

# Scheduling for Mastery-Based Learning

A practical decision guide for school leaders who are considering or implementing mastery-based learning — specifically focused on how to choose the right scheduling model for your school.

SCHOOL LEADER GUIDE

MASTERY-BASED LEARNING

SCHEDULING



# Any Schedule Can Work

**Mastery-based learning is not a scheduling model.** It is a philosophy about how students learn, demonstrate, and deepen understanding. That philosophy can be embedded in almost any schedule that a school already uses, or is considering.

What follows is not a recommendation to adopt a particular schedule. It is a set of questions designed to help school leaders find the schedule that fits their students, staff, context, and constraints, and then understand how mastery-based structures can live inside it.

*The schedule is not the intervention. Mastery-based learning is. Your schedule is the container. **What matters is what you build inside it.***

WHAT MAKES A SCHEDULE WORK FOR MBL?

# What MBL *actually requires* — and what it doesn't.

Before exploring schedule types, it helps to name what mastery-based learning actually requires from a schedule and what it does not.

## What MBL Requires from Any Schedule

- ✓ Time for students to progress at different rates, at least sometimes
- ✓ Structures for demonstrating mastery, not just completing tasks
- ✓ Opportunities for revision, reattempt, and return to unfinished learning
- ✓ Visibility into where each student is, for teachers and ideally for students

## What MBL Does NOT Require from a Schedule

- ✗ A fully self-paced or student-directed schedule
- ✗ Elimination of traditional periods or grade levels
- ✗ Technology platforms (though they can help)
- ✗ A total redesign of how your school runs

# Five questions to surface *your real constraints.*

Work through these questions as a leadership team. There are no right answers, but only answers that are right for your school. Each question is designed to surface a real constraint or real capacity that should shape your scheduling decisions.

Question	A	B	C
How much variation in student pacing can your teachers manage day-to-day?	<b>Very little</b> — students move through content largely together	<b>Some</b> — teachers manage small-group differentiation within a lesson	<b>A lot</b> — teachers are comfortable with students at multiple points simultaneously
How much agency are your students currently able to exercise over their own learning?	<b>Limited</b> — students need significant structure and direction to stay on task	<b>Growing</b> — students can manage shorter self-directed windows with scaffolding	<b>Strong</b> — students can set goals, track progress, and self-direct for extended periods
How much scheduling flexibility does your school actually have?	<b>Very little</b> — fixed period structure shared across departments or a larger institution	<b>Moderate</b> — can adjust within our own school, but some external constraints apply	<b>High</b> — significant control over how we structure time
What is your school's relationship with traditional grading and transcripts?	<b>Traditional</b> — letter grades and traditional transcripts required	<b>Transitioning</b> — some traditional grading remains, some mastery-based reporting in place	<b>Mastery-based</b> — standards-based or mastery-based reporting, or significant flexibility
How ready is your staff to implement MBL practices?	<b>Early stages</b> — most staff are new to MBL and need clear, structured entry points	<b>Developing</b> — some staff are experienced, others still building understanding	<b>Strong</b> — most staff understand MBL principles and can adapt instruction flexibly

## SCHEDULING MODELS

# Five models, *from structured to student-led.*

Five scheduling approaches, ordered from most teacher-directed and constrained to most student-directed and flexible. **Each one can support mastery-based learning.** Use your answers from the decision framework (pg. 4) to see which model fits your context right now and which you might grow toward over time.

<b>MODEL 1</b> <b>Fixed Periods</b> Mostly A's	<b>MODEL 2</b> <b>Flex Blocks</b> Mostly B's	<b>MODEL 3</b> <b>Modular / Rotation</b> Mostly B's	<b>MODEL 4</b> <b>Project Anchored</b> Mostly C's
<b>MODEL 5</b> <b>Self-Paced / Open</b> Mostly C's			

← TEACHER-DIRECTED, CONSTRAINED

STUDENT-DIRECTED, FLEXIBLE →

# Fixed Periods with MBL Practices Embedded

*Traditional schedule. Mastery lives inside the lesson.*

## BEST FOR SCHOOLS WHERE

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- Traditional period structures are non-negotiable
- Teachers are newer to MBL and need predictable structure
- Grading and reporting systems are still largely traditional

## TRADE-OFFS TO WEIGH

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- Whole-class pacing limits how much individual variation is possible
- Revision and reattempt must be designed deliberately into existing time
- Mastery can feel like a checkbox rather than an ongoing loop

## WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

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Students move through content together, but teachers use formative assessment to identify who needs reteaching before moving on. Exit tickets replace homework grades. Revision is built into the following class period. Mastery is demonstrated through end-of-unit assessments with at least one reattempt opportunity.

# Flexible Blocks with Differentiated Pathways

*Core whole-group time. Protected space for differentiation.*

## BEST FOR SCHOOLS WHERE

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- Teachers can manage small groups or stations within a block
- Students are building independent work habits
- Some scheduling flexibility exists within a department or grade level

## TRADE-OFFS TO WEIGH

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- Requires strong classroom management and station design
- Differentiation can become tracking if not monitored carefully
- Teachers need time to plan multiple pathways within a single lesson

## WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

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Each class period has a short whole-group launch (10–15 min), followed by a differentiated block where students rotate between direct instruction, independent practice, and conferencing with the teacher. Students are grouped by where they are in the learning progression, and groups shift regularly as students demonstrate mastery.

# Modular or Rotation-Based Scheduling

*Structured modules. Students rotate on mastery, not the clock.*

## BEST FOR SCHOOLS WHERE

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- School can restructure time within a term or unit
- Content lends itself to discrete modules (skills, concepts, topics)
- Some students are ready to move through modules at different speeds

## TRADE-OFFS TO WEIGH

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- Module design is time-intensive upfront
- Students who move slowly may feel stigmatized if groupings are visible
- Requires clear criteria for what "ready to move" actually means

## WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

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A unit is broken into 3–5 discrete modules. All students begin together. As students demonstrate mastery of each module, they move to the next with some finishing a week earlier than others. Early finishers take on extension work, or begin the next unit's first module. Students who need more time receive targeted small-group support in the same space.

# Project-Anchored Scheduling

*Real-world anchors. Skills acquired as needed.*

## BEST FOR SCHOOLS WHERE

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- Interdisciplinary or project-based learning is already part of the school's model
- Teachers are comfortable designing backward from an authentic product
- Students have strong enough agency to sustain work across multiple sessions

## TRADE-OFFS TO WEIGH

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- Individual skill mastery can be harder to track and document
- Students who struggle with unstructured time need scaffolding
- Requires rich, well-designed projects; poor projects undermine the model

## WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

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Students work toward a multi-week project that requires mastery of specific skills. Rather than scheduled skill instruction, teachers observe where students are getting stuck and pull small groups for targeted teaching. Mastery demonstrations are embedded in the project itself — a student doesn't need a separate test, because their work is the evidence.

# Self-Paced or Open Scheduling

*Students own the pace. Teachers coach and certify.*

## BEST FOR SCHOOLS WHERE

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- Students have strong self-regulation and goal-setting skills
- Teachers function as coaches rather than instructors
- The school has flexible or non-traditional scheduling structures

## TRADE-OFFS TO WEIGH

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- Without strong student agency, pace gaps widen and some students stall
- Requires robust tracking systems so no student falls invisible
- Most challenging for students from highly structured prior environments

## WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

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Students are given a clear learning progression with defined mastery criteria for each level. They choose when and how to engage with content — using videos, texts, peer instruction, or direct teacher support — and demonstrate mastery through assessments they choose to attempt when ready. Teachers review progress daily and intervene proactively with students who are stalling.

"When self-paced scheduling works, it is the most powerful of the five. A student who can accurately describe their own mastery, name their growth, and identify what comes next has internalized the whole point of mastery-based learning."

# Four practices *that make a schedule mastery-based.*

Mastery-based learning is not a destination you arrive at by adopting the most flexible schedule available. It is a set of practices you deepen over time. The following practices are what make a schedule mastery-based. **Without them, the schedule is just a schedule.**

01

## Clear Mastery Criteria, Visible to Students

Students need to know what mastery looks like **before they begin**, not just after they are assessed. This means learning outcomes that are specific, accessible, and in student-facing language.

02

## Assessment That Informs, Not Just Measures

Assessments in MBL are **checkpoints, not verdicts**. They tell teachers and students what to do next. This is true whether the schedule is fixed or open.

03

## Opportunities for Revision and Reattempt

**The loop matters more than the gate.** Students who have not yet demonstrated mastery need structured opportunities to return, not a lower grade. This is possible in every scheduling model; it just looks different in each one.

04

## Progress Tracking That Is Meaningful, Not Just Recorded

Someone (ideally the student, certainly the teacher) should be able to answer at any point: **where is this student, and what do they need next?** That answer shapes instruction.



**Where to Start** Pick the model that fits your honest answers from the decision framework (pg. 4). Implement two or three of the practices above inside that model. Get good at them. Then revisit this guide. **Start with practices. Let the schedule follow.**

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