



# Beacon's Education Program: Why it works

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## Part One: Curriculum Spirals

Beacon's Education Program is based upon a system which we call Curriculum Spirals. Consulting the generalizations of child and adolescent development, assessing the individual student's readiness for instruction, and teaching material that matches the child's pace provides steady and continuous progress. Briefly, *we teach the right skill to the right child at the right time.*

Students grow and learn on individual timetables, yet there are hallmarks and benchmarks common to each age and stage which can help the teacher identify the most realistic expectations for a student's school success. For the most part, students grow and develop in an orderly sequence, much like a spiral, with later abilities, skills, and knowledge building on those already securely learned. These indexed principles of growth and development are reliable enough to tell us, based upon averages, when we should expect a child to be ready for the introduction of a new cognitive, social, physical or emotional skill.

When these principles are used to make decisions about what to teach, to whom, and when, the program is said to be developmentally responsive. A child's development can be positively influenced by providing wisely chosen opportunities to practice new skills until mastery is achieved, as well as step-wise challenges, just beyond the student's present level of mastery to peak and sustain interest. At Beacon, applying the principles of child development with a deep understanding of how learning takes place helps teachers make wise curriculum choices...those that lead children to school success.

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## Part Two: Mastery Learning

### *What is Mastery Learning and why use it?*

Traditional education continues to assume that large numbers of students must fail, just get by or long for challenge because that's the way it has been for centuries. As an agricultural nation, our society did not need large numbers of well-educated citizens. With industrialization came the need for widespread literacy, but expanded schooling only for those who would govern, run businesses or follow professions, generally, the children of the upper middle and wealthy class of citizens. Slowly educators began to acknowledge that the needs generated by an information and technology age required students to have access to instruction that was not a one-size-fits-all curriculum.

Mastery Learning is an instructional technique originally developed by Benjamin Bloom in the early 1940's and later clarified and expanded into the early 1990's. He believed that students spent too much time on drill, rote learning, competition for grades, and working toward the achievement of 'minimum standards'. ***His goal was to shift the school's emphasis from teaching facts to teaching students how to solve problems using information and skills.***

In 1950, Bloom and Lois Broder published a classic of educational research. The results of this study clearly demonstrated that 'higher level skills', which psychologists and educators once believed were inherited, could in fact be taught. They discovered that successful problem solvers attacked problems in an analytical and systematic way (active) while poor problem solvers simply tried to recall a memorized answer (passive). He concluded that much of the variability seen in student performance is not natural or inevitable but the result of the way schools teach. Differences in learning ability are much smaller than most of us imagine. ***Bloom's dictum became: what one student can learn, nearly all student's can learn.***

One of Bloom's research studies demonstrated that most students simply needed more time on task or more rapid advancement while learning skills. Using what he learned from his study Bloom developed the Mastery Learning Technique which can be used in a classroom with one teacher.

### ***The Mastery Learning technique***

1. Before a new unit of study begins, the teacher administers a pre-test to determine which of the skills that are about to be taught are already known by the students. Students who know the information and can accurately perform the mastered skill are not held back. Students who have not yet had enough time to master a given skill are not pushed forward. This prevents any student from developing so-called 'splinter' or 'shadow' skills.
2. During skill instruction in any classroom, on a rotational basis, each of three instructional groups will be getting instruction, guided practice, or independent application activities at any given time.
3. At the end of the instructional unit, the teacher gives a formative test to determine the need for corrective instruction. Teachers use pretests, formative tests, re-teach materials, cooperative group strategies and flexible time-on-task strategies to help students accomplish a score of 80% or better in each unit of work aimed at developing a skill. Subjects most readily adapted to the mastery system are Reading, Computation, and Composition.
4. The teacher identifies the common errors, points most students didn't get from the lesson, and re-teaches the material in a different way.
5. The final step is the evaluative test. Similar but not identical to the formative test taken earlier in the instruction, the evaluative test result becomes the student's grade. Membership in a group is based on the pace of the student's progress in learning the skill. The work of any group being taught may reflect a range above or below two grade levels.

### ***Assessing and reporting to parents***

Grading is not done on the traditional curve. Students grades reflect the extent to which they have mastered the unit, not their class rank.

Progress Report grades are developed with mastery in mind. From Kindergarten through Grade 5 the numbers 1, 2, 3 and sometimes 4 are used to report achievement.

**1= Needs help.** The student is accomplishing most of the work but needs teacher assistance more than most students in order to do the work.

**2= Competent.** 80 % of the time a student is doing 80% of the assigned work with 80% proficiency. Think of it as: 8 out of 10 times, the student does 8 out of 10 assignments and 8 out of 10 answers/outcomes are correct.

**3=With Ease.** The student is performing the assigned work without difficulty, with more than 80% competency and at a faster rate than most of his or her classmates.

**4=Gifted/Talented.** The student has a specific talent or gift in this area.

**In grades 6 through 8, the Middle School Transcript uses an A-C grade, C closely resembles the effect of 2=Competent, used by the elementary school.**

In cases where a student has a specific learning disability, a self-referenced goal is established for the individual. On the progress report, the teacher indicates with an asterisk (\*) subjects where the curriculum has been adapted to insure the highest level of that student's competency. This can be helpful to all students including, intellectually gifted or fast-paced learners.

*Beacon Educational Program Features: Mastery Learning. taf. 8.99. Revised 2005.2007*

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### Part Three: Arts Education

At Beacon Day School *every* student receives hundreds of hours of instruction in the arts *each and every year*. Beacon arts teachers are practicing artists who teach technique and discovery. Each Beacon student learns how to create his/her own music, dance, drama and visual art.

Research in the field of arts education has identified and verified how arts instruction in the schools improves student performance in many areas, not just arts.

Art experience enhances the student's growth in academics; gives them tools to explore ways to express their ideas and feelings, develops their intuitive and creative abilities, provides opportunities to work together for one outcome, and builds critical thinking skills. Doing your own work and that of the group, analyzing it, having others comment on it while you return the favor happens naturally in the arts classroom.

Arts experiences can reach students whose main intelligence is right-brain creative by enhancing and expanding lecture and writing approaches to learning. Differences of skill and ability actually enhance a student's understanding and one's valuing of diversity.

- Arts through history have served to anticipate, explain, and react to other disciplines and social ideas.
- In the arts you can learn to accept diversity without losing what is important to you as an individual, and without sacrificing the ideas of the dominant culture.
- Opening up of attitudes is more easily accomplished in the arts. While you may not fully understand, or even like the work of a different culture, you will learn to accept the work of others and its importance to them.

Before written language, we were drawing; painting, creating ceremonies where singing, drumming, and making rhythmic movements helped us communicate, comprehend, and make meaning of our world and ourselves. Expressive arts can help us communicate thought and feelings simultaneously, shape our ability to think, be focused and self-disciplined.

Arts experience connects us with one another in all cultures and places. The arts encourage us to develop respect for the long and complicated history of our own culture and the cultures of others.

At Beacon, every child's comprehensive arts education includes this curriculum:

- Aesthetic development- children learn to create, think, feel, move, and critique their elevated experiences.

When they sing and play instruments together they build a powerful expression that transforms everyday experience into the realm of inspired.

- Physical, emotional and spiritual exercise- in dance, children learn to stretch and strengthen their bodies, increase their flexibility, expand and enrich their emotions, focus their interpretive power and feed their souls.
- Mental agility- when children draw, paint and construct, the mental acts of decision making, problem solving and building connections exercises their brains.
- Social competence- children who learn to look outside of themselves as they discover, develop and practice respect for the work of others. They learn how adding their own contribution makes them eligible for the credit that goes to the group.

Performances and exhibits are really a by-product, not the primary goal of education. Performances are an outcome of creative processes listed above. Yet, they are precious opportunities to see our children at work. Looking at them on stage, through eyes that have watched them achieve so many other things makes us passionate once more, proud of our work as parents and teachers, and proud of our children's' accomplishments. And rightly so.

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## Part Four: Time for Learning

Every school must identify the most efficient use of instructional time. Conversation in many education circles is now focused on how 'teaching to the test' narrows the curriculum, which in turn takes away the broader learning experiences that produce an 'educated student.'

The relationship between time and learning is an important one. Twenty five years ago, Beacon Day School initiated a year round education program as a vehicle for assuring that every child is well and soundly taught. In 2003 with the opening of the Beacon Middle School, the discussion of relationships between time and learning resulted in an extended year schedule for young adolescents. Each schedule is developmentally appropriate for the student's learning style, which changes with advancing age.

Here are some recognized benefits of year round and extended year schedules as identified by teachers and parents:

Year round school provides numerous benefits and advantages to students and teachers.

- Increased student achievement through continuous skill development and mastery (Continuous Progress Education)
- Higher rate of student knowledge retention
- Less time spent on review
- More time on task in classroom
- Individual learning styles can be addressed
- Additional and expanded remediation and enrichment opportunities
- Additional time for visual and movement arts classes
- Year round reduces need for excessive homework

- Positively effects performance, attitude, achievement, attendance,
- Minimized vacation/ holiday learning loss
- Improved student and teacher motivation and morale
- Establish and sustain relationships with students and teachers over time
- Flexibility and compatibility with parents vacation schedule
- Opportunities for children to spend quality time with family
- Additional staff time for planning, learning and correcting curriculum
- Periodic breaks for teachers keep intensity of instruction high

As one of the five elements of a Beacon education, time and learning is a powerful scaffold.

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## Part Five: Effective Learner

Beacon's Instructional Program insures that each student will become an Effective Learner.

Most traditional schools are still working with a model designed in the 19th century. Our academic program at Beacon School is designed to produce the effective learner, one who will be ready and able to contribute to life and work in the 21st century.

The effective person has three central attributes; he or she is a life-long learner; has the skill to find the key that unlocks every learning system; and the competence to work within a rapidly changing society.

The Beacon School path toward becoming that effective person requires the student to achieve three goals:

1. You must learn how to learn. Once you taste success in learning, you are willing to take on more responsibility for your own learning, which increases your success and feeds your desire to continue learning. You become in fact, a highly motivated and successful lifetime learner.
2. You must discover that all learning is connected. When you begin to experience integrated learning you recognize that all learning is a system, and you need to become skilled at finding the key that unlocks each learning system.
3. You must develop the ability to anticipate and promote change, and to see yourself as a competent participant in the change. You must learn to think, to make reasoned decisions and to solve problems when working alone and within groups of classmates.
4. At Beacon, we recognize and are prepared to work alongside of students with ranges of development, diverse learning styles, talents and interests. We are successful when we have helped your child develop that special potential he and she were born to achieve.