



Mastery-based Learning

in Washington State



Students from Avanti High School (Olympia)

2020

Report Summary

*Prepared by
the Washington State Board of Education*

Imagine a classroom you've been in, either as a student or visitor, where all the students were engaged and excited about what they were learning. Now imagine every Washington student could experience that feeling, in every class.

The Mastery-based Learning (MBL) Work Group looked for ways to increase student access to relevant and robust mastery-based academic pathways aligned to personal career goals and postsecondary education. The Work Group also reviewed the role of the High School and Beyond Plan (HSBP) in supporting mastery-based learning.

School looks very different today than it did when the MBL Work Group began our journey—due to COVID-19 and the reckoning our country is undergoing as we grapple with our historical and present-day structural racism. The Work Group members believe that Washington has both an opportunity and an imperative to respond to this dual pandemic of COVID-19 and the structural racism that our school system has never effectively addressed. Our collective “why” calls for a transformation of our education system to close both the opportunity gap and resulting achievement gap. The recommendations of the Work Group are described in a report to the Washington State Legislature, and summarized in this brief.

To every student who has ever felt invisible –we dedicate this work to you. We will not stop fighting until school becomes a safe place to explore, be accepted and appreciated, and to practice thinking critically—the place where you discover yourself and learn all you need to reach your dreams.

What is Mastery-based Learning?

A student's learning happens differently for each subject and that learning does not need to happen only in a classroom. Mastery-based learning shifts the focus to the educational needs and interests of each individual student. Through an MBL approach, the education system values the knowledge and skills students already have and engages students through their diverse cultures and communities; students are also supported through authentic relationships with educators to experience rigorous and personally relevant coursework. In MBL:

- Students advance upon demonstrated mastery of content;
- Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students;
- Assessments are meaningful and a positive learning experience for students;
- Students receive rapid, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs; and
- Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge along with the development of important skills and dispositions.

Find charges to the Work Group from ESSHB 1599 Sec. 301 on SBE's [web page](#).



Avanti, Discovery, Gibson Ek High School students present to the MBL Work Group (Olympia)

Work Group Membership

Rep. Sharon Tomiko Santos,
Chair of House Education
Committee

Rep. Chris Corry,
House Education Committee
Member

Sen. Lisa Wellman,
Chair of the Senate Early
Learning & K-12 Education
Committee

Ashley Lin,
Senior at Union High School
(Camas School District), AWSL

Frieda Takamura,
Renton Technical College Board
of Trustees, EOGOAC Member

Dr. Kory Kalahar,
Principal, WestSide High School,
Wenatchee Public Schools

Miguel A. Saldaña,
Teacher, Pasco High School,
Pasco School District

Jenny Morgan,
Counselor, Capital High School,
Olympia School District

Aurora Flores,
Academic Counselor at Omak
School District, Manson
School District Board Member,
Immediate Past President of
WSSDA

Krestin Bahr,
Eatonville School District
Superintendent, Immediate Past
President of WASA

Dr. Kathe Taylor,
Assistant Superintendent,
Learning and Teaching, OSPI

Dr. Paul Pitre,
State Board of Education, WSU
Everett Chancellor

Why do we need Mastery-based Learning in Washington State?

Schools are experiencing unprecedented disruption, forcing educators to think differently about how they engage with their students and forcing changes to longstanding systems that have been established to deliver education. This presents an opportunity to not only discover ways to address education during the coronavirus pandemic, but also to address the much longer standing pandemic of racism that has plagued our society and our school system.

Our collective “why” calls for a transformation from a traditional system to an MBL approach because this enables:

- A focus on meeting the needs of each individual student.
- Students to enjoy relevancy, engagement, and choice in their learning.
- Contextualized learning environments that recognize learning does not just happen in a classroom, but is happening all the time.
- Actively embracing inclusivity—compassion and belonging for students.
- Freedom for both students and educators to develop and try different ways of doing things and embracing the innovation and learning that comes from both successes and mistakes.
- Valuing knowledge and skills that students already have.
- Each student’s learning progresses at their own pace.
- Transformation of our education system to close the opportunity gap and resulting achievement gap, and recognize that each student’s learning happens differently for each subject.

Through mastery learning, we are able to meet our students where they are when they enter our school and then coach our students through their learning to move from being a learner who is just discovering their strengths and talents to being a learner who is driving their learning and completely thriving when they graduate.

-Julia Bamba
Gibson Ek High School
Principal



Work Group recommendations

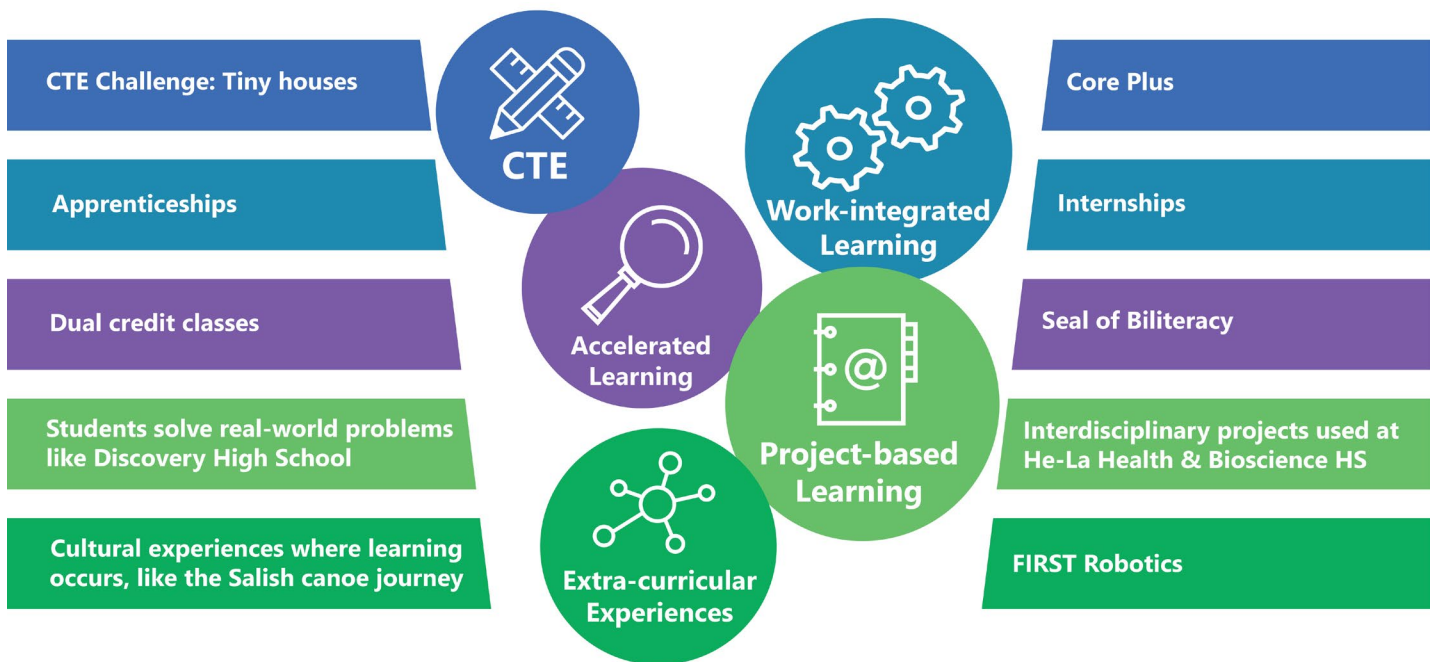
Because of the dual pandemics experienced in our state, nation, and the world, our schools cannot and should not go back to business as usual. The coronavirus has further exposed the inequities of our system, and with the multiple recent incidents of racism and violence against people of color—the need for a shift to a MBL system has been accelerated and is even more urgent than when the legislation passed to create this Work Group. Now is the time to wholeheartedly focus our collective efforts on addressing the systemic opportunity gap that has been fostered by the current structure of our education system for far too long. If a mastery-based learning (MBL) education system simply recreates the status quo—all of the efforts of this Work Group will have been for naught. Rather, a MBL system must be evaluated and sustained primarily based on its progress in reducing both the opportunity and achievement gap.

The following MBL Work Group recommendations are grouped into five sections, based on the applicable component of the five statutory charges from ESSHB 1599.



Methow Valley students learn construction trades

Mastery-based Learning aspects and examples:



1. Barriers to Mastery-based Learning

One of the biggest barriers identified is that, although we recognize many of the practices in MBL in what we might observe through “good teaching,” mastery-based learning is not a concept that is well understood, neither within the education community, nor by the public. Various initiatives around the state already fit within the framework of MBL, including work-integrated learning, project-based learning, and extra-curricular experiences.

A. Engage families (report page 12)

Any shift in education, whether it be instructional practices, assessment and grading practices, school day schedules, a shift in school culture, etc., will fail if students and their families are not meaningfully engaged from the beginning. MBL will include a change in all those things and more; it is imperative that any school that begins a journey toward MBL simultaneously brings students’ families along with them, through authentic family engagement efforts.

B. Review the state accountability system for alignment with MBL (report page 13)

C. Engage education partners regarding barriers to MBL (report page 14)

MBL is already taking place in other countries and our parents want to know why it is taking so long in U.S. Pre-COVID, our families either had their kids totally bored in school or totally ignored in school. We need to get away from seat time requirements where a student learns for nine months and then all students are expected to be in the same place academically at the end of the school year.

This is an industrial view of education that isn’t equitable. I think if we were able to engage our families and say this is what we’re doing with MBL . . . if they knew MBL is the end goal of where we’re going, they would be so excited. Families want to be involved in anything that makes the system better for their kids, and I believe MBL could do that.

-Sharonne Navas, Co-Founder & Executive Director of the Equity in Education Coalition



2. Improvements in the High School and Beyond Plan (HSBP) as an essential tool for MBL

As Washington moves toward a mastery-based education system, the High School and Beyond Plan (HSBP) has a critical role to play.

A. Support students through additional school counselors (report page 17)

The Work Group recommends the Legislature fund certificated counselors at the middle school level in line with the ASCA ratio, to support beginning the HSBP process in a more robust way that sets students up for success as they enter high school. The Work Group recommends that districts be required to allow counselors to spend a certain percentage of their time in direct support of students' learning goals.

B. Provide professional development for educators to support MBL and the HSBP (report page 18)

The High School and Beyond Plan (HSBP) should not just focus on the student's goals for after high school but should help students take ownership over their learning during high school while exploring their values, strengths, passions, and long-term goals.

C. Make the HSBP more meaningful and useful for students (report page 19)

Advice to the state from a local school about how to support MBL capacity...

As our state studies MBL and how to support and foster high quality MBL, being intentional about ways to do that should include recommended professional learning - not only for the teachers but for those in leadership positions at the district level.

- Henderson Bay High School
Peninsula School District



3. Development of Mastery-based pathways to the earning of a high school diploma

In Washington, our high school diploma represents completion of three broad sets of requirements that together are intended to represent that a student is ready for success in postsecondary education, gainful employment, and citizenship, and is equipped with the skills to be a lifelong learner: the subject area (credit) requirements, the High School and Beyond Plan, and the graduation pathway options.

A. Develop a Profile of a Graduate (report page 22)

To help families and schools embrace the purpose of a high school diploma, the Work Group recommends the development

Bright Spot: Fife School District's High School and Beyond Plan Process

In junior high and high school, students take an advisory course, called a "family group." Twice a month, family advisors receive a lesson plan from the Career and College Specialist that connects the daily lesson to career guidance themes. In grades 9-12, students get a .25 credit each year for their advisory course, and it is where all HSBP activities, along with SEL and financial literacy activities, take place. All of the activities in high school are building toward the district's required Senior Project, based on the student's HSBP. During each student's presentation, they talk about their career exploration and interests, how they will pay for any needed education or training for their career, and show evidence of what they have done (both academically and outside of school activities) to prepare for their one year after graduation plan.

of a state "Profile of a Graduate." Many states and districts throughout the country have developed such a profile that includes cross-curricular skills a student should have developed by the time they complete high school: such as being creative, empathetic, self-directed, collaborative, and a global citizen.

B. Develop supports for Mastery-based Learning implementation (report page 23)

The transition to a Mastery-Based Learning (MBL) model requires a sustained effort over time to ensure state and local policies support implementation and schools and districts have access to resources to support their learning as they transform their systems.

State and regional structure

To that end, the State Board of Education (SBE) should be tasked with providing statewide coordination through capacity-building support and technical assistance, including communications and advocacy around the shared goals of MBL. One possible strategy for creating a regional support structure could be leaning on partner organizations. These organizations could focus on providing professional development as well as sharing best practices for improving student learning outcomes by acting at the system and organization levels.

I chose Discovery after touring it—there was a difference in school structure and a difference in approach. I didn't struggle academically, but I struggled keeping a purpose to my work. This school has really helped me feel a purpose.

-Washington Student



Continuing the MBL Work Group

The Work Group should be extended with the primary charge of developing the state Profile of a Graduate. A final report would be provided to the Legislature on the Profile of the Graduate, as well as an update on how implementation of MBL in the state is going, by December 10, 2021.

C. Engage higher education (report page 25)

As this work moves forward, a more explicit role for higher education to engage in this work may be



Delta high school students pose for group photo after job shadow experience (Pasco)

helpful to ensure students who take advantage of these programs are not placed at a disadvantage in the admission process.

D. Create state policy framework for MBL diploma (report page 26)

Washington's state policy framework for a MBL diploma is not creating a separate high school diploma. Rather students who embark on the MBL pathway to earning their diploma would have different opportunities for demonstrating what they know and can do—but would still be meeting the same learning standards as students in the credit-based framework. A MBL route to a diploma would have different characteristics than a credit-based route, as a MBL diploma is designed around the individual student's interests through their engagement in personally relevant, contextualized learning experiences, such as project- or work-based learning, interdisciplinary coursework, and extra-curricular experiences.

4. Results of the competency-based pathways previously approved by the State Board as a learning resource

These schools have been leading the way in competency-based education for the rest of the state and based on the mastery-based pathway described above, Washington is ready to expand MBL for the rest of schools in the state.

What can be learned from schools using the waiver of credit-based graduation requirements? (report page 28)

1. An advisory structure that fosters relationships between students and an advisor that they stay with their entire high school career facilitates a sense of belonging.
2. Use the High School and Beyond Plan, along with the Big Picture Learning Plan, as a guide for each individual student's learning journey.
3. Facilitate student ownership over their own learning process.
4. Importance of resources to support educator collaboration, a regional support structure, and professional development.



Delta high school student at mock interview (Pasco)

What can be learned from other Washington schools doing some form of MBL? (report page 30)

Several schools in our state already embody some of the characteristics of the Work Group's vision for MBL. Delta High School and Avanti High School are both small choice schools that students opt into based on interest in a different education experience than is provided at the local comprehensive high school. Because of each school's development of a relationship-based community-centered culture, they have been able to create robust advisory programs for their students. Both schools' advisories meet regularly to offer academic and social/emotional support, as well as offer a safe place to bond with other students and build community.

Delta High School (Pasco, Washington)

In Delta's STEM-focused program, students receive a variety of CCL experiences including interaction with career guest speakers, industry tours, job shadows, resume reviews, mock interviews, internship fairs, and more. Delta also hosts a variety of on and off-site events throughout the year, based on student interest identified in their HSBP and market trends.

"Each year we offer multiple career exploration events for all grades. Typically, 9th & 10th grade attend career exploration events in October and March such as Health Science Day, Nuke Tech Day, and STEMCon.

At these events, I bring in industry professionals to lead hands-on workshops which give students a glimpse into real-world STEM careers in action.

Juniors and seniors attend college and trade tours across the state based on personal interests and pathways," said Community Engagement Manager for Delta High School, Heather Hoppe.

Avanti High School (Olympia, Washington)

[Avanti High School](#)'s individualized learning plan approach allows students to learn at their own pace. Classes consist of mixed age and grade levels and students are not held to finishing course content within a defined term. Students who demonstrate mastery before the academic term is complete, may receive credit and begin a new course.

Likewise, if a student has not demonstrated mastery of the content on a specific course by the end of the academic term, they have the option of extending that learning plan until they reach mastery, indicated by a letter grade of B or above, as well as self-evaluations and learning reflections completed by the student.

Students do not receive Cs, Ds, or Fs at Avanti. Rather, they continue to learn content until they reach mastery, which translates into academic credit.

I think the most important piece for me is that it takes a lot of work to set it up at first, but I find the pay off to be totally worth it. The work is really in front-loading the structure of the class, but once the students start to take more ownership of their learning, a lot of the work of a teacher in a more traditional classroom gets transferred to the students. When students monitor their own learning, the teacher's role becomes more of a coach or facilitator, and a lot of the busy work of grading and record keeping becomes more manageable and more meaningful to both students and teachers.

-Cecily Schmidt,
NBCT-Visual Art
Avanti High School



Students at Avanti High School create a garden (Olympia)

5. Expansion of Mastery-based credits to meet graduation requirements

Mastery-based (or competency-based) crediting is an option for students to earn high school credit for demonstration of learning on assessments that are clearly aligned to learning standards.

State Board developed new rule on mastery crediting (report page 34)

Due to the coronavirus and related school building closures and ongoing disruptions of our educational system, the Work Group felt it was important to accelerate expansion of mastery-based crediting policies where possible. The Washington State School Directors Association (WSSDA) released [model policies in six additional subject areas](#) and SBE adopted a new section of [rule](#) to detail the process for granting students mastery-based (MB) credit.

Culturally responsive example of mastery crediting (report page 36)

Enumclaw School District developed a [sample model](#) for how to provide credit through Indigenous pedagogical courses. One such story is about Enumclaw student, Adam Miller, who would spend part of each season learning from elders and cultural practitioners while on canoe journeys and in the local environments. The policy allowed Adam to utilize these cultural experiences for graduation requirements, aligning the cultural learning to core learning standards. Because Enumclaw acknowledges these important partnerships with the Local Tribal Community (Muckleshoot), he was able to graduate on time, and is the youngest person hired right out of high school by an environmental agency. The student now works to serve the community through environmental restoration.



Conclusion

Washington State faces both an opportunity and a moral imperative to respond to the dual pandemic of COVID-19 and structural racism that has been ignored for too long in our education system. Mastery-based learning is not the latest education trend. It is a proven strategy that has the potential to eliminate the achievement gap by providing access to equitable educational opportunities and thereby closing the opportunity gap.

Through MBL, Washington can actively decolonize our education system by ensuring the curriculum reflects multiple cultures and not just the dominant narrative, facilitating students' connections to place and community, and ensuring student ownership over their own learning experience. When each and every student can direct their own path and experience the joy of learning, then and only then will our world become a healthier, more equitable place.



Adam Miller's canoe journey

Find the full report on the [MBL Work Group web page](#).