

Competency-Based Learning/Mastery-based Learning

During the 2025 Legislative session, legislators have been advancing **SB 5189**, an act relating to supporting the implementation of competency-based education, also known as mastery-based learning.

History:

- Since 1906, education in America has been based on Carnegie Units, or credit hours. Derisively labeled “seat time,” it required students to be enrolled in a class where they must demonstrate mastery of specific learning outcomes and their level of mastery could be compared with other students learning the same material. This is the system that allowed Americans to participate in the greatest revolution in innovation in history: automobiles, airplanes, air conditioning, computers, space flight and more.
- In 2020, SB 6521, declaring an “emergency” and creating an “innovative learning” pilot program, was signed into law. It required five districts to participate in an experimental program, *authorizing full-time enrollment funding for students “participating in approved mastery-based learning programs.”* Ultimately, 47 schools from 28 districts participated across two Cohorts.
- The Work Group decided to combine MBL with Culturally Responsive Sustaining Education (CRSE) stating that MBL provided “an outstanding opportunity to develop culturally relevant, or sustaining, instructional practices that embed recognition of students’ cultures in the learning process. The goal was to “actively decolonize our education system by ensuring the curriculum reflects multiple cultures and not just the dominant narrative....”

Questions Worth Asking

- Who gave this experimental work group the authority to turn mastery-based learning into an equity program?
- Why are academics NEVER mentioned in hearings before the legislature, in white papers or reports? What exactly is being mastered?
- Why have parents never been included or given the opportunity to provide feedback? Why do teachers report they don’t think parents would approve?
- In this student-centered model, will all children select learning goals that challenge them? Will they be able to choose projects/performances that actually demonstrate mastery of a subject? Can they meet deadlines for graduation?
- Why should school districts collect taxpayer dollars for learning being done on the job or in the community?
- Now in its 4th year of implementation, why does it continue to rely on teacher and student surveys of satisfaction with school climate? Shouldn’t it be able to provide evidence of growth?
- With a lack of evidence that students are progressing academically and a “substantial minority of educators” who “do not feel well prepared for the shift to CRS MBL or believe that it will improve equitable student outcomes or school climate,” why expand this experiment statewide?

Competency-based/Mastery-based learning is an equity-based approach to modifying graduation requirements. While it seems likely that graduation rates will increase, does that mean the children of Washington will be prepared for the rigors of college or be able to function in a complex global economy?