

APPENDIX 1: WHAT IS MASTERY LEARNING AND GRADING?

Mastery Learning is a research-based instructional approach that is designed to help all students improve their learning. At its core is the belief that everyone can learn given the right circumstances—aptitude is dependent on the length of time it takes a person to learn, not how “bright” a person is. Putting this philosophy into practice requires teachers, students, and parents to shift their thinking about the purpose of assessment and grading.

O’Conner (2009) summarizes some of the common grading practices that a mastery learning approach seeks to avoid. The two most important are: only grading a student’s first efforts, and only using averages to determine a student’s final grade.

In a Mastery Learning classroom, by contrast, students are given the opportunity to revise and resubmit graded work without penalty. In addition, their final grade is determined by examining patterns in the gradebook—not by calculating the average. Instead, teachers are encouraged to look at the grade a student earns most often on assessments related to a given learning target (the mode). They are also encouraged to give more weight to grades earned on more recent assignments than on grades earned at the start of the year.

These grading policies are in keeping with the core belief that all students can achieve mastery given the right amount of time and practice. They also reflect the belief that a student’s final grade should indicate the degree to which they have achieved mastery by the end of a unit or grading period.

Garrison and Ehringhaus (2008) offer one of the best defenses of this approach to grading:

A good analogy . . . is the road test that is required to receive a driver's license. What if, before getting your driver's license, you received a grade every time you sat behind the wheel to practice driving? What if your final grade for the driving test was the average of all of the grades you received while practicing? Because of the initial low grades you received during the process of learning to drive, your final grade would not accurately reflect your [actual] ability to drive a car.

Just as a student driver is only judged by their performance on the final road test, and not while practicing with their driving instructor, grades for initial assignments—as well as homework and classwork that allow students to practice—are not included when determining their final grades.

To be clear: Although these assignments won’t be used to determine a student’s final grade, a student’s ability to succeed on the graded assessments (tests, essays, projects, etc.) will depend on the extent to which they have practiced the skills and concepts being assessed. Homework and classwork still matters.

To ensure that students’ final grades most accurately reflect their achievement, they will receive multiple opportunities to show their growth towards mastery in each of the learning targets specified in this syllabus. Throughout the year, the teacher will provide students with timely and meaningful feedback to guide students towards higher levels of achievement. We will use rubrics associated with each learning target, so students know exactly what they need to do to move towards mastery. Some important tips for parents:

- Ask students every day about what standards were covered in class.
- Ask students when their next summative (end of unit) assessments will be.
- The online Schoology gradebook will show many assignments “not counting toward students’ final grades” because those are formative assessments.
- Ask students to tell you their proficiency level on the standards for class.
- Ask students to review at home the standards that they are the weakest in.
- Ask students to show you evidence that they are proficient at a standard.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at max.cecil@grantmagnet.net if you have any questions about the Mastery Learning instructional approach.

Suggested Reading

Garrison, C., & Ehrlinghaus, M. (2008, January 22). Formative and summative assessments in the classroom. National Middle School Association. Retrieved from <http://www.nmsa.org/Publications/WebExclusive/Assessment/tabid/1120/Default.aspx>.

Gentile, J.R., & Lalley, J.P. (2003). *Standards and mastery learning: Aligning teaching and assessment so all children can learn*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Guskey, T.R. (2013). The case against percentage grades. *Educational Leadership*, 71(1), 68-72.

O’Conner, K. (2009). *How to grade for learning*. (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Reeves, D.B. (2004). The case against the zero. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 86(4), 324-325.