

Mastery-Based Grading (“MBG”)



1. What is Mastery-Based Grading?

It is a system of grading students based on their demonstrated level of mastery of concepts (“Essential Skills”), rather than just calculating an average based on the total number of “points” they earn in a semester. **It measures demonstrated student learning, not speed of learning.**

2. Why Mastery Based Grading?

Mastery Grading gives students and parents specific feedback about what skills they have and have not learned. It is information that can be used to direct learning and growth. The teacher does not just average a student’s mastery scores, but instead assesses the student’s level of mastery based on the evidence collected. For example, if a student earns evidence scores of 1,1,2 and 4 in a particular essential skill, the teacher may assign them a “4” if they feel that the student has mastered the concept – and the student is not penalized for taking longer to achieve mastery.

Example:

Traditional System: “Your son has a B because he has earned 486 of the 586 points possible in the course.”

Mastery-Based Grading System: “Your son has a B because he has demonstrated mastery of essential skills 1, 2 and 4, but he has not yet demonstrated mastery of skill #3.”

3. Isn’t Mastery-Based Grading subjective?

Yes, as are all forms of grading. Mastery-Based Grading is just transparently subjective, whereas in traditional systems of grading, the subjectivity is masked by “the average”.

Example:

Traditional System:

Teacher says, “You can’t argue with the math! You earned 68 out of 80 points. That’s an 85%, so you get a B”.

Hidden subjectivity: Why was this assignment/assessment worth 80 points? Were there 80 questions?

Were some questions weighted more than others? If so, why? Were any questions thrown out?

Was there a curve? If so, why? Were all classes curved at the same number? If so, then should my child’s grade really be determined by what other children’s scores are? If not, then why not? Are there different expectations of learning for each class?

Mastery-Based Grading System:

Teacher says, “Based on my expertise in this subject and the rubric that has been provided to you, the evidence you have given me demonstrates a level 3 mastery, which corresponds to a B.”

4. What do teachers and students think of MBG?

Students love MBG because they understand that one bad test doesn’t ruin your chances of getting an “A”. They appreciate that they don’t have to learn material *quickly* to earn a good grade; depth of learning is valued over speed of learning. They also appreciate that MBG gives them specific feedback as to how they can grow in their mastery of skills.

Teachers love MBG because of its emphasis on depth of learning and growth, and because it is easy to communicate to students and parents what the student has learned, and has yet to learn. Students seek clarification of concepts rather than haggling for points.

5. What are the challenges you have encountered implementing Mastery Based Grading?

1) Powerschool is set up for a traditional grading system, and it has taken a considerable amount of work to make it work accurately for MBG. The interface is still somewhat confusing for parents, but I believe we have found a way of doing it that makes sense for teachers, parents and students.

2) Some students don’t study enough for the early assessments of content because they know they will have additional opportunities to demonstrate mastery without direct penalty. This is why the “Habit of Mind: Accountability” is a part of their grade.

