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Mastery-based Learning Components & Key Look-fors

Mastery-based learning (also called competency, proficiency or performance-based learning) is an educational approach that makes learning more rigorous, individualized, and meaningful for all students. It allows schools to meet students where they are by establishing a transparent set of learning goals with multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery of key skills and content-knowledge and empowering students to move at a flexible pace.

Mastery-based learning gives students voice and choice in what they learn, when they learn it, and how they show their learning, thus embodying the key elements of positive youth development—a foundational framework upon which school models should be designed. (For more about positive youth development and its importance in school design, see our recent paper.) Further, mastery-based learning is a more equitable approach to teaching and learning since it is transparent, shifts the power dynamic toward students, and challenges implicit bias and hierarchical nature of traditional school structures.

At Springpoint, we are encouraged by the growing interest and robust conversations around mastery-based learning that we have seen as we support educators who are designing new, innovative school models. We have also been inspired by and learned from schools across the country that are pushing the boundaries of teaching and learning using mastery-based approaches. (We profiled some of them in our paper *Inside Mastery-based High Schools: Profiles and Conversations*.) To further guide our work with partners, we have developed a set of "key components" of mastery-based learning and accompanying indicators that can help practitioners understand what mastery can look like in practice. These "look fors" can be used to determine how a school is approaching and using mastery and how all stakeholders are impacted by the approach.

While we have built off CompetencyWorks' definition and Great Schools Partnership's ten principles of mastery-based learning, we recognize that there is not one shared definition of mastery-based learning as it is evolving as schools and educators create new approaches and iterate on current systems. Nor do we consider this an exhaustive collection of "look fors" or a complete check list; no school will perfectly exemplify every indicator here since each school has a unique approach and different sets of strengths. Yet we hope that the following provides guidance and a starting point for those currently working within a mastery-based setting and those who are interested in doing so.

A note: *When referring to competencies, we mean the discrete skills and knowledge that students develop and demonstrate through learning experiences. As such, competencies are not synonymous with standards, which largely focus on content or specific pieces of information within a particular discipline, though there are parallels and overlap in certain instances.*

1. Competencies include explicit, transparent, measurable learning objectives.

Transparency is the cornerstone of mastery-based learning. Students have full access to competencies and rubrics across all content areas. Credit accumulation expectations are explicit, understood by all students, and include fully articulated competency requirements.

IN A MASTERY-BASED SCHOOL, YOU MIGHT SEE THE FOLLOWING:

- **All competencies within a course are transparent to students.** Students have consistent and easy access to competencies from the beginning of the school year. For example, students may have access to a learning management system or digital tracker with the competencies listed, there might be a list of all the competencies for the course on the wall of a classroom, or rubrics and grading tools may be designed to help students understand their performance and areas for growth.

- **Competencies, rubrics, and other grading tools are aligned across disciplines and performance levels.** Alignment is key to helping students understand the ways in which skills and knowledge are transferable. Transferability maximizes the number of opportunities students have to provide evidence that they have demonstrated mastery.

- **Adults explicitly show students what mastery in each competency looks like.** Through traditional and nontraditional in-person and virtual lessons, adults take responsibility for teaching students what mastery of each competency looks like, and how students can get there (e.g., students might view examples of competencies being demonstrated in a particular learning experience).

- **Students co-design unique projects that demonstrate mastery.** As students take ownership of their learning, they may co-design their own projects that demonstrate transfer and mastery of skills in a given course, while maintaining alignment to common rubrics and assessment criteria.

- **Teachers set clear expectations for attainment of competencies.** Students deeply understand expectations across competencies and outcomes. Teachers work to monitor student progress toward the school's annual goals for credit accumulation, which students also understand and demonstrate investment in.

2. Learning outcomes emphasize application and creation of knowledge, along with the development of skills needed for success in college and career.

Instead of focusing on discrete and specific content knowledge or standards, learning outcomes are centered around developing skills and higher-order thinking that can be applied across disciplines. Content and disciplines become the vehicle by which skills are developed and demonstrated, rather than the primary driver of learning.

IN A MASTERY-BASED SCHOOL, YOU MIGHT SEE THE FOLLOWING:

- **Students see the connection between competencies mastered in high school and those they will need in post-graduate life.** Students know what to expect in freshman year of college or their first year of a job within their chosen career, and understand the role their high school career plays in preparing them for new challenges.
- **Students can integrate their mastery of multiple competencies within cross-disciplinary projects and activities.** Students are offered interdisciplinary opportunities to demonstrate mastery of competencies within several content-areas at once or may be encouraged to partner with fellow students in different content areas to work on the same project assessing the same competency.
- **Students have multiple opportunities, over time, to work on and demonstrate mastery of a competency.** Competencies should be big enough that they can be worked on over time rather than quickly mastered and discarded.

3. Students can individually advance and earn credits upon demonstrated mastery of rigorous competencies, rather than by time or age.

Since students advance in their learning based on demonstration of mastery, there are opportunities for customized instructional support and innovative approaches such as interdisciplinary classes and nontraditional groupings (i.e., students are not sorted into traditional grade levels or grouped heterogeneously within courses). With multiple types of assessments, multiple modalities, and the ability to revise work through the course of their experiences, students can demonstrate growth in both skills and knowledge.

IN A MASTERY-BASED SCHOOL, YOU MIGHT SEE THE FOLLOWING:

- **Advancement happens and credits are earned in real time.** Students move on (in their coursework or the course itself) when they demonstrate mastery—regardless of quarter, semester, or annual reporting deadlines.

- **Rigorous expectations are shared throughout a school.** To be considered rigorous, competencies must prepare students for college and career, encompassing the academic demands of freshman year in a competitive college and 21st century job skills.

- **Students know where they are in their journey toward graduation.** Instead of progressing once a year to the next grade level, students are able to articulate their individual progress toward graduation (i.e., "I have earned X out of Y credits" or "I am X% of the way to graduation"). Students see how they are progressing in their skill development as well as where they are on the path toward graduation.

- **Students demonstrate agency over their skill development and know what competencies they are working on at any given time.** Students understand and can explain why they are working on each learning task. They know which credits they have and have not yet earned, frequently reflecting on their progress toward mastery and graduation through a structured and facilitated process. As students grow, they are pushed to take more initiative in structuring their own learning plan and seeking support to reach their goals. This is a scaffolded process: adults support goal-setting and academic planning in early years, moving to a more collaborative planning model in later years, and students ultimately develop agency and proficiency toward self-management.

- **Transcript grades reflect students' highest achieved level of mastery.** When possible, students are not prohibited from revising and improving work throughout the course of their secondary experience, revisiting competencies as they build skills and knowledge.

- **Students may work on competencies in an order that works best for them.** If appropriate for the subject matter, students can move through competencies in a customizable order. Skills and content may be revisited and applied in many contexts instead of followed in a static and linear fashion.

4. Assessment and feedback is a frequent, meaningful and positive learning experience for students and adults.

Mastery-based performance assessments provide students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate their skill development. Rather than averages or percentage-based grades, students are measured based on how completely they have mastered competencies. Assessment measures mastery of specific competencies rather than completion of tasks or activities.

IN A MASTERY-BASED SCHOOL, YOU MIGHT SEE THE FOLLOWING:

- **All assessments are formative.** Assessment is always approached with a growth mindset, rather than as a punitive exercise. Adults frame assessments to emphasize progress toward mastery, and support student understanding of the data they generate to identify areas for improvement and growth. There may be some “summative” type work where a student has to perform on-demand, but these assessments are still considered formative in nature as students will continue to work on the skills.
- **Assessments are varied.** True mastery of a skill is demonstrated when a student applies that skill to a new situation. By varying assessment types, teachers honor multiple modalities and reinforce the true nature of demonstrating learning. Assessments may be performative, discussion-based, brief tasks, or large projects.
- **Feedback is narrative and actionable.** Students can clearly understand how to grow along a competency. Feedback is clear and aligned to the competencies so students can apply it to revisions or further assessments.
- **Conferencing protocols let students reflect on progress.** Students have access to consistent and frequent feedback that they know how to incorporate in their work. Conferences have clear protocols and makes student progress transparent.

5. Students receive rapid, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs as measured by frequent and meaningful assessment.

Student progress is continually monitored by adult learning facilitators and the students themselves. If a student struggles to master certain competencies, an adult intervenes in real time with differentiated supports aligned to that student's needs. Decisions about how to individualize the learning for students is grounded in data from formative assessments.

IN A MASTERY-BASED SCHOOL, YOU MIGHT SEE THE FOLLOWING:

- **Staffing and scheduling is structured in such a way that adults can provide support.** Adults have several ways to intervene in the event that a student or a group of students need support. For example, they have flexibility and time to provide one-on-one tutoring, small-group instruction, learning lab sessions, or large group lessons. Adults may trained in project-based methodology with individualized student coaching at the center of the work.
- **Students are empowered to support each other.** Where appropriate, students who have mastered given competencies can support those who are working toward mastery. Students are encouraged to collaborate with peers when it supports their learning.
- **Adults continually monitor students' progress through competencies.** Adults personalize learning for students, steering them toward tasks and activities that align with their needs. Adults use data both reactively to address student needs and proactively to guide students' developmental trajectories. Students gain the skills and agency that allow them to take ownership of their progress, consistently receiving a set of supports and instructional approaches from adults that align with their needs as they continue to develop along the competencies.

About Springpoint

Springpoint is a national nonprofit that partners with districts, charters, and networks to design and launch innovative high schools that meet the needs of all students, preparing them for college and career success. We provide school design and planning workshops, implementation supports, tools and resources, customized coaching, and learning experiences that help educators do school differently. We also provide strategic advising to districts and CMOs looking to engage in design work more broadly. Our work is grounded first and foremost in the needs of students and communities and in research based positive youth development.

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