

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

a briefing series for new england's educational leaders

What Is **Mastery-Based Grading**?

Question: What is the average of 85, 82, 90, two absences, five late arrivals, three tardy homework assignments, a failure to participate in class on four occasions, two note-passing incidents, and one unusually poor test performance the day the family dog died?

While it may seem mathematically impossible (How can you average together numbers and behaviors?), this kind of calculation happens all the time in schools. It's called grading.

Luckily, there are more accurate, equitable, and educationally useful ways to report learning progress and academic achievement. **One approach is mastery-based grading.**

How It Works

✓ **Mastery-based grades are connected to clearly defined learning objectives.**

Consider this question: What does a C mean? While the grade is a deeply familiar symbol, and more or less everyone has received a C at some point, what does the grade actually convey about learning? For example: What was taught in the course? What knowledge did those C students acquire? What skills did they learn? Can the students write well, do math, conduct research, think critically, communicate effectively, or use a computer? Did they work hard and make a lot of progress over the semester, or did they slack off and hardly try at all? The fact is that the C just doesn't tell us—and yet countless students graduate from high school every year with C grades. Mastery-based grades are connected to clearly defined learning expectations, so educators and parents know, with far more precision, what a student has actually learned or failed to learn.

✓ **Mastery-based grades separate academic achievement from behaviors.** In many schools, behaviors such as attendance, tardiness, class participation, or turning in work on time are factored into final grades alongside scores on tests and assignments. While school attendance and class participation are vitally important to success in school, averaging together behaviors and learning obscures academic progress and achievement, making it much harder to determine what students are excelling at or struggling with. Has the student failed to grasp critically important concepts, or did she simply not turn her homework in on time? Is it a learning problem or a behavioral problem? Mastery-based grading systems report work habits, behaviors, and character traits separately from academic achievement, making it much easier for educators and parents to diagnose

✓ **Mastery-based grades are focused on learning progress.** Despite the fact that public schools were created to teach students knowledge and skills they don't already possess, many grades represent an average of where students start out and where they end up—and how they behaved along the way. In many schools, a student could have a life-changing experience, suddenly realize the importance of doing well in school, decide to work harder, begin studying every night and every weekend, go from failing tests to acing tests, and learn a whole lot—more than ever before—and yet...still fail the course. When grading systems penalize students for poor scores at the beginning of a term, students may be less motivated to work hard or overcome past failures because their final grades won't reflect their effort and learning progress. Mastery-based grades can incentivize students to work harder and achieve more because progress and effort are recognized and rewarded.