Organizing for Results: The Basis of Authentic Restructuring and Reform

By designing our educational system to achieve clearly defined exit outcomes, we will free ourselves from the traditional rigidity of schools and increase the likelihood that all students will learn.

"Organizing for results" is an inherently attractive concept. It implies a deliberate attempt to plan and conduct essential activities so as to accomplish our aims successfully—in other words, purposefully doing what we set out to do. From my perspective, that means having all students learn well, not just the fastest, the brightest, or the most advantaged. Unfortunately, our educational systems, schools, and instructional programs are not organized to achieve or ensure successful results; instead, they are organized primarily for student custody and administrative convenience. If we were to organize for results, we would have to make major changes in our philosophy, purpose, operations, and structures.

To appreciate the inconsistency between this sensible concept and the way we actually organize and operate schools, we need to look closely at the prevalent practice paradigm: the fundamental character and operating relationships of our system of education. That paradigm (fig. 1) is both defined by and organized around the calendar. School decision making, curriculum planning, instructional and administrative operations, institutional arrangements, student certification and graduation systems, and student opportunity and eligibility conditions—all are defined by and tied directly to the calendar.

The calendar and its adjuncts, the clock and the schedule, exert a pervasive influence on both the organization of schools and the thinking of those who work and study in them. Consider these universally accepted terms: school years, semesters, Carnegie units, seat time, credit hours, class periods, grade levels, programs of study, and student eligibility criteria. They all reflect our time-based way of doing business. Even courses, which we commonly refer to as "bodies of knowledge," are actually time blocks that uniformly last nine months, no matter what the content to be mastered or the success of students in mastering it. A "course" ends when time—usually the semester—runs out, not when students demonstrate the

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To ensure success for all students, educators must give up the notion that student performance conforms to the bell-shaped curve, because it serves only to limit both effort and expectation.

learnings the course was intended to convey. In short, we behave as if the entire educational system would collapse if teaching, testing, grading, awarding of credit, and promotion did not follow the calendar-driven two-semester schedule.

As Figure 1 shows, the prevalent practice paradigm includes a second powerful determinant of school organization: the legal mandate to keep students in the custody of the school for fixed periods of time. The calendar serves as a regulator and a measuring device of custody. This custody/calendar imperative defines student credit, eligibility conditions, and promotion (i.e., the school's certification system for students); and the certification system determines how the instructional system operates—when it should be the other way around. Note that in almost all schools a unit of credit requires a fixed number of hours of "seat time" in a course, and students cannot receive credit or be promoted unless they put in the necessary time. This rigidity virtually demands that content be packaged to fit class-period and semester-length blocks of time. Consequently, student placement and advancement are constrained within these larger blocks of time. It is much easier to move students once a year than to advance them when they are ready.

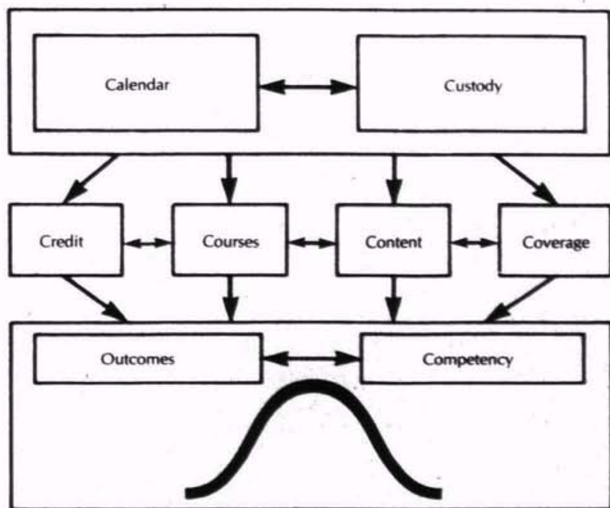

Fig. 1. The Prevalent Practice Paradigm

Furthermore, according to contemporary school reform advocates such as Wilbur Brookover, John Goodlad, Lawrence Lezotte, and Theodore Sizer, this calendar-defined model promotes teaching that emphasizes curriculum coverage over student mastery. Teachers too, they argue, get caught up in the unproductive syndrome of "putting in time" and "covering material." These reformers support my assertion that our schools are primarily organized for custody rather than for results.

The bottom section of Figure 1 shows the usual result of this way of operating schools: an enormous range of student outcomes—the typical bell-shaped curve—with only a small number of students reaching levels of performance that their teachers consider "successful." This pattern of results is, alas, known to educators as the "normal" curve. And it persists today, despite the contentions of John Carroll (1963) and Benjamin Bloom (1968, 1976, and 1980) that it rests on false assumptions about the nature and distribution of student aptitude for learning. Both argue that aptitude can best be understood as the *rate* at which individuals can acquire new learning or behavior, rather than the *levels* at which they can learn or perform. The bell-shaped curve, then, reflects the limited instructional delivery structures and constrained learning opportunities of calendar-driven schools, not the actual capabilities of learners. When time is held constant, conventional practice inevitably produces variable outcomes.

The Outcome-Based Paradigm

Most educators know that it would make more sense to operate schools on the basis of what students can actually do. But the demands of custody and administrative standardization make this ideal almost unattainable. I helped to develop the key concepts and frameworks of Outcome-Based Education to address that problem.

Outcome-Based Education (OBE) means organizing for results: basing what we do instructionally on the outcomes we want to achieve, whether in specific parts of the curriculum or in the schooling process as a whole. Outcome-based practitioners start by determining the knowledge, competencies, and qualities they want students to be able to demonstrate when they finish school and face the challenges and opportunities of the adult world. Then, with these "exit outcomes" clearly in mind, they deliberately design curriculums and instructional systems with the intent that *all* students will ultimately be able to demonstrate them successfully. OBE, therefore, is not a "program" but a way of designing, developing, delivering, and documenting instruction in terms of its intended goals and outcomes.

Figure 2 shows one version of how the outcome-based paradigm works. It contains almost all the elements of the prevalent practice paradigm, except that the defining/driving elements and the consequences elements have been reversed. In the outcome-based paradigm, it is the outcomes, not the calendar, that determine credit and, in turn, define what constitutes a "course" and the content needed in that course. Here the key issue is reaching the outcomes successfully, not precisely when or how much time it takes to do it. Further, this focus on outcomes calls for a different approach to pedagogy, with emphasis on active modeling, expecting success, in-

tensive engagement, diagnostic assessment, and frequent feedback to students about their performance—what Sizer (1983) calls "coaching."

Focusing on outcomes creates an inevitable need for educators to accommodate the differences in learning rates inherent in any group of students. The bottom of Figure 2 shows time and custody distributed in a theoretical bell-shaped curve; differences in students' aptitudes and abilities will be reflected in the time needed to reach given outcomes rather than in their success on those outcomes. This paradigm challenges schools to establish delivery systems that can adjust to these time differences—by varying the length and sequencing of instructional opportunities or by using short-term grouping strategies, for example.

The High Success Program

Recognizing the merits of this paradigm, nearly 2,000 educators across the U.S. and Canada have joined the Network for Outcome-Based Schools since its founding in 1980.

In January 1987, the Network received a grant from the Danforth Foundation to introduce and implement the outcome-based paradigm in 12 Arizona and Illinois high school and elementary districts. This effort is called the High Success Program (HSP) on Outcome-Based Education. As its director, I have worked with hundreds of teachers and administrators who are now experiencing the positive impact of the OBE paradigm on curriculum organization, teaching, student motivation and learning, and instructional leadership. "Organizing for results" and "success for all" are two of our mottoes.

The Outcomes that Define Outcome-Based Education

In Outcome-Based Education, exit outcomes are a critical factor in designing the curriculum: you develop the curriculum *from* the outcomes you want students to demonstrate, rather than writing objectives *for* the curriculum you already have. I encourage districts to develop exit outcomes that go far beyond the narrow subject-matter emphasis that characterizes most state testing and reform efforts. HSP districts such as Sunnyside Unified in Tucson, Arizona, and Township High School District 214 in Mt. Prospect, Illinois, have defined exit outcomes that reflect our emphasis on the broad opportunities and challenges students will face when they leave school and assume adult responsibilities. We want students to be equipped to lead enriched and successful lives—not just to meet conventional curriculum demands or college admission requirements.

This broad perspective provides a rich range of possibilities for the development of high-level, cross-disciplinary, experiential curriculum, teaching, and learning. By defining competencies of all kinds in both functional and higher-order terms, HSP districts know that their outcome goals and indicators need not be limited to basic skills, low-level cognition, and narrow objectives. For example, District 214 has identified 10 "General Learner Outcomes" as the keys to its instructional design and delivery processes. Among the things this district expects all graduates to demonstrate are (1) skills in problem solving and decision making; (2) skills in expressing themselves creatively and responding to the creative works of others; (3) concern, tolerance, and respect for others; (4) skills in adapting to and creating personal and social change; (5) capacity for enhancing and sustaining self-esteem through emotional, intellectual, and physical well-being; and (6) skills necessary to be self-directed learners.

The design and development strategies of OBE flow from an equally straightforward principle: that all other levels of outcomes in an instructional system—program outcomes, course outcomes, unit outcomes, and, ultimately, lesson outcomes—should be derived directly from, and align with, these visionary exit outcomes. In other

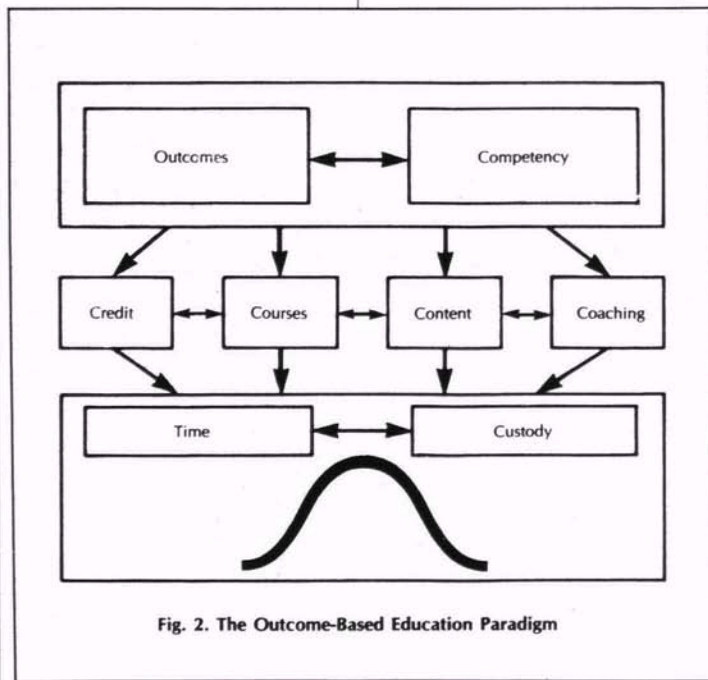

Fig. 2. The Outcome-Based Education Paradigm

words, we design *down* from broadly defined exit outcomes to define coherent, thematic programs that directly support them, then determine what the appropriate segments of the program should be (what educators almost always call a course or grade level), and then determine the appropriate units to facilitate those course outcomes. Figure 3 illustrates this process of designing down.

The Key Operational Principles

In my experience, three key principles enable our HSP teachers to create the "success conditions" that foster student motivation and learning. By systematically following these three principles, teachers can implement the optimistic "success for all" philosophy and purpose of Outcome-Based Education to provide what we have come to call "PRO Success Instruction."

1. *Clarity of focus on outcomes.* At the beginning of all courses, units, and lessons, teachers should clearly describe to students the outcomes they expect them to demonstrate successfully as a result of those experiences. They should also make sure that their curriculum, instructional focus, modeling, evaluation standards, and grading all closely align with those outcomes. At all times, students should know what the goals of their learning experiences are, what criteria will be used to assess their performance on those goals, and where they stand in relation to each of those goals (rather than to each other). This clear picture of where they stand and where they are headed is a genuine boon and stimulus to students.

2. *Expanded opportunity and instructional support.* OBE practitioners believe that all students deserve the time and instructional support they need to learn well what is considered essential to their future success in school and in life. Instead of merely "covering the curriculum" (fig. 1), teachers should use an intensive coaching approach, ensuring that students have mastered content, concepts, or skills before advancing them to lessons, units, courses, or levels that

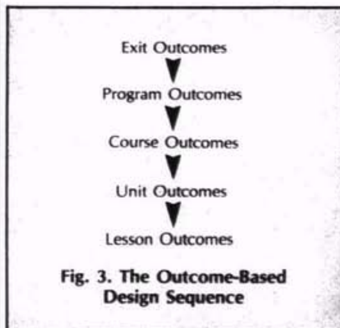

Fig. 3. The Outcome-Based Design Sequence

directly depend on those prerequisite learnings (fig. 2).

This ideal can be realized in a variety of ways. Many HSP teachers set aside time for students to continue to improve their performance and grade of record *after* an initial assessment of their learning has taken place. This extra time allows teachers to target assistance on the concepts or areas where students are having difficulty—a corrective loop. These HSP teachers have informally adopted a rule that encourages second chances and continuing support: "Grade in pencil rather than in ink." They have also come to recognize that there is a large difference between practice assignments and outcome demonstrations and have begun to focus their formal grading almost exclusively on the latter.

In addition, HSP teachers have learned that "second chance" instructional opportunities have an impressive impact on the success and motivation of many students, particularly those who have not been the fastest and best learners in the class and those who want to learn as well as they can. And, rather than encouraging procrastination as some teachers feared, these practices motivate many students to keep trying to reach levels of mastery not previously attainable. Having recognized these benefits, HSP teachers now define their professional role in a fundamentally different way. They speak about no longer being "in the coverage business but in the learning success business" and are eager to find ways to help all students learn more successfully.

3. *High expectations for learning success.* HSP teachers now hold the philosophy that all students can learn successfully. And many of them have come to recognize the wisdom in Bloom's assertion that learning results are a direct reflection of both teacher expectations and the instructional practices that embody and reinforce them. Consequently, they now insist that all students reach high performance standards on all outcomes within their reasonable grasp.

These teachers have achieved this goal by defining outcomes in higher-order terms, by setting high criterion standards for grades and credit, by giving students temporary "Incompletes" rather than permanent low grades if standards are not met, and, of course, by providing additional instruction when necessary. By insisting that students re-do assignments until they perform well, by allowing students to re-take tests (in alternate forms) until they score well, by grading in pencil rather than in ink, and by actually changing grades to reflect improvements in performance, teachers have created an incentive system that is challenging and supportive at the same time. Students know they have to do high-quality work to receive credit, but they also know that they will be given the support they need to reach those challenging standards.

Implications of the Paradigm

We have entered an era in which policymakers and the public seem to realize more clearly than ever before that undeveloped human talent and educational failure are permanent drains on society. Most of the "reforms" that emanated from the studies, reports, and state policy initiatives of 1983 did little to change the structural and operational features of schools, features that reinforce the prevalent practice paradigm and its bell-shaped distribution of outcomes. If disillusionment with the quick fixes of the '80s leads to a serious re-examination of how schools are organized

A Model for Outcome-Based Education

The Outcome-Based Education model shares with all other instructional systems four major operational components: (1) curriculum content and structure, (2) instructional delivery, (3) student assessment and credentialling, and (4) student placement and advancement. Outcome-Based Education differs, however, in how these four components relate to each other and to the outcomes that result from them (see fig. 4).

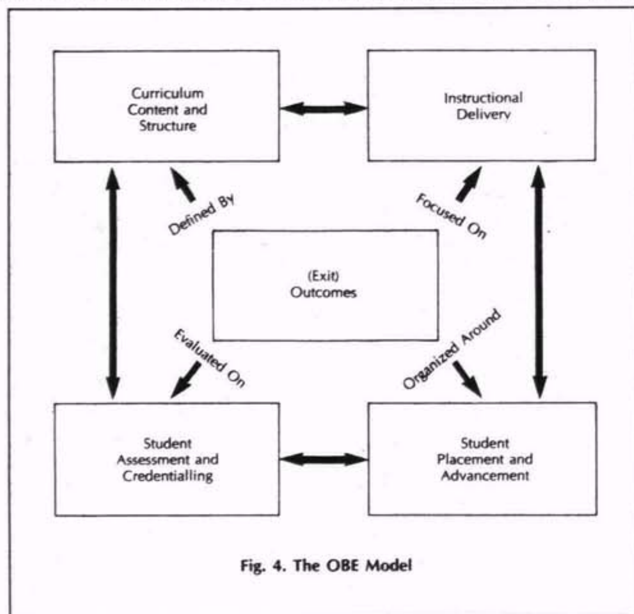

Fig. 4. The OBE Model

In this model, exit outcomes—the knowledge, competencies, and personal qualities we want students to demonstrate upon leaving school—are the driving force in designing and conducting instruction in schools. Figure 4 accordingly shows exit outcomes at the center of the model, with arrows pointing outward to the other components, which are defined and determined by them. (If Fig. 4 represented prevailing practices, either the word *Calendar* would sit at the center, or the diagonal arrows would point inward.)

The arrow pointing to Curriculum Content and Structure indicates that curriculum is defined by the substance and requirements of the exit outcomes, not the other way around. (In authentic outcome-based practice, objectives are not developed for the curriculum that already exists.) The arrow pointing to Instructional Delivery means that teachers' instructional planning and classroom practices continually focus on the outcomes being pursued. The arrow pointing to Student Assessment and Credentialling means that the criteria for evaluating students reflect the exit outcomes, placing the emphasis on *what* students can demonstrate rather than on *when* the demonstration takes place. The arrow pointing to Student Placement and Advancement means that students' placement in instructional groups and students' opportunity to advance should match their performance on essential outcomes, not just their ages or assigned tracks.

After clearly defining exit outcomes, outcome-based practitioners design curriculum content and structure, instructional delivery, student assessment and credentialling, and student placement and advancement that directly match and support them. By ensuring that these four components support *each other* as well, outcome-based practitioners align the entire instructional system and thereby increase the chances that all students will learn successfully. Figure 4 indicates this interrelationship by means of the two-way arrows between these four components.

The model depicted here represents a dramatically different way of thinking about the design, delivery, and documentation of instructional programs and learning results. By organizing for *results*, the districts that have introduced this approach in their schools and classrooms are enhancing their students' success—and thus their own.

—William G. Spady

and operate, I believe that fundamental transformation along the lines I have discussed here could take place.

Organizing for results requires changes in many facets of schooling: grading and credentialling systems, curriculum development and organization, eligibility conditions that govern when and for how long students are allowed to learn particular content, grouping practices, the emphasis on textbooks as definers of the curriculum and dominators of instructional planning and pedagogy, systems of testing and accountability used to measure both personal and program effectiveness, and our inherently competitive and comparative system of expectations, opportunities, and rewards.

While the broad-scale implementation of the outcome-based paradigm may seem impossible, smaller-scale attempts to apply its philosophy and principles are already meeting with success, in HSP districts and elsewhere. Educators can be confident that Outcome-Based Education will truly help them to organize for—and get—results.□

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