

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

a briefing series for new england's educational leaders

What Is a **Mastery-Based Diploma**?

For more than a century, American high school students have earned “credits” for passing courses. When they accumulate enough credits, they receive a diploma. The problem with this approach is that **credits** do not always equal **competency**. Every year, students across the country graduate knowing calculus, while others struggle with basic arithmetic. Some leave with strong writing and research skills, while others are only minimally literate. Clearly, a high school diploma means very different things for different students.

To make sure that every high school diploma certifies strong preparation for college, work, and life, the old system needs to change. In today's world, a high school diploma has to **mean** something. That's where the mastery-based diploma comes in.

How It Works

- ✓ **Learning standards enhance course credits.** In the traditional high school system, one student may earn an A-plus while another earns a D-minus—and yet both students receive credit toward graduation. It's possible for a student to earn only Ds and still graduate. But is this student prepared for adult life? How do we know what the student has learned or not learned? Unfortunately, many high schools simply cannot answer these basic questions—but a mastery-based diploma will.
- ✓ **Standards ensure consistent learning expectations.** In many high schools, each teacher decides how grades will be awarded. The result? Some courses are very demanding, while others have few requirements. Grades may be based entirely on the quality of a student's work, while others consider attendance, class participation, and homework completion. Without consistent learning expectations, schools cannot make sure that all students acquire the essential skills they need.
- ✓ **Students demonstrate learning before moving on.** In a mastery-based system, every student must demonstrate what they have learned—by writing a paper, delivering a presentation, or completing a challenging project—before they pass a course, move on to the next grade, or graduate from high school. Learning standards establish a *minimum level of competency*, based on common high expectations, that all students must meet before moving on.
- ✓ **The focus is on learning, not time.** In most high schools, students are expected to attend class for a certain amount of time every day and graduate in four years. The time students spend in school is consistent, but what they learn is often extremely inconsistent. In a mastery-based system, learning expectations remain constant while time is variable. One student may graduate in three years, while another graduates in five—but every student graduates prepared for future success.
- ✓ **A mastery-based diploma certifies readiness for life.** Employers and college-admissions officers want to know exactly what graduates can do and how well they can do it. They want to know if students have strong writing, public-speaking, or computer-programming skills, for example. A mastery-based diploma not only tells us what students have done, but what they can **do**.