Can We Achieve Outcome-Based Education?

Outcome-based education has dramatic potential for changing American schools, but can educators meet the challenges of implementing it?

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To believers, outcome-based education (OBE) is a silver bullet with dramatic potential for changing American schools. Switching to an outcome-based system, however, presents an imposing challenge to educators (Finn 1990). Many of the "implementation pioneers" that William Spady and Kit Marshall speak of struggle daily to make sense of what, exactly, OBE should look like in their schools. [See "Beyond Traditional Outcome-Based Education," p. 67, this issue.]

For the past several years, OBE has gained momentum in Minnesota. The State Department of Education has developed a vision for outcome-based education (Erickson et al. 1990), the State Board of Education recently proposed a move to high school graduation outcomes, and two active consortiums unite districts working to implement OBE in their schools. This move toward outcome-based education has challenged Minnesota educators. As one teacher put it, "I'm working to *understand* the concept of outcome-based education, let alone implement it!" (King and Bosma 1991).

The Origins of OBE

The good news is that while its label is relatively new, OBE actually developed over the course of the past several decades. To discuss outcome-based education is necessarily to discuss ideas that have become part of American educational practice since the 1950s, many of which have even deeper roots in the history of American education.[1]

Objectives. Ralph Tyler's (1950) course syllabus *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* was a precursor of OBE. This text identified fundamental issues for teachers to consider when developing curriculum and planning instruction: educational purpose, content, organization, and evaluation. Tyler noted the importance of the *objective* for systematically planning educational experiences, stating that a well-written objective should identify both the behavior to be developed in the student and "the area of content or of life in which the behavior is to be applied."

Following Tyler came two other developments in the push for objectives: the taxonomies of objectives for the cognitive and affective domains from Bloom and his colleagues, and Mager's (1961) work on behavioral objectives. For American educators, the taxonomies provided the framework—and behavioral objectives, the method—for embracing a behaviorist orientation in psychology and for clarifying the instructional process.

Outcomes. The use of the term *outcome* makes it casually synonymous with goal, purpose, and end. William Spady, a prime mover in the development of OBE, uses the words *outcome* and *goal* interchangeably (Mitchell and Spady 1978, Spady 1988, Spady 1981, Spady 1977), and his meaning is similar to that put forth by Johnson (1967), Gronlund (1970), and Gagne (1974). He describes publicly derived exit outcomes as "competencies, knowledge, and orientations" (Spady et al. 1986).

Outcomes, the end-products of the instructional process, may be observable or internal changes in the learner. Given this definition, an outcome-based program requires a change in traditional approaches to curriculum development, shifting the focus from objectives derived often from content or textbook outlines to objectives based on desired changes in the learner.

Criterion-Referenced Measurement. As described by Glaser (1963), criterion-referenced measurement is especially appropriate for OBE because it locates a student's test behavior on a continuum ranging from "no proficiency" to "perfect performance." Along this continuum are the tasks a student must perform and the criterion level reflecting an acceptable level of performance. Such a continuum provides "explicit information as to what the individual can or cannot do" (Glaser 1963). OBE practice suggests establishing criterion-referenced measures to determine student placement, document learning, adjust instruction, and evaluate program effectiveness (Jones and Spady 1985). Ideally, criterion-referenced measures, linked to outcomes, provide feedback to inform instruction and to assist in evaluating courses of study.

Mastery Learning. Bloom based his Learning for Mastery model on Carroll's model of school learning (1963). Bloom's model, using group instructional techniques, varies both instruction and time to meet individual needs. An integral part of OBE, mastery learning was the vehicle for the development of

the Network for Outcome-Based Schools following a meeting in the early 1980s, when a group of practitioners met to discuss the implementation problems of mastery learning and competency-based education (Block et al. 1989).

Accountability. To trace the origins of OBE also requires a look outside education at the social forces exerting pressure on schools. In the 1970s, the growing realization that schools were failing at their basic mission, coupled with the belief that schooling is important for success in the world, led several groups—parents, taxpayers, legislators, and business leaders—to demand evidence of student achievement. Consequently, legislatures across the nation enacted accountability measures, including student assessment, teacher evaluation systems, and procedures for citizen input. Since that time, many citizens have supported such legislation, agreeing that in education, as in all fields, people should be accountable for their work.

Competency-Based Education. The competency-based movement was essentially a response to the changing job market in the late '60s, when people questioned whether education was adequately preparing students for life roles. Spady (1977) argued that competency-based education (CBE) should be built around the integration of outcome goals, instructional experiences, and assessment devices. This definition, however, became more of an ideal than what developed in practice: CBE frequently became a testing and remediation program focused on basic skills. In its ideal form, CBE contained all the elements of OBE; however, the lack of agreement as to what "competency" represented ultimately doomed it.

Why OBE Now?

Like competency-based education before it, OBE has emerged during a decade of accountability concerns. National reports have repeatedly documented the claim that the nation is at

serious risk, in part because of our schools. Politicians—even the President himself—have taken on school change. In a bid to vitalize his role as the Education President, George Bush announced six national education goals and the America 2000 Education Strategy. Two people with experience outside education—a politician/educator and a business executive—will play key roles in implementing this strategy: Lamar Alexander, former governor of

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Tennessee (and former president of the University of Tennessee), is now Secretary of Education; and David Kearns, former Xerox CEO, serves as Deputy Secretary. The long-term commitment of organizations like the National Alliance of Business and the Committee for Economic Development to the school reform process (Pipho 1990) suggests the importance placed on school improvement by the business community.

OBE has appeal because it truly has something for everyone. Politicians, business folk, community leaders, and educators alike can grab hold of exit outcomes, the high-sounding educational goals that every school district in the nation has espoused for well over a hundred years. However, the real attraction of outcome-based education may be its effective coupling of control with autonomy. At the central level, legislatures and school boards exert

control by setting exit outcomes; at the same time, they give schools the autonomy to achieve these outcomes in any number of ways. With the *ends* set, the *means* to those ends can rest totally in the hands of school people, and the OBE challenge becomes a technical one of implementation. Schools have both the freedom to effect exit outcomes in any appropriate way and the responsibility for producing results.

Challenges to Overcome

Can OBE succeed? The outcome-based concept extends several powerful ideas developed since 1950. Educators' extensive experience with behavioral objectives, learning outcomes, criterion-referenced measurement, mastery learning, and competency-based education provides a strong base on which to build. However, what distinguishes OBE from other reforms is its unrelenting focus on outcomes. OBE forces us to express what we value in education, to commit educational resources to bringing that to life in students, and—in contrast to present practice—*to continue until we have succeeded.* Educators become accountable for producing exit outcomes in virtually *every* student who enters school.

But there is no guarantee that OBE will fare any better than its cousin, competency-based education, in seeking to transform American education. If outcome-based education is to succeed, we must marshal the will and the resources to make it a top priority of the next decade. Euphoric claims to the contrary, experience in Minnesota suggests a number of practical implementation challenges:

• *A massive curriculum development effort* is required to, in Spady's words, "design down" from exit outcomes to specific lesson outcomes for every student.

• The *instructional implications* of an outcome-based system require attention to the logistics of enrichment and remediation, the effect on children with spe-

cial needs, and the mechanics of monitoring student progress.

• *Appropriate measurement* of many important outcomes puts teachers at the cutting edge of performance assessment, an area where extensive research is needed before practical classroom applications will be widely available.

• Administrators face the very real challenge of *how to move a school district* from traditional practice to the new world of OBE. Extensive staff development is required, as is the ongoing monitoring of progress.

If there is agreement on a single fact in American education today, it is that the public school system must improve. The flurry of educational reform activity that has characterized the past 30 years continues unabated. In this context, OBE enthusiasts often use the language of the born-again convert; doubters cynically wonder if this, too, shall pass. Outcome-based education seems to provide a ready answer to the question of what can be done to reshape America's schools for the 21st century, but whether or not it will become *the* solution remains to be seen. □

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