# Virginia Department of Education

# Guidance on Virtual Course Requirement for Graduation Superintendent’s Memo # 170-18

Since 2013, students in Virginia have been required to “successfully complete one virtual course, which may be a noncredit-bearing course or a required or elective credit-bearing course that is offered online.” (SOA: Section 50 and 51: <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/admincode/title8/agency20/chapter131/>). Additionally, the Profile of a Virginia Graduate calls for students to be able to personalize their education to reflect their own interests and goals. The use of virtual courses in high schools supports this goal.

In order to assist school divisions in choosing which courses they will allow students to take to fulfill the graduation requirement, the information below provides overall guidance based on current research and best practice.

Virtual courses are considered to be courses taught in a web-based environment. It may be suitable for a student to download parts of a course so that they may work offline, but generally a virtual course requires that students be connected to the Internet for at least part of the time.

It is important that experiences students have while taking virtual courses in high school prepare them to participate in college-level or career-based virtual courses after high school. Hence, virtual courses taken for this requirement should match the style of such courses as are commonly found on college campuses or in job training programs. They should encourage students to develop skills such as self-discipline, time-management, and focus.

## Types of Virtual Courses:

### Fully Online:

Fully online courses include courses with structured timelines for interaction, assignment completion, and assessment. Fully online courses may be closely monitored by a local teacher or students may work independently. Courses may be taken for full academic credit or may supplement regular instruction by providing enrichment based on student interest or reinforcement of previous learning.

Examples of fully online courses:

* Virtual Virginia courses: Semester- or year-length courses taught by Virginia-certified teachers with a high level of student-teacher and student-student interaction through the Internet. See course listing: <https://www.virtualvirginia.org/programs/courses/>
* Certain approved courses provided by an approved MOP: Many courses are provided as semester- or year-length courses, taught by Virginia-certified teachers, with at least a minimal level of student-teacher interaction. Search a list of providers and courses: <http://www.learn24va.org/courses/>
* Online Dual Enrollment courses provided through partnerships with local colleges and universities.

### Blended Courses:

Alternatively, many schools have developed blended courses, which combine some aspect of virtual learning with some characteristics of traditional face-to-face classrooms. *Blended learning is a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through a web-based environment that provides content, instruction, and feedback with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace and at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home* (adapted from the Chistensen Institute definition of blended learning).

Examples of blended courses:

* A course, such as the VDOE Economics and Personal Finance course on Virtual Virginia, taught partially online and partially by a classroom teacher who enhances the curriculum with other instructional tools and where students have some autonomy in how they interact with the material and each other.
* Microsoft Imagine Academy, e-Learning option, with flexibility so that students may have some autonomy over their learning path, instructional time, and interaction with teacher and other students: <http://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/career_technical/ms_it_academy/index.shtml>

### Examples that would not fulfill the virtual course requirement:

* A series of podcasts, such as often found on iTunes U or YouTube:   
  A series of podcasts that provide content but does not include any sort of interaction with a teacher or other students.
* Short web-based, computer-mediated tutorials on specific skills:  
  Tutorials that address very limited, specific skills but which have no way of assessing student ability to put those skills into use, have no interaction with other students or a teacher.
* A class that incorporates online activities from an online textbook but which does not allow students any autonomy over their work pace or path.
* A “flipped” classroom model where students complete instructional activities outside of the classroom and work on understanding concepts and practicing skills in the regular classroom setting, but where the path and pace are set by the teacher with little room for students to receive extra guidance for particular problems or extra resources for particular interests.

## What a positive virtual course experience provides:

* Students help plan out their own work pace and schedule
* Students have clear goals and reach those goals
* Students are self-motivated and self-disciplined
* Students interact with others, when appropriate, and in an appropriate manner
* Students use frequent feedback/assessment to improve their performance