

Organizing for Results in High School English

Three high school teachers in Tempe, Arizona, have reduced poor grades and failures in their English classes by applying the principles of Outcome-Based Education.

As teachers of English in Tempe Union High School District in Tempe, Arizona, we felt that too many of our students drifted through with D's, never learning to express themselves clearly and correctly in spoken and written English. By following the principles of Outcome-Based Education (OBE), we have developed a program to address that problem—and have already seen results.

Learning About Outcome-Based Education

In the spring of 1986, the district sponsored a two-day workshop with William B. Spady, director of the High Success Program on OBE. Spady asserted that (1) all students can learn and succeed, (2) students learn at different rates, (3) teachers can raise expectations for students if they also give them expanded opportunities to succeed, and (4) teachers should focus on the outcomes they want students to achieve as they plan, teach, and test.

By the end of that spring, the three of us had already tried to put these ideas into practice in our 9th grade English classes. Nevertheless, we wanted to apply an outcome-based instructional approach more formally. Because we believed we could develop a better program by working together, we proposed to our princi-

pal that we "parallel" teach. This meant joint planning and common scheduling of our classes so that we could regroup and share students when appropriate for remediation and enrichment. The district agreed to fund a summer workshop to enable us to get organized.

Defining Outcomes

Although the content of the district's 9th grade curriculum was already identified, it was not written in terms of intended outcomes. Therefore, writing basic course outcomes became our first priority; developing unit outcomes came next. Despite the anti-calendar approach of the model, we specified the number of days devoted to each unit to ensure that we would have enough time to teach, assess, remediate or enrich, and reassess each unit.

We spent the rest of our workshop creating a pool of assessment indicators for every outcome, including "creative" ones involving writing and speaking. For example, one outcome requires analyzing a short story in terms of plot, character, setting, and theme. We developed a generic form that could be used to analyze any short story. Students used this form in class, and encountered it again on the unit test when they were asked to analyze a

story they had not already studied.

Never before had our goals, outcomes, performance indicators, and timelines been so clearly drawn before the first day of class. We were excited—we felt that our shared philosophy, our clarity of focus, and our organization would make us better teachers, and the students better learners.

No More D's

On the first day of school we informed both students and parents about our new approach to English. Perhaps the biggest change for them was that we would no longer award D's. In keeping with our new, higher expectations, we would insist upon a minimum of C work; otherwise, students would be given "Incompletes." We explained that students would have several opportunities to achieve this 70 percent level of proficiency, including in-class remediation and re-testing and tutorials by staff before and after school.

Once classes started, we felt we never had enough time. We still had to meet daily to discuss the nuts and bolts of the lessons: the resource materials, the lesson plans, and the quizzes and unit tests, which we wrote as the units were taught. We also found ourselves meeting with students before and after school almost daily.

Record keeping was also problematic, because grades were based only on mastery of outcomes as reflected in compositions, oral presentations, and tests. To provide more feedback, we designed a "unit reporting form" for parents that allowed us to comment on attendance, work habits, behavior, and homework. This form also served as a management tool; it was distributed to students at the beginning of every unit so they could chart their own progress and take responsibility for their own success. Although cumbersome to fill out, this report became a more precise indicator of student performance than conventional report cards.

Other efforts to expand opportunities for success included urging students to complete work and to come for extra help, phoning parents, and occasionally making ourselves available on non-teaching days.

Frustrations and Rewards

In spite of the frustrations of time pressures, greater planning work, and adapting outcome-based principles to an existing curriculum and timetable, our reorganization has resulted in better teaching and better learning. For us, student appreciation of our extra efforts has been a major reward. One student, who had spent one and a half hours after school remediating a lesson on sentence structure, walked out the door saying, "Thank you. I never understood it before."

And we all have stories of students for whom OBE English has made a major difference: Miguel, a bright student newly arrived in this country who needed extra time to learn his second language; Jerome, who needed extra support to deal with a minor learning disability; Jessica, who was elated to discover that she could earn B's when given a chance to re-test.

On the other hand, we had to face the reality that some students refuse to learn. For students with ingrained self-defeating belief systems or behavior patterns, expanded opportunity does not mean infinite opportunity; they may not succeed no matter how much time and help we offer.

On that semester's final exam, the average score of students in the OBE sections was several percentage points higher than the average of those in non-OBE sections. At semester's end, not only was the unsatisfactory grade of D missing in our final reports, the number of failures was fewer than in previous years. Given our own satisfaction and the success of our students, none of us will go back to our old way of doing things. □

Maureen Buffington, Bryan Curd, and Olas Lunt are Teachers of English at Tempe High School, 1730 S. Mill Ave., Tempe, AZ 85281.

— A. DAVID BRIGGS —

Alhambra High: A "High Success" School

A small-scale OBE program at Alhambra High School in Phoenix, Arizona, has improved students' attendance and motivation and has sparked schoolwide interest in the program.

Alhambra High School, where I am principal, is an active participant in William Spady's High Success Program. Our school, located in Phoenix, Arizona, has a student population of 2,400 and a certificated staff of 135 (average age: 51). In 1987, 18 teachers, representing various subject areas, volunteered to apply the philosophy and operational principles of Outcome-Based Education as described by Spady.

Early Results

These teachers defined the intended

outcomes for their courses and units, carefully aligned their tests and performance criteria with those outcomes, provided students with second chances and extra time to demonstrate the outcomes successfully, and raised their expectations for the minimum acceptable performance. The district allowed these teachers released time to prepare their units and lessons.

During the first year of implementation, success stories spread through the faculty. The participating teachers reported increases in their students' attendance, motivation, attention to

course work, self-esteem, and confidence. A much higher proportion of students than usual earned A's and B's in their classes. Organizing for results has really paid off for these 18 teachers—and for students, who have made comments like the following:

- "Teachers definitely work harder at helping you learn."
- "I now know that I am capable of doing better than I have done in the past."
- "Having more than one chance to learn and do well has made a big difference in my work."

Copyright © 1988 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.