An essential practice for educational equity is establishing clear, agreed-upon learning outcomes and defining the criteria for meeting those outcomes. These descriptions of what mastery looks like are powerful tools for learning, teaching, and assessment design.

Examples from the Field

In the school district of Meriden, Connecticut, teachers from the two public high schools (Orville H. Platt High School and Francis T. Maloney High School) worked together to define district-wide Graduation Standards, indicators, and scoring criteria. These common criteria are used as banks from which teachers draw to craft rubrics for assessments. Although teachers might be using different materials or texts in the two schools, students will be scored using the same criteria for success. (Here is an example.) These common criteria have also enabled teachers to craft common assessments that require students to demonstrate their mastery of the standards through rich and complex tasks. Teacher Kelly Roman, speaking about her experience with the common criteria, said, "As soon as we wrote these scoring criteria, I realized that I was making a commitment to get all of my students there."

In Maine School Administrative District #6, teachers have been engaged in an ongoing process to define the standards, indicators, and criteria that are used in all schools and for all students. Teachers worked across the district’s eight schools to align the work K-12, guiding the creation of curriculum and the feedback that students receive. During the collaborative process, the teachers took—and continue to take—opportunities to review student work together, calibrating their judgements and crafting a shared vision of the skills that they expect all students to attain. The district maintains these public online documents for all teachers, students, and families to reference to ensure that students are held to clear and consistent expectations across all classes.

At University Park Campus High School in Worcester (UPCHS), Massachusetts, which was ranked among the top 100 schools in Massachusetts despite a student population with many students who begin high school below grade level, teachers use common scoring criteria to assess and track student progress towards meeting school-wide expectations. Teachers at this school work to incorporate indicators from these school-wide rubrics into all assignment rubrics; additionally, the school is working on an electronic way to track student growth on each indicator. This system will also enable teachers to review their curriculum and find gaps. The common rubrics are one element of UPCHS’s approach, which puts its diverse population into an all-honors or AP curriculum, regardless of past educational achievement. By building student voice and agency, and through utilizing a set of coherent instructional strategies that scaffold material for all learners, this school has achieved extraordinary results.

In all of these schools, the shared scoring criteria enable teachers to craft their own learning experiences for students while grounding their curricula on a common foundation. This common foundation is one source of equity, ensuring that all students have opportunities to learn the vocabulary, skills, and knowledge that the teachers, working together, have defined as essential.
What We’ve Learned

- **Refer to student work while designing or revising scoring criteria**
  When writing common criteria for learning outcomes, all discussions should be grounded both in the required standards and in collaborative examination of student work. The best way to improve the criteria once they are written is to use them on student work and to revise them together.

- **Define the highest level of the rubric clearly**
  Some schools run into trouble by defining the highest level in their rubrics (whether they label this “4,” “A,” “Exceeds,” or anything else) in a vague or unattainable manner. The criteria for the highest level of performance should be a clear description of what excellent work looks like at that grade level. When the highest level on a rubric is only achievable by doing lots of extra work or doing work at the next grade level, students and parents can get the unintended message that most students should not bother trying to achieve excellence. This message can be demotivating for students and can upset parents. If various teachers in the school have different ways of defining the highest level of work, this can also be demotivating and confusing for students.

- **Use what you have created in all classrooms**
  Once common scoring criteria have been written, the school or district needs a system for ensuring that all staff use them—and use them consistently. This work will only produce consistency if all teachers use the criteria in their classrooms and have time to score work collaboratively with other faculty. At Champlain Valley Union High School in Vermont (CVUHS), groups of teachers wrote common scoring guides called Learning Scales, and are working to use those scales for collaborative assessment design. At CVUHS, the learning scales are not just for scoring; the school is working to create a culture in which the scales guide instruction and assessment design and in which teachers look at student work together, asking, “What do these results tell us about how we should adjust our teaching?”

- **Select exemplars of student work collaboratively, and use them in teaching**
  As Ron Berger describes in his book An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students, it is essential for teachers to work together to build a collection of exemplars of student work. These exemplars transmit the culture of excellence to each new class of students, and the collective selection of them provides powerful training and calibration for teachers.

Resources from the Great Schools Partnership

- [Scoring Criteria - Design Guide](#)
- [Assessment Pathways](#)
- [Elements of Effective Instruction](#): Clear Shared Outcomes