

Outcome-Based Education: A Success Story

The principles of Outcome-Based Education have transformed an average district in Sparta, Illinois, into an exemplary district in just four years.

Four years ago, Sparta School District in Sparta, Illinois (enrollment: 2,030), was just an average school district with below-average test scores. Because of contractual problems and two strikes, staff morale was the lowest it had been in years. Severe financial problems had caused extensive layoffs of teachers and staff. Teachers, administrators, and the board of education recognized that the fundamental educational delivery system in Sparta schools had to be improved.

OBE Comes to Sparta

In 1984, our State Board of Education embarked on an outcome-based approach to schooling in Illinois. The Sparta Board of Education sought to meet this mandate with technical assistance from Clinton Bunke and later William Spady. With a Chapter II Competitive Grant from the state board and help from Ted Sanders, state superintendent, funds were committed to develop a model OBE program in Sparta.

The board authorized the formation of the Sparta Core Group, composed of the superintendent, principals, and volunteer teachers, and gave them responsibility for developing a holistic school improvement program. The core group adopted as its mission the three basic tenets of OBE: (1) success for all students; (2) success breeds success; and (3) schools control the conditions for success. We also felt it was vital to integrate effective schools research into our OBE program.

After inservicing staff and core group members on OBE principles, we selected four strategies for improvement: (1) adoption of an instructional strategy for all staff (we chose the Hunter model); (2) adoption of Mastery Learning as a supplemental

Photograph Courtesy: Sparta High School Yearbook Staff, Sparta, Illinois



A second chance to succeed—one of the hallmarks of Outcome-Based Education—conveys the idea that anything worth doing is worth doing right

instructional strategy; (3) adoption of a uniform discipline program (Canter's Assertive Discipline); and (4) development of outcomes at each grade level.

To minimize the stress these changes would cause, the core group made the program voluntary, wrote no timelines for results, empowered teachers to make decisions about their classroom activities and training, involved teachers in the development of



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project activities, and kept lines of communication open to allow for appraisal and revision.

Four Years of Results

The results of these efforts have been gratifying. Test scores have risen dramatically. In 1984, no grade level K-12 had 50 percent of the kids score above average on a nationally normed test. Currently the reverse is true: in all grade levels K-12, 50 percent or more of our kids scored above average on a nationally normed test (SRA). In addition, students' grades have risen, and more students are participating in extracurricular activities. Discipline procedures, such as detentions, are down; we credit this to kids' being more successful in the classroom.

Relations among staff members, the administration, the board of education, and the community have also taken a positive turn. Recent climate surveys indicate a renewed confidence in Sparta schools. Principals and teachers from Sparta speak in other school districts and at workshops. Sparta is now known as a place to visit to view exemplary educational activities—a far cry from its previous reputation.

Sparta is not a wealthy district, but by focusing our energies and resources on one specific mission, we have made substantial improvements in the quality of education we provide. Although we still have not achieved every goal, we have a structure in place to solve problems. OBE has given our principals and staff the means to achieve success—for their students and for themselves. □

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