

An Introduction to Outcomes-based Education

by

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Since the "A Nation at Risk" report a decade ago, our system and methods of education have undergone severe and serious scrutiny by numerous audiences. Educational reform has become a common goal in response to criticism that today's students are not prepared for the world which they will face in the twenty-first century. Educational systems, experts, organizations, consultants, theorists, observers, consumers and practitioners have produced voluminous reports, recommendations and studies relating to educational reform. Reform recommendations have ranged from discrete changes in our curriculum and instruction to changes in the structure and function of our schools based on new ways of thinking about teaching and learning. Outcomes-based education falls on the latter side of the reform continuum.

Outcomes-based education reflects the evolution of education and is a natural extension of many past reform efforts in curriculum, instruction and assessment. There are many individual interpretations of outcomes-based education reflecting how ideas have been communicated and translated into action by states, districts, and schools. It is important that, for the sake of clear communication, any discussion of outcomes-based education includes a definition in order to distinguish between nominal and functional outcomes efforts. Among outcomes-based education efforts there are common elements which define and identify functional outcomes-based education.

Outcomes-based education is basing everything we do in school on the outcomes we want all students to achieve by the time they leave us. This requires defining outcomes that are truly significant and necessary for students to be successful adults and then focusing all of our energies and resources on ensuring that our students have met

those outcomes. Curriculum, instruction, the school calendar, the school day, the organization of grades and levels, student assessment and evaluation - no part of an educational organization goes untouched when student outcomes are the focus of efforts.

Outcomes of significance are outcomes that are truly important for future success. Outcomes of significance are necessarily multidimensional: they extend beyond knowledge to include competence (what students can do) and orientation (what students are like). In the past, schools have tended to put more emphasis on, and thus produced students whose strengths reflected, pure knowledge. Knowledge lends itself to objective measurement and fairly simple reporting; it can be meted out in large or small doses of various difficulty; it can be communicated through a textbook. Some application of knowledge was emphasized by some teachers or within specific content or categorical areas. Now, however, projections of future employment and what today's employers say about their current employees, the rate at which knowledge is increasing with each passing day, and awareness of what is happening within our country and around the world clearly indicate that much more than knowledge will be required for our students' future success. Knowledge, orientation and competence make up the whole student. As adults reflecting on our experiences, we know that what we can do or what we are like shares equally with the importance of knowledge in contributing to our success. Failure to incorporate competence and orientation in our outcomes is a failure to prepare students adequately.

The necessity of articulating outcomes that are multidimensional and pervasive requires collaboration by all stakeholders. Educators, business people, parents, elected officials, and representatives of community organizations and interests must be involved in defining the outcomes of significance for our students. Early and substantive involvement builds ownership and provides a more complete perspective on what knowledge, competencies and orientations are needed for projected future success. Increasing numbers of states' and districts' adoptions of an outcomes approach has created dissent among some individuals and organizations in questioning the method and intent of schools' outcomes, primarily in addressing orientations as a dimension of student learning. As with any departure from traditional curriculum or instruction, outcomes-based education will be questioned and challenged. Substantive involvement of community members in developing outcomes of significance will build commu-

nity ownership and commitment to outcomes for all students. Community commitment is crucial to the success of an outcomes approach.

As outcomes-based education has been adopted by states and districts, common areas of outcomes have been identified. It appears that we predict adult success through a few general outcomes that are more specifically defined by each community. We want our students to be good citizens. We want them to be able to work well with different groups of people under different circumstances. We want them to be able to communicate in a variety of ways. We want them to be able to use technology. We want them to be able to solve problems and make informed decisions. These are not sophisticated or complicated. They are simply the hopes that most parents have for their children and the characteristics that people generally value in themselves and others.

Outcomes of significance are found in the context of society. Success is rarely proven in isolation, but within the challenges offered by the workplace, family, and community. Real life provides context and issues through which students' knowledge, orientations and attitudes are acquired and tested. These are complex, interrelated and interacting components which stretch beyond pure knowledge. This complexity requires corresponding changes in the presentation of learning experiences, the materials and tools with which students learn, the content with which experiences are organized, and the complexity of our assessment of students' progress. Every educational decision must be made on the basis of its contribution or potential contribution to students' achievement of the significant outcomes.

The nature of outcomes of significance and the resulting complexity of all educational decisions suggest the integral role of the social studies in successfully implementing outcomes-based education. It is necessary that social studies educators understand the important role that they can play as states, districts and school adopt outcomes-based education.