



Austin High School, Houston ISD Competency-Based Education Case Study

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About This Case Study

This case study is intended to serve as a strategic planning and implementation resource for any district or school that is interested in implementing competency-based, student-centered blended learning.

This case study describes the design process and early implementation that [Stephen F. Austin High School, Magnet School for Maritime Studies and Teaching Professions](#) (Austin High) in Houston ISD (HISD)¹ used to launch a student-centered blended learning program with competency-based education (CBE) as a key pillar of its redesigned student experience.

In order to describe Austin High's program in a relevant and actionable way for other practitioners eager to begin competency work at the school level, this case study

describes the work Austin High has done to rethink path, pace, and assessment. Our hope is that other schools and districts interested in CBE, regardless of grade level or subject, will find Austin High's experience useful for informing their efforts to personalize instruction.

Austin High provides an example of a school-based, ground-up CBE initiative in a student-centered blended learning environment. The school's work has resulted in strong blended learning implementation that drives toward multiple specific elements of CBE. The information

¹ As the largest school district in the state of Texas, Houston ISD (HISD) operates 283 distinct campuses serving over 200,000 students in the Houston metropolitan area. Austin High School (Austin High) is an HISD secondary school with an enrollment of 2,000 9-12th graders located in Houston's East End neighborhood.

that follows showcases the design process and early implementation strategies that Austin High used to launch its new model — specifically, its work to rethink **path, pace, and assessment**. Austin High shifted its model from traditional, whole-group instruction that

follows a time-bound scope and sequence to a blended learning model, which allows students to master grade-level standards on a flexible timeframe and resolve academic achievement gaps as needed.

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION: WHAT AND WHY?

This case study uses the [iNACOL and CompetencyWorks](#) working 5-part definition of CBE:

1. Students **advance upon demonstrated mastery**.
2. Competencies include **explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives** that empower students.
3. **Assessment is meaningful** and a **positive learning experience** for students.
4. Students receive **timely, differentiated support** based on their individual learning needs.
5. Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include **application and creation of knowledge**, along with the **development of important skills and dispositions**.

Ties to these definition elements are **highlighted** throughout this paper.

While this definition serves as an important goal, we believe that transitioning from a traditional instructional model to a competency-based, personalized model need not be immediate or binary: It is often much more realistic — and thus effective — for a school or district to transition gradually or to focus on different elements of this definition at different times. Even Austin High, with all of its success, is not fully competency-based at this early stage of redesign (two years at the time of this paper’s publication). They are, however, well on their way!

CAMPUS-LEVEL CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

Context is important for any district or campus working toward CBE. In many cases, sites or organizations will have engaged in previous CBE-related initiatives or established institutionalized practices that support the success of a targeted CBE initiative. However, Austin High’s success was bolstered by a timely confluence of opportunities for innovation and new changes in mindset:

- An openness to completely reimagine what school looked like for their students
- An unusual degree of autonomy afforded to the campus by the district
- High degree of responsiveness to implementation support

In the fall of 2015, Austin High participated in a [Raising Blended Learners \(RBL\)](#)² blended learning exposure

workshop that brought together a cross-functional team comprised of Austin High campus leaders and Houston ISD district representatives. The goal was to develop a vision and plan for transitioning from highly traditional teaching and learning model to student-centered blended learning. It was through this redesign process that the Austin High team was able to identify and commit to the essential campus-level conditions for success that would serve as the foundation for a personalized learning experience for Austin High’s students. In the year leading up to the RBL pilot, the conditions for success where Austin High focused their efforts were:

1. Collective Stakeholder Input
2. Intentional Culture-Building
3. Rethinking Human Capital

² Raising Blended Learners (RBL) is a demonstration initiative showcasing how blended learning strategies can improve student outcomes in a diverse set of districts across the state of Texas. More information about the initiative is available at: www.raisingblendedlearners.org.

Collective Stakeholder Input

One year before launching their blended learning pilot, the Austin High team began to invest multiple groups of stakeholders in the vision for the campus to move toward blended learning. The team started gathering input from their teachers through surveys and discussions, classroom observations, and a [book study](#) on blended learning. Teacher survey results showed that approximately 40% of the staff on campus were familiar with blended learning, and the remaining 60% were willing to learn more about it.

In order to prioritize their students' voice into the new vision, the team also asked students from three subgroups (high-achieving, middle-achieving, and those students at

risk for dropping out) key questions about where they felt they were being supported by the school and where they saw areas for improvement.

Additionally, as a school operating in a large school district, it was imperative that Austin High have significant autonomy to implement their pilot without going through a lengthy authorization process for each change. The campus team conducted two pre-launch planning meetings with technology and instructional leaders from the district to garner support and agree upon autonomies necessary to launch their redesign pilot.

Intentional Culture-Building

Prior to launching their pilot, the Austin High team spent four weeks in the summer with their founding teachers planning for the pilot. Although this planning time was outside of the scope of what the district requires and subsidizes for teacher professional development, the school's leadership team knew how much would be required to redesign their model and plan for the first year of implementation and made a campus-level financial decision to invest the funds that would allow for the extra planning time.

During the four weeks, the team collaboratively wrote all vision documents, implementation resources, and content required to start the pilot. The team first wrote the core values for their students based on their school design pillars, then spent multiple sessions drafting specific systems and curriculum documents. Austin High's assistant principal and lead teacher also ran PD sessions on culture, planning rigorous lessons, and evaluating student work, and the team began to write new grading criteria, rubrics to evaluate student work, and a framework for how the content would be organized on the HUB (the district's Learning Management System, or LMS).

Additionally, the team intentionally built a strong culture within their group through personality and workstyle reflections, intentional collaboration, and informal time together outside of school. Once the year started, they continued this collaborative planning practice and met daily to reflect on and revise their systems and supporting resources for the pilot. The team attributes a significant amount of their initial success to this investment in teacher capacity and team-building prior the start of school.

The Austin High team knew that handling a drastic increase in student ownership and autonomy (control over learning and time) would initially be challenging for students who, for years, had been in schools with traditional instruction and school discipline structures. Additionally, all students, but especially students who had historically struggled academically, would need specific supports around processing their academic data, setting academic and non-academic goals, and working independently toward long-term deadlines.

To help them adjust, during the first 25 days of school, the cohort of 9th grade students engaged in a [25-Day Launch](#) program that was strategically designed to help them internalize the new pilot's values, systems, and routines. During this process, they learned how to operate within a small, consistent learning community (cohort) with progressive restorative practices and how to make appropriate daily choices about how to spend their class time. This also afforded both students and teachers the opportunity to learn about and practice essential culture items.³

The 25-Day Launch experience was structured around a series of targeted learning activities such as community circles and mentorship, where students were introduced

to the Austin High goal-setting procedure and the use of the [Character Strength Rubric](#). The pace at which academic content was taught was slowed to ensure that non-academic skills could be taught through academics, and the team decided that it was permissible if teachers temporarily fell behind in teaching their academic standards in service of teaching non-academic skills as well.

Prioritizing agency and cultural competencies over academic content at the beginning of the year allowed students and staff to develop a shared vision and common language for the culture (academic and non-academic) of the pilot, resulting in a more effective and positive first year of implementation.

Rethinking Human Capital

According to the staff surveys administered as part of the initial design work, many of the Austin High teachers self-identified as experiencing satisfaction in the workplace when they saw increased student achievement and when their students experienced success. In order to ensure that teachers received recognition for their efforts, the pilot team also designed their teacher appraisal and development system to incorporate Houston Independent School District's priorities of intentionally recognizing teachers among their peers.

Two of the other motivators identified as high priority in the teacher survey were responsibility and advancement. The team intentionally incorporated opportunities for both into the pilot model by creating both formal and informal leadership roles that would allow teachers to be a part of strategic decisions made about the pilot, to influence their content teams in the broader high school (outside of the pilot), and to serve as model classrooms for blended learning. Teachers were also eligible for

additional external professional learning opportunities.

Conversations with teachers after the survey was completed also revealed a need for additional support and increased collaboration with school leaders. In response to this feedback, and given the size of the pilot project, the principal allocated one assistant principal to serve as the principal for the pilot in order to increase support for teachers and to create a consistent leadership presence in the pilot. In order to do this, the principal reduced the amount of responsibilities that were required to support the "mainstream" Austin High School. This dedicated capacity allowed the assistant principal to do one-on-one coaching, run weekly professional development, staff meetings, and support student culture throughout the year.

³ Essential culture items included:

100% of learners will internalize procedures and the Mini Academy will score at or above Proficient on Key Systems Rubric; 100% of learners will navigate technology tools with proficiency; 100% of learners will complete an individualized learning plan and engage in a conversation with mentor to set NWEA and American Reading Company reading level goals; 100% of learners will use data to self determine 1 flex time per week; 100% of learners will identify at least 1 character strength at Proficient or higher; 60% of learner will be at Developing or higher on Culture Rubric; Learner Leaders will run announcements and celebrations at All Academy Meeting using protocol; 100% of learners will complete first collaborative project.

AUSTIN HIGH PILOT REDESIGN PROCESS

Since assessments indicated significant academic gaps in all subject areas, one of the Austin High team's first realizations was that choosing a single classroom or subject area to pilot student-centered blended learning would likely fall short. The team decided to create a "mini academy" — a school within a school that would offer an interdisciplinary experience targeting reading skills for 9th grade students and whose schedule would be independent of the master schedule, allowing teachers to

reallocate time to meet students' significant needs. They called their pilot the Austin High Blended Learning Mini Academy, or the Mini Academy.

The Mini Academy would have a separate teaching staff, a new schedule, and an environment that offered much more flexibility around path, pace, and assessment — all of which would allow for a mastery-based approach to learning standards.

The New Student Experience

The design team's focus was on **closing academic gaps** across all subject areas, **increasing student engagement and motivation**, and **building student agency** to support students success in high school and as they matriculate to college and/or enter careers.

Following the workshop, Austin High's campus-based innovation team continued the redesign process and planned for implementation. Using a series of RBL templates, the team clearly articulated 1) a problem statement, 2) root causes of the problem, 3) core elements of a reimagined student experience, and 4) measures to monitor the impact of their work. These are summarized below:

1. **Problem:** Forty-eight percent of the Austin High 9th graders read at or below a 3rd grade level as measured by American Reading Company assessment, and 65% of 9th graders meet state standards on the annual STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness) exam. Additionally, students often lack the agency essential for college and career success.
2. **Root Causes:** During the redesign process, the campus team identified what they believed were the root causes contributing to the problem. The purpose of this exercise was to design a new student experience that helped address the findings. Among the root causes identified were:
 - Students are bored or frustrated because instruction and assignments are either too difficult or too easy
 - Most instruction is delivered in a whole-group format according to a rigid grade level-oriented, time-bound scope and sequence

- Teachers deliver instruction and students receive it
 - Students are not actively engaged as participants in the learning process and have limited opportunities to develop student agency skills
 - Class periods are only 45 minutes, which leaves little time for students to work toward full mastery of standards or to remediate previous standards to close achievement gaps
 - Teachers have little time or purposeful programming aimed at getting to know students beyond coursework and forming strong relationships with students
 - Professional learning has been fragmented and inconsistent. This leaves teachers with a surface-level understanding of some instructional best practices
3. **Student Experience Design Pillars:** In response to the problem and root causes identified, the campus team set out to reimagine a vision for a more effective student experience. They codified their vision into core Student Experience Design Pillars, which were then used to create a common language for designing the student experience.

Austin High's Student Experience Design Pillars included:

- Student Agency/Mentoring and Goal Setting
- Rigor & Relevance
- Data-Driven Instruction/Flexible Instructional Grouping
- Competency Based Progression
- Project Based Learning

4. **SMART Goal Metrics:** Austin High utilized End of Course exams for math and reading, student and teacher perception surveys (YouthTruth), and reading

assessments (American Reading Company) to assess students reading level and growth.

The Design Journey

The campus-based team engaged in a number of design phases throughout their process, which are described below.

Core Problem Identification

When considering a starting point for its blended pilot, the Austin High team honed in on 9th grade because of its historically high reading gaps (at the time, 48% were reading at or below a 3rd grade level). The team surmised that these gaps resulted primarily from the following factors:

- Students did not master basic reading skills during early elementary grades
- In a one-size fits all system of instruction, students had few opportunities to reinforce skills they had learned and remediate those they had not yet mastered
- Changes in the district's philosophy and curricular approach to reading instruction while the current 9th grade students were in elementary and middle school

Acknowledging that gaps were the result of systemic failures, rather than lack of student motivation or work ethic, were key to Austin High's outlook. The team also noted that previous teachers could have helped to eliminate gaps if they had been provided meaningful student proficiency data, trained on using student data strategically to inform instruction, and given flexibility to move away from one-size-fits-all instruction.

Features of the Mini Academy

In addition to having a separate teaching staff, a new schedule, and an environment that offered much more flexibility around path, pace, and assessment, the Mini Academy design would also include the other features

that were intended to build an intentional student culture focused on non-academic competencies:

- **Flex model:** The Flex model allows students to access and work through content online at their own pace while receiving ongoing direct instruction and support from teachers as needed. Students can move forward as they master content or circle back for additional support when needed.
- **Assessments:** The team reconsidered how and when they used existing assignments and introduced new ones, including STAR360, American Reading Company Assessment (IRLA), and teacher-created formative assessments). These new assessments provide students and teachers with clearer and more frequent information about student progress and mastery of learning standards.
- **Flex Time:** During daily Flex Time, students are not assigned to any specific class; instead, each day, they choose to attend a class where they feel they need additional support.
- **Advisory period:** During Advisory periods, students meet with teacher mentors to set goals and participate in structured community circles and restorative practices. This period is aimed at fostering deeper student-teacher relationships and supporting students in developing agency skills.
- **Prioritization of formal reading:** The Mini Academy hired a Reading Interventionist and created a daily class for high school students who were reading at an early elementary grade level.



Planning for Pilot Launch

With the pilot planned, the campus team’s next challenges were around launch: They now had to choose Austin High students to join the Mini Academy, recruit Austin High teachers interested in participating in the pilot, and determine how to staff the new reading intervention positions with no additional funds.

Student and Teacher Selection

The team decided to launch the pilot with 125 students. Because they hoped their model would prove successful and scale across the school, ultimately reaching other district campuses, they made sure the composition of the Mini Academy students reflected the same demographics as the larger school population. Students entering 9th grade at Austin High were chosen at random, and the demographics for initial selections were vetted against the population of the traditional high school before students were invited to participate.

The team also identified five Austin High teachers who had expressed an interest in blended learning and had demonstrated a strong growth mindset to fill each of five

core subject areas. All were relatively new to teaching, with two or fewer years of teaching experience. Since all core subject areas were represented in the Mini Academy, students were able to spend all class periods — with the exception of electives — there.

Reading Intervention Staff

In order to hire a new staff member for the reading intervention program while remaining budget-neutral, the core teaching team decided to increase their own class sizes. A higher ratio of students to teachers made additional funds — which would ordinarily have been used to staff the program with a sixth teacher — available for hiring a reading interventionist who would teach work with students on reading in small groups throughout the day. The current interventionist is a former elementary school teacher with a strong literacy background.

The Mini Academy pilot launched with 125 9th grade students in August 2016. The subsequent year, when the original students matriculated to 10th grade, 125 additional 9th grade students joined the program.

THE MINI ACADEMY PILOT IN ACTION: CBE HIGHLIGHTS

The table below contains artifacts from Austin High’s work during the past two years and are categorized by specific elements of the CBE definition. The remainder of this case study provides additional detail on Austin High’s approach in action.

Element	Category	Artifacts
Students Advance Upon Demonstrating Mastery	Path/Pace	Link to Artifacts Students Advance Upon Demonstrating Mastery
Differentiated and Timely Support Based on Individual Learning Needs	Path/Pace	Link to Differentiated and Timely Support Based on Individual Learning Needs
Multiple Data Sources	Assessment	Link to Multiple Data Sources Artifacts
Multiple Opportunities to Demonstrate Mastery	Assessment	Link to Multiple Opportunities to Demonstrate Mastery Artifacts
Transparency in Learning	Assessment	Link to Transparency in Learning Artifacts
Continuing to Refine the Feedback Cycle	Assessment	Link to Continuing to Refine the Feedback Cycle Artifacts

PATH & PACE

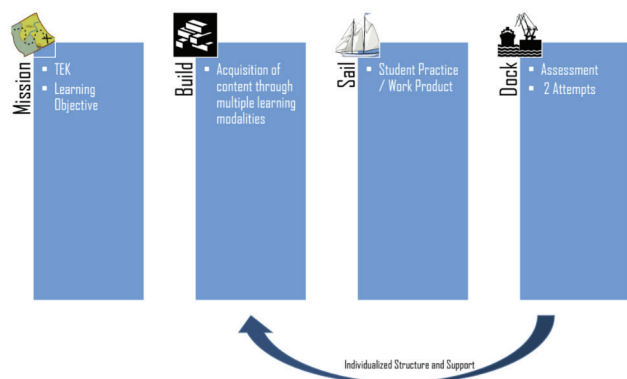
Redesigning the path and pace of learning in Mini Academy classrooms gave students the opportunity to advance upon demonstrating mastery and receive differentiated and timely support based on their individual learning needs.⁴ Students in the pilot classrooms are no longer taught a single standard as a whole group; instead, instruction is primarily delivered through personalized online playlists, which are coupled with flexible small-group and individual instruction that use content aligned with each student's needs.

Pilot teachers have observed students becoming more engaged and motivated to achieve mastery the more a path is personalized. Redesigning the pace of learning also students autonomy over when they move on to the next skill; anecdotally, teachers have observed increased student confidence as a result. As students learn to make informed choices about when to move on to the next skill, they develop agency skills and begin to close learning gaps.

Students Advance Upon Demonstrating Mastery

Personalized Learning Cycle is Mastery-Driven

Traditionally, high schools keep time constant and learning variable⁵: Students spend the same amount of time learning every subject every day, but each student's level of mastery or understanding varies widely. The Mini Academy's Personalized Learning Cycle (below) upends this norm, allowing students demonstrate mastery of one standard before moving on to the next.



The four stages of the Personalized Learning Cycle reflect the “Maritime Magnet” element of the larger campus:

1. **Mission:** Students review the learning standard (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS) and the standard's associated learning objectives.

2. **Build:** Students navigate multiple learning modalities on the district Learning Management System (LMS) to acquire the necessary understandings and skills represented by a given standard. Teachers create playlists for each standard to allow students to master standards at their own pace: For example, a teacher might use Screencastify to film a lesson and Edpuzzle to embed quizzes and activities into flipped lessons uploaded to the LMS.
3. **Sail:** Students practice skills and create high-quality work products to reflect understanding of the standard.
4. **Dock:** Students take assessments (formative assessments) to demonstrate mastery of the standard. Students are given multiple attempts to pass the assessment.

Flex Time Allows Students to Advance Upon Demonstrating Mastery

In addition to working through the Personalized Learning Cycle during core subject classes, students move at their own pace during Flex Time. All core subject teachers are available during Flex Time, and students choose where to spend each Flex Time period based on the course(s) in

⁴ For a more detailed definition and explanation of CBE as presented by iNACOL, see the International Association for K12 Online Learning: <https://www.inacol.org/>

⁵ Nicholas Donohue, President and CEO of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, <https://www.ewa.org/blog-educated-reporter/how-are-competency-based-education-and-student-centered-learning-changing>

which they need additional support or where they would like to complete additional course content. However, because students opt into classes in real time, planning small-group instruction can be challenging. Teachers are currently exploring methods for increasing planning time so they can better target students' individual needs, such as offering advance Flex Time Signups (one to two days in advance of each Flex Time period). Throughout the year, as Mini Academy teacher mentors engage in intentional conversations with students around making the best choices for Flex Time, the amount of Flex Time increases.

Use of Flex Time helps the Mini Academy provide **timely, differentiated support**⁶ to students and opportunities to develop agency as students identify their learning needs and make intentional decisions to support their academic progress.

Reading Intervention is Mastery-Driven

Mini Academy students participating in reading intervention advance upon demonstrating mastery and are assessed weekly through running records — structured note-taking conducted to monitor progress during guided reading — and monthly with the American Reading Company Assessment. Students are divided into groups based on these assessments, and when results indicate a student is ready — regardless of time of year or stage of the assessment cycle — they move on to the next reading level. The visible tracking of reading levels and consistent celebration of incremental progress with the teacher helps students shift toward a more active role in their learning progress.

In designing the pilot, the Mini Academy team understood that it was essential to communicate with students about their progress and to facilitate collaboration between students and teachers to catch up if necessary. In doing so, they created a culture that helped students build growth mindsets and persistence; for students who have

struggled with reading for most of their academic careers, this promising new approach is helping them believe that progress is possible.

Teachers Adjust Planning Methods to Accommodate Mastery Approach

When students **advance upon demonstration of mastery**,⁷ teachers must change their methods of developing and organizing learning content. Many educators interested in the concepts of CBE get stuck here, believing they need to prepare learning progressions and content for an entire course before starting. However, during the first pilot year, Mini Academy teachers decided to build content unit by unit throughout the year. While this approach limited opportunities for students to progress beyond one unit at the beginning of the first pilot year, Mini Academy teachers believe it allowed for a smoother transition to the new model. As the year progressed and teachers gained experience with this new structure, some teachers were able to work one or two units ahead.

Currently, during the second pilot year, the 9th grade team is focused refining existing content and using content from the first pilot year to allow students to progress to new units as they demonstrate mastery. The 10th grade teaching team, new to the model, is again pursuing a unit-by-unit content development approach.

When planning for unit playlists — the Mini Academy's primary instructional strategy — teachers frequently adapt content, resources, and activities used in the past, utilizing historical student mastery data to inform how much emphasis to place on a given standard or how to best incorporate the content into the playlist. Teachers collaborate with their Mini Academy colleagues and other teachers from Austin High School who, while teaching in a traditional model, are effective planning partners on content development. Teachers also meet weekly or bi-weekly with a school leader or lead teacher who supports them in planning and change management.

⁶ For a more detailed definition and explanation of CBE as presented by iNACOL, see the International Association for K12 Online Learning: <https://www.inacol.org/>

⁷ For a more detailed definition and explanation of CBE as presented by iNACOL, see the International Association for K12 Online Learning: <https://www.inacol.org/>

Differentiated and Timely Support Based on Individual Learning Needs

Students receive timely, differentiated support⁸ throughout the day via core subject classes, Flex Time, reading intervention, during goal-setting conferences with teachers and mentors. In all of these learning scenarios, teachers use up-to-date, standards-based mastery results (most often based on formative assessments in the form of short quizzes) and reading level data to determine the composition of small, flexible learning groups and prepare appropriate content to meet all students' needs. While a teacher is working with another group or conferencing with a student, students work independently and collaboratively on their Personalized Learning Cycle and are free to move throughout the classroom to work wherever and however they prefer.

Small-Group, Flexible Instruction During Core Subject Classes

While students work through their Personalized Learning Cycles in English Language Arts (ELA), math, and science, teachers intervene with students in small groups and through individual conferences. In ELA classes specifically, remediation is provided through guided reading groups for students reading above a 3rd grade level. Students reading below a 3rd grade level attend a daily intervention class for remediation.

Teachers use multiple assessments to plan small-group instruction in a way that differentiates for students' learning needs (path) and the amount of time it will take them to master the standard (pace). At the beginning of the year, class periods are approximately 55 minutes, allowing teachers to check in with students individually at the beginning and end of class and conduct small-group instruction with two to three groups per period. After

the first few months of school, class periods increase to 100 minutes, allowing teachers to meet with four to five groups. While small-group instruction predominates, some whole-group instruction (e.g., a mini-lesson or whole class Socratic discussion) is provided when teachers believe it is the best approach.

Small-Group, Flexible Instruction During Reading Intervention

Reading intervention serves students reading at or below a 3rd grade level. During Flex Time and/or as a part of their ELA classes, students are pulled for reading intervention in a separate classroom with the reading interventionist for 30 to 45 minutes per day. Teachers use American Reading Company results, reading level, and running record data to determine the composition of student groups. The interventionist creates a learning path for the group by looking at the skills and strategies of the group's next reading level to determine which objectives to include and the sequence for mastering the objectives. The pace of learning is driven by the rate at which each individual student masters the skills and strategies at each reading level.

Students who attend reading intervention classes also attend regular ELA classes and receive small-group instruction focused on grade level remediation. This approach provides students with the support they need to develop both grade-level and below-grade-level skills, helping to prevent the development of new learning gaps while addressing existing ones.

⁸ For a more detailed definition and explanation of CBE as presented by iNACOL, see the International Association for K12 Online Learning: <https://www.inacol.org/>



ASSESSMENT

The Mini Academy team has undertaken deliberate work — without which shifting the path and pace of learning would not have been possible — to redesign the way assessments are carried out. Since no single assessment exists to measure mastery at the appropriate depth and frequency needed, multiple assessments have been identified for tracking mastery of the learning standards.

Multiple Data Sources

Mini Academy teachers use multiple forms of assessment to track progress toward mastery of standards. These include formative, unit, and benchmark assessments, end-of-course (EOC) exams (STAAR) and reading level assessments (American Reading Company). Assessments take place in several formats, including group assessments (conducted online or in paper format) and one-on-one reading level assessments. The frequency of these assessments is intentional and provides teachers and students a “pulse check” on standards mastery and longer-term retention of skills, strategies, and understanding.

This new approach to assessment provides teachers with a comprehensive and ongoing (“live”) view into a student’s current mastery of the standards. It also extends assessment to students in a meaningful and positive way, allowing them to feel empowered as active participants in the learning process.

Additionally, students use assessment results to determine and discuss areas of growth in goal-setting conversations with their teachers during mentoring time.

When designing assessments, particularly formative assessments (for the Personalized Learning Cycle), Mini Academy teachers collaborate with other teachers on campus who teach the same courses in the Austin High’s larger traditional model. This collaboration allows for the development of an extensive bank of formatives to pull from each year.

Multiple Opportunities to Demonstrate Mastery

In all Mini Academy classrooms, formative assessments offer students multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery of the standards on a weekly basis. When students do not demonstrate mastery, they return to the “Build” content (playlists and other learning resources) for additional practice or participate in a teacher-led small-group session, then attempt the assessment again. Teachers track student attempts at mastery through the LMS and have real-time access to their scores. However, since teachers do not know how long a student worked on a standard or playlist, they have to trust that passing the “Dock” (the last phase of the Personalized Learning Cycle) assessment is sufficient to demonstrate mastery.

If the student does not demonstrate mastery after two attempts, teachers conference with the student to determine if the standard is appropriate or if the student misunderstands the content. Once additional

appropriate support is provided, the student is offered another attempt at the mastery assessment. This intentional approach to mastery, where student progress is valued and drives the path and pace of learning, makes assessment a clear and meaningful part of the learning process.

Students participating in reading intervention also receive multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery. Students may request assessments when they believe they are ready to move to the next reading level, and teachers can recommend assessments when they believe a student is ready to move to a higher intervention group. The interventionist also conducts student assessments outside of allocated intervention time. If the student does not demonstrate readiness to move on to the next level, the teacher and student set an attainable goal to motivate the student to continue participating in the current group.

Transparency in Learning

Throughout the Personalized Learning Cycle students have full access to their progress through the LMS, the district's online grade platform, and one-on-one conferences with the teacher. In order for the student to own their learning and make appropriate choices for stations and Flex Time, students have to understand which standards they have mastered and where they need to focus next. Thus, shared access to data both guides the teacher's instruction and supports students

to become more aware of where they are in the learning process.

Further, students receiving intervention and teachers have access to reading level data which is updated at least monthly. Throughout the year, as students receiving intervention make sufficient progress toward assessing grade-level content, they exit the course making space for a new student to participate.

Refining the Feedback Cycle

As the pilot has continued, Mini Academy teachers have continued to refine their assessment practices. For example, they are currently piloting ways to create unique assessments for the multiple attempts at mastery offered to students and to create an online method for recording

and tracking student goals. Teachers are also developing refinements around providing grades and timely feedback to open response questions in online assessments and considering ways to provide students options for demonstrating mastery.

Element	Assessment Artifacts
Multiple Data Sources	<p>Sample Data Analysis Template: This sample template was shared with teachers to help them reflect on their assessment data and plan for instruction based on the data.</p> <p>Sample Formative Assessment (Dock): Sample formative assessment (Dock) used at the end of the Personalized Learning Cycle to assess students' level of mastery of a standard.</p> <p>Sample Formative Assessment (Dock) 2: Sample formative assessment (Dock) used at the end of the Personalized Learning Cycle to assess students' level of mastery of a standard.</p>
Multiple Opportunities to Demonstrate Mastery	<p>Personalized Learning Cycle Graphic: The Mini Academy's Personalized Learning Cycle describes how students move through their Personalized Content and how they can identify when they are ready to take the assessment.</p> <p>Teacher- Facing Intervention Data Tracker: The interventionist used this sample tracker to track when students were assessed on their reading level.</p>
Transparency in Learning	<p>Personalized Learning Cycle Graphic: The Mini Academy's Personalized Learning Cycle describes how students move through their Personalized Content and how they know when they are ready to take the assessment.</p> <p>Online Student-Facing Grading Platform: Sample teacher view of online grading platform, organized by student name.</p>
Continuing to Refine the Feedback Cycle	<p>Personalized Learning Cycle Graphic: The Mini Academy's Personalized Learning Cycle describes how students move through their Personalized Content and how they know when they are ready to take the assessment.</p>

Element	Pace/Path Artifacts
Students Advance Upon Demonstrating Mastery	<p>▶ Video describing Flexibility of Path/Pace: A student describes how students work on their own playlists during class time or Flex Time.</p> <p>Flexibility of Path/Pace in Action: Video of students working on individual content during Flex Time in Algebra. In this classroom, all direct instruction took place in whole-group settings, and everyone was on the same scope and sequence map.</p> <p>ESL Weekly Goal Setting Sheet: This goal-setting sheet for students in ESL development groups helps them set goals for a given week.</p> <p>Personalized Learning Cycle Graphic: The Mini Academy's Personalized Learning Cycle describes how students move through personalized content and how they know when they are ready to take an assessment to show mastery.</p> <p>Personalized Learning Cycle Norms: The Mini Academy's Personalized Learning Cycle norms describe what a typical assessment cycle looks like for students.</p> <p>Chemistry Learning Cycle Visual: The Mini Academy's Personalized Learning Cycle shows how students move through personalized content and how they know when they are ready to take an assessment to show mastery in Chemistry.</p> <p>Mini Academy Personalized Learning Process: The Mini Academy's Personalized Learning Cycle shows how students move through personalized content and how they know when they are ready to take an assessment to show mastery.</p> <p>Student-Facing Data Tracker/Goal Setting Sheet: This sample shows how students decide to work through content based on where they are starting.</p> <p>Student-Facing Data Reflection/Planning Sheet: Sample reflection template students can use to reflect on their data and plan for next steps regarding their grades, Flex Time, etc. based on their data.</p> <p>▶ Student Video Discussing Path/Pace (0:00-0:35): Students reflecting on Path/Pace in the Mini Academy.</p>
Differentiated and Timely Support Based on Individual Learning Needs	<p>Teacher Providing Individual Support: In this video, an algebra teacher provides individualized support for students working on different content during the class period or Flex Time.</p> <p>Teacher Providing Individual Support: In this video, an algebra teacher provides individualized support for students working on different content during the class period or Flex Time.</p> <p>Reading Launch Plan: This plan outlines the thinking behind and initial steps to roll out reading intervention.</p> <p>Intervention Plan: This process shows how the interventionist sets focus areas for students after they are assessed. These focus areas are linked to the progress the student is making, not where the scope and sequence map says that the student should be.</p> <p>Master Schedule: This end of year master schedule for the end of the year includes significantly more Flex Time because students knew how to appropriately use the time to make choices about their learning.</p> <p>Student-Facing Data Tracker: Sample student-facing data tracker used to help students progress monitor their own level of mastery of essential standards.</p> <p>Student-Facing Data Tracker 2: Sample student-facing data tracker used to help students progress monitor their own reading level.</p> <p>▶ Student Video Discussing Flex Time (2:00-2:42): Students at Austin High School (Houston ISD) explain flextime (start at 2:00-2:44)</p> <p>▶ Student Video Discussing Mentorship (1:00-1:28): Students reflecting Mentorship in the Mini Academy.</p> <p>▶ Student Video - Recommending the Mini Academy (3:37-4:10): Students reflecting on whether or not they would recommend the Mini Academy to a friend.</p>

- ▶ https://youtu.be/Q7_tP8OoJ1w
- ▶ <https://youtu.be/jNrjCv8vG7k>
- ▶ <https://youtu.be/k5HANLZUkrM>
- ▶ <https://youtu.be/H21VFofFKno>
- ▶ <https://youtu.be/GmH2zbEarlQ>



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