Learning From an Outcomes-Driven School District

By reorganizing all aspects of schooling, the Johnson City, New York, schools have raised both standards and achievement in a community historically beset by low academic expectations.

In Johnson City (New York), the school system has systematically reorganized to achieve extraordinary student outcomes. Students in Johnson City achieve at a level significantly higher than the modest expectations "appropriate" for a lower middle class community with virtually no managerial or professional citizens. Despite a free or reduced price lunch population of over 20 percent, a sizable Asian immigrant population with limited English proficiency, and the second highest poverty rate of the 10 urban districts in Broome County, district students steadily increase the margin by which they exceed the national norms on standardized tests. By the time students complete the 8th month of the 8th grade, they score, on average, at grade 11 or above in both reading and mathematics. By the time they finish the 8th grade, at least 75 percent of the students are at least six months above grade level.

Laudable test scores such as these, however, do not adequately reflect the district's goals. As its mission statement says, Johnson City's goal is for all students to learn well what the schools want them to learn. Many districts could subscribe to that mission statement and would measure the achievement of that learning primarily, if not exclusively, through standardized tests. But in Johnson City five exit behaviors further define this mission:

1. Students are to have high self-esteem both as learners and as persons.
2. They will be able to function at high cognitive levels, not just at the lower levels expected on standardized tests.
3. They will be good problem solvers, communicators, and decision makers; will be competent in group processes; and will be accountable for their own behavior.
4. They will be self-directed learners.
5. They will be heads of the shoe factory periodically reminded youngsters they did not need further education, he created a community norm now being overturned as school district leaders emphasize achievement and opportunity.
In Johnson City, New York, a factory town, students consistently score above national norms on achievement tests despite the second highest poverty rate among urban districts in the county.

5. They will have concern for others.

**Mastery Learning-Based Instruction**

The restructuring which is the point of this article is most obvious when one looks at the instructional program. Over time Johnson City has developed a clear and consistent definition of the instructional process. Based on mastery learning, that process ensures, first, that there is a high degree of correspondence between instructional objectives, what is taught, and what is tested; and, second, that more time for learning and more instruction are available for those who need it.

The district begins by assessing whether students have the prerequisites for the unit. If they do not, then the teacher provides instruction on the prerequisites. Then comes cue setting, a brief explanation of the unit's objectives, and a description of what students will be able to do and will know after mastering the unit. Next comes the "best shot" instruction; this is large-group instruction that the teacher thinks has the best chance of enabling all the students to achieve mastery. Following this instruction is guided practice in which the teacher informally evaluates how well each student is doing. The emphasis is always on successful practice; no child, for example, is asked to do homework that he or she does not know how to do.

When the teacher is confident that most, if not all, students can demonstrate mastery, he or she administers a formative test on the unit's objectives. Students who have mastered the objectives then work on enrichment activities, while the others receive corrective instruction. Thus, students who need more time and instruction receive it, and those who do not are freed to work on other things. Before the teacher goes on to the next unit, students take a summative test on the current one.

Instead of being graded on each unit, students are certified either as having mastered the unit's objectives or as not having completed the unit. The latter students are responsible for completing the unit at a mastery level after school or at other available times before the end of the course. Even though the class moves on to another unit, the teacher continues to work with students who have "incompletes" on previous units. Course grades are given every 10 weeks. The lowest level of achievement for which students can receive credit for a unit is 80 or 85, depending on the subject and level. If a student scores lower than that, he or she gets an incomplete, not a failing grade.

**Restructured Responsibilities**

An important part of the teaching-learning process is the restructuring of responsibility. Students, for instance, may not take a second summative test on a unit until they can prove that they have engaged in additional learning activities designed to help them achieve the unit's objectives. A student who has not done his or her homework hardly qualifies for extra consid-
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Typically, teachers are inundated with reading material about problems or practices. Then, loaded with new information on theory and research, they are given risk-free opportunities to develop programs consistent with that research and with district goals. Someone—a teacher or an administrator—will identify an instructional practice that promises to solve an existing problem or to improve achievement in some way. If it is consistent with the beliefs and practices of the district, then several people will learn all they can about it, usually by going to a training program at district expense. Then, with better knowledge of the practice, district staff will evaluate it in terms of its appropriateness for the district. If it is deemed appropriate, then the person or persons trained in that practice—called core people—make a presentation to the district’s staff, inviting anyone interested to join them in its implementation. Core people thus become in-house trainers, gaining both expertise and a strong sense of ownership.

Staff Development Mastery Model
Johnson City School District also operates on a mastery model in staff development. Thus, innovations are not implemented districtwide simultaneously; rather, staff members learn and deploy at their own rates. The rule is “You don’t have to cooperate, but don’t get in the way.”

The district has a clear procedure for career development. As a learner, a staff member first must master the facts about an innovation being implemented. Then comes application of the practice in controlled and predictable situations, as in implementing a unit guide prepared by someone else. Third, the teacher applies the practice in additional areas. And fourth, the teacher designs new courses or new units based on the practice.

As a teacher of teachers, he or she must first know the theory underlying the practice. Next comes modeling the practice for others. The third step involves the planning, say, of unit guides to help others learn to apply the practice. Finally comes the coaching of other teachers. Teachers whose proposals to assume leadership in solving a district problem are accepted receive released time and any other resources needed to enable them to function in their new roles.

Although all teachers in Johnson City are on display every year when hundreds of educators visit the district, a second aspect of the staff development program places a number of teachers and administrators even more in the public eye. They are encouraged to become district spokespeople, serving as consultants to other districts that wish to learn about and perhaps adopt an outcomes-driven mastery model. All staff are encouraged to become experts in the instructional process; those who serve as consultants are those who, in addition to gaining expertise, also become adept at explaining the program and at helping others try it out. Although becoming consultants gives teachers and administrators motivation to become experts at what they do and provides them with both status and financial rewards, it costs Johnson City nothing. Any school employing the staff member pays not only a consultant fee but also for the substitute replacing the staff member while he or she is a consultant.

Overcoming Historical Obstacles
All this is not to say that the Johnson City School District has achieved perfection. Formidable problems still must be overcome. Johnson City bears the imprint of George F. Johnson, once head of the Endicott-Johnson Shoe Company, whose family name graces the town, the school district, and three of the four schools. Until his factory closed in 1960, George Johnson used to come to the high school to dissuade students from any aspirations for college; if his shoe factories were good enough for their parents, he told them, they were good enough for them. Johnson was a pioneer in pro-

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viding medical benefits, parks, and subsidized housing and food for his workers, but he had no use for unions or colleges.

With such a history, the district has faced the challenge of finding ways to see that high school graduates have both the competencies and the credentials to go to college, whether or not they do so. Staff members must influence the values of both the community and the students so that their graduates will attain equality both in their post-secondary aspirations and in their achievements. In this long and difficult process, results are already being seen. Almost 70 percent of the district's graduates earn the more difficult Regents' diploma necessary for admission to the many campuses of the State University of New York, compared to a statewide average of less than 50 percent. That record is comparable to two of the three upper-middle class districts in the county and about 15 percentage points higher than the third.

Students' aspiration levels are rising, as reflected in the number who take advanced placement courses and college admissions tests and in the number who win New York State Regents' scholarships. The patterns of college attendance are also changing. More students are attending four-year institutions, and a greater number are sending transcripts to MIT, the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, Stanford, and other high-status schools.

Pursuing Excellence
Johnson City is a shining example of a school district that has been systematically reorganized to raise both standards and achievement. Leadership has become, first and foremost, instructional leadership; and staff development has become a means for sharing both leadership and responsibility for solving problems. It is a lesson in what can be done when a district commits every aspect of schooling to the pursuit of excellence.

1. Johnson City's program has been recognized by the National Diffusion Network for its excellence and for the Outcomes-Driven Development Model the district created to restructure all aspects of district life in its objectives.


Tom Rusk Vickery is Associate Professor, Cultural Foundations and Curriculum, Syracuse University, School of Education, 259 Huntington Hall, Syracuse, NY 13244-2340.