Common Principles of Mastery-Based Learning
Based on the Final Report of the Proficiency-Based Learning Task Force of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium.
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The definition of mastery-based learning is surprisingly aligned across the states, putting aside different wording for similar meanings. In literature on this subject, state policy (either contemplated or enacted), and educator conversations, people describe this effort using such terms as proficiency-based learning, competency-based learning, standards-based learning, performance-based learning, and even personalized learning. While personalized learning is often used both in this context and more broadly, the other four terms are used interchangeably. The following principles appear to underpin mastery-based learning across these states.[1]

1) **Students advance upon demonstration of mastery of content, 21st century skills, and dispositions that prepare them for college and careers.**
    The pace of learning is based upon demonstrated readiness to move on to new learning. Instead of waiting idly for others, students can engage in new learning as they are ready. Students who are momentarily struggling with new learning are provided the opportunity to attain this learning, rather than be artificially promoted with little hope of acquiring the expected knowledge or skills.

2) **Learning standards are explicit, understood by students, and measurable.**
    In order for students to lead and own their learning, each student needs to understand what is expected for learning. Once learning targets are clear, students can create multiple ways that enhance, substitute, and go beyond the learning overseen by a teacher and provided within a classroom. And these standards must integrate content areas as appropriate, mirroring life outside of formal education and supporting a basic commitment of the Common Core to integrate multiple content areas beyond ELA and math.

3) **Assessments – formative, interim, and summative – measure and promote learning.**
    Assessment cannot be seen as a final event with unchangeable scorecard. Conversely, assessment is a powerful learning tool that identifies areas of success and areas for deeper effort-both for the teacher and each student. As a measure of progress – similarly to a dieter watching a scale over several months – assessment results demonstrate progress and ultimately attainment of goals more so than a single measurement at the end.

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[1] This definition owes much to *It's Not a Matter of Time: Highlights from the 2011 Competency-based Learning Summit* written and compiled by Chris Sturgis, Susan Patrick, and Linda Pittenger. Numerous stated referenced this work when defining proficiency-based learning. In addition, several states referenced the work of the Council of Chief State School Officer's Innovative Lab Network and the efforts undertaken by this group both regarding state accountability and personalized learning.

4) **Demonstration of learning uses a variety of assessment methods including in-depth performance assessments that expect application of learning.**
    Neither a single assessment nor a single assessment methodology will suffice for demonstrations of mastery. This does not imply that certain assessment methods are never used, but rather, that the full and rich expectations of the learning standards require a variety of assessment methods to fully measure student mastery. In depth-performance assessment must be incorporated into the learning experience to ensure student readiness for college, careers, and citizenship in our communities. Importantly, state assessments – which may be aligned with high stakes judgments for students – should not hinder the development and integration of deep, rich, and thoughtful curriculum and instruction or formative assessments that focus on the skills and dispositions necessary for college and career readiness.

5) **Instruction is personalized, flexible, and adaptable to student needs – both initially and as required by ongoing student learning.**
    The instructional practices employed by teachers need to vary depending upon the content and the learning styles of the students. Even within a common curriculum, different students learn in different ways requiring different strategies. Importantly, different instructional strategies for different students must not result in different and inequitable learning outcomes for different students. In addition, as needed and undertaken rapidly, teachers need to employ new and different instructional strategies to support students when initial strategies fail to assist students in learning specified outcomes.

6) **Students both direct and lead their learning even as they learn from and with others – both within and outside of school.**
    While the guidance and wisdom of teachers is critical to student success, students simultaneously need to take increasing control of their learning. Thoughtful teachers will not follow each student throughout his or her life, requiring each student to become an independent learner. Furthermore, it is impossible for a single teacher to create the perfect learning environment for each individual student without significant student ownership. Finally, while teachers will continue to play an oversight and coordination role, learning does not stop at the doors of the schoolhouse. Mastery-based learning recognizes – and – promotes learning that takes place outside of the school building and school day, realizing that in our technological world, our students have learning opportunities ready and available almost anywhere and anytime. Mastery-based learning recognizes the learning that students make outside of school interventions.

7) **Grading is used as a form of communication for students, parents and teachers – not control or punishment.**
    Communication between students, parents, and teachers concerning student learning remains vital to deep learning; grading provides a means to enrich this communication. Grading that is based on demonstrated learning – not homework completion, class preparation, or class participation, among other things-provides the opportunity for students, parents, and future teachers to understand what students

know and are capable of doing. Schools may choose to enhance grading with additional comments or grades on habits of work, but these are separate and understandable, providing information that students can use to increase mastery.

What a Mastery-Based Learning System Provides.

As learning is a process that changes almost daily for each student, the key to any efficient educational system is information regarding learning. Task force members reported a host of ways that they would hope students and teachers would respond to student needs in a mastery-based learning environment; below are the most common and consistent expectations for a quality mastery-based learning system.

1)   **Information** on student learning – not compliance – **must be timely and focus on specific standards** enabling a) teachers to vary learning approaches to meet student learning needs; and b) students take ownership of their learning.

2)   **The data on student learning must be "trusted" by teachers, students, and parents.** The notion of data being "trusted" includes but goes beyond the usual technical requirements of assessments. Many state assessments demonstrate technical quality, but for whatever reason, are not trusted or valued by educators. Data mastery from a -based learning system must be trusted to ensure use.

3)   The system needs to **leverage alignment of instruction and curriculum** to common and defined learning outcomes. State standards have been in use across the country for 25 plus years – and teachers have always had learning standards for their classrooms – but most standards have failed to move beyond pressuring curriculum alignment. Efforts to implement the Common Core must move beyond curriculum alignment to instructional change and enhancement.

4)   Data produced by the system needs to provide an **understanding as to why students are both succeeding and/or not succeeding.** Such information would enable teachers and students to know how to learn differently, not simply the success or failure of current activities.

5)   Student learning growth needs to be defined on **a criterion-referenced continuum (a learning progression).**[2]

6)   The data produced by the system should **enhance communication regarding learning among** teachers, students, and parents, employing grading systems that are clear and readily understandable. Our current grading systems appear to provide information, but specific understandings of student capacities are relatively limited within current grading practices.

7)   The requirements of the mastery-based learning system must **seamlessly align with the needs, expectations, and entry criteria for higher education.**

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[2] Frederick A. Mosher from the Consortium for Policy Research in Education notes increasing applications of learning progressions in *The Role of Learning Progressions in Standards-Based Education Reform,* a resource receiving significant attention from several stated involved in this task force.