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OUTCOME-BASED EDUCATION: A Tale of Two Definitions

The debate over Outcome-Based Education (OBE) is marred by varying definitions, lack of information and misleading characterizations. In its original form, the term OBE was applied to making a direct connection between the material children were taught and their demonstrable comprehension of it. In that sense, OBE has been encouraged by parents and educators for years. In its contemporary usage, however, OBE refers to a set of curriculum requirements that seeks to assess and mold not only academic learning but children's cultural and ethical development as well.

Subjective Outcomes

For example, in the Pennsylvania OBE framework that was the point of contention in a statewide debate last year, there are over 127 basic outcomes (and another 448 that flow from them) that students would be expected to master. The list does address fundamentals such as mathematical formulas and reasoning, reading and writing, and understanding of the principles of the Declaration of Independence. But it also contains many vague and subjective outcomes in a section dealing with "self-worth." It suggests, for example, that students learn to master their strengths and weaknesses (who's to decide which is one or the other?), to recognize sources of stress for themselves, their families and their communities, and, as with one outcome for younger children, to recognize what creates anger and hurt for individuals.

These are just a few of the outcomes that span several pages of the OBE framework in Pennsylvania. Other frameworks being proposed in states such as Alabama, Virginia and Texas include language about ethics and character education, but are not as specific. Regardless of the specificity, however, the education establishment has praised Pennsylvania's work and sees OBE as an answer to improving education. In reality, it falls short of instituting rigorous, quantifiable standards and relies heavily on a student's ability to master the work as perceived by his teachers.

Killing the Drive to Excel

One of the methods widely accepted in education circles by which OBE would be imposed is the practice of collaborative or cooperative learning. Such methods seek to group students around a particular lesson to allow smaller groups to benefit from working together to solve a problem or master a subject. The underlying philosophy of these methods is that competition hurts children's ability to learn, and thus they should be taught to cooperate, not compete, when learning. What it results in, however, is learning at the lowest common denominator, i.e. at the level of the slowest child in the group.

Competition has been for years an important part of a child's learning experience. It is also one of the facts of life. To ban competitive learning from the classroom is akin to banning one's drive to excel. If all are going to achieve together, and be rewarded only collectively, what possible impetus is there left for children to reach beyond the average level of achievement within the group, or even the minimal level needed to get by.

In other reports about the new teaching methods that are being discussed to implement OBE, children are not to be evaluated by grade, but only by whether they have achieved a certain outcome. In other words, it doesn't matter how well one performs, as long as the job gets done.

Summary

Outcome-Based Education mandates not only what our students ought to achieve, but the process by which they are taught. The theories guiding this are just that — theories. There is no proof that these methods improve student achievement, or provide students with higher-order thinking skills to help them progress through life.

Proposals for new curriculum frameworks in the states may be very strong, and very positive. Others may be based on the OBE theories that hail from the ivory towers of the education establishment. Reformers and parents interested in school improvement should comb these documents carefully, ask questions about the proof and results gained elsewhere, and should learn to separate the wheat from the chaff. More importantly, groups that are trying to change the system and are demanding accountability for schools and students should be prepared to offer alternative legislation in order to gain a seat at the bargaining table.

For more information on Outcome-Based Education and other curriculum issues contact The Center for Education Reform at (202)-822-9000.