

# State Report Assails

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A state auditor general's report on so-called "independent study" programs in California schools says they are often poorly supervised, financially sloppy and of limited educational substance.

The report also said such alternatives to regular classroom study are invaluable for selected students, but urged tighter program controls to curb apparent abuses.

Requested by the Joint Legislative Audits Committee, the report was released to indignant protests from officials in the state Department of Education, which is legally charged with monitoring the program. Department officials said the 1976 legislation establishing independent study programs did not carry any money for administering it.

An alternative to regular classroom study, independent study programs allow students — often dropouts or those with high absenteeism — to earn high school credit while working, studying at home or otherwise satisfying school requirements. Their work may or may not be supervised by a credentialed teacher, and is often monitored by volunteers or paraprofessionals in certain fields.

In the 1979-80 school year, the auditor general reported, the independent study program experienced a 239 per cent increase over the previous year, with nearly 14,000 students enrolled in such programs statewide.

"During our review of independent study programs, we found that the state Department of Education provided limited guidance to school districts and has not developed comprehensive guidelines for administering the programs," the auditor-general concluded.

"In addition, the department has not instituted district reporting requirements that would allow it to effectively monitor these programs," the report said.

As a result, the report concluded, local districts "are not administering independent study programs as prescribed by law."

In a sample of student case files, the auditor general found that nearly 40 percent of the independent study agreements were improperly completed and lacked "a clear statement of objectives, an adequate evaluation of the student's accomplishments, or the written approval of a student's parent or guardian."

The lack of written parental approval was sometimes explained by a lack of parental interest or concern. In some cases, the report said, administrators "did not insist upon parents' signa-

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tures to avoid alienating students."

In a review of 12 independent study programs — including programs in Elk Grove and San Juan Unified school districts in Sacramento County — the auditor-general said districts had "overclaimed" state funds paid to districts for "average daily attendance" — commonly referred to as ADA and the cornerstone of local school finance.

Because many "independent study" students were not in school long enough to qualify districts for ADA reimbursement, the report said, districts "are receiving reimbursement from the State

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School Fund for which they did not qualify.”

Specific information on the individual districts included in the survey was not provided in the report.

The report cited varying levels of teacher supervision in independent study programs — “from a telephone call to a student’s employer once a week to required attendance at the school site for several hours each week.”

Although independent study often requires large amounts of reading by students, the auditor-general found that many students in the program have low reading abilities. Only three of the 12 programs surveyed for the report required students to show minimum levels of competence in reading skills before being allowed to enroll in the program.

The auditor general also found a high dropout level in the independent study program, with more than 65 percent of students enrolled having “left their programs by the close of the school year.” The report said one-fifth of the students enrolled in independent study in 1979-80 either graduated, passed an equivalency exam or transferred to another educational program within their districts.

The auditor general noted the difficulties inherent in working with students who already have a high truancy and/or dropout rate — implying, perhaps, that a one-fifth success ratio may be significant for such a student population.

The report also cited the importance of inde-

pendent study programs to the educational and career futures of some students.

Students with medical or psychological problems were allowed to complete their school work and “thus avoid negative peer pressure which they experienced on campus,” the report said.

Others were students on extended trips, pregnant girls, and children whose religious beliefs prohibited participation in certain programs.

“In one district, ballet students received their high school education through intense, small group teaching for a short time each day at the ballet school,” the report said. “Another district used independent study for students living in isolated regions who otherwise would be forced to take long bus trips to attend high school.”

Some students entered independent study, the report said, “because it enabled them to work. For example, in one program, apprentice students in commercial fishing completed independent study course work while on three-month fishing trips. In other programs, students were working in their parents’ businesses learning a trade.”

The report recommended more stringent monitoring of independent study programs by local districts and the state Department of Education.

In a letter to Auditor-General Thomas W. Hayes, Deputy State Education Superintendent William Whiteneck said the report was “inconsistent and internally contradictory.” Whiteneck emphasized that the department monitors the program “at the expense of other department responsibilities” and said no funds were allocated for state administration of the program when it was established in 1976.