

# "OUTCOME-BASED" EDUCATION:

## An Overview

Concerns that the education system cannot adequately prepare students for life and work in the 21st Century have prompted people across the country to explore new ways of designing education. In several states, educators and policy makers are attempting to change the way we measure the effectiveness of education from an emphasis on traditional *inputs*, such as course credits earned and hours spent in class, to *results* or *outcomes*.

The shift toward outcome-based education is analogous to the total quality movement in business and manufacturing. It reflects a belief that the best way for individuals and organizations to get where they're going is first to determine where they are and where they want to be—then plan backwards to determine the best way to get from here to there.

Proponents of the outcomes approach in education assume there are many ways to arrive at the same results: the important thing is that states, districts, schools and students do, in fact, achieve them. Opponents worry about who will decide on outcomes and how students, schools and districts will be held accountable for achieving them. Both sides raise fundamental questions about the structure and direction of the education system and the role of education in a democracy.

### Why is there so much confusion about outcome-based education?

Debate about outcome-based education reveals widespread confusion about terminology and concepts. The terms "outcomes," "standards" and "goals" frequently are used interchangeably, and individuals disagree about their meanings and applications. These terms also are used indiscriminately to refer to different types of results, including *content outcomes*, *student performance outcomes* and *school performance standards*.

*Content outcomes* describe what students should know and be able to do in particular subject areas. *Student performance outcomes* describe how and at what level students must demonstrate such knowledge and skills. *School performance*

### Minnesota Statute 125.661

*Outcome-based Education is a pupil-centered, results-oriented system based on the belief that all individuals can learn. In this system:*

- (1) *What a pupil is to learn is clearly identified*
- (2) *Each pupil's progress is based on his or her demonstrated achievement*
- (3) *Each pupil's needs are accommodated through multiple instructional strategies and assessment tools*
- (4) *Each pupil is provided time and assistance to realize his or her potential*

*standards* define the quality of education schools must provide in order for students to meet content and/or performance outcomes.

Confusion arises when people often fail to distinguish between outcome-based education as a concept and programs such as the Outcome-Driven Developmental Model of the National Center for Outcome-Based Education.

Another source of confusion about outcomes arises from the variety of levels at which they can be developed and implemented. Connecticut's Common Core of Learning, for example, is a set of content and performance outcomes developed at the state level. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics Standards are content and performance outcomes developed by a national curriculum organization, which have been adopted throughout the country by individual teachers, schools and districts.

Approximately 20 national groups, including the Bradley Commission, the National Academy of Sciences, the U.S. Department of Labor and the New Standards Project, are developing various types of outcomes that are content-specific or integrate several subject areas.

Some states and districts mandate outcomes, while others present them as guidelines. Some states require, for example, that schools "meet or exceed" a certain set of outcomes in order to maintain accreditation. Other states encourage districts and schools to develop and adopt their own outcomes, based on a particular model put forth by the state.

### Common Arguments In Favor of Outcome-Based Education

- Promotes high expectations and greater learning for all students.
- Prepares students for life and work in the 21st Century.
- Fosters more authentic forms of assessment (i.e., students write to show they know how to use English well, or complete math problems to demonstrate their ability to solve problems).
- Encourages decision making regarding curriculum, teaching methods, school structure and management at each school or district level.

### Common Arguments Against Outcome-Based Education

- Conflicts with admission requirements and practices of most colleges and universities, which rely on credit hours and standardized test scores.
- Some outcomes focus too much on feelings, values, attitudes and beliefs, and not enough on the attainment of factual knowledge.
- Relies on subjective evaluation, rather than objective tests and measurements.
- Undermines local control.

Finally, some people confuse outcomes-based education with Mastery Learning, an instructional model conceived by John Carroll in 1963 and developed by Benjamin Bloom. Both outcome-based education and Mastery Learning are based on the assumption that all students can master tasks and materials if given enough time.

However, the Mastery Learning model divides knowledge and skills into small, distinct, sequential units based around the existing curriculum. A student's progress is measured primarily by tests, for the purpose of assigning a grade. A sample objective might be: "Students will be able to underline the verbs in a sentence."

The outcomes model first requires looking at what skills and knowledge students need to have when they leave the system. Those skills then drive changes in the curriculum, instruction and assessment, not vice versa. The outcomes model emphasizes higher-order skills, such as analysis, synthesis and problem solving and the integration of knowledge across subject areas. Student progress toward outcomes is measured through a variety of methods, including tests, teacher observation, checklists and portfolios of student work.

A sample outcome might be: "Students will use language effectively with a variety of audiences to inform, explain, describe and narrate."

**Outcomes are:**

- Statements about what students should know and be able to do as a result of their education.
- Focused on what students learn, not what teachers teach.
- A way of reorienting the education system toward results.

**Outcomes are NOT:**

- Curriculum.
- Tests.
- Teaching methods.

**History**

In the 1970s.

States and districts implemented minimum competency tests to measure the lowest acceptable level of student performance in particular grades. Curriculum and teaching methods frequently were designed around minimum competency requirements. Student performance was measured and compared primarily on the basis of standardized achievement tests.

In the 1980s.

International comparisons indicated that American students lagged behind their counterparts in other countries in academic achievement. Ten states replaced minimum competency requirements with "learner outcomes," based on the belief that minimum proficiency was not sufficient for success in school and beyond. A new emphasis on

higher-order skills and thinking processes led many institutions to increase the number of Carnegie units required for graduation, especially in math and science.

The 1990s

A growing number of educators and policy makers acknowledge that "more of the same" in education will not adequately prepare students for the changing demands of work and society. These policy makers and educators are developing outcomes as one component of comprehensive reform of the education system. The Business Roundtable, which represents 200 corporations, says, "A successful system is performance or outcome based" and "...uses assessment strategies as strong and rich as the outcomes." (*The Essential Components of a Successful Education System, 1992*).

**States that have developed or implemented some form of outcomes:**

Alabama	Arizona	Arkansas
California	Colorado	Connecticut
Delaware	Florida	Georgia
Hawaii	Indiana	Kansas
Kentucky	Louisiana	Maine
Maryland	Massachusetts	Minnesota
Missouri	New Jersey	North Carolina
Oklahoma	Oregon	Pennsylvania
Tennessee	Utah	West Virginia

**States where outcomes are (or can be) part of the state accreditation or assessment process, in addition to those listed above:**

Illinois	Iowa	Michigan
Missouri	Nebraska	New Mexico
Ohio	South Carolina	Texas
Vermont	Virginia	Wyoming



**What proof is there that outcome-based education will work?**

A sample standard from the Connecticut *Common Core of Learning*: Student will be able to "make estimates and approximations and judge the reasonableness of results."

\***The Eight-Year Study.** The concept of outcome-based education dates back at least to the 1930s. In what later became known as the *Eight-Year Study*, 300 American colleges and universities agreed in 1933 to free 30 experimental high schools from their conventional subject-unit entrance requirements. The schools, in turn, agreed to submit detailed information concerning their graduates seeking college admission. The high schools then designed courses to foster the kinds of higher-order thinking and learning skills required of successful college students. The 1,475 graduates of these schools were compared, on the basis of several criteria, with graduates of conventional schools. The comparison revealed, among other things, that graduates of experimental schools that deviated the most