file review and classroom observation will be suspended for the remainder of this PY 2019-2020 monitoring period.

IV.3. Will there be changes to the AEFLA grant application, currently out for July 1 award, because of the pandemic?

Yes. Because of the potential for broad impact of the pandemic for AEFLA programs and service delivery by eligible providers, the Department has modified its plans for competitions involving Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 AEFLA funds by adjusting the competition timelines and extending the due date an additional two weeks. All grants are now due May 1, 2020.

The Department posted this change on the Department's website on March 16, following state procedures in notifying current and potential applicants in a "direct and equitable" manner in the same way the notice of availability of funds was made public and as detailed in section 231 (c) of WIOA.

The Department will work through the current situation to ensure that there are no gaps in the service, even if this might mean extending current eligible providers' grants and contracts for a short duration to ensure negotiations and signed documents can be exchanged within the required time period. Notice of such extensions will be made following the same procedures as noted above.

V. HSED Testing

V.1. Will Official Practice Tests (OPTs) be allowed to remain valid for test takers longer than the prescribed three months due to the pandemic?

Due to the disruption, this guidance will be temporarily suspended. However, great care should be taken to continue to ensure test taker readiness. The test taker, the instructor, and the program coordinator should all be in agreement whether the length of time between the qualifying score and the live exam is too far along to achieve a passing score or whether there are other indicators of the test taker's readiness.

New (5-13-20): V.2. Will the Department allow Official Practice Tests (OPTs) to be administered remotely?

Due to the current disruption and moving forward, the Department will make available to participants that are prepared a process by which an OPT may be administered remotely. An agency will need to submit a signed Agency Remote Testing Agreement by the local HiSET® chief administrator and abide by the High School Equivalency Official Practice Test Guidance, to follow the privacy, test security, technology, and test administration requirements and procedures as outlined.

Questions and Additional Guidance

If you have questions, please contact Alex Harris at alex.harris@iowa.gov. For additional COVID-19 guidance and information, please visit the Department's COVID-19 webpage.

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