

## OVERVIEW

### *The Outcomes We Want*

*Ron Brandt*

An influential coalition of business executives, politicians, professors, and policy people agree: the U. S. needs national education standards. I support the idea, even though I recognize that in practice, such projects often fail to live up to their sponsors' ambitions. Standards could challenge students to exert greater effort. They could encourage wider use of performance assessment and create demand for more intellectually stimulating curriculum. Or they could result in greater social stratification by spawning a perpetually outdated curriculum geared to rigidly irrelevant tests.

Thoughtful educators like Elliot Eisner (p. 76) protest that advocates of a national curriculum are too ignorant about schools to understand their real needs. He may be right, but the impetus of the Bush administration's America 2000 project, the National Education Goals Panel, and the National Council on Education Standards and Testing—plus separate but related work by the Carnegie Forum's New Standards Project—almost guarantees that we will have standards of some sort. The question is: what sort?

The usual answer is that we will have statements of "what students should know and be able to do." That sounds reasonable enough (although I have not yet seen examples), but those familiar with the range of achievement levels in most American classrooms are understandingly skeptical. "By when?" they ask. The National Assessment Governing Board has bravely set out to answer that question by defining what students should know and be able to do at three levels—basic, proficient, and advanced—for each of the subjects assessed at grades 4, 8, and 11. Whether these standards become the pattern for those developed by other agencies—and whether their existence makes any difference—remains to be seen.

The drive to define standards, which comes largely from

outsiders, is paralleled by growing interest among practitioners in Outcome-Based Education. Jean King and Karen Evans (p. 73) point out that OBE is simply the latest, though perhaps most sophisticated, reincarnation of the sensible idea advanced by such giants as Ralph Tyler and Benjamin Bloom: that planning for curriculum and instruction has to start with what students are expected to be able to do. Tyler advised basing all other decisions on objectives stated in measurable terms. His student Bloom emphasized mastery of the objectives, pointing to the futility of moving ahead when students had not yet learned the prerequisites.

Bill Spady and Kit Marshall (p. 67) build on that heritage by noting that educators usually interpret OBE too narrowly: they begin with the established school subjects. Spady and Marshall call for thoughtful definition of the outcomes we really want for students, most of which cross disciplinary lines.

In this issue we see that many educators are coming to a similar conclusion. Teachers in forward-looking schools are joining in multidisciplinary teams, tackling the tough questions about what sorts of things their students will need to be able to do to live satisfying, productive lives. The basic school subjects won't disappear; they represent different modes of understanding that human beings have found to be enormously useful. But many of the most urgent and interesting curriculum topics, and a good many of the outcomes we value most, do not fit neatly into a single subject area.

So, we may have a problem. In the rush to set standards that could reshape education in the decades ahead, will the agencies undertaking the task go beyond the customary school subjects to reflect our broader, more encompassing purposes? More and more schools are making the effort to forge a more integrated curriculum. Those developing performance standards will do well to follow their lead. □

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