

Outcome-based education: why educational outcomes do matter

Current, July-August 1995

Prescribing learning results that all American students must master - a project known as outcome-based education (OBE) - has become the subject of one of the nation's fiercest education battles. Though initially a conservative idea for improving education standards, an idea bitterly resisted by the left, it is today as much championed by the left as it is decried by conservatives. Chester E. Finn, Jr., an Assistant Secretary of Education in the Reagan Administration who once promoted OBE, now complains that "the word 'outcomes' has become tainted," and pleads, "Mea culpa."

What happened was that the conservative effort to move the educational establishment in the direction of measuring the quality of education not by inputs (e.g., money spent on education) but by actual student achievement, or outcomes (e.g., grades and test scores), was hijacked by the left. Though conservative reformers successfully moved the debate in the direction of outcomes, they lost the battle over how to define which outcomes constitute a well-educated student.

Conventional (liberal) wisdom for most of this century was that the best way to judge quality in education was to look at inputs: intentions and efforts, institutions and services, resources and spending. It became increasingly plain, however, that there was little correlation between expenditures and educational attainment. This led conservatives to consider the relevance of outcomes. The shift in this direction was given its greatest impetus in the mid-1980s by the National Governors' Association (NGA). Under the leadership of then-Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander, they devoted 12 months to developing a national education-reform agenda. The aim was clear: "Schools and school districts [must] produce better results."

This approach gathered further momentum in 1989 when President Bush invited the governors to an Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia. They agreed to set six ambitious national education goals to be achieved by the year 2000. The salient feature of all these goals was the emphasis on outcomes. Today, 25 states have developed or implemented an outcome-based approach to education. Eleven others have made outcomes a part of their state accreditation or assessment process.

In 1991, the U.S. Department of Education began supporting efforts to develop a world-class set of voluntary national education standards and tests. This involved three things. First, definitions within subject areas of what our children should know and do by the end of high school - content standards; second, achievement levels specifying what depth of knowledge is "good enough" - performance standards; and third, tests reporting whether children are learning what they are taught.

A GOOD IDEA SUBVERTED

However, this good, commonsensical idea was soon corrupted. Problems arose when policy-makers moved from the sensible concept of judging education quality by focusing on results to the practical details of specifying those expected results. The outcomes defining what students should master emphasize not skills but behaviors and beliefs in the affective domain. They show little concern for core academic content, describing instead mental processes such as attitudes, dispositions, and sentiments. In short, the focus was on behavioral and social outcomes rather than knowledge and skills.

This perspective is often associated with William G. Spady, director of the High Success Network, a group of schools implementing OBE. He and those who preach the gospel of "transformational OBE" expect students to "demonstrate those behaviors that denote a positive social, emotional, and physical well-being." The following examples from OBE draft documents illustrate the point:

(1) An Ohio graduate should be able to "function as a responsible family member . . . [and] maintain physical, emotional, and social well-being."

(2) In Pennsylvania, "each student shall gain knowledge and have exposure to different cultures and lifestyles."

(3) In Minnesota, it was proposed that "the graduate demonstrates the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential to . . . develop physical and emotional well-being."

Examples such as these are more the rule than the exception. Almost all OBE plans include long lists of similar so-called outcomes, sometimes including hundreds of objectives. Ironically, the meaning now attached to the term "outcome based education" turns the focus on results on its head, all but precluding "results-oriented" accountability. Like many educational fads, the current outcome-based effort perverts a sensible principle so that implementation subverts the original intent. How did this occur?

Much of the problem can be traced to the processes and mechanisms that generate outcomes. Elected officials typically delegate responsibility to panels or agencies dominated by education experts, whose views differ radically from most of the elected officials and their electors. The pattern in states is almost always the same: The governor or legislature establishes a commission to develop outcomes for public schools; well-intentioned elected officials hand responsibility for specifying outcomes to groups dominated by views anathema to the majority; the commission develops a laundry list of bizarre, politicized outcomes; a wide cross-section of the public raises an outcry; and the state government cancels the plan, or at least the most offending parts of it.

Today, outcome-based education has become a generic phrase describing a good idea gone wrong. Accordingly, it has produced an enormous backlash manifesting itself in two fallacies, the "Aquarian" and the "Nostalgist."

THE AGE OF AQUARIUS

The exit outcomes of Spady's transformational OBE are what he refers to as "the knowledge, competence, and orientations (our word for the affective and attitudinal dimensions of learning) . . . deem[ed] critical for assuring success." The goal is to cultivate the ability to function successfully in life-roles, such as being a consumer, a producer, a citizen, a family member, an intimate friend, and a lifelong learner. This understanding is based upon a flawed conception of the role and purpose of education, with deep roots in educational progressivism, especially John Dewey's idea that it is possible and justifiable for educators to use the school to create a "new social order." Irving Kristol provides a succinct description of this "progressive" viewpoint:

[It] aims to develop the "creative potential" of the whole person . . . which must not be discouraged by grading, tracking, strict discipline, a dress code, or intellectual discrimination of any kind. Intellectual excellence may be acknowledged, but not rewarded. Social cooperation, a warm and friendly attitude towards one's fellows, a capacity for enthusiasm about anything - from turtles to rap music - are all signs, of equal worth, that a youngster is being prepared to be a good citizen in a democracy.

The question to ask is what outcomes can a state reasonably require students to learn in a public - that is, compulsory - school. Does it include the broad, expanded, and controversial outcomes proposed by some OBE advocates? Forcing parents to send their children to school is one thing. But for the state to declare that students cannot graduate from a school that they must attend unless they demonstrate competence in state-approved values and attitudes has all the trappings of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

The situation becomes more odious when the state provides no alternatives for children whose parents do not want to send them to public schools permeated by the Aquarian gestalt. When a government prescribes outcomes that include values and attitudes, it takes on a correlative responsibility to provide families with a wide range of schooling options so they may exercise a responsible choice that meets their needs. If it does not do this, it should be no surprise when a backlash develops.

If a state refuses to allow a wide range of alternatives, as well as some means of support for these options, it is left with only one option: prescribing carefully circumscribed outcomes that reflect only the broadest public consensus on what students should learn. Such an agreement is most likely to be a consensus not on affective outcomes but on cognitive ones - academic knowledge, skills, and understandings all children must master if they are to become productive members of society.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS?

Religious fundamentalists and others on the right generally unite behind one major objection to OBE: They believe that the schools and curricula of a bygone era are sufficient for children today. Schools should, therefore, not teach children to think critically, weigh evidence, reason analytically and independently, or reach conclusions contrary to "established tradition." Further, for religious fundamentalists, critical thinking is an assault on religious faith and family values. To those whose world is bounded and defined by religious faith, it is sacrilegious to oblige their children to become critical thinkers and independent questioners of authority.

One can understand that parents become upset when government schools teach doctrines that offend their deepest beliefs. And, as mentioned, the situation is compounded when families cannot exit the system unless they can afford a private school or the state allows the option of home schooling. It is another thing, however, to believe that government schools should refrain from teaching children the knowledge, skills, and understandings that enable them to become thoughtful and productive citizens. Thus, those committed to education reform, especially conservatives, must resist the temptation to support a nostalgic view that the content and approaches to teaching used in earlier, simpler times are good enough for today's children.

Today's children must meet higher standards than those faced by prior generations of Americans. These standards involve combining an extensive knowledge of facts and specifics - those that make up what E.D. Hirsch, a University of Virginia English professor, calls our "cultural literacy" - with the ability to think critically, understand complex relationships, and solve complicated problems. The goal of education ought to be to give all children a chance to develop these abilities.

There is no "silver bullet" to cure the principal education problem America faces: weak academic achievement, even among those who complete formal schooling. The starting point for a remedy must be a focus on outcomes, properly understood. Unfortunately, many on the left (the Aquarians) and the right (the Nostalgists) are undermining the sound, sensible notion that educational quality ought to be judged by what and how well children actually learn. The Aquarians propose a collection of nebulous life-roles, values, and attitudes, rather

than measurable academic outcomes. The Nostalgists criticize the left's Aquarian life-roles. Their grievances have more merit, however, than the alternative they propose: a return to the content and methods of a bygone era.

ESCAPING THE OBE THICKET

There is a twofold strategy that provides a plausible way out of the OBE thicket. First, we need high, uniform, but sensibly drafted, core academic standards for all our children, with a corresponding system of accountability. Second, we need great diversity in the nature of schools and in the ways professional educators produce the intended results, with families free to choose those schools that best meet their needs.

Survey findings show that most Americans support such an approach. In recent years, polls by the Gallup Organization, among others, have been consistent: The public wants high standards for all students, tests to measure student results, much less bureaucracy, regulation, and red tape in running schools, and different types of schools. Other surveys reinforce this viewpoint, including a report by the Public Agenda Foundation. It shows that the views of school "experts" are out of touch with the public's main concerns. While there are some extreme views on both sides of almost every education issue, the majority of Americans of all races and creeds want safe schools where discipline is enforced and students master the basics before moving on to other things. However, this traditionalism does not lead them to yearn only for "the good old days."

STANDARDS AND TESTS

Standards and Tests. The nation's governors continue to speak forcefully on the need for high, national outcome standards defining what all students should know. They have described five general principles that should guide the adoption of standards. They should be: (1) voluntary and not mandatory for states and communities; (2) academic and not deal with nonacademic concerns like students' values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors; (3) as rigorous as what other industrialized countries expect of their students; (4) developed using a broad based, participatory, consensus-building process; (5) adaptable so states and communities can design their own curriculum plans using the broad outlines suggested by the standards.

None of this should involve standardization or a national curriculum. There must be no federal demand to read certain books, teach specific courses, or meet federal graduation requirements. These and other issues should be decided by states and communities.

Good tests are needed to determine whether and how well students are learning what is taught. These exams, however, would not be more of the same standardized tests we have now, where many of our children live in a Lake Wobegon world where all are above average. The tests would have consequences for graduation, employment, and higher education. Moreover, they would permit individual student comparisons across schoolrooms, schools, districts, the states, the nation, and internationally. Other types of timely, reliable, and comparable information, such as college entrance rates and placement in the work force, must be collected and made understandable and available to the public.

Almost every modern society with which the United States trades or competes has woven these elements into its education system. We owe at least as much to our young people, especially those we label "at risk" and "disadvantaged." For them in particular, expectations in school are almost always low and the curriculum

watered-down. Demanding less of these children advances neither equality nor excellence. These goals are served by providing access to high standards that reflect a rich and challenging curriculum, demanding much of all, and helping everyone meet these standards.

Diversity and Choices. The second element of this policy strategy combines what Chester Finn calls supply-side pluralism and demand-side choice. This entails creating a system in which families can choose from a wide variety of types of schools and methods of pedagogy. Whereas in other areas of life we assume the superiority of the freedom to choose among a variety of options, in education we too readily allow a highly restrictive group to exercise a monopoly over the supply of a vital service, education. Schools must become much more customer-driven to meet the different needs, values, and traditions of many different young people, families, educators, and communities.

As states and communities adopt standards and adapt them to their situations, they will come to judge quality by the academic results students achieve. This will lead to less monopoly control and decreased government regulation of schools, including the manner in which educational services are delivered. Decentralization will create greater diversity in the ways schools organize themselves and in the methods and techniques instructors use to teach to these new high standards.

Deregulation must also apply to the education profession. We cannot limit ourselves to graduates of teacher- or administrator-training programs. We should develop alternative paths into the classroom and the administrator's office. Individuals with sound character who know their subjects, want to teach children, and are willing to work with master teachers to learn the craft of teaching should be permitted to be a part of America's school system.

THE PUBLIC SCHOOL OF TOMORROW

One example of the effort to give families more choice is the move to create independent public schools - what some call charter or outcome schools. Led by Minnesota, 11 states have enacted charter-school legislation, with others currently considering it. Though details vary, plans allow teachers and others to ask permission from a local or state authority to start a charter school. The charter's terms free teachers from regulations and bureaucratic red tape. In exchange, teachers are held accountable for students mastering agreed-upon knowledge and skills. In short, teachers swap red tape for results and develop a system of accountability based on well-defined outcomes.

A variation on the charter idea is the "contract" school, where school boards engage outside managers to design and run schools or to provide educational services. According to RAND analyst Paul Hill, this approach "allows schools to be operated by a variety of public and private organizations, based on school-specific contracts that define each school's mission, guarantee a certain amount of public funding, and spell out the terms of accountability."

From this and other examples, a new understanding of the nature of a "public" school and its governance begins to emerge. Any school that embraces world-class standards, meets nondiscrimination, health, and safety requirements, and is held accountable for its results becomes a public school, without reference to whether a government school board owns, operates, or funds it. The responsibility of a public school board then becomes making sure that families have the broadest number of enrollment options available to them, that every child has a school to attend, and that schools are held accountable for their academic results.

Pursuing the twofold strategy suggested here can help resolve differences between OBE supporters and critics.

It also can lead to a different and renewed idea of education, one that serves the public interest and prepares our young people to live, work, and compete successfully in the next century. The resulting system will have high academic standards for all students, test for results, and provide educators with more flexibility and less red tape, while giving families more choices among schools. Viewed in this way, outcome-based education is a cure for what ails America's schools.

Mr. Manno is senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. From "Educational outcomes do matter" by Bruno V. Manno, *The Public Interest*, Spring 1995, pages 19-27:

Abstract

Outcome-based education (OBE) has ceased to become an effective tool in evaluating students' academic skills. OBE should be returned to its original, skill-oriented form, instead of remaining focused on testing students' attitudes and beliefs towards learning.

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 1995 Taylor & Francis Ltd.
<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/>

Source Citation

Manno, Bruno V. "Outcome-based education: why educational outcomes do matter."
Current 374 (1995): 3+. *Gale Opposing Viewpoints In Context*. Web. 25 Sep. 2012.

Document URL

<http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/AcademicJournalsDetailsPage/AcademicJournalsDetailsWindow?failOverType=&query=&prodId=OVIC&windowstate=normal&contentModules=&mode=view&displayGroupName=Journals&limiter=¤tPage=&disableHighlighting=false&source=&sortBy=&displayGroups=↦action=e&catId=&activityType=&scanId=&documentId=GALE%7CA17374413&userGroupName=lex&jsid=0892d64b5cb99b33c1ec7b5cbcd56605>

Gale Document Number: GALE|A17374413