

What's Wrong With Outcome-Based Education?

May 1993 Phyllis Schlafly Report

Outcome-Based Education (OBE) is sweeping the country in the name of school "restructuring." OBE calls for a complete change in the way children are taught, graded and graduated, kindergarten through 12th grade. Since the American people seem ready to accept drastic surgery on our failed public schools, state departments of education are seizing this opportunity to force acceptance of OBE as the cure. But OBE has parents even more agitated than they are about explicit sex education. Crowds of a thousand or more parents are known to have gathered in Pennsylvania, Oklahoma and Ohio. Here is a summary of the ten major objections that parents have raised against OBE.

1 OBE is packaged in a deceptive language that appears to be mischievously chosen to mislead parents. Public school administrators have an obligation to present their "reform" plans in plain English so that parents can easily understand the objectives, the methods, the content, and exactly how OBE is different from traditional schooling.

OBE advocates continually use double-entendre expressions that parents assume mean one thing but really mean something different in the OBE context. When they talk about "new basics," for example, they are not talking about academics such as reading, writing and arithmetic, but OBE attitudes and outcomes. When they talk about "higher order thinking skills" or "critical thinking," they mean a relativistic process of questioning traditional moral values.

The following statement from OBE literature is typical: "OBE schools are expected to become 'success based' rather than 'selection oriented' by establishing the instructional management procedures and delivery conditions which enable all students to learn and demonstrate those skills necessary for continued success." OBE salespersons don't tell parents that "success" for all children means "success" in demonstrating only the dumbed-down outcomes that the slowest learners in the class can attain. OBE means "success" in mediocrity rather than excellence.

2 OBE uses students as guinea pigs in a vast social experiment. OBE advocates are not able to produce any replicable research or pilot studies to show that it works. OBE is being forced on entire state school systems without any evidence that it has been tried anywhere and found effective.

The best test of an OBE-type system was Chicago's experiment in the 1970s with Professor Benjamin Bloom's Mastery Learning (ML), which is essentially the same as OBE. ML was a colossal failure and was abandoned in disgrace in 1982. The test scores proved to be appallingly low and the illiteracy rate became a national scandal. Bloom, the father of ML, is well known for his statement that "the purpose of education is to change the thoughts, feelings and actions of students." (*All Our Children Learning*, page 180.)

Dr. Bill Spady, sociologist and director of the International Center on Outcome-Based Restructuring, defined the connection between OBE and Mastery Learning in an article entitled "On Outcome Based Education: A Conversation with Bill Spady" (*Educational Leadership*, Dec. 1992-Jan. 1993): "In January of 1980 we convened a meeting of 42 people to form the Network for Outcome-Based Schools. Most of the people who were there — Jim Block, John Champlin — had a strong background in Mastery Learning, since it was what OBE was called at the time. But I pleaded with the group not to use the name 'mastery learning' in the network's new name because the word 'mastery' had already been destroyed through poor implementation."

The major OBE/ML experiment, which took place in Utah in 1984-86, shows how federal funding enabled OBE to spread nationwide. A letter applying for the federal grant, written by Utah State Superintendent of Public Instruction G. Leland Burningham to then U.S. Secretary of Education T. H. Bell (July 27, 1984), stated: "This [project] will make it possible to put Outcome-Based Education in place, not only in Utah but in all schools of the nation." Spady's Far West Regional Laboratory received the federal grant and he was made director of this pilot project, which is now implementing OBE/ML nationwide.

3 OBE offers no method of accountability to students, parents, teachers, or taxpayers. Since OBE includes no objective standards of achievement that are measurable, it will be years and millions of tax dollars into the future before we know whether schoolchildren are learning anything important *or* are wasting their time. Educators admit that OBE is very expensive since each student works at his own pace at mastering every outcome/skill/behaviour until he succeeds. Perhaps this is what they mean by "lifelong learning."

For as long as most of us can remember, secondary schools have been structured on a measurable grid called the "Carnegie units." The traditional high school curriculum includes four units of English; three units each of mathematics, science and social studies; two units each of arts and humanities; a unit of health and physical education; and several electives. After you complete enough units (usually 21), you receive a high school diploma and colleges will admit you.

Outcome-Based Education tosses these traditional units out the window and replaces them with vague and subjective "learning outcomes" that cannot be measured objectively by standardized tests and for which there is no accountability to

parents and taxpayers. OBE will make it virtually impossible to conduct any kind of tests that allow comparisons with students in other schools, other states, or prior years. Under OBE, grades have no relation to academic achievement and knowledge. Colleges will have no criteria by which to judge whether students are ready for admission.

In the elementary grades, OBE does not teach children essential reading, writing, and arithmetic skills (such as addition, subtraction and multiplication tables), but pretends to teach them "higher order thinking skills" instead. OBE ignores the obvious fact that one can't engage in "higher order thinking" until one has some facts to think about. For example, an Iowa State OBE assessment test for the 11th grade shows no requirement of math skills beyond the fundamental computations of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division.

4 OBE is a dumbed-down egalitarian scheme that stifles individual potential for excellence and achievement by holding the entire class to the level of learning attainable by **every** child. To accomplish this, children are placed in Politically Correct groups (race, ethnicity, gender, class) for "cooperative learning" and may be given a group grade instead of individual grades. Cooperative learning researchers admit that the purpose of this strategy is to eliminate grading and competition in the classroom. This is the essence of OBE and explains why all measurable criteria — standardized tests, the Carnegie units, traditional subject-matter, and report cards — must be eliminated.

OBE is based on the unrealistic notion that every child in a group can learn to the designated level and must demonstrate mastery of a specific outcome before the group can move on. The faster learners are not allowed to progress, but are given busy work called "horizontal enrichment" or told to do "peer tutoring" to help the slower learners, who are recycled through the material until the pre-determined behaviour is exhibited.

Cooperative learning researcher Robert Slavin said in "Mastery Learning Reconsidered" (funded by the U.S. Department of Education in 1987): "If some students take much longer than others to learn a particular objective, then . . . either corrective instruction must be given outside of regular class time, or students who achieve mastery early on will have to waste considerable amounts of time waiting for their classmates to catch up." If OBE were applied to basketball, the basket would have to be lowered so all could score equally.

In order to master all outcomes, children with a particular talent are required to forfeit time in their area of strength. Because no child moves ahead until all demonstrate mastery, the inevitable happens: the faster learners quickly learn to slow their pace in order to avoid extra work, and they just give the answers to the slower learners so the group can move forward. Incentive and motivation are reduced, and boredom and resentment increased. The result is that all students demonstrate "mastery" of mediocrity, and none can aspire to excellence. **Every** child loses under this system.

5 In an OBE system, academic and factual subject matter is replaced by vague and subjective learning outcomes. According to OBE guru Bill Spady, "the traditional subject-based curriculum disappears" from OBE. New OBE report cards substitute check marks for grades, focusing on general skills, attitudes, and behaviours instead of individual subjects.

A look at the outcomes that have so far been made public show that they are heavily layered with such "Politically Correct" notions as training for world citizenship and government (instead of patriotism), population control, radical environmentalism, and government "solutions" for every problem. (See typical examples below in "[OBE in Washington State](#).")

6 A high percentage of OBE "outcomes" concern values, attitudes, opinions and relationships rather than objective information. A large number of OBE's goals are affective (concerned with emotions and feelings) rather than academic (concerned with knowledge and skills). OBE requires students to meet vague psychological objectives relating to self-esteem, ethical judgment, and adaptability to change. Moving from one level to the next, and even graduation, is dependent on meeting behaviour-change requirements and government-mandated attitudes. (For a sampling of vague and affective outcomes, see below under "[OBE in Pennsylvania](#).")

OBE thus involves a major change in the school's avowed mission. Henceforth, its mission is to conform student beliefs, attitudes and behaviour to prescribed school-mandated social norms, rather than to provide an academic education. Parents are concerned about what methods will be used to change behaviours that are deemed incorrect.

"Self-esteem" is a major attitudinal outcome demanded by OBE. Many of the techniques used to change a child's self-esteem or his adaptability to change are psychotherapeutic. This amounts to practising psychology without a license as well as engaging in unprofessional group therapy. Arizona recently made an attempt to protect its school personnel by providing them with civil and criminal immunity.

Parents who are trying to rear their children with strong religious values are concerned that willingness to go along with the crowd is taught by OBE as a positive rather than a negative attitude. Since "tolerance" is a major attitudinal outcome demanded by OBE, parents are concerned that this includes "tolerance" for extra-marital lifestyles of all kinds. The non-directive, "decision-making" classroom technique leads children to believe they are mature enough to make decisions about sex and drugs that parents believe are unhealthy and may even be illegal.

The public school establishment is highly secretive about the OBE tests, but tests that have come to light include many questions of attitude and opinion for which there are no right or wrong answers. What is the correct answer, for example, to questions about whether the student "understands others" or "applies good consumer behaviour"? Nevertheless, the student is required to conform to the government-mandated outcomes, whatever they are.

OBE raises the fundamental question of **who** should decide what values, attitudes, and beliefs a child should be taught. Should it be the parents or the U.S. Department of Education, which funded OBE? Should the public schools be allowed to teach values that may be controversial and sometimes even contradictory to values taught to children by their parents?

Behaviour modification is fundamental to achieving OBE-type results. OBE uses a "stimulus-response-stimulus" pattern, a rewards-and-punishment process based on Ivan Pavlov's and B.F. Skinner's programmed learning/behaviour modification techniques. Under OBE, students are recycled through the process until they meet the mandated outcomes.

Educators see computer-assisted instruction (CAI) as a powerful programmed-learning tool to change children's values. Here are some samples of their thinking. "The computer is ideally suited to the role of facilitator in values education. It inherently possesses the Rogerian qualities of genuineness and congruence. . . . Values clarification and values analysis are aptly suited to being used as a basis for software development." ("Can Computers Teach Values?", *Educational Leadership*, April 1982.)

It will work on the principle that students' attitudes can be changed effectively by using the Socratic method of asking an appropriate series of leading questions logically designed to right the balance between appropriate attitudes and those deemed less acceptable."— (Donald Bushnell, "The Role of the Computer in Future Instructional Systems," *AV Communication Review*, 1963.)

7 OBE sets up a computer file on each child to track the child's efforts to master the learning outcomes. These "electronic portfolios" will take the place of traditional assessments and test results and will become the basis for the school's efforts to remediate whatever attitudes and behaviours the school deems unacceptable. The portfolios will include all school, psychological and medical records, and are to be available to prospective employers after graduation.

The computer portfolio on each child plays an essential role in the tracking of individual students. The computer records how the child responds to behaviour modification, what is his threshold of resistance to remediation, and whether he develops positive attitudes toward the mandated outcomes.

Parents are concerned about **who** will have access to these files and what will become of the data compiled on each student. Professional journals describe the goals like this:

"The computer's vast storage capacity permits access to a much broader base of data than just one classroom. In fact, the responses of the entire population of a school system could easily be compiled, stored and shared." (*Educational Leadership*, April 1982.)

Student privacy is tossed out the window. Will the child be able to get a job if he has not demonstrated the OBE values and Politically Correct attitudes? Some have suggested that state law should forbid employers to hire anyone who does not have a certificate showing mastery of the government-mandated outcomes.

8 OBE is a method for concealing and perpetuating the number-one crime of the public school system — the failure to teach first graders how to read. OBE is wholly committed to the "whole language," word-guessing method rather than the phonics method. This ensures that children will learn only to memorize a few words that are massively repeated. Teachers are cautioned not to correct spelling and syntax errors because that could be damaging to the student's self esteem and creativity. (For specific OBE reading methods, see below under "[OBE in Oklahoma](#).")

The education elitists who are promoting OBE are perfectly content to have the schools turn out quotas of semi-literate workers who can be trained to perform menial tasks under supervision in order to serve the demands of the global economy. OBE graduates will never be able to aspire to enjoy the great literature in the English language.

The rationale was explained by well-known reading researcher Thomas Sticht, who said in 1987,

"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."

(*Washington Post*, Aug. 17, 1987.)

The U.S. Department of Labor is a big player in the OBE movement. OBE will aid in managing and training the work force by tracking all students beginning in the 4th grade and routing them through vocational education tracks as needed. Functional literacy competencies are defined as an ability to read a map and a bus schedule. Sticht is also a member of the Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) and, as Associate Director for Basic Skills at the National Institute of Education, promoted similar techniques called "competency education" and "mastery teaching." (*Washington Post*, Aug. 17, 1977.)

9 OBE, of course, involves high costs for administration and the retraining of teachers in an entirely new system, which will be reflected in higher school taxes. The computer portfolio system is reported to be five times as expensive as traditional assessment tests. Putting computers into the hands of first-graders to give the facade of moving into modern technology is a gross waste of funds. Computers may actually be a detriment to learning elementary writing and arithmetic skills, but they may be very useful in changing values, as noted above.

10 OBE involves tightened state control at the expense of local control. Although OBE salespersons claim otherwise, the new system tightens the grip of state education officials and federal education laboratories because they write the required outcomes, develop the curriculum, train the teachers, and judge the performance of the students (all of whom must conform to National Goals).

Even though local school districts may be told to develop their own plan for achieving the designated outcomes, the plans must be approved by the state departments of education. Texas Commissioner of Education Lionel Meno gave his definition of local control (*Texas Lone Star*, June 1991): The state sets the goals, the local districts choose how they will comply.

Teachers will not be able to get around the OBE system, and teach the basics anyway, because the teachers are graded on how their class meets the outcomes. Teachers who do not conform will be phased out, and the schools will be taken over by the state, as is mandated in Kentucky.

OBE in Pennsylvania. When the Pennsylvania State Department of Education first proposed converting to Outcome-Based Education in 1992, it listed 545 outcomes that students would have to meet before graduation. The outcomes were later condensed to 55. Many of the goals are affective, which means that they concern attitudes, values, feelings and emotions rather than academic achievement. A look at some of these outcomes makes clear that they cannot possibly measure students' performance objectively. Here are some examples.

"All students develop interpersonal communication, decision making, coping, and evaluation skills and apply them to personal, family, and community living." "All students understand and appreciate their worth as unique and capable individuals, and exhibit self-esteem." "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." "All students relate basic human development theories to care giving and child care strategies." "All students apply the fundamentals of consumer behaviour to managing available resources to provide for personal and family needs." "All students make environmentally sound decisions in their personal and civic lives."

OBE in Washington State. Washington State's Performance-Based Education Act of 1993 calls for a new performance-based assessment system to "replace the current state standardized achievement tests." The goals are extremely vague. For instance:

Under Goal 1 students are to "communicate effectively and responsibly in a variety of ways and settings." No indication is given of what is meant by "responsibly."

Under Goal 2 students know and apply the core concepts and principles, among other things, of "healthful living." What constitutes healthful living is not disclosed.

Under Goal 3 students are to "think critically and creatively, and integrate experience and knowledge to form reasoned judgments and solve problems." It is unclear whether or not "knowledge" includes the kind of specific fact-oriented knowledge that most of us consider an essential part of education.

Goal 4 instructs students to "function as caring and responsible individuals and contributing members of families, work groups, and communities." "Responsible" and "caring" are undefined. The outcomes also include "honest and ethical behaviour," which suggests a moral code of some sort, though presumably not a Judeo-Christian ethic. Another outcome is "citizenship," which is redefined from its traditional sense to include "a multicultural and world view."

OBE in Oklahoma. In 1992, the Oklahoma State Department of Education published five volumes of "Learner Outcomes" for Grades One through Twelve. The Foreword in each volume makes clear that the changes in the school system do **not** mean teaching the basics (usually defined as reading, writing and arithmetic). The Foreword states: "Oklahoma has joined a national movement in education — not a 'back to basics' approach, but an effort to focus and organize all of the school's educational

programs and instructional efforts around the clearly defined outcomes we want all students to demonstrate when they leave school."

The Oklahoma Learner Outcomes dictate total subservience to the discredited "word-guessing" method of teaching reading to first graders, and do not allow the use of the proven phonics method. Instead of teaching children to read by learning the sounds and syllables of the English language so that the child can sound out words, the child is taught by endless repetition to memorize a few dozen "sight" words, to guess at new words by looking at the pictures on the page, to "predict" the text instead of reading it, and to skip over words they can't read. The teacher is instructed **not** to have the child focus on reading actual words, but to let the child substitute any words that seem to fit.

The ability to read a simple story that a child has never seen before is **not** on the list of Oklahoma "outcomes." Predicting is **not** reading, nor is asking a friend, nor is guessing at the meaning from the illustrations.

Here are some direct quotations from the official "Oklahoma State Competencies, Grade One," pages 15-22, which confirm that first-graders will reach their "Reading Learner Outcomes" by guessing rather than by reading: "The student attend[s] to the meaning of what is read rather than focusing on figuring out words. . . . Uses context, pictures, syntax, and structural analysis clues to predict meanings of unknown words. Develops a sight vocabulary of high frequency words. . . . Predict[s] unknown words. . . . Uses predictions in order to read pattern books (stories with a repetitive element). . . . Uses fix-it strategies (predicts, uses pictorial cues, asks a friend, skips the word, substitutes another meaningful word). . . . The student will interpret a story from illustrations."

The "Oklahoma State Competencies, Grade Two" reinforce the guessing game rather than teaching the child to read. Here are some additional quotations (pages 7-15): "Use context clues and nonverbal clues to aid comprehension (pictures, type faces, word placement, illustrations). . . . Predict outcomes. . . . Makes, verifies, and/or revises predictions while reading."

Even in the 12th grade, the child is still told that he need not "focus on figuring out words." However, he must nevertheless demonstrate "a positive attitude toward self as a reader." (Grades 9 through 12, page 21.)

The Oklahoma Learner Outcomes for Mathematics, Grade One (pages 25-27) make clear that the child will not learn ordinary arithmetic skills (that will eventually enable him to make change at the grocery store), but will instead be given a mish-mash of "higher order thinking skills and facility in applying technology." The instructions state: "The longstanding preoccupation with computation and emphasis on rote activities must change to a focus on fostering mathematical insight, reasoning, and problem solving both individually and in collaborative groups." In other words, first-graders must sit around in a group and collaborate on their "insight" without ever learning the sums of 2+2 and 3+3. Learning the multiplication tables is not an outcome specified in any grade.

OBE's behaviour modification techniques are evident from the first-grade "Comprehensive Health Learner Outcomes." They include (page 60): "The student will identify different types of family structures, so that no single type is seen as the only possible one. . . . The student will describe ways family members resolve problems and conflicts."

Throughout the Oklahoma OBE curriculum, many "outcomes" are listed that pertain to feelings, rather than academic achievement. For example (Grade 4, page 70): "The student will enjoy feelings resulting from involvement in physical activity." Here are some of the Oklahoma outcomes that pertain to sex. "The student will identify appropriate expression of sexual feelings." (Grades 6-8, page 195.) "The student will develop communication skills, including being able to talk with one's actual or potential partner about sexual behaviour." (Grades 9-12, page 202.)

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the famous Russian author and former political prisoner in Soviet Gulags, said in a speech in the mid-1970s:

"Coexistence on this tightly knit earth should be viewed as an existence not only without wars . . . but also without [government] telling us how to live, what to say, what to think, what to know, and what not to know."

Unfortunately, that's what Outcome-Based Education is — a process for government telling our children how to live, what to say, what to think, what to know, and what not to know. What the children say, think and know must conform to the liberal Politically Correct ideology, attitudes and behaviour. What they do not know will be everything else. And because they won't know the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic, they won't be able to find out. OBE is converting the three R's to the three D's: *Deliberately Dumbed Down*.