

## **The ABCs of OBE:Whats Wrong with 'Outcome Based Education' (IP-1-1994)**

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Issue Paper

**By [Dwight Williams](#)**

Throughout America, the federal government is imposing a new educational program called "Outcome Based Education" (OBE). Under OBE, students no longer earn grades based on their mastery of a curriculum. Instead, students are evaluated on whether they have attained various "outcomes," many of them vaguely-defined.

In this Issue Paper, education analysts Dwight Williams and Edward Lederman break through OBEs layers of jargon to explain what OBE really means. Part One, by Williams, analyzes OBE in detail. Part Two, by Lederman, puts OBE in the context of the education consultation complex.

The weight of the evidence suggests that OBE degrades student learning.

OBE prohibits successful students from moving on to more advanced material until every student in the class has mastered the current material. Although theoretically intended to promote group learning, the effect has been to slow advanced students, while slower students slow down even more.

OBE denigrates traditional motivations for learning such as test scores because under OBE no student is allowed to fail.

OBE is often presented to parents in a disguised form, under a variety of names, such as "standards-based" education.

OBE proponents such as Mrs. Clinton and Labor Secretary Reich see education as the production of group-oriented, other-directed corporate employees, rather than well-informed, skeptical, individualist citizens of a republic.

Although OBE jargon uses attractive terms such as "critical thinking," those terms are redefined to mean their opposite. For example, "critical thinking" means the use of emotion, rather than logic, to make politically correct decisions.

To pay an army of OBE education consultants, schools divert vast resources into retraining teachers to use a program of no proven effectiveness.

# Introduction

*by Tom Tancredo*

For the last decade a firestorm of controversy has been building around something called Outcome Based Education (OBE). To understand the conflict we must recognize that it is part of a much larger and older war in which the combatants hold markedly different world views. The viewpoints of both sides can be stated in a positive manner as follows:

Viewpoint One	Viewpoint Two
Schools are agents of change.	Schools should perpetuate the culture.
Schools should challenge perceived inequalities.	Schools should transmit values.
Schools should create citizens with social utility.	Schools should be based in Classical Realism.
Graduates should have work skills that are specific and marketable.	Graduates should be schooled in a "core knowledge" curriculum.
Schools should be child-centered.	Schools should be society-centered.

Prevailing attitude is, "Failure is impossible."

Prevailing attitude is, "Here is the standard; meet or exceed it."

Although many people will agree with certain aspects of both points of view, the philosophical gulf that separates the two sides is immense. Both sides, however, recognize that control of the monolithic government schools system is one of the most important strategic objectives of the war.

The current educational vehicle for viewpoint one is Outcome Based Education, although the name sometimes changes in response to political opposition. OBE gains foot soldiers by appealing to many concerned citizens who may be unaware of or unsupportive of its "globalist" world view, but who recognize that the present government education system is corrupt and dysfunctional. Many parents and students victimized by the current system cry out for change, and OBE supporters promise change in terms that seem reasonable, rational, and compelling.

For example, OBE proponents correctly attack the use of "seat time" for determining student progress. They say that students should have to demonstrate mastery of certain skills before moving on. Few persons would disagree. (Except, perhaps, for the Ohio Association of School Boards, which has proposed that every student who attends four years of high school should receive a diploma, regardless of whether he has passed any classes.)

Demonstrable, specific outcomes are important educational strategies which most good teachers have employed in their classrooms for centuries. Of course truly quantifiable standards not only challenge students, they challenge the system. And the last thing the government schools bureaucracy needs is more hard evidence of the failure of government schools.

As a result, OBE as actually implemented becomes a tool for the government school system to avoid accountability while creating the illusion of success. We should not be surprised that the government education establishment has debased outcomes by stating them in purely subjective terms, or by creating outcomes based on a students acceptance of political correctness. Rigorous academic standards, supposedly the very foundation of OBE, are nowhere to be found. The whole program is then sold with empty or dishonest slogans such as "standards" or "marketable skills" or "no one fails," and opponents are accused of being Neanderthals who oppose education reform.

At the federal level, the Department of Education and the Department of Labor are pushing, with full support from the White House, to require all schools to conform to viewpoint one. Both federal dollars and federal laws are being used to enforce conformity.

OBE is about far more than the integrity of particular outcomes. OBE encompasses all aspects of pedagogy, from philosophies of learning to behavioral conditioning to job placement. OBE also promotes a world view that is collectivist, communitarian, and emotional, rather than individualist and rational.

I hope that the materials in this Issue Paper will help parents, students, educators, and all concerned citizens cut through the forest of jargon that surrounds OBE, and come to an understanding of the real issues raised by federal efforts to impose OBE nationwide. The stakes are immense.?

# The Laypersons Guide to Outcome Based Education

*by Dwight A. Williams*

Traditional education is characterized by a philosophy that there is a certain body of knowledge which schools should present to students. This body of knowledge is called a curriculum. Schools design a curriculum and then present the information and facts in classes, a number of which students must complete to graduate. These requirements are called credits or Carnegie Units. Normal graduation requirements include a prescribed number of credits in a variety of academic subjects and a smaller number of elective credits which the student selects according to his/her interest. When a student completes the prescribed instruction in each subject and demonstrates by taking tests and achieving a passing grade (percentage) that he or she has mastered the information within that subject, a credit is earned and entered upon a transcript. When the total credits, required and elective, reach the required number, a student is eligible for graduation. If a student fails to achieve a passing grade in a subject, no credit is given until the student repeats the class and earns a passing grade.

In traditional education, we teach knowledge in the belief that knowledge provides the foundation to develop the skills necessary for a career and is the basis for a lifetime of learning.

In OBE, credits are no longer required for graduation. During the "transitional" stage of OBE, letter grades and credits may be retained by a school. But in the final, "transformational" stage of OBE, letter grades are abolished.

In fully-implemented, "transformational" OBE, the graduation requirements consist of meeting outcomes. Outcomes can take many forms, even academic in nature, but what almost always emerges is a set of statements like these:

"All students understand and appreciate their worth as unique and capable individuals, and exhibit self esteem."

"The student will demonstrate the ability to communicate effectively."

"The student will evidence those qualities necessary to be an effective and responsible citizen in the twenty-first century global community."

"The student will demonstrate an awareness of the critical state of the environment and his role in the future of our planet."

"The student will celebrate diversity and demonstrate respect for everyone."

"All students make environmentally sound decisions in their personal and civic lives."

These types of graduation requirements cause suspicion and concern on the part of parents. How can these outcomes be measured or tested? What questions can a student answer correctly to achieve a passing "outcome" of "self esteem"? How much celebration of diversity is necessary to graduate? Objective tests of knowledge and concepts are replaced by subjective judgments of a teacher or panel of teachers as to whether the student demonstrates the desired life skill, attitude or behavior.

Many of these "outcomes" relate more to students feelings, beliefs or relationships than to knowledge. OBE relies, not on what knowledge a student has, but rather the demonstration of certain skills or attitudes. The underlying belief is that the acquisition of knowledge is no longer pertinent.

Why would educators abandon a curriculum based on knowledge, and replace it with a system based on beliefs and feelings? To answer this question, let us examine the Outcome Based Education philosophy.

First, it must be understood that in OBE every student succeeds. That's right, no one fails. In fact, everyone gets an "A." Once the outcomes are established, we determine those life skills or attitudes that the student must demonstrate to achieve the outcomes.

No longer do we decide what we want the student to know. Instead we now determine how we want that student to appear in his or her attitudes, beliefs and functioning. Graduation outcomes determine the course work and only those things pertinent to acquiring the skills or attitudes are taught.

How does everyone get an "A"? Actually, students do not get an A, or a B, or any other letter grade (here we are talking about the final, "transformational" stage of OBE). Instead students gain mastery. Students demonstrate proficiency. This means that the student has shown the ability to perform the life skill or display the attitude or behavior outlined in the curriculum. And

every student *will* achieve mastery. No matter how long it takes. If he or she doesn't get it the first time, it's try, try again, until it is achieved.

Of course, some students will get it sooner than others, and if the skill demonstrations were too difficult, some students would never achieve mastery. But this is not allowed in OBE. The first principle of OBE is that "All students will succeed." So what you get is a skills demonstration lenient enough that everyone can eventually succeed. Everyone must. It's the first requirement of the plan.

Some students have a higher aptitude, or more demanding parents, or more motivation. In OBE, the best students are not allowed to move forward until everyone succeeds. This is described by proponents of OBE as "equity in education with equality of results." The traditional approach would call for equality of opportunity with the greatest success going to those most capable or hardest working. OBE denies the best, brightest, and hardest working the opportunity to perform to their best level because the teacher is busy "remediating" the as-yet-unsuccessful ("students in-progress") rather than taking all to new heights. OBE is much like playing a basketball game with the goals lowered so everyone could score easily and the best players are required to sit out until everyone has scored the same number of points.

And what do students actually learn in OBE? Very little math and English. In Iowa, for example, the 11th grade OBE competency test requires no geometry, no algebra, no statistics, and nothing at all except addition, subtraction, multiplication and division.

In English, the situation is even worse, since OBE frequently jettisons phonics for "whole language" education. With phonics, students learn the basic sounds from which all English words are constructed. Once the student learns these sounds, the student can sound out the syllables, and pronounce almost all English words he or she has never seen before (with a few exceptions, such as "rough"). Theoretically, phonics should be perfect for OBE, since phonics really does impart a set of skills that can be used by the student forever.

OBE, however, relies on a different program (which has almost no demonstrated record of success) called "whole language" education. Under "whole language" students are taught to recognize entire words much like Chinese students must memorize pictograms. Thus, if a student is confronted with an unfamiliar word, the student must guess its meaning and pronunciation. The child thereby loses one of the great advantages that alphabetic languages such as English and French possess over ideographic languages such as Chinese and Japanese: the alphabetic languages are constructed of a common pool of syllables, and by using the syllables, the reader can conquer almost any word in the languages vocabulary, whereas words in ideographic languages can only be mastered one at a time through

rote memorization.

Ironically, "whole language" is in many respects simply a dressed-up version of the discredited "look-say" method of instruction. "Look-say" was correctly discarded because it focused only on the memorization of the appearance of certain words, without giving students the skills to learn new words on their own. That "look-say" is enjoying a comeback as part of an education program supposedly based on imparting skills rather than memorized facts is quite ironic.

Of course teaching students how to use context for making educated guesses about a words meaning should be part of English instruction; but there is no reason that teaching students how to use the tools of educated guessing and memorization should require exclusion of the tool of phonics.

"Whole language" teachers are warned not to correct a students spelling or grammar, for fear of damaging the childs "self-esteem." Presumably this helps the student move toward outcomes such as demonstrating "a positive attitude toward self as a reader." (Oklahoma outcomes, grades 9-12). Contrast this outcome with the genuine self-esteem a child gains in a traditional system by meeting the requirement of reading a particular number of books each year.

How do we find out if a student is progressing in OBE? We use something called a portfolio assessment. This, supposedly, is a file containing examples of the students work (and sometimes, medical and psychological records). By looking at his/her work from a previous time and comparing it to the current effort, we are supposed to be able to see a pattern of progress. The portfolio is also supposed to provide colleges and employers with the opportunity to gauge the ability of a prospective entrant or employee by virtue of viewing the portfolio. No college currently accepts this type of evidence for admission nor are they likely to short of the force of law.

These dossiers/portfolios raise important privacy issues. According to the Family Research Council, Educational Testing Service (the company that administers the SAT and similar tests) is developing an "employer friendly" system known as "Worklink" that will allow employers to electronically review a job applicants assessments. So if a 10th grader gets involved in a personality clash with a teacher, and the teacher rates the student low on "honesty/integrity," the rating will follow the student for the rest of his life, in a dossier that includes the students social security number. Should a teachers subjective analysis of a students "coping skills," "self-esteem," "sociability," and "need for affiliation" really become part of a permanent electronic record?

So OBE, as it has been proposed in most districts, is radically different when compared to the traditional methods schools used to educate students. Furthermore, this type of OBE doesnt work. And, OBE costs a great deal more

money than traditional methods of teaching. But before we get into that, let's look at:

# THE HISTORY OF OUTCOME BASED EDUCATION

Education has always had outcomes. We have always expected certain things of our students before granting them a diploma.

However, beginning in the 1950s, some members of the education industry began to see a different role for schools. The initial groundwork for OBE was laid in the behavioral modification psychology research of Harvard University's B.F. Skinner. Skinner and his methods became well known during World War II when he developed some rudimentary teaching machines, and even more to his notoriety, was able to utilize his theories of behavior modification to train pigeons to detonate bombs and torpedoes. Skinner, an avowed socialist and humanist (he was a signer of the *Humanist Manifesto II* and was the 1972 "Humanist of the Year Award" recipient), soon developed a belief that his methods could be effectively applied in the classroom to mold the behavior of students: "the reinforcing consequences of being right will eventually prompt students to do what they are supposed to do. But to elicit the behavior the first time, their behavior must be primed and prompted." This is done, he says, by "programming the subject matter."

In other words, if students are given the subject matter (knowledge) we wish them to have and are rewarded for mastering that subject matter, they will respond to that reward with the "correct" behavior and as time goes on they will respond more easily and rapidly.

Skinner's work inspired another psychologist, Benjamin Bloom, to publish his 1956 work, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. In this work, Bloom developed the idea of sets of "higher order" and "lower order" thinking skills. Such things as knowledge and comprehension are in the lower order realm while "higher order skills" are such things as application, synthesis and evaluation.

His approach to thinking as either "cognitive" (dealing with reasoning or rationale) or "affective" (dealing with feelings, emotions, beliefs, attitudes and values) is, and has been for over twenty years, taught as near-gospel in psychology and training classes for teachers. The driving force in OBE philosophy and methods is Bloom's belief that, by concentrating on the affective (feelings, emotions, values, etc.) domain of thought to achieve behavior modification, higher order skills are instilled in students. His work

describes "evaluation," the highest of the higher order skills, as "formulating subjective judgment as the product resulting in personal values/opinions with no real right or wrong answer."

Bloom developed this philosophy and methodology into a teaching method he called "Mastery Learning," a name used until 1980 when it was agreed at a meeting of Bloom disciples that, since the name had acquired a stigma resulting from negative public reaction to the "values clarification" and "behavior modification" aspects of the plan, the name should be dropped. The new name chosen? Outcome Based Education. Even then, it was believed by the chief proponents of OBE that the name would be useful for only five years. William Spady, the nations foremost "guru" of OBE, expressed pleasant surprise in a recent interview in *Educational Leadership* magazine (Dec. 1992-Jan. 1993) that this name has lasted ten years. But recently, in the face of growing public opposition to OBE, new names (Standards Based, Performance Based, Values Based, Success Based, Skills Based, Re:Learning) have emerged to deflect public outcry.

Like many other districts in the late 1970s, Washington, D.C., undertook a Mastery Learning Program. James T. Guines, Associate Superintendent of Schools and the designer of D.C.s plan was quoted in the *Washington Post*. He said, "the new curriculum is based on the work in behavioral psychology of Harvard Universitys B.F. Skinner...If you can train a pigeon to fly up there and press a button and set off a bomb, why cant you teach human beings to behave in an effective and rational way. We know we can modify human behavior. Were not scared of that. This is the biggest thing thats happening in education today."

Is behavior modification bad? The question really should be, do we parents want public school teachers, whose qualifications to modify behavior are certainly suspect, practicing any type of manipulation on the minds of our children? Dr. William Coulson, who, along with Carl Rogers (Rogerian psychology), developed the behavior manipulation methods used in virtually all of the behavior modification and drug and alcohol prevention programs in our schools, now speaks out against the use of such techniques even by *trained* mental health professionals. He warns against the very real possibility of *permanent mental health problems* among children subjected to this type of curriculum by amateur psychological practitioners (teachers).

Dr. Coulson is no wild-eyed fanatic. He is the director of the Research Council on Ethnopsychology, a former member of the Technical Advisory Panel on Drug Education Curricula for the U.S. Department of Education, a consultant for the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the U.S. Department of Justice, and holds numerous degrees. Dr. Coulson indicates that behavior modification in schools is wrong, and from others we know that behavior modification is what OBE is

all about.

In 1983, the federal government, through the National Commission on Excellence in Education, produced a report called *A Nation at Risk*, which formally told us something we already knew in our hearts: Education was failing. Twenty-three million adult Americans were illiterate. One-seventh of 17-year-olds were functionally illiterate (today the average college entrant reads at a seventh grade level). American students were academically last or near last in the developed world.

What was the response? Did we get greater literacy or better math skills? No. What we got instead was the SCANS commission (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills). Interestingly, the Commission was created under the Department of Labor, not the Department of Education. And the SCANS report has been used to promote OBE as an answer to corporate workplace problems rather than as an answer to education problems.

Consider the words of Thomas B. Sticht, associate director for basic skills of the National Institute of Education and one of the education leaders who joined industry leaders on the SCANS commission: "Many companies have moved operations to places with cheap, relatively poorly educated labor. What may be crucial, they say, is the dependability of a labor force and how well it can be managed and trained, not its general educational level, although a small cadre of highly educated creative people is essential to innovation and growth. *Ending discrimination and changing values are probably more important than reading* in moving low-income families into the middle class." (emphasis added). (*Washington Post*, Aug. 17, 1987).

Mr. Sticht is not alone in his views on the relative unimportance of literacy. Dr. Anthony Oettinger of Harvard says of literacy:

The present traditional concept of literacy has to do with the ability to read and write. But the real question that confronts us today is: How do we help citizens function well in their society?...Do we really want to teach people to do a lot of sums or write in a fine round hand when they have a five dollar hand-held calculator or a word processor to work with? Or do we really have to have everybody literate writing and reading in the traditional sense when we have the means through our technology to achieve a new flowering of oral communication? It is the traditional idea that says certain forms of communication, such as comic books are bad. But in the modern sense of functionalism they may not be all that bad.

This cavalier attitude of the unimportant of "traditional" literacy pervades OBE thinking. Now add the sentiments that Dr. Shirley McCune of the Mid-Continent Regional Education Laboratory (McRel) expressed in her keynote speech to the 1989 Governors conference in Wichita, Kansas: "What has changed in education today is that we no longer see the teaching of facts and information

as the primary outcome of education." So the skill of literacy does not count for much. And "mere" facts are superfluous. All of this raises the question: just what standards are people in the "standards movement" talking about?

How about employable skills? Here the prospect is even more disquieting. Typical of the attitude of many in the corporate/public education liaison community are the thoughts expressed by Lester Salamon and David Hornbeck (both OBE supporters) in their co-edited book, *Human Capital and Americas Future*: "What is more, employer beliefs about the superior capabilities of educated employees turned out not to be confirmed in practice; educated employees have higher turnover rates, lower job satisfaction, and poorer promotion records than less educated employees." Salamon caps off this discussion with the statement, "One final complication" (to employers training their own employees) "arises from the fact that, unlike physical capital, human capital cannot be owned by someone else."

Apparently the belief of Mr. Hornbeck (who coauthored the Alabama plan for implementation of OBE) is that public schools, rather than the government, should shoulder the burden of employee training, and while training should produce adequate entry-level workers, it would be counterproductive to make the future employees too "educated," since educated employees are less loyal to their employer.

At least for entry level jobs, much of the corporate community seems to have concluded that skills (such as effective communication) are important, but knowledge (why did the Civil War occur?) are not. For short run corporate personnel needs, this may be true.

But schools do not exist for the sole purpose of producing entry-level business employees. Understanding the Civil War, reading Shakespeare, pondering the nature of protons and neutrons may have little immediate business application, but they are important to leading a well-rounded, integrated life. There is more to life than job skills.

Moreover, in the long run businesses need employees with wisdom and judgment. Wisdom and judgment are not skills like entering data into a spreadsheet or using appropriate etiquette in a business telephone conversation. Wisdom and judgement are built from awareness of the human experience from historical study of our predecessors triumphs and failures, through the great lessons of human nature that are learned from the study of literature for its own sake, from the in-depth study of a minor topic that happens to excite a particular students curiosity.

To devote the schools to the production of entry level employees with appropriate job skills is to deprive students of the most valuable part of a liberal education. Do we really want our schools to spend their time inculcating in children "the disposition to be an economic asset"? (an objective of

Virginias OBE program, which was later abandoned by Governor Wilder).

And there are other interest groups at work in favor of OBE, most in the name of money. And that brings us to a discussion of

## THE HIGH COST OF OBE

In Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, the school district spent approximately \$8,100 for each student to set up an OBE "reform" plan. Kentucky spent over \$80 million on its state-wide plan in only a year and the states education system is a shambles. Sweden invested nine years and \$7 billion before scrapping OBE as an academic failure. By the admission of even its strongest proponents, OBE costs more than traditional education.

The reasons are many, but in the end, they reduce to one fact: A large number of groups have their self-interested forks in the educational-dollar pie. As a result, too much of the education budget is spent in ways that have nothing to do with direct classroom instruction of students in academic areas. Government budgets are, however, not the only sources of dollars for OBE development and implementation. Nationally, large foundations with their own philosophical and/or political agenda grant millions of dollars each year. There is almost always a hook attached to these grants and it involves using the public schools as a tool for advancing the interest of these groups.

Furthermore, big industry not only plays a major part in the production of curriculum and instruction models, it pays for the privilege with hundreds of millions in contributions. The Littleton plan was paid for by Hewlett-Packard. Interestingly, the Colorado pilot plan, for public-expense job training, is centered on development and manufacture of computer products. Hewlett-Packard would seem to gain a great deal if Colorado turned public schools into job training centers for computer companies at taxpayer expense.

This is a pattern repeated throughout the country as prominent local and regional industrial and business groups buy billions of dollars worth of future job training with a few million today invested in establishing the education plan best suited for their development of "human capital."

Why does OBE cost so much? First there is the army of "consultants," "facilitators," "conferees," etc., etc. Such organizations as the ASCD, the SOI, McRel, FWEL, The New Standards Project, CES, and ICOBED all share an interest in the continued attempt to institute OBE. The ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) holds an annual meeting to discuss new methods of teaching, meaning OBE, and charges upwards of \$500/person. Dr. William Spady recently conducted a seminar in Oklahoma for

teachers in which they were to be instructed in the methods of OBE. The price tag? \$80,000. The New Standards Project out of the University of Pittsburgh was to get \$300,000 for two years from Colorado until the legislature wrote the appropriation out of the state budget. However, in the recently-enacted reform bill, HB 93-1313, the wording allows the newly appointed council to reinstate this expense as part of the development of Colorado's Standards Based Education plan.

Administrators insist that this plan is no departure from what they are currently doing, yet one consistent element of any implementation plan is "professional educator development."

In-service days (days a teacher spends in continuing his/her professional education) run typically at a minimum of 6-8 days per year. During restructuring of schools, the number may go up several days each year. Taxpayers pay salaries to teachers for these days at regular pay rates, yet no student instruction takes place. In addition to paying teachers on these in-service days, typically a fee is also paid to the "expert" or "facilitator" who conducts the in-service. Literally billions of dollars of taxpayer money each year go into in-service days in school districts nationwide. As long as there is a new fad and someone to sell it, the cost will continue to spiral.

Further, there are real expenses involved with this plan. If schools are going to keep the best students involved while the teacher spends time catching up the rest, another instructor is required. Also, the development of new assessment methods to judge student progress toward the outcomes requires teachers to spend more time in preparation. Subjective judgments of student progress prevent a teacher from simply using a key to grade an objective test; thus, more time is consumed. If a company is in the business of producing widgets, and often has to throw away today's effort and duplicate it tomorrow, production costs go up. The same is true of education that devotes itself to taking students through the same material repeatedly until they all get it.

Coupled with the fact that OBE costs a great deal more money, the situation is further complicated by...

## **OBES RECORD OF FAILURE**

What do the test scores show about OBE? Rocklin, California, schools experienced drops in average math scores on standardized tests of nearly 11% in a single year after adopting OBE.

In Rochester, New York, the school system adopted OBE, with the following results: per-pupil costs rose over \$1,200 in four years; in that same period, the number of pupils earning the New York State Regents Diploma (the most

rigorous type of diploma) fell from 23% to 18%; the percentage of third graders passing the state reading exam fell from 81% to 79% (instead of rising to 90%, as had been predicted); and 70% of 9th graders at the city's best high school failed the basic statewide math test.

Dr. Robert Slavin, of Johns Hopkins University's Center for Research On Elementary and Middle Schools, undertook a study of Mastery Learning (OBEs predecessor) for the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. He published his conclusions in January 1987, in a work entitled *Mastery Learning Reconsidered*. In his research, Dr. Slavin found that, in spite of predictions by proponents (including Benjamin Bloom), of dramatic academic improvement for students in Mastery Learning programs, the best result was that some students did not fall back. The previous predictions of improvement had been about 30-35 percentile points on standardized testing. Any familiarity with national and international testing of American students reveals that no such change, or any positive change for that matter, has resulted from the widespread implementation of Mastery Learning/OBE in the U.S.

What Dr. Slavin discovered was that the only improvement shown occurred on tests made up by the people pushing for the plan. However, in a very short time, even that improvement disappeared when compared with the retained learning of students taught by traditional methods. In other words, even when Mastery Learning students learned slightly more (2%) during a learning exercise, within three weeks they remembered less of what they learned than did traditional students.

His studies also found that all students slowed in the learning process. One group of students that was tested prior to Mastery Learning instruction demonstrated that it took the slowest-learning 25% of the class 2.5 times as long to complete a learning assignment as it did the fastest 25% of learners. After four years of Mastery Learning instruction, it took them 4.2 times as long in spite of the fact that the fastest learners had slowed considerably. In other words, he found that although the fastest learners slowed down, the slowest slowed even more.

Dr. Slavin blamed this fact on the group exercises common to most Mastery Learning programs in which the best learners become the leaders of the groups and soon learn that all students benefit from their skills and efforts. Time was taken from those things at which the students were best and devoted to those things with which they struggled most or in which they had little interest, such as art, music, or socialization programs like environmental awareness. This has been called the Robin Hood approach to education. What kind of system turns an excellent math or science scholar into a bored, mediocre student by denying him time to pursue his academic interests so he can become a "successful," if very average, artist? The answer is Mastery

Learning/OBE.

Additionally, Dr. Slavin blames the fact that students quickly learn that they will receive many opportunities to be "successful." Multiple chances to earn passing grades on tests and assignments, offer no incentive to complete work well and on time. Students often put off studying knowing that "it doesn't matter if I go to the movie tonight and flunk the history test tomorrow, I can always pass when I take it again next week." (Newspaper columnist Robert Holland reports that at one OBE school in Minnesota, in grades 7-12 at the end of the January 1992 semester, half of all the grades awarded were "Incomplete.")

Dr. Slavin published an additional report in January of 1990 which he named *Mastery Learning Re-considered*. The concluding statement to this work is: "...the claim that mastery learning can accelerate achievement is, in general, in elementary and secondary schools is still awaiting convincing evidence." Remember, Mastery Learning was the original name for OBE.

Dr. Slavin, it must be noted, has stated that his research is applicable only to Mastery Learning, and not to Outcome Based Education; and his research involved only programs called "Mastery Learning." Nevertheless, it may be reasonable to apply at least some of the findings about Mastery Learning to OBE, since, after all, OBE uses many of the same techniques that Slavin found defective in Mastery Learning such as offering students an infinite number of chances to pass a test.

Persons unconvinced that OBE is a failure in terms of students' academic achievement, might ask a proponent of OBE to refer them to a single school district where it has worked. Or might ask them to supply the name of a research document which supports the fact that OBE improves academic achievement. But skeptics should be prepared for an answer that they may not understand. Usually when backed into a corner by a question that has no positive answer, OBE proponents will respond by engaging the questioner in a conversation, which she cannot follow, comprised of

## THE VOCABULARY OF OBE

OBE is a separate language, with words such as interdisciplinary, interactive, world-class, collaborative, cognitive, critical thinking, synthesis, integrated, higher order skills, pluralistic, multicultural, transgender, twenty-first century skills, modern functionalism, and on, and on.

We will deal here with only a few of these terms because even most educators with whom you speak will not have a clear understanding of most of them.

Readers are encouraged to review the dictionary meaning of the other terms noted here (and any others the reader may encounter) or to try to "synthesize" a definition of what they might mean prior to engaging in any discussion with an OBE advocate. The reader will soon realize the true OBE meaning of them has nothing to do with the English language as we know it, but rather is a type of "educational doublespeak" designed to leave the listener greatly impressed with the scholarship of the "doublespeaker," feeling properly intellectually humble, and without a clue about what the speaker has said.

Do not fall into this trap. The weakness of their argument is responsible for this tactic. An outsiders misunderstanding or failure to understand has nothing to do with ignorance. The plan is to confuse and impress skeptics right out of their concern. So insist that everyone speak plain English. When these high sounding terms are put into real English, they will sound as shallow as they really are. And OBEspeakers may have to say as Dr. William Spady, OBEs greatest sales agent, said when asked for his definition of patriotism: "I dont know how to define that."

*Success* illustrates the deceptive nature of OBEspeak. To most parents, "success" at school implies academic achievement, or achievement in some other aspect of school, such as sports or theatrical production. But in OBEspeak, "success" means the attainment of outcomes that have been deliberately dumbed-down so that the school will meet its own outcome of "every child will succeed."

*Interdisciplinary*, as an OBE term, means that a variety of basic disciplines (math, science, history and English for example) are combined into one academic "learning experience."

To illustrate, a science project could be given grades in all academic areas as the student does the science experiment, and then writes a report that includes a math exercise and the history of development of the scientific principle illustrated by the experiment. The approach sounds good, until one realizes that in transformational OBE no time is given to separate studies of the disciplines involved; the only aspects of history, English, and math studied are those that are specifically related to the science experiment. A narrow focus reduces the knowledge the student gains in the various areas of studies, because the student learns only what is relevant to the mastery of the outcome of the "learning experience." In the ideal transformational OBE program, all "learning experiences" take place within the context of a single curriculum, often called "Human Development" or "Life Skills" studies, and no textbooks or separate classes exist for what most of us consider to be the academic basics.

*Multiculturalism* (a new name for the old *Global Studies* programs) has become the substitute for American History in many schools across the

country. The justification for this type of study is to "promote understanding and celebration of the diversity of the many cultures of the Global Community." Many parents are disturbed to find this also often includes understanding and celebration of alternative lifestyles. Even without concern for such considerations, implicit in these studies is a reduction in the time and resources devoted to "understanding and celebration" of the American traditions and culture that have been the chief motivation for over three centuries of immigration to this country.

What remains of American history education often has a strong political slant, as students must meet outcomes such as Pennsylvanias "All students relate in writing, speech or other media, the history and nature of various forms of prejudice to current problems facing communities and nations, including the United States."

Moreover, students are guided by OBE towards acceptance of a communitarian world view in which stronger government is seen as the solution to most problems. Thus, Virginias OBE program included a proposed study unit on homelessness for 8-year-old students. Fifth-graders were to be taught 20th century American history by learning about three individuals: Cesar Chavez, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Colin Powell. Ninth-graders could study ancient Greece by writing a newspaper article with the headline "Gloria Steinem Addresses Womens Group in Sparta."

Now Mr. Chavez, Mrs. Roosevelt, and General Powell are exemplary people, but they are not even remotely the most important persons in 20th-century American history. Only a person suffering from racial and gender bias (against white males) could imagine that there is more to be learned about 20th century America by studying Mrs. Roosevelt rather than President Roosevelt, or General Powell (whose military accomplishments consisted of overrunning a third-world dictator) rather than General Eisenhower (who defeated one of the most powerful empires in world history), or Cesar Chavez (whose work led to important improvement for farm workers in the West) as opposed to Eugene V. Debs (whose vision for a radically transformed American economy has been largely realized).

Imagining Gloria Steinems feminist critique of ancient Greek society could be an enlightening project. Will there also be a libertarian critique by John Stuart Mill of the closed society in medieval Europe? Will there be an anarchist critique from Sacco and Vanzetti of compulsory education, political indoctrination in government schools, and corporate-supported efforts to turn schools into training camps for docile employees? Perhaps not.

*Critical Thinking Skills* are defined as those skills necessary for our students to make good decisions. But OBE does not aim to produce skeptical, innovative thinkers. In practice, the most important "critical thinking skill" inculcated is docility: a passive acceptance of politically correct versions of "self-esteem"

and "diversity," a conformist celebration of mediocrity through "equality of outcomes," and a willingness to become a corporate employee with the "skills" to enrich an employer, but without the excessive "education" that would encourage questioning of supervisors (or of government/corporate control of learning and the economy).

It has been traditionally held that the basis of good decisions ("critical thinking") is a clear understanding of the facts and information that relate to that decision. OBE programs students to make decisions with their affective thought process, encouraging the development of opinions based on feelings, rather than on objective analysis of facts. Critical thinking under OBE is hardly the stuff of which sound decisions are made by real decision makers in business and the work place on a daily basis.

*World Class* is often used in OBE dialogue. One policy statement of the Colorado State Board of Education indicates that this term means performance at the level of the students in the top 20% of the industrial nations in the world.

When one considers that a fifth place finish by Colorado fourth graders in a science test competition (the best result any of the age groups had in several subjects) in 1992 was hailed by the president of the Colorado Science Teachers Association as worthy of "shouts from the highest mountains," "world class" apparently means "Third World Class." Germany and Japan did not enter this competition and our students were beaten by the world powers Hungary, Italy, Borneo, and South Korea. Our education system once served as the model for much of the entire industrialized world, and the methods used then are those being abandoned by our schools at the insistence of proponents of OBE but still in use by most of the countries whose students regularly outperform ours.

*Modern Functionalism* has become a favorite smokescreen put forth by the OBE/education establishment. One recent study released by the U.S. Department of Education told us 43% of adult Americans were "functionally illiterate." When one reads the study results closely, this statement had nothing to do with the traditional meaning of literacy (see Dr. Oettinger, page 10) but rather, the ability of our adult citizens to use calculators to perform certain functions, the ability to use computers in certain tasks and so on. Modern functionalism is not about literacy, but rather the ability to use technology as a crutch to replace the traditional academic skills our schools are either unwilling or unable to impart to our children.

*Collaboration* is a wonderful idea until it falls into the hands of OBE practitioners, and constructive cooperation is replaced by forced collectivism. One group exercise outlined in the Littleton High School graduation requirements indicates that the only way a student can obtain an advanced performance grade is if that student not only works well in the group but also

embraces the point of view of the group. OBE collaboration is also illustrated by a recently expressed point of view by a Littleton board member that all school board votes should be unanimous. Dissenters who express a different point of view from that of the group will find no "celebration of diversity" in OBE.

OBEs vision of collaboration amounts to one application of Mrs. Hillary Clintons communitarian "politics of meaning." Instead of a society based on individual achievement, competition, and rights, we must instead learn a cooperative "way of life," in which fitting into a group becomes the most important task. OBE "collaboration" may socialize students into becoming employees who fit into large corporations or government agencies; it will hardly empower them to found small businesses or write novels.

*Standards.* One newly-emerged term, "standards" requires special scrutiny. It is developing into the latest establishment covert action designed to divert the public debate from the failings of OBE methods and to convince the casual observer of education reform that a new idea that will provide answers for the woes of public education. The well-informed observer will find him or herself asking...

## **ARE THEY STANDARDS OR ARE THEY OUTCOMES (AND DOES IT REALLY MATTER)?**

During the first session of the 59th Colorado General Assembly (January 1993-May 1993) education reform took the forefront as one of the most controversial issues to be dealt with by our representatives and senators. What finally emerged from extensive debate, four complete rewrites of the draft legislation, and more than 140 offered amendments, was HB 93-1313, signed into law by Governor Romer on June 3, 1993.

The significance of this legislation for many legislators who voted in favor of it was that it would establish clearly defined requirements (standards) for graduation from public schools and clearly defined methods of assessing students ability to meet those standards. The significant portion of that statement is "clearly defined." What has emerged so far are "standards" which are uncomfortably close to outcomes. That this law mandates the institution of OBE in our public schools has been roundly denied by the education establishment supporters who pushed this legislation. That administrators in schools across the state continue to use H.B. 93-1313 to bully their local boards into implementing OBE is undeniable.

H.B. 93-1313 could never have passed the legislature in the face of the concerted anti-OBE lobbying efforts by many organizations and citizens without the removal of all OBE references from the bill. This was done in the first amendment to the bill. Nevertheless, the bill is replete with the futurist, politically correct language of OBE.

Although many persons worried that the "standards" would amount to nothing more than vague, unaccountable "outcomes," the proposed draft standards released on February 28, 1994, did include some genuine standards. While many proposed standards were vague and unquantifiable, many others included real academic content. For example, 10th graders would be expected to be able to draw a freehand map of the world from memory; fourth graders would be taught how matter changes from solid to liquid to gas.

How the proposed draft standards finally end up being implemented in the schools is yet to be determined. There is ample room for true academic standards to be implemented, just as there is ample room for the meaningless quasi-outcomes to become the heart of the system. Significantly, the time lines under H.B. 93-1313 could allow the State Board of Education to replace the academic standards with OBE-style affective outcomes after the 1994 election. How closely involved the public stays with the Councils work may have much to do with whether H.B. 93-1313 turns into a vehicle for genuine reform, or a Trojan horse for OBE.

## CONCLUSION

Outcome Based Education has been presented to parents and students with misleading rhetoric. This Issue Paper has attempted to answer the questions that have been avoided by persons who want to force OBE onto the entire public, private, and home school system. One final question remains to be answered by the reader: "Why in the world would you want your children, or anyone else's children, to be inflicted with the educational disaster known as Outcome Based Education?"

# Pedagogical Churning

*By Edward Lederman*

In the securities industry "churning" means the unscrupulous placement of a client into one stock after another for the sole purpose of generating sales commissions. In American education, where more EdD/PhDs ply their trade

than any other nation on earth, innovation for innovations sake pedagogical churning is built into the system.

Theoretically, to obtain a doctorate, one must make a "significant contribution" to the field. Nowadays even a grade school principal is a "Doctor." It seems there are many theoretical adjustments just waiting to spring on our children from that source alone.

Oddly enough, despite the high level of credentialism in the schoolhouse the main impetus for "change" lies outside the building. District and state level bureaucrats make their way up the ladder by implementation of programs. The more involved, ambitious and fiscally demanding the program, the bigger the boost to ones power and status.

Added to this dynamic of administratively driven innovation is the phenomenon of the outside "education consultant" a high-powered, policy-making individual skilled in the art of grantsmanship and theory.

Often the internal bureaucrat and the external consultant work well together. The consultant provides both the ideas and initiative for programs to be administered in house. The consultant can also serve as the whipping boy in those rare cases of egregious failure for which some accountability is demanded. The consultant simply moves on to other districts leaving the administrator relatively untainted.

Neither of these players in this superstructure of public education should be considered on the same moral plane as the crooked stockbroker moving the widows account from IBM to General Motors and back again. No doubt some outside consulting has resulted in palpable gains for the students. Then again, on occasion the widow would enjoy a net up-tick from a given move. In general, however, the widows funds are wasted, and our public schools have suffered wave after wave of new approaches, while remaining remarkably unimproved.

Another aspect of "innovation" in public education is how similar it is. That is, programs throughout the country are not discrete and unique experiments. Quite the opposite. From the new math of the sixties, to the schools without walls movement of the seventies, to the present OBE/standards movement, the anointed innovation takes over much as the new fall look would dominate the windows of major clothing stores. You see the new look/method everywhere, until, within three to seven years, something else comes to take its place.

The current rage, yet another marriage between outside consulting and state level bureaucracy, is variously labeled "Outcome Based Education," "Essential Schools" or other names. In part, the program is based on the work of Theodore Sizer, Brown University Professor, author, former dean of the

Harvard School of Education and grantsman extraordinaire. (Some of the other intellectual roots of OBE, including Skinnerian behavior modification, are discussed in the first part of this Issue Paper.)

His 1984 book, *Horaces Compromise*, set out a lucid and well-received critique of the public high schools. His solutions involved reducing the student-to-teacher ratio so that instruction might be more personalized focusing on the mastery of certain skills and subject matter at the expense of the current "comprehensiveness" of curricular offerings, and assessment of student progress by demonstration of mastery (exhibition) as opposed to the current system of grades and units.

The word "outcome" was not used more than once or twice in Sizers book and was hardly a central concept. The real popularization of the term occurred with the 1988 publication of *Winning the Brain Race*, coauthored by Xerox Chair, David T. Kearns and Dennis P. Doyle. In using the word "outcomes," Kearns and Doyle were making the point that educational programs should not be evaluated on "inputs": money, teacher-to-class ratios, computers, staffing, etc., but rather on "outcomes": what the children know and can do at the end of the program. Behind the idea of "outcomes," as used by Kearns and Doyle, were objective and absolute criteria.

Sizer and his nationwide group, the Coalition of Essential Schools, have effectively appropriated the term and its cachet. "Outcome," as in "Outcome Based Education," is something far different from what Kearns and Doyle were saying.

The outcome in Sizeresque programs is the student demonstration of "an exhibition of central skills and knowledge of the schools program." So what is the schools program? Well, the program is to be determined "unreservedly" by the schools principal and staff. Finally, after understanding a central tenet of Sizers philosophy maximum personalization of the "teaching and learning" process one comes to grasp fully what is meant by "outcome" in "outcome based education": anything principals, teachers, and students tell us it is. Subjective and relative. How convenient.

This finessing of accountability goes far in explaining the attractiveness of Sizers theories and rhetoric to education establishment types. His theories are popular because his theories make providers more comfortable.

The other reason for Sizers success lies in the extremely effective organizational structure of nonprofit 501(c)(3) organizations fashioned to promote the product line. His national flagship, the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), features a central staff of thirty, a monthly newsletter, and taxpayer funded coordinator/lobbyists in participating states across the country.

Here in Colorado, where a state-hired "coordinator" presides over an amalgam known as "Re: Learning," programs are pending or under way in over seventy-nine elementary, middle and high schools.

Affiliated with CES is another alphabet soup nonprofit, the Education Commission of the States (ECS), a twenty-five-year-old group that linked up with Sizers approach in the mid-eighties and has been vigorously proselytizing ever since.

In all fairness to Sizer and the organizations in his immediate orbit, relatively few of the hundreds of districts across the nation that are starting to mouth his rhetoric and implement his programs bear his official stamp of approval. Most are like knock-offs at a discount store. In fact the diverse, though thematically consistent, labeling ("Direction 2000," "Re-Direction High School," "Re:Learning," "Project Learn for Life") serves two purposes. First the labels give a trendy high-gloss feel to the programs, vaguely tying them into the newest rage. Second, the diverse labels assure deniability and confusion when critics attempt to use disappointing results in one school to oppose a program in another.

Consultants figure prominently in Outcome Based Education. First, they promote it initially at the state level. They may be affiliated with either CES or ECS or they may be independent with their own ties to the bureaucracy. Often they are past employees of the same departments they are lobbying.

In the promotion stage, consultants are often supported by corporate grants, again through CES or ECS. Less common sources of "seed money" are state awards for innovation. A consultant may also be working "on spec" (meaning that he is paid only if the school adopts Outcome Based Education). Once a school elects the "Outcome" route, sizable fees are available for training teachers and staff in the program. At this stage, also, the main source of funding resides in corporate largess, outside of district budgets.

The one major exception to the independent funding of Outcome Based Educations promotional expense is the state paid "coordinator." According to CES headquarters there are six to eight coordinators. That claim may be too modest, though, because the source did not count Colorado as one of those states, and we do indeed have a full time "State RE: Learning school coordinator." Illinois has two. Over twenty states have some form of CES-sanctioned program going and unaffiliated imitators are active in many more.

Some Re: Learning schools, concentrated on the East Coast, have already logged over eight years in the system. The Coalition of Essential Schools has conducted preliminary assessments, publishing marginally favorable dropout rate comparisons and nothing else.

Common experience with Re:Learning schools is that those with lower

socioeconomic student bodies stay with the program and those with more privileged clientele opt out after a few years. The reason given for this by CES headquarters is that more aggressive middle class parents, who are college oriented, get cold feet at the lack of recognized credits, curricula required for college entrance, and grades. Supposedly, the problem is purely one of bureaucratic meshing with college admission offices and not substantive.

Conversely, poorer schools finding it hard to do worse are more willing to take chances and thus more likely to stick with the program, adhering more faithfully to its pedagogical theories.

Whether explaining away its failures or analyzing its successes, "Essential Schools" people always pose their approach in contrast to that all-purpose behemoth: The "Educational Establishment." This wrapping of OBE in a countercultural mantle belies a theoretical and organizational structure tailored carefully for the comfort and maintenance of the education establishments status quo.

In *Horaces Compromise* Sizer railed against the top-down nature of public education decision making, yet CES works precisely in that manner. It infiltrates the power structure at the state level and promotes district superintendents and principals from above. Teachers do not instigate Re: Learning programs; they are trained into them. Parents are presented with a *fait accompli* and a fistful of expensive, high-gloss brochures.

While "less is more" (referring to the concentration of learning "essential" skills) is an OBE aphorism, the same phrase does not describe OBEs approach to educational budgeting. CES spokespersons describe a 10% increase in operating budget (over and above consulting fees) necessary to obtain the desired student-to-teacher mix. Others familiar with the movement say 15% is more realistic. In either event the prospect of more funds has always been a positive incentive for administrators interested in expansion.

Although more personalized relationships between students and teachers would obviate the need for school counselors, this aspect, though mentioned in *Horaces Compromise*, is not promoted by CES. OBE/CES/Re:Learning promoters know their market, and it is not taxpayers or parents. CES people scrupulously avoid mentioning or doing anything that can threaten the job security of any school employees.

No accountability, more money and top-down promotion. Scratching the surface then, we find that the educational power structure should have no problem cozying up to "Essential Schools."

All of this does not surprise, given Th