

Mastery Learning at Tilden Preparatory School

Mastery Learning is an educational philosophy and practice that supports all students to become competent and confident learners. At the core of Mastery Learning is the idea that students can learn any body of knowledge if they can go at their own pace and learn the material in the way they learn best. In addition, research shows that if students learn course content to 80% mastery or higher, they will have the foundation they need (the retention and/or ability to refresh their memory) to successfully move on to more advanced material.

At Tilden, we find that teaching students one-to-one allows the greatest opportunity for them to go at their own pace and learn in the way that best accommodates their style of learning so they can attain this level of mastery. The more difficulty a student has had with successfully learning in school, the more important pacing and style of teaching are to their success. Many students become frustrated with learning because the pace is too fast (or too slow), too much material is presented at once, or because their particular learning style is not being addressed.

Mastery learning is designed to facilitate this process. Material is presented in amounts that match the student's capability, whether this is more or less than "average", and presented in a way the student can understand, so the experience of learning and mastery are maximized.

Learned Helplessness

Students who have met with repeated failures in a particular subject, or in school in general, often come to the conclusion that they simply aren't "smart" or "good at school". This can be the result of learning basics at a lower than 75% mastery level, which leads to increasing failure as course content becomes more challenging. On an emotional level, students begin to feel fear, anxiety, apathy and/or depression when faced with new learning in a subject that has been so difficult in the past, and these emotions can lead students to shut down as a way to protect themselves. This is called learned helplessness, the process whereby after meeting with repeated failure, a person stops trying even when success is possible.

The remedy for learned helplessness is competence. When students see that they can be successful, feelings of confidence, self-control and self-esteem replace the negative emotions they felt previously. This supports even greater success--just as negative emotions can lead to learned helplessness, positive emotions such as confidence, excitement, and pride can enhance learning. We see this happen every day at Tilden---students begin to take greater risks to try new ways to understand material, increase their perseverance and stamina for "hanging in" until they "get" challenging material, and even ask to go on to higher levels (such as Honors or AP courses) in subjects they previously avoided.

At Tilden, we pay close attention to the critical ingredients for fostering this transformation--pacing, style of teaching, and the relationship between teacher and student. We allow the flexibility to learn material in as little as 15 hours of teacher/student time per semester course or as many hours as needed (usually 30-36 for regular courses and 45-55 for AP courses) to gain 80% mastery. We train our teachers to individualize their approach for each student, and we hire teachers who love what they teach and love working with teens. If a student feels the teacher/student match isn't working, we switch teachers because we know how important the relationship is, particularly for students who need to regain excitement for learning and confidence in themselves as learners. Finally, if a student is taking longer than expected in a course, our Heads of School, Learning Specialist, and Co-Directors (all of whom specialize in working with teens) are available at all times to consult with the teacher(s) and family, identify any problems, and address their solutions. If you would like to learn more about Tilden Preparatory School and/or Mastery Learning, please call us at 925-933-5506 (Walnut Creek) or 510-525-5506 (Albany) or visit our website at www.tildenprep.com.