



Idaho Mastery Education Network (IMEN): From Policy, Planning, and Design to Successful Implementation

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In 2013, the Idaho Governor's Taskforce for Improving Education introduced the concept of mastery education as a school improvement strategy. State level policy makers quickly adopted the idea of a mastery-based educational system to improve Idaho's K-12 education system. A policy lever emerged during the 2015 session of the Idaho Legislature in the form of House Bill 110 that created a grant program known as the Idaho Mastery Education Network (IMEN), and sparked an Idaho State Department led initiative and incubator program, under the direction of Superintendent Ybarra, to implement a mastery education system. Idaho is listed as one of two states that currently have policies to support mastery education through both "(1) specific competency-based education pilot programs and (2) general innovation programs or funds" (F., & E., 2017, p.6).

This study examines the partnerships, processes, and challenges that emerged as the public policy moved from an idea to implementation. This research study was provided through a service grant and partnership between the Idaho State Department of Education and Boise State University to provide the Idaho Mastery Education Network with information to help inform IMEN professional development and strategic planning for next steps.

The Idaho Mastery Education Network of 19 incubators, consisting of 32 schools, were provided with the opportunity to create a mastery model that would serve their unique communities. Some of the incubators have a

district-wide implementation, while others represent a school or a grade level team. IMEN teams provide mastery learning to students within schools of elementary, middle, junior/senior high, high, alternative, charter and K-12. IMEN teams support each other during in-person and online professional development and networking opportunities. Each team has provided an explanation of why they are implementing mastery education, along with demographics, bright spots, and resources at the Idaho State Department of Education website (<https://www.sde.idaho.gov/mastery-ed/>).

These incubator school districts and charters received professional development to support planning and design of mastery education in the 2016-2017 school year, and are working through strategic implementation in the 2017-2018 school year. This educational update for teaching and learning has been supported through five key tenets of mastery education, originated as a national working definition (Sturgis et al, 2011), that help to define and inform the IMEN work.

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 rapid, 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.

Methods of Study

Some data was preexisting from Idaho State Department of Education, additional data was collected through interviews, focus groups, and observations. Focus groups were conducted with students, parents, teachers and school leaders at each of the IMEN incubator sites. The participants were chosen by the school leaders according to availability and interest. Focus groups participants varied between five to twelve individuals per session. The study team conducted the following sessions totaling 72 focus groups and over 1400 minutes of interviews to gain feedback on the implementation of mastery in their school systems:

31 student groups

25 teacher and school leader groups

16 parent groups

Focus group interview questions were asked to determine strengths and weaknesses of system and classroom indicators in the areas of assessment, differentiated support, competencies, learning outcomes, and student advancement upon mastery.

In addition, IMEN schools and districts were provided with a stakeholder survey from the Idaho State Department of Education, supported by Strategies 360, to share with their community and an IMEN planning/design survey to share with their school teams. These surveys, along with the focus group responses, were used to capture individual perceptions and system-wide feedback on experiences related to moving from a traditional school system to a mastery education system.

Key Findings

The focus of this research partnership has been to discover how policy, practice, and research can work together to support an educational refresh to Idaho's K-12 system, thus improving access to a relevant and empowering education for our students. The study examined what benefits and challenges emerged in the incubator schools during the early stages of planning/design and implementation. The mastery education benefits that emerged from the IMEN stakeholder surveys, also were present in the IMEN focus groups.

Benefits

- 1) Ability for Students to Personalize Their Learning: Students reported being able to work at a flexible pace, with choice and voice in their learning. Students also reported that they feel prepared and confident, when the time comes to assess their skills and knowledge. Teachers reported that instructional support is given with an emphasis placed on the learning instead of just earning grades.
- 2) Flexibility: Educators and parents discussed the use of innovative teaching strategies and the ability to provide flexible learning spaces. Participants also discussed the use of time and resources and increased collaboration, thus allowing teachers to better serve their students.
- 3) Transparency: All focus groups discussed that with mastery students, parents, and teachers are able to see where students are in the learning, work together to set clear goals,

differentiate support for student learning, and monitor learning growth and progress.

- 4) Desire to Learn: Students reported that they are able to work through the learning cycle to make meaning, investigate, create/design, communicate, and synthesize their learning. They also discussed that they are offered more choice and are able to incorporate their interests into their studies.
- 5) Self-Efficacy for Students: All focus groups discussed changes in student ownership of learning, progression toward college and career readiness standards, and a move away from traditional seat-time as a measure of student success. Students and parents discussed that failure was no longer an option at their schools because students could no longer advance until they could demonstrate mastery.

Challenges

The top challenges or obstacles for implementing mastery education were identified from IMEN focus groups. These challenges have also been shared within national conversations from other states, districts, and schools.

- 1) Need for capacity-building support. Ongoing support is needed for the work that has been started to include professional development for current teachers; efforts to collaborate with institutes of higher education to support needed changes in K-12 teacher preparatory programs to include teaching in a mastery-based system; training, infrastructure and

knowledge to support improved instructional strategies for mastery classrooms; training, infrastructure and knowledge for central office management and leadership to support the logistical necessary for a district or charter to move to a mastery system, including board training and policy development; and policies that will remove barriers and provide guidance.

- 2) Help for navigating a dual system of traditional and mastery education. Support for aligning the education system from K-12 through higher education to be a continuum of learning with supporting resources of competencies/learning progressions, assessments, grading/reporting for transcripts, high school graduation requirements, NCAA requirements, access to scholarships, and educational equity for all students.
- 3) Communication to address perceived barriers. Continued communication to students/parents/schools about college admissions, awarding credit at the local level, knowing what waivers are available, knowing what students and schools can and can't do for state level assessments, addressing the misconception of mastery being only a digital education platform.
- 4) Meeting local LEAs where they are. Continued support for districts/schools to determine what is already mastery education teaching/learning in their current system. The network needs to continue to scaffold strategic support and planning to help districts/charters as they fully implement mastery.

Significance of the Study

Idaho is working at the forefront of mastery education. Phillips and Lockett (2017),

authors of the article, *The Path to Personalized Learning: The Next Chapter in the Tale of Three States*, share “Idaho’s Path to Mastery-Based Education” (p.6), along with lessons learned to include carefully crafted messages, emphasis on collaboration and building communities of practice, and communication to help support a new style of education (p.10).

This IMEN study invited students, parents, teachers and school leaders into focus group conversations that analyzed mastery learning challenges at the classroom, organizational, and system level. The focus groups and surveys were conducted to bring stakeholders into the collaboration and planning to support teams in system improvement. The study found many of the benefits for mastery education are also the challenges, as this is a systems-changing strategy to update education in Idaho. While some teachers, classrooms, schools, and local education associations (districts and charters) are seeing widespread success from the change to a mastery-based system, the focus groups also brought to light the need for systemic and strategic support throughout the network. Researchers heard many stories of work-around or temporary solutions for challenges and obstacles that incubators are experiencing. Systematically addressing these obstacles will allow incubators to focus more on building teacher capacity to support instructional needs. There is a need for coaches or technical assistance providers to be available to help districts/schools during the change process from a traditional system to a mastery education system. Further, there are logistical and policies issues that emerged from the study of the incubator sites as needed changes to more fully implement mastery education in Idaho.

Partnership Considerations

Often innovative ideas are at greatest risk

when the visionary leader leaves. Mastery education requires support from multiple levels and the broader school community. As we transition Governors, it is important that there is collaboration among stakeholders to determine Idaho’s vision for our high school graduates.

The mastery or competency-based education literature looks at strategies for creating a K-12 continuum that provides learning progressions for these essential academic and life skills, providing performance-based assessments, and involving students and families in the planning and reflection of learning. Rose Colby (2017), author of *Competency-Based Education: A New Architecture for K-12 Schooling*, recommends “as you develop your blueprint for the future, I encourage you to take the time necessary to comprehensively determine your community’s vision of its graduate” (p. 26).

The Idaho State Department of Education has indicated the importance of developing an Idaho Profile of a Graduate. This resource could serve as a common connection between the existing Governor’s three task force committees - Improving K-12; Higher Education; and Workforce Development. Collaboration is needed at both the state and local levels, and should include Career and Technical Education and higher education, to align the IMEN Competencies and Learning Progressions to the Idaho State Content Standards and Idaho’s Profile of a Graduate.

Policy Considerations

Currently, IMEN schools are working within dual systems for assessment. While locally, schools/districts are able to assess students according to where they are currently learning, regardless of age or grade, state tests require that students are given grade level tests each year. Allowing students to take

state tests upon readiness, or provide performance level checkpoints, would provide the long-term flexibility that is needed. Currently, IMEN schools are also working within dual systems for reporting. This takes valuable time and resources, and system support is needed in the long-term. Policies that continue to allow students to earn credit based on demonstration of mastery, rather than completion of time-based courses, will provide schools/districts the needed flexibility. Locally, school boards are able to determine how students may earn credit through Advanced Opportunities policy. In order to establish this as a long-term solution, support for awareness of this policy and implementation recommendations should be shared with Local Educational Authorities (LEAs).

Funding Considerations

Currently, IMEN schools are using a seat-time waiver to provide students with the ability to earn credits inside and outside of the classroom. Seat-time waivers need to be available to all schools/districts pursuing mastery education. The move to mastery education in Idaho will continue to benefit from support-based funding made available for districts considering implementation of mastery. The Idaho State Department of Education has indicated that mastery education will be considered as a school improvement strategy in the revised ESSA plan, to support the lowest performing schools, allowing schools to utilize SIG funds and Title funding to support their efforts in transitioning to a mastery system.

Future Research

As the IMEN incubator schools complete the first year of implementation, further research could support the development of metrics to assess learning outcomes, systematic implementation and sustainability processes,

and balancing measures that help define and communicate the impact of the IMEN work. Continued research that involves stakeholders will provide ongoing considerations for solutions to challenges that emerge during the implementation process.

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