Mastery Charter Schools

Real-Time Redesign Case Study

Overview

- Mastery Charter Schools (Mastery) is a network of 24 charter schools in Philadelphia, PA, and Camden, NJ. The network serves 14,000 K-12 students, 86 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch, 98 percent of whom identify as students of color, and 20 percent of whom have Individual Education Programs (IEP).

- Through stakeholder engagement, external inspiration, and internal research, Mastery identified a central problem of practice connected to their emerging strategic plan: **"How might we build a blended learning model that fosters achievement and independence in our high school students?"**

- To address their problem of practice, Mastery built a plan to pilot the **integration of [ISTE Standards for Students](#) into lesson plans** for a small set of high school classrooms.

> " *The most exciting part of this process that we will do more of and that we will take with us is taking a more robust approach to gathering and incorporating the feedback and perspectives of families and students at the front end and throughout the entire strategic planning process. Through the empathy interviews and design thinking process that puts student experience at the center via the Strategy Lab, it's incredibly important to elevate the voices of families and students to ensure that their input is driving our network's priorities."*
>
> - Kevin Zimmer, Senior Director of Academic Operations for Mastery Charter Schools

Introduction

In summer 2020, leaders at Mastery Charter Schools (Mastery) were in the challenging position of preparing to reopen school amid the COVID-19 pandemic; at the same time, leaders wanted to continue progress toward their network's long-term vision of preparing all students for postsecondary success.

They joined the [Always Ready for Learning Strategy Lab](#), a nine-month, pro bono, cohort-based learning experience. The Strategy Lab supported Mastery and six other school systems to launch the new school year with a strong start and to implement a real-time, targeted improvement process that would accelerate progress toward a more equitable, resilient system for teaching and learning.

As part of the Strategy Lab, Mastery used the [Real-Time Redesign](#) process to make progress on their vision — even amid a challenging year.

Come Together

Step 1: Organize an Inclusive Team

Mastery first brought together a **team of cross-functional leaders** but then engaged a **more diverse group of academic leaders**.

- The original, cross-functional team was highly committed, but not all members of the team were directly connected to teaching and learning. As the group thought about the work ahead, they realized that a **team more focused on academics would be best positioned to facilitate a process focused on teaching and learning**. At the same time, the group identified the need to ensure that the design team was racially/ethnically diverse so as to be more representative of the diversity of their student body.

- With these guidelines in mind, the group invited a new set of academic leaders to make up their design team. Not only did this design team have deep expertise in teaching and learning, **they also had close connections to the school-level leaders, teachers, students, and families** who would need to be involved in the process along the way.

The design team paused to reflect on ways it was – and was not – reflective of the students, families, and teachers it hoped to benefit.

- Mastery has a strong commitment to equity, inclusion, and anti-racism. Mastery's Chief of Student Development recently wrote, "We take inspiration from the discussions sparked since the murder of George Floyd, and endeavor to lift the organization to a higher and more effective place for our students as well as our staff. We know that a healthy inclusive organizational culture enables adults to nurture a healthy school and classroom environment and believe we have an opportunity to significantly boost this work."

- Reflecting on this commitment, the design team self-identified limitations to their perspectives and experiences. **Once they identified these limitations, the team engaged staff who have insights into students' lives – especially those who feel least successful in the current system**. This approach ensured that those closest to challenges in the network (teachers and students) would have a say in designing solutions. It also helped the team develop a design that could actually be used day to day, as teachers and students could provide "on-the-ground" perspective to inform the work.

The design team built a shared commitment to change, **based on the network's emerging strategic vision**.

- As a network, Mastery is committed to advancing equity and preparing students for the future. As the design team thought about the future of teaching and learning, **they envisioned confident, independent learners supported with personalized, blended, and culturally responsive teaching and authentic relationships with adults**. The emphasis on personalized learning and cultural relevance grounded the team in a shared vision for equity and aligned with work the network was doing with Zaretta Hammond to advance culturally relevant teaching. The focus on blended learning as a tool for personalizing learning and building independence set the team up to build toward resiliency, as well.

Step 2: Look Backward Before Going Forward

The design team centered the voices of those most affected by their work.

- Mastery needed input to define the specifics of its model. **The vision was clear: culturally responsive, blended learning**; however, it was not yet clear how that vision would be realized, and the team knew that stakeholders would have unique and important perspectives on this question. The design team carefully considered whom to interview, how to ensure that interviewees felt authentically heard, and what questions to ask to get specific input. The team conducted multiple rounds of interviews, intentionally seeking out the voices of teachers to understand the challenges they were confronting.

Step 3: Stand on the Shoulders of Giants

To build on what they were learning internally, Mastery looked to outside research and examples.

- Mastery sought research on and examples of blended learning models that promote equity. Through this research, the team **explored what equity in blended learning means: using technology to meet each student's needs, closing digital divides, and preparing each student for success in the 21st century**. The team encountered approaches to embedding technology in every classroom as a way to meet those goals. The team also explored ISTE Standards for Students, which provide clarity about how to use technology in a way that empowers students.

Dream Big

Step 1: Clearly Define the Problem You Seek to Change

Mastery drew out clear themes from their empathy interviews, in addition to deep ongoing interviews and focus groups the district had been conducting with students and their families.

- Student and family input provided helpful direction for the design team. **Interviewees identified the need to support students and teachers with technology, increase digital access, and create independent learners who more actively own their learning** (versus relying on a standard teacher-centric classroom). These themes provided important insight into what it would take to move the network toward a blended learning model.

Based on these themes, the team identified their problem of practice: **"How might we build a blended learning model that fosters achievement and independence in our high school students?"**

- This problem statement challenged the team to find solutions that would **empower each student and promote their development in academics and beyond** (including cognitive and social-emotional skills). Importantly, their problem statement reflected key areas of the **network's commitment to anti-racism: student independence, high expectations, and engaging, impactful instruction**. Finally, the problem statement required the team to think about how **technology — an inherently adaptable tool — might be used to individualize the learning experience**.

Step 2: Brainstorm & Pick a Solution

In brainstorming solutions to the problem they had identified, the team identified a range of possibilities.

- The team's potential solutions fell into one of three categories:

  - **Adopt practices that focus on teacher moves**. This set of solutions honors the critical role that teachers play in the classroom and focuses on how to equip teachers with the support and materials needed to engage students via blended learning.

  - **Adopt practices that focus on systems and processes**. This set of solutions recognizes that a move to a blended learning model is a significant change across a network, and thus explores the ways that network-provided resources (e.g., sample lesson plans, new software/tools) may be important foundations for the change.

  - **Adopt practices that focus on students**. This set of solutions anticipates challenges high schoolers might face in moving from a traditional to a blended learning model, and suggests concrete ways to scaffold the student independence needed for success in a blended learning model (e.g., pairing students together, enabling student voice and choice in their learning, promoting student goal-setting).

The design team decided on a solution that would **integrate ISTE standards for students into lesson plans** as a way to support student independence in a blended model.

- The design team reviewed the ideas to consider which would best meet the needs of students, promote equity and resiliency, and be feasible for near-term improvement. **The winning solution rose to the top because it addressed the intersection of equity and blended learning**; ISTE Standards for Students, "are designed to empower student voice and ensure that learning is a student-driven process." Mastery also appreciated that ISTE uses a proven, research-backed approach, meaning the network wouldn't have to start from scratch.

- This solution aligns well with Mastery's goals for this work. The team was attracted to ISTE as a proven framework that emphasizes *equity* by **empowering student voice through technology**. The team was also drawn to the opportunity their solution offered to build *resiliency*; **ISTE standards can be used across grade levels and subject areas**, and they would be able to **start small** (i.e., with one standard) so as to allow the network to learn and adapt as it goes.

Start Small

Step 1: Design & Run a Pilot

The design team decided to **pilot integration of <u>ISTE Standards for Students</u> into high school lesson plans**.

Mastery built a clear <u>prototype plan</u> for integrating ISTE standards into lesson plans. To pilot this model, Mastery **prioritized ISTE standards that most closely align with its vision of personalized, blended, <u>culturally responsive</u> learning**: Knowledge Constructor and Creative Communicator. Mastery has future plans to support teachers in developing lesson plans that intentionally integrate those standards. Teachers will then be coached to deliver the lessons and to gather student input and feedback.

This pilot had several assumed benefits. It would provide a **clear anchor point for the network's transition to a blended learning model**, it would **clarify what it looks like to build student ownership and independence in their learning**, and it would **give teachers much-needed guidelines** and support as they facilitate this change.

Mastery's pilot plan is intentionally small and highly organized. Mastery planned to focus initially on a small group of two to four high school technology elective teachers, though they shifted to **embed the standards within core content and instead lean on technology teachers to act as supportive co-teachers** (what some might compare to the role of a librarian). Teachers will be coached to integrate select <u>ISTE Standards for Students</u> into one lesson. Throughout the process, the design team will continue to manage the pilot timeline, engage school leaders and teachers, support the work, and reflect on progress along the way.

Conclusion

Mastery has plans to pilot in the fourth quarter of the 2020-21 school year, and the design team is hopeful the data they collect will show the benefits of this solution for students and teachers. Mastery has plans in place regardless of the outcome and is prepared to scale a successful solution and/or take lessons from this experience to inform future work.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. Where do you **see your own system in this case study**? Are you facing similar challenges? What have you learned from this case study that might help you address your challenges?

2. Mastery's pilot of ISTE standards will start small – with a subset of standards and in a small number of classrooms. For your own pilot, how might your design team measure impact and assess scalability? What challenges to scaling might you encounter, and how might you overcome them?

3. The design team's process addressed their broader, long-term goals around culturally responsive teaching and blended learning through **small-scale, incremental change**. What about this approach differs from how your team approaches the design of teaching and learning today? Where do you see opportunities in your district to use a real-time, targeted improvement process?

4. One way Mastery's design team honored the charter network's commitment to equity was by **pausing to consider the limitations of their perspectives and seek out the voices of others**. How might the process have turned out differently without this kind of preparation and reflection? Where do you see opportunities in your context to build toward equity and resiliency in teaching and learning?

5. Mastery's work supported their network-wide shift toward **culturally responsive, blended learning**. Where do you see opportunities in your context for blended learning and/or culturally responsive teaching? How would such work support equity and resiliency in teaching and learning?