



# How to Simplify Grading for Equity

Now more than ever, humans need connection. K-12 educators have gone above and beyond to keep classrooms connected. However, student needs are significant, and teachers' bandwidths are limited. **Grading for equity** fosters student-teacher connections and empowers students to take ownership of their learning.



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# What is Grading for Equity?

In 2019, long-time educator Joe Feldman authored [Grading for Equity](#), a handbook that defines grading for equity, its impact, and how it can transform today's schools. Feldman described three main pillars of equitable grading:

- **Accuracy**
- **Bias-resistance**
- **Intrinsic motivation**

Grading for equity is one piece of creating a more just and equitable educational experience. It challenges traditional grading practices that are often biased and reinforce inequities by valuing certain forms of knowledge over others. Traditional grading systems may also penalize students who do not have access to specific resources. In contrast, grading for equity prioritizes the acquisition of skills and knowledge in the best way for every student over the accumulation of points.

This philosophy matters because it has the potential to level the playing field for students from all backgrounds. By creating more inclusive and equitable grading systems, students can be assessed on their mastery of the material they need to succeed.

Grading remains essential for educators as it helps measure student learning and growth. By receiving this timely feedback, students can understand where they are in their learning journey and what the next steps on their path are. However, educators know grading is time-consuming, particularly when assessing student mastery across multiple standards.



# 6 Ways to Implement Grading for Equity in the Classroom



While there's no silver bullet for the perfect grading system, there are some steps that educators can take towards grading for equity:

## 6 WAYS TO IMPLEMENT GRADING FOR EQUITY IN THE CLASSROOM

1. Communicate learning goals frequently so all students know what's expected of them.
2. Don't base grades on behavior.
3. Give feedback that showcases where students currently are in their learning journey.
4. Use simple scales. A-F is more straightforward to define than a 100-point grading scale.
5. Share grading rubrics and expectations with students ahead of time.
6. Give students more opportunities to showcase their learning until they've reached mastery.

While many schools have started grading for equity. There are some barriers to implementing it at scale. Commonly cited problems include:

- **Lack of access to real-time data surrounding student progress.**
- **Additional work for educators as students are allowed to retake assignments and assessments.**
- **Lack of empirical evidence showing the impact on student achievement.**

While these concerns are valid, schools can begin to overcome these challenges. One district, [Capistrano Unified](#), has taken several steps toward implementing grading for equity. Read on to hear how they've streamlined PLCs and simplified grading for equity.







# One District's Story: Capistrano Unified Finds Common Ground with Common Assessments

Capistrano is currently in a multi-year pilot of [Mastery Connect](#) with its 35 elementary schools. Rather than forcing a tool on teachers who are not yet ready, the goal of the pilot is to meet teachers where they are in their PLC work.

“Mastery Connect is not just one more thing, but a tool to help teachers,” Julia Dewees, an EdTech TOSA at Capistrano, said.

A large district like theirs needs to put critical assessment data into the hands of teachers when they need it most. This need for data in their efforts to be genuinely standards-aligned led them to pilot a common assessment management system. Yet, teachers in such districts already have a lot on their plates. Recent years have also brought districtwide PLC initiatives, MTSS Intervention, Common Formative Assessment data, state testing prep, standards-based report cards, and more.



While important, these initiatives have brought a wave of initiative fatigue. Like many other districts, learning how to take full advantage of professional learning communities (PLCs) to successfully collaborate and implement each of these initiatives has been challenging at Capistrano.

“Much of our teachers’ PLC time was spent creating and grading formative assessments. We were trying hard to put this data into a usable, accessible format,” Dewees explained.

“Equity is when every student has the opportunity to demonstrate mastery for every standard,”

—JULIA DEWEES,  
EdTech TOSA at  
Capistrano Unified

Capistrano isn’t alone here. [Insufficient access to timely data](#) is a familiar hurdle teams face in preparing for productive PLCs. Still, teams face the same goal: to help all students reach grade-level mastery of all standards.

“Equity is when every student has the opportunity to demonstrate mastery for every standard,” Dewees said.

Using data from these assessments, teachers can [differentiate instruction](#) and ensure that every student can demonstrate mastery of every standard. Simply put, Mastery Connect

is a tool that supports the value of feedback, intervention, and differentiation at the right time, helps simplify the grading process, and levels the playing field for educators and students.

According to Dewees, one of the best Mastery Connect features is the Tracker, which helps teachers gain a bird’s eye view of all student progress across multiple standards. The Tracker displays standards across the top row, student names along the side, assessment data, that match the four levels of mastery on the District report card, making it easy for teachers to get a comprehensive overview of student performance.





“Mastery Connect is something our elementary teachers never had before. We use [Canvas LMS](#), which has a traditional grade book. Mastery Connect has been a real gift for our teachers keeping track of standards-based learning,” Dewees said.

Mastery Connect’s integration with Canvas LMS is another feature Capistrano’s teams appreciate.

“Mastery Connect is one way we’ve gotten our elementary classrooms back into Canvas LMS in a way that’s different from how they used it during online learning,” Dewees explained.

Mastery Connect also has an item bank that includes rigorous, standards-aligned questions similar to those found in state testing. The bank has items available in Spanish, making it accessible to students in the District’s dual immersion language program. Teachers can create assessments and get instant item analysis for each question, including student performance data, making it easy to see which students need additional support and what areas need improvement.



**“If our teachers want to reach equity, then teachers need to have conversations about what’s happening in successful classrooms,”**

**–JULIA DEWEES,**  
EdTech TOSA at Capistrano Unified

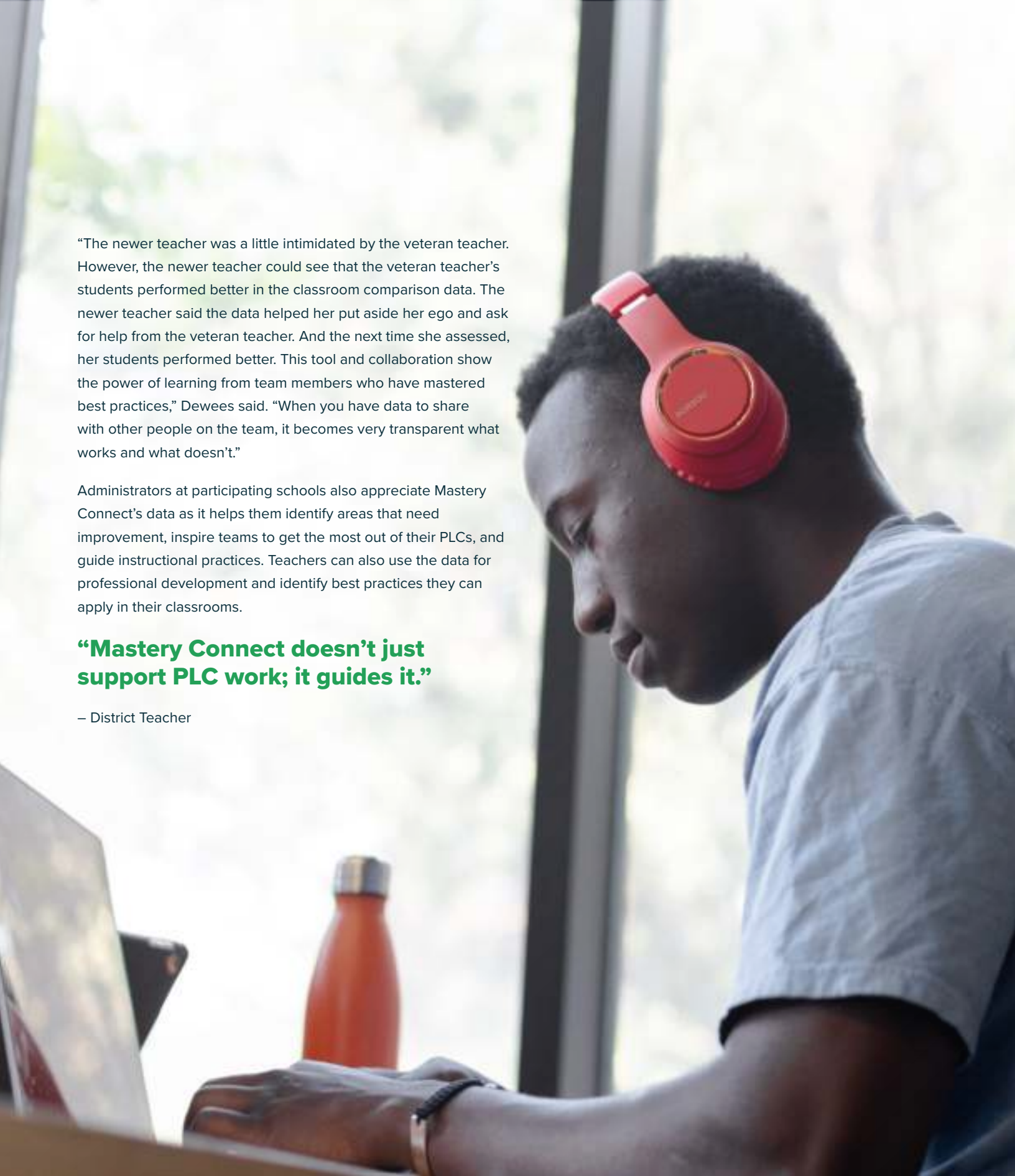
Item analysis can also take place at the classroom and grade level. This data allows teachers to learn from each other and guides PLCs at Capistrano.

Collaboration requires openness and trust. This can take time for many teams, but it’s essential to [building a positive assessment culture](#).

At Capistrano, Dewees shared a conversation between two team members: a junior teacher who had recently joined the team and a veteran teacher who had previously been awarded Teacher of the Year.







“The newer teacher was a little intimidated by the veteran teacher. However, the newer teacher could see that the veteran teacher’s students performed better in the classroom comparison data. The newer teacher said the data helped her put aside her ego and ask for help from the veteran teacher. And the next time she assessed, her students performed better. This tool and collaboration show the power of learning from team members who have mastered best practices,” Dewees said. “When you have data to share with other people on the team, it becomes very transparent what works and what doesn’t.”

Administrators at participating schools also appreciate Mastery Connect’s data as it helps them identify areas that need improvement, inspire teams to get the most out of their PLCs, and guide instructional practices. Teachers can also use the data for professional development and identify best practices they can apply in their classrooms.

**“Mastery Connect doesn’t just support PLC work; it guides it.”**

– District Teacher







# Equity Every Day

So far, Mastery Connect has positively impacted the teachers piloting the program.

With Mastery Connect, using Common Formative Assessments in PLCs has become a tool for equity to help ensure that every student can demonstrate mastery of every standard.

[See Mastery Connect in action](#) to learn more about how it can simplify grading for equity at your school.

“

**Mastery Connect has turned our teachers from data collectors to data users, and isn't that what PLC time is supposed to be about? We can see the data to equitably guide our students to grow and meet every standard daily,**

”

—JULIA DEWEES,  
EdTech TOSA at Capistrano Unified





**MASTERY**  
**Connect**

# Streamline Data-Driven Instruction with Mastery Connect



## Formative Assessment

Search, create and administer formative assessments to get immediate feedback about what your students know—and don't know—so you can target interventions and adjust instruction in the moment.

## Benchmark Assessment

Easily create benchmarks using item authoring tools or integrated item banks for teachers to deliver and score in the classroom. Set proficiency targets, measure growth, and incorporate benchmark data into the formative process. The Benchmark Compare feature offers a side-by-side view of students' formative and benchmark assessment data, allowing educators to identify important patterns and trends in student levels of understanding.

[Learn more](#) about how our assessment offerings—including the Mastery Connect assessment management system— drive learning forward and positively impact student success. [Mastery by Instructure](#) combines the assessment tools and quality content educators need to implement a successful assessment program.

## Curriculum Planning Map

Map your curriculum by adding lesson plans, activities, videos, and other resources aligned to any set of standards. And save time by building on maps year after year.

## Teacher Collaboration

Fuel your PLC with collaborative tools, like common assessments and comparison reports, to gain insight into best practices, learning trends, and instructional approaches.

## Integration

When you pair Mastery Connect with Canvas LMS, you get single sign-on and automatic data passback so teachers can launch formative or benchmark assessments directly from the Canvas interface.





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**Canvas by Instructure:** providing a robust foundation for teaching and learning—both in and out of the classroom—for all students, while seamlessly integrating with other learning tools.



**Mastery by Instructure:** bringing together the assessment tools and quality content educators need to implement a successful assessment program that drives learning forward.



**Elevate by Instructure:** improving the use of data and technology to help solve district challenges and give educators the information they need to make impactful decisions.



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