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Outcome-Based Education

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As schools nationwide continue their efforts to improve, some reformers suggest that what is needed is a fundamental rethinking of the function and structure of education. Outcome-based education (OBE) is one model for restructuring currently being examined nationwide.

Traditional educational practices center on "inputs." Students are exposed to a segment of curriculum over a specified time. At the end of the unit, an examination is usually given, and grades are assigned regardless of whether all students have achieved mastery of the material.

In contrast to a content and time-based method, OBE specifies the "outcomes" students should be able to demonstrate upon leaving the system. These outcomes are derived from a community vision of the skills and knowledge students need to be effective adults. OBE focuses educational practice on ensuring that students master those outcomes, and it asserts that all students can succeed.

Encouraged by positive reports from OBE programs in districts like Sparta, Illinois, and East Islip, New York, a number of districts have adopted OBE systems. Educators who are considering adopting OBE need to be aware of the controversy and challenges inherent in the model as well as its potential usefulness.

What Form Does OBE Take?

There is no single, authoritative model for outcome-based education. Frameworks for OBE share an emphasis on systems-level change; observable, measurable outcomes; and the belief that all students can learn.

William Spady's model for OBE urges schools to generate "exit outcomes" based on the challenges and opportunities that students will face after graduation, and then to "design down" from the outcomes for all other aspects of educational delivery.

A key component of Spady's model is expanded opportunity and instructional support. Students are given more time if needed to master material, and they are offered second chances or given a grade of Incomplete until they succeed. Teachers use "coaching" as well as grouping and team teaching to provide additional assistance.

Albert Mamary's Outcomes-Driven Development Model (ODDM) echoes Spady's "success for all" philosophy while choosing a strong research base for its starting point. Mamary stresses need for a "transformational leader" who generates a broad base of support for the process (Vickery 1990).

School District No. 1 in Pasco, Washington, has created a unique OBE model based on six essential elements: vision, knowledge, action, results, restructuring, and teaming. Specific components include a mission statement, intense teacher retraining, and ongoing research into better methods of assessment and feedback.

Why Is OBE the Subject of Growing Interest?

OBE has gotten increased attention in recent years because it promises far-reaching reform, offers a balance between school autonomy and accountability, and appears to deliver dramatic results.

For Spady and other advocates of school reform, a shift toward OBE is long overdue. Reports in the last decade concerning the state of America's schools reveal that they need to more adequately prepare students to be effective in a complex society.

Many states have now legislated standards for school improvement, with the onus on school districts to make sure the standards are met. In spite of the uneasy relationship between state and district agendas, many districts are discovering that OBE allows them to combine accountability with greater school autonomy. In Florida, for example, the state legislature helped districts to define outcomes, then waived dozens of statutes to give schools the flexibility they needed to meet those goals (McNeir 1993).

Schools that have successfully implemented OBE programs describe auspicious results. Alhambra High School in Phoenix, Arizona, reported significant improvements in attitude and performance by both students and teachers within the first year (Briggs 1988). And, after four years of OBE, the Sparta School District in Illinois achieved radical gains in grades and test scores in spite of its previous financial and labor problems (Brown 1988).

What Are Some Primary Criticisms of OBE?

Criticisms of OBE issue from diverse sources, and they encompass a variety of concerns about theory and implementation. The notion of outcomes as values is perhaps the most controversial objection to OBE. Some critics argue outcomes "concern values, attitudes, opinions and relationships rather than objective information" and that OBE's goals are "affective (concerned with emotions and feelings) rather than academic" (Schlafly 1993).

Another objection is that OBE views education as a means to an end. McKernan (1993) argues that predecided outcomes are antithetical to the very nature of education, which he considers to be explorative, unpredictable, and valuable for its own sake.

The lack of a comprehensive research base is another concern. Glatthorn (1993) notes that "only a few systematic research efforts have studied the implementation and effects of the OBE model as a comprehensive reform strategy." Although many schools that have implemented OBE programs report improvement, the evidence of its ultimate effectiveness is inconclusive.

A major controversy focuses on the notion of content versus process. OBE systems may deemphasize specific subject content in favor of broader outcomes, leaving educators with the difficult question of what content should remain in the curriculum. Parents have voiced concern about students' losing competency in basic skill areas such as math and literacy.

William J. Smith, executive director of The Network for Outcome-Based Schools, stated that "OBE advocates and theorists support mastery of basic skills, yet they understand how these skills must be learned if students are to use them effectively. They must be learned in the context of purpose, meaning and connectedness" (personal communication, November 3, 1993).

A related concern is measurement and assessment. Broad-based outcomes are difficult to measure using standardized tests and traditional grading practices; therefore, new assessment techniques must be developed to measure specific outcomes. Proposals for assessment, such as a "portfolio" system that records a comprehensive array of student-performance indicators, have met with only limited success (Rothman 1993).

Finally, a practical concern for critics is the cost and time of shifting entire school systems to OBE.

What Must School Districts Do Before Implementing OBE?

Fully committing to OBE requires change in nearly every aspect of an existing educational program. Before implementing an OBE system, educators must weigh objections as well as commendations of OBE and determine in advance how to address challenges.

At its core, OBE is concerned with a community vision of what students need from school to be effective adults. Because of the potential for outcomes to be viewed as value statements, it is crucial for leaders to involve all sectors of the government, community, and school system in deciding to adopt OBE and in generating outcomes.

Failure to obtain community support and a degree of consensus can sidetrack an OBE program. Pennsylvania adopted OBE statewide only to nullify the mandate soon after. Critics of OBE had charged that it "fostered the teaching of 'values' rather than academic skills and knowledge" (Rothman 1993). After certain controversial outcomes were deleted and the program was reviewed by the State Attorney General, OBE was reinstated amid continuing opposition.

School districts should involve faculty and staff in the process of initiating OBE through workshops, surveys, or weekend retreats. Administrators can generate support by facilitating consensus about beliefs

and working collectively to evaluate the pros and cons of adopting OBE. If support is generated within the organization, it can be shared with the community through public forums and school board meetings. In most successful programs, ongoing dialogue is central to the drafting of outcomes and continues throughout the OBE process.

How Can Districts Make a Successful Transition to OBE?

Drafting workable outcomes provides the underpinnings of a successful OBE process. Additional suggestions from OBE practitioners include setting manageable goals, adopting transitional measures, and allowing enough time for real change to occur.

When drafting outcomes, "the key for most districts seems to be developing outcomes that are broad in their vision, but specific enough to be taught and measured effectively" (McNeir). Aurora Public Schools in Colorado includes two core outcomes: Collaborative Workers and Quality Producers. Examples of outcomes from Reynolds High School in Troutdale, Oregon, include Effective Communicators, Community Contributors, Individual Achievers, and Lifelong Learners (Conley 1993).

Teachers and administrators recommend moving slowly toward the often daunting task of restructuring. North Eugene High School in Eugene, Oregon, began with only a third of its teachers employing OBE methods. Next year all teachers will join the implementation process.

Few administrators attempt to transform a school district from traditional practice to OBE overnight. "Transitional OBE," which leaves some aspects of existing structure and curriculum intact as districts move through the restructuring process in stages, is a good way to ease into OBE.

Streshly and Bernd (1992) note that a unified and sustained vision by school leaders over time is necessary for genuine growth to occur. Just as educators must allow time for careful planning and implementation, they must cultivate the patience and commitment to allow their efforts to evolve into lasting change.

Resources

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