

# Beyond Traditional Outcome-Based Education

*Transformational Outcome-Based Education gives schools a profoundly different means of restructuring themselves.*

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Outcome-Based Education (OBE), is founded on three basic premises:

- All students can learn and succeed (but not on the same day in the same way).
- Success breeds success.
- Schools control the conditions of success.

OBE is growing at an astounding rate throughout North America. The emphasis on student success has come about for many reasons, including evidence of lagging U.S. student achievement compared with that of many other developed countries. Three forces have combined to attract a large educational following to this restructuring of the way we teach our youngsters.

First, in the past decade, several states and districts have fostered major improvements in student learning through OBE in schools and subject areas of all kinds. Whether operating under the label Mastery Learning, Outcome-Based Instruction, Outcomes-Driven Developmental Model, OBE, or something else, these efforts have attracted many educators and have validated all three philosophical premises.

Second, regional and state policy-making bodies (along with the President and the governors) in the 1991 National Goals for America's Schools are demanding improved student outcomes and placing them at the center of major efforts to improve all aspects of schooling: curriculum, instruction, assessment,

attendance, credentialing, accreditation, and accountability. Major examples include legislation in Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, and Washington. This emphasis on improving student learning and demonstrating student success is mainly the result of the strident criticisms that have been heaped on the public schools by a host of business people, legislators, and journalists. Successful outcomes are now both the starting points and the bottom lines of educational policy thinking and action in both the United States and Canada.

Third, our educational system needs a new theoretical and operating paradigm; and a growing consensus of prominent educators, business executives, and political leaders supports this notion. These leaders, among them educational reformers Philip Schlechty and TheodoreSizer—call for a new, restructured system of education—a necessity if either the United States or public education is to survive the flood of internal and external economic, social, and political problems making daily headlines. They argue that our educational system needs to shed its archaic, Industrial Age assumptions and structures and, as modern corporations have done, find a new way of doing business. These reformers strongly agree that “more, longer, and harder” must give way to “different, smarter, and better,” and that the new paradigm must be success-based in philosophy and outcome-based in practice.

The biggest single factor accounting

for differences in OBE approaches involve the concept of “culminating demonstration.” This issue has two aspects. One involves the nature of the demonstration (the substance, processes, and setting that are brought into play); the other is the scope of learning to which it applies. Consequently, we routinely say that “Outcomes of Significance” require *substance* of significance applied through *processes* of significance in *settings* of significance.

Substance can range from very specific content details to broad, complex concepts and their interrelations. Processes can range from relatively simple cognitive or psychomotor skills to complex, higher-order syntheses and applications. Settings are both the places where learning is to occur (such as the classroom) and those where it is applied and demonstrated (real life).

The scope of these outcomes can range from relatively small segments of learning, such as lessons and units, to large arenas of learning or performance demonstration, such as entire subject areas, whole programs of study, or even the total K-12 schooling experience. The trend in the past few years is definitely toward expanding the nature and scope of demonstrations: more significant substance, processes, and settings, which involve larger scopes of learning. OBE is evolving from a microcurriculum and instructional design approach to a more comprehensive approach.

## Applications and Implications

We in the High Success Program on OBE believe that most of the fundamental features of reform proposals can easily be incorporated within the “success for all” restructuring principles of what we call “Transformational Outcome-Based Education.” Transform-

FIGURE 1

## WHAT IS TRANSFORMATIONAL OBE?

In contrast to 10 attributes of traditional (and current) education, advocates of Transformational OBE propose 10 alternatives:

Transformational OBE is not:	Transformational OBE is:
1. Calendar defined (schools, programs, processes, credentialing, and decision-making priorities);	Outcome defined (schools, programs, processes, credentialing, and decision-making priorities);
2. Constrained in opportunity (which limits time for teaching and successful learning to occur);	Expanded in opportunity (which enables successful teaching and learning for all to occur);
3. Custodial in credentialing (credit based on seat-time attendance and ambiguous criteria);	Based on performance credentialing (credit through accomplishment, using clear criteria, and demonstrating success of priority outcomes);
4. Tied to curriculum coverage (approach to teaching and testing);	Aided by instructional coaching (fostering successful performance for all students on essential outcomes);
5. Segmented in content (curriculum structure, instructional delivery, testing, and credentialing);	Integrated in concepts (cross-curriculum approach to outcomes, curriculum structure, instructional delivery, and assessment);
6. Based on cumulative achievement (approach to curriculum planning, teaching, testing, and grading);	Based on culminating achievement ("end-result" approach to outcomes, curriculum design, instruction, assessment, and grading);
7. Selection oriented (opportunity structures, grading, and curriculum tracking);	Oriented to inclusionary success (structure of curriculum cross-groupings, learning, assessment, and credentialing opportunities);
8. Characterized by contest learning (students compete for scarce rewards);	Characterized by cooperative learning (to foster learning success for all);
9. Dependent on comparative evaluation (emphasizing relative quality of work accomplished and grades assigned);	Confirmed by criterion validation (expectations of high-level performance on clearly defined outcomes and standards);
10. Composed of cellular structures (school and curriculum organization, learning environments, and credentialing).	Formed on collaborative structures (for curriculum planning, instructional delivery, and student learning).

mational OBE, like Schlechty's and Sizer's school restructuring efforts, is a collaborative, flexible, transdisciplinary, outcome-based, open-system, empowerment-oriented approach to schooling. Figure 1 contrasts 10 attributes of traditional (and current) education to 10 alternatives advocated by Transformational OBE supporters.

Advocates of Transformational OBE are people whose thinking is future oriented and visionary. They are optimistic, and oriented to growth and success. They embrace, rather than fear, change in education; they are what futurist Joel Barker calls "paradigm pioneers."

As the rapid growth of the OBE

movement attests, people are drawn to an outcome-based approach in different ways and with different understandings of its potential applications and implications for curriculum design, instructional delivery, and student assessment and credentialing. Some of these approaches we call Traditional OBE; others are genuinely Transformational; and yet others lie somewhere in between—what we call Transitional OBE.

### Traditional OBE

The irony about Traditional OBE is this: it characterizes almost all of the current OBE approaches in local districts in the United States and Canada, and it is

highly effective in improving student achievement. Yet it is not, strictly speaking, outcome-based. The reason is simple: the starting point for almost all district OBE efforts over the past 20 years has been the existing curriculum, not a clear picture of intended Outcomes of Significance for students that lie beyond the curriculum. What is taking place in most OBE districts today should actually be labeled CBO (for Curriculum-Based Objectives) rather than OBE, because the curriculum actually precedes the outcomes in the design process.

Traditional OBE typically encourages local staff to take their existing curriculum content and structure—lessons,

units, courses, and programs—and determine what is truly important for students to learn to a high level of performance. (We view this as an inherently internal, micro, and limiting approach to addressing the issue of significance.) Once these CBO priorities have been set, they are used as the basis of curriculum, instruction, and assessment design and alignment. After teachers begin to apply OBE's principles in their classrooms to these aligned instructional components, they routinely experience major increases in student learning success, even within the time and programmatic constraints imposed by the traditional school structure.

The downside of this Traditional OBE approach is reflected in five issues:

- The concept of culminating demonstration is often limited to individual units or small segments of instruction, which makes each unit or segment an end unto itself and its substance and processes quite specific.

- The content and structure of the curriculum remains the same as before; the units and courses that already existed are still there, albeit with a clearer focus. Thus outcomes are synonymous with traditional, content-dominated categories that do not relate to real-life demands and living experiences.

- Such programs typically are silent concerning the context or setting of intended role performances. The school and classroom are assumed to be the only contexts in which preparation, performance, and assessment are to occur.

- These approaches rarely are driven by a framework of exit outcomes or a clear concept of the graduate as a total person. Their guiding metaphor of the graduate is simply an "academically competent student."

- Traditional OBE rarely addresses or challenges the traditional nature of schooling today, including the time-defined structuring of curriculum content and its attendant nine-month delivery, credentialing, and placement structures. By focusing primarily on unit and course outcomes, it seeks, and

gets, greater success within these arbitrary constraints, rather than seeking to modify or eliminate them. Most of the state-level OBE reforms reflect a strong traditional bias.

### Transitional OBE

As its name implies, Transitional OBE lies in the Twilight Zone between tradi-

## Transitional OBE lies in the Twilight Zone between traditional subject-matter curriculum structures and planning processes and the future-role priorities inherent in Transformational OBE.

tional subject-matter curriculum structures and planning processes and the future-role priorities inherent in Transformational OBE. It is a viable approach for districts seeking to extend their vision beyond existing subject area content in defining outcomes of significance because (1) these districts usually address higher-order competencies that are essential in virtually all life and learning settings, and (2) they can at least initially postpone the overwhelming challenge of rethinking and restructuring everything about their curriculum and delivery structures while getting into OBE.

This approach is primarily concerned with students' culminating capabilities at graduation time and centers curriculum and assessment design around higher-order exit outcomes. Having

graduates who are broadly competent persons best reflects its vision. Transitional OBE districts usually generate exit outcomes in a process that places less emphasis on the exact nature of future conditions but takes them into account informally in addressing the question: *What is most essential for our students to know, be able to do, and be like in order to be successful once they've graduated?*

In answering this question, Transitional OBE staff and community members almost universally emphasize broad attitudinal, affective, motivational, and relational qualities or orientations. These schools give priority to higher-level competencies, such as critical thinking, effective communication, technological applications, and complex problem solving, rather than particular kinds of knowledge or information.

Two pioneering OBE districts have been studied by thousands of educators interested in their Transitional Exit Outcomes. One pioneer is Township High School District 214 in Arlington Heights, Illinois, a large district serving grades 9-12 near Chicago. The other is the Johnson City Central School District in Johnson City, New York. The most recent version of District 214's General Learner Outcomes framework requires all graduates, regardless of courses taken or programs pursued, to successfully demonstrate 11 kinds of competency or role performance. The Johnson City framework consists of five key competence and affective arenas that guide all curriculum and instructional decisions.

As prime examples of Transitional OBE, both frameworks are virtually silent regarding subject matter content or subject-specific skills. Ultimately, the purpose of programs and courses is to adapt content to the explicit development of the higher-order competencies and orientations in the exit outcomes, rather than to foster subject knowledge in isolation.

It is our experience that districts go through three stages of maturity in imple-

menting Transitional Exit Outcomes:

- *Incorporation.* The typical need involves getting staff to recognize that textbooks and subject matter outlines are neither the only nor the primary focus of their instructional efforts. OBE staff development shows teachers how to focus on these outcomes with their existing content as the base.

- *Integration.* In curriculum redirection and redesign, Transitional Exit Outcomes become the prime goal of all departments and programs; teachers use content as the support base for addressing and facilitating these outcomes. Interdisciplinary work becomes much easier because people with different specialties can jointly integrate their work and address the same outcomes.

- *Redefinition.* The most advanced stage of Transitional OBE begins to

## What do schools want for their students? Individual teams describe these role-grounded exit outcomes: involved citizen, collaborative contributor, adaptable problem solver, perceptive thinker.

open the door to Transformational approaches. Schools and districts further subordinate subject content priorities to the emergence of key concepts, issues, problems, and processes. With this broader focus, the purpose and meaning of the content take on a higher form. Here, shared concepts and problems, not content per se, are linked to ever higher-order forms of demonstration and application in the fulfillment of what truly do become Outcomes of Significance.

### Transformational OBE

This paradigm represents the highest evolution of the OBE concept, and it contrasts sharply with both the prevailing educational system and with Traditional OBE. Its implications for curriculum design and the structuring of schools is profound. It fully embraces and embodies the spirit and substance of the four OBE operational principles (see "Success for All," left). It is grounded on the question: Why do schools exist in this day and age?

The Transformational OBE answer to this question is bold: "To equip all students with the knowledge, competence, and orientations needed for success after they leave school." Hence, its guiding vision of the graduate is that of competent future citizen. When viewed from this future-oriented, life-role perspective, success in school is of limited benefit unless students are equipped to transfer that success to life in a complex, challenging, high-tech future. Our prevailing, century-old, Industrial Age curriculum structure and delivery model lack credibility and the capacity to generate these kinds of results.

Transformational OBE takes nothing about schooling today as a given; no existing features are considered untouchable in carrying out a curriculum design. Instead, Transformational OBE districts set their existing curriculum frameworks aside when addressing the issue of future-driven exit outcomes. But because these districts have few examples of mature OBE designs on

### Success for All

Advocates of Outcome-based education (OBE) agree that an *outcome* is a successful demonstration of learning that occurs at the culminating point of a set of learning experiences. The term *culminating* refers to the completion point of a segment of curriculum—what students are ultimately able to do at the end, once all formal instruction is over and can be synthesized and applied successfully.

Adherents of OBE seek to apply four key principles to the design, delivery, documentation, and decision-making work of schooling:

- *Ensure Clarity of Focus on Outcomes of Significance.* Culminating demonstrations become the starting point, focal point, and ultimate goal of curriculum design and instruction. Schools and districts work to carefully align (or match) curriculum, instruction, assessment, and credentialing with the substance (criteria) and processes of the intended demonstration.

- *Design Down from Ultimate Outcomes.* Curriculum and instructional design inherently should carefully

proceed backward from the culminating demonstrations (outcomes) on which everything ultimately focuses and rests, thereby ensuring that all components of a successful culminating demonstration are in place.

- *Emphasize High Expectations for All to Succeed.* Outcomes should represent a high level of challenge for students, and all should be expected to accomplish them eventually at high performance levels and be given credit for their performance whenever it occurs.

- *Provide Expanded Opportunity and Support for Learning Success.* Time should be used as a flexible resource rather than a predefined absolute in both instructional design and delivery (to better match differences in student learning rates and aptitudes). Educators should deliberately allow students more than one uniform, routine chance to receive needed instruction and to demonstrate their learning successfully.

—William G. Spady and  
Kit J. Marshall

which to model their efforts, these pioneers are building a new legacy of work whose designs and results are not yet certain.

Transformational OBE has its roots in the future-scanning procedures found in well-designed strategic planning and design models. We ask districts to form strategic design teams to thoroughly examine, critique, and synthesize the best available information about the conditions of life students are likely to encounter in their future. These carefully developed descriptions of future conditions serve as the starting point for their OBE design. Three districts provide outstanding examples of careful design work in OBE.

*U.S. Department of Defense Dependents Schools.* In April 1990, a task force of parents, teachers, and administrators from the U.S. Department of Defense Dependent Schools (DODDS) in the Mediterranean Region developed these statements about some future conditions they needed to address:

Based upon an assessment of the future, we believe our students will face challenges and opportunities in a world characterized by:

- Worldwide economic competition and interdependence which creates ever increasing requirements for job related performance and a need to transcend language, cultural, national, and racial differences....

- An increasing pluralization and polarization of social, cultural, political, and economic life that demands understanding and that requires innovative approaches to leadership, policy-making, resource distributions, and conflict resolution.

The DODDS group developed seven such statements and systematically used them to develop an outcome-based mission for their schools. Then, from the mission statement and the seven conditions, they drew a series of critical inferences and implications they translated into a framework of 10 role-based

Transformational Exit Outcomes. This framework, in turn, was to become the template against which all curriculum design and evaluation in their schools would proceed and the success of their mission would be judged.

Certainly not all exit outcome frameworks capture the life-role essence inherent in this future-oriented approach, but two early 1991 efforts in Colorado and Wyoming, have come close.

## **Transformational OBE takes nothing about schooling today as a given; no existing features are considered untouchable in carrying out a curriculum design.**

*Aurora Public Schools.* Educators in the Aurora, Colorado, Public Schools began a serious strategic planning effort in 1990, which resulted in (1) a set of future conditions that drove both their district mission and a set of 28 key learning goals and (2) a set of five role-based exit outcomes that were derived systematically from the mission and the goals. Both role context and role demonstration elements are evident in their exit outcome framing statement and their outcome statements, two of which are:

We will know we are accomplishing our mission when all of our students are:

- Collaborative Workers, who use effective leadership and group skills to develop and manage

interpersonal relationships within culturally and organizationally diverse settings.

- Quality Producers, who create intellectual, artistic, practical, and physical products which reflect originality, high standards, and the use of advanced technologies.

Aurora's other statements refer to Self-Directed Learners, Complex Thinkers, and Community Contributors. Work is now underway in Aurora to frame each existing curriculum area around this set of five exit outcomes so that the outcomes serve as the key organizers of all their programs and courses. The district also is developing performance indicators for assessment purposes.

*Hot Springs County School District.* The third example involves the Hot Springs County School District in Thermopolis, Wyoming, which initiated a similar outcome-based strategic planning process in 1990. This district's planning team reviewed many district and state exit outcome frameworks and found the power, persuasiveness, and role grounding of the Aurora framework to be most impressive. The Hot Springs Team used the Aurora framework as a general template for defining their own priority future conditions. The team wrote six role-grounded exit outcomes very similar in nature to Aurora's. Three of them are:

- Involved Citizens, who take the initiative to contribute their time, energies, and talents to improve the welfare of themselves and others and the quality of life in their local and global environments.

- Self-Directed Achievers, who formulate positive core values in order to create a vision for their future, set priorities and goals, create options and take responsibility for pursuing these goals, and monitor and evaluate their progress on them.

- Adaptable Problem Solvers, who anticipate, assess, and

resolve the problems and challenges that accompany the rapidly changing political, economic, environmental, and social conditions of modern life.

The other three outcomes describe students as Perceptive Thinkers, Collaborative Contributors, and Innovative Producers. Hot Springs has formed a design task force for each outcome, composed of staff members representing a variety of grade levels and subject areas. Each task force will determine:

- The essential learning components that must be developed to assure student success on the outcome;

- The instructional methods and learning contexts appropriate to each;

- The performance indicators and assessment strategies consistent with each.

We have found in all three of these districts—DODDS, Aurora, and Hot Springs—a comprehensive, deliberate pursuit of Transformational OBE: that is, to have all exit outcomes serve as the “bottom line” of teaching and assessment in every area of study that any student pursues, starting the first day of kindergarten and continuing until graduation day. Why? Because having all students succeed on these Transformational Exit Outcomes is now viewed as the reason the district and all its programs exist.

Changes in each district’s program content and structure are sure to follow

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as the emphasis shifts from completion of traditional subject areas, courses, content, and skills to these higher-order, life-role performances. Current programs and courses will facilitate, rather than define, each district’s exit outcomes. Strategic decision making, program planning, and resource allocations will all directly reflect the nature and scope of these outcomes.

With its focus on the future, its philosophical commitment to success for all students on Outcomes of Significance in life, and its implications for fundamentally redefining the curriculum, instructional delivery, assessment, and credentialing components of schooling, Transformational OBE gives schools a profoundly different means for restructuring themselves. But it takes vision and a willingness to step beyond the givens of curriculum thinking and program design that have left us mired in an Industrial Age model governed by an Agricultural Age calendar. □

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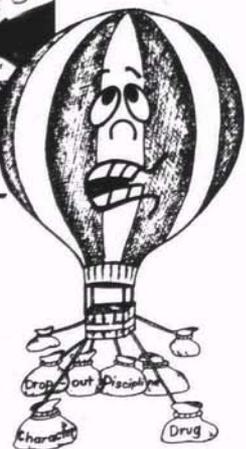


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