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Restructuring to Achieve Outcomes of Significance for All Students

The people of Arlington Heights, Illinois, worked together to define the learning outcomes essential for their students' success, then set about designing their curriculum around them.

"Would you tell me, please," said Alice, "which way I ought to walk from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where . . . ," said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you walk," said the Cat.

". . . so long as I get somewhere," Alice added as an explanation.

"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."

—from *Alice in Wonderland*
by Lewis Carroll

In sharp contrast to Alice's contentment simply to arrive "somewhere," our outcome-based program in Township High School District 214 in Arlington Heights, Illinois, has been designed to answer the question of where we want our students to travel in their learning. Over the past three years, teams of teachers, administrators, school board members, and residents of our district have worked together to define our learner outcomes, striving to address three key questions: (1) *Upon completion of their high school studies, what should our students know?* (2) *What should they be able to do?* and (3) *What should they feel or believe?* As we embarked upon the effort to define essential learning outcomes for our students, we took steps to address several dimensions of our vision, including hindsight, depth perception, and peripheral vision. But it was our efforts to sharpen our foresight that probably made the greatest difference in our work to define essential outcomes.

Keeping an Eye to the Future

Our district's strategic plan includes our vision for our students and staff, as well as the district as a whole, and defines our mission, beliefs, and goals as well. Specifically, our mission is to "enable all students to learn the skills, acquire the knowledge, and develop the attitudes necessary for them to reach their full potential as citizens who can meet the challenges of a changing global society."

Our ongoing study of future world conditions predicted by the country's leading futurists and demographers has led us to ask ourselves how we are planning to help students:

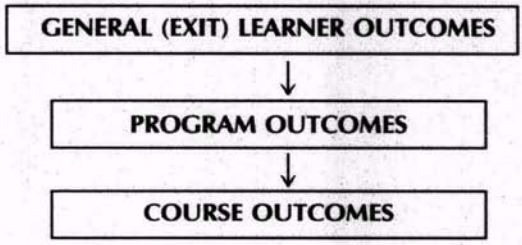
- become self-directed learners;
- employ problem-solving and decision-making skills;
- attain communication and group-interaction skills;
- express themselves creatively;
- utilize skills necessary to adapt to and create change;
- enhance and sustain their self-esteem;
- demonstrate concern, tolerance, and respect for others.

We asked ourselves, *What does the diploma from District 214 represent?* and *What are the essential learnings we believe are critical to the success of all of our students?*

During the process of defining the outcomes of significance for student learning, we focused on the image of our students walking across the stage on graduation day and receiving their diplomas. We asked ourselves, *What does the diploma from District 214 represent?* and *What are the essential learnings we believe are critical to the success of all of our students?* This focus helped us identify the following exit outcomes, or general learner outcomes, for our students:

- ability to communicate (in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and numeracy skills);
- facility in social interaction;
- analytic capabilities;
- problem-solving skills;
- skill in making value judgments and decisions;
- skill in creative expression and in responding to the creative work of others;

Fig. 1. Curriculum Alignment.



- civic responsibility;
- responsible participation in a global environment;
- skill in developing and maintaining wellness;
- skill in using technology as a tool for learning;
- skill in life and career planning.

It is important to note that these 11 statements are not goal statements or simply part of the district's philosophy. Rather, they are outcome statements—our students are required to demonstrate achievement of these outcomes.

Designing An Outcome-Based Curriculum

The district's general learner outcomes serve as the foundation of our curriculum development process. Based upon the principle of curriculum alignment, which is one of the chief operational principles of outcome-based education, we have employed the curriculum development framework illustrated in Figure 1.

Our program level outcomes address the following academic areas: English, mathematics, science, social studies, fine arts, physical education and health, foreign language, and practical arts. We also developed program outcomes in student services and student activities, to more fully address the totality of student life in our schools and to expand the range of opportunities for students to achieve each of the general learner outcomes.

Besides defining the essential outcomes in each content area and aligning them with the general learner outcomes, program outcome teams were also asked to outline the most appropriate sequence of learnings within each program and to design curriculum frameworks. These frameworks include various pathways students can follow to achieve the essential program outcomes. Some pathways include more courses than others, depending upon the students' entry level achievement and degree of mastery of the course prerequisites. Consequently, while the amount of credit earned and the number of courses that students complete to achieve the essential learner outcomes may vary, the core set of learnings that all students must achieve remains constant.

Developing Performance-Based Indicators

One of the most important steps we took to facilitate the task of aligning the program outcomes with the general (exit) learner outcomes was to identify performance-based indicators of students' achievement of the exit outcomes. Over the past two years an interdisciplinary team of faculty members and administrators, with the technical assistance and support of our friends from Alverno College,[1] developed a set of indicators for each of our general learner outcomes. These indicators provide a picture of the ability described in each outcome.

Throughout our work, our colleagues from Alverno cautioned us to be aware of some critical challenges to identifying these indicators, such as the fact that an ability is larger than the observed performance of it or that any performance or demonstration of an ability is larger than the sum of the criteria applied to it. While we were mindful of these challenges, we were also determined to turn around the expression "I'll believe it wher I see it" to "I'll see it when I believe it."

If we truly believe it is important for our students to develop analytic capabilities, for example, then what in their performances will indicate that they have indeed developed the skills of analysis? What would we accept as evidence that we have made progress in helping students develop these skills? Some of our answers to these questions are:

- The student employs observation skills to acquire useful knowledge and information and classifies and organizes information;
- The student draws and supports inferences;
- The student describes and defines relationships such as cause/effect and comparison/contrast;
- The student integrates and applies skills in observation, classification, organization, inference, and in the definition of relationships in a variety of situations.

Shifting the Focus of Instruction

Since developing the indicators for each of our exit outcomes, we have designed an achievement level framework that takes into account the developmental nature of the outcomes. Essentially, we identified three levels of achievement:

- Level 1: the development of a knowledge base related to the outcomes;
- Level 2: the students' demonstration of practical applications of the exit outcome within various contexts;
- Level 3: the ability to transfer their learning to new situations.

An overview of the achievement level framework is presented in Figure 2.

Fig. 2. District 214 General Learner Outcomes Achievement Levels Framework

Students Will Demonstrate:	Communication	Social Interaction	Analysis	Problem Solving	Value Judgments and Decisions	Creativity	Civic Responsibility	Global Environment	Wellness	Technology	Life and Career Planning
Level 1: • Understanding of a knowledge base • Application of knowlege with evaluative criteria											
Level 2: • Practical applications of their learning within various contexts											
Level 3: • The ability to transfer their learning to new situations • The ability to integrate their learning and create new applications of learning											

Essentially, the original set of indicators we developed addresses the first level of the achievement framework; and the second and third levels, developed later, deal with more extensive applications of learning. They provide a progression of applications by which students can demonstrate greater independence as learners. A comparison of the learner's role and the instructional role, presented in Figure 3, provides an illustration of this progression.

The outline presented in Figure 3 not only highlights the developmental sequence of students' achievement of the exit outcomes, but also illustrates the shift in instructional focus, from a direct instruction role to coaching and facilitative roles, that complements students' progress and development as learners. As we worked to develop the indicators of our students' performance, we often referred to this progressive shift in instructional focus as moving from the role of "sage on the stage" (direct instruction) to the role of "guide on the side" (coach/facilitator). Clearly, our ultimate goal is to enable our students to gain greater independence in their learning as they demonstrate mastery of the outcomes. To accomplish this goal, we believe it is essential to also restructure the instructional process and support systems within an outcome-based framework.

Expanding Opportunities for Success

Defining the outcomes for all of our students and restructuring our curriculum to provide the essential learning experiences are only the first steps in the development of our outcome-based education program. If these efforts are going to make a difference, deliberate and systematic connections must be established throughout the instructional process. The outcomes we expect our students to achieve must drive our decisions about the types of instructional strategies to employ, the design of learning activities for students, and the means of assessing student achievement. This principle of instructional alignment and outcome-driven decision making is one of the chief defining features of our district's adopted instructional model (see fig. 4).

Another key defining feature of our instructional model is the principle of expanded opportunity. In particular, the instructional strategies component of the model calls for frequent formative assessment of student progress and the opportunity for students to receive remediation or extra assistance when necessary. In many respects our instructional model could be described as a second-chance system. The notion that failure is not absolute, but rather a temporary setback that may be overcome, stands among the core set of beliefs that have directed our efforts to apply the principle of expanded opportunity.

But although the positive effects of implementing the principle of expanded opportunity have been thor-

Fig. 3. District 214 Roles for Learners and Instructors.

Learner's Role	Instructional Role
Students will demonstrate:	
Level 1:	**Direct Instruction**
• Understanding of a knowledge base. • Application of knowledge with evaluative criteria.	• Helps students establish a foundation of knowledge.
Level 2:	**Coaching Model**
• Practical applications of their learning within various contexts.	• Coaching for application.
Level 3:	**Facilitator**
• The ability to transfer their learning to new situations. • The ability to integrate their learning and create new applications of learning.	• Supports and encourages student as an independent learner.

oughly documented in the research and development on mastery learning (Block and Anderson 1975, Bloom 1976, Guskey and Gates 1985)—the implementation of this operational principle of outcome-based education poses serious challenges, particularly at the secondary school level.

Restructuring Instructional Support Systems

Inbar and Sever (1986) identified two types of challenges similar to those we have faced in our district in implementing second-chance systems:

> Since second-chance processes do not take place in a vacuum and are part of a whole social structure, the facility of their implementation should not be taken for granted. If we focus on the realm of educational structures, it seems safe to assume that many of the systems which offer a second chance challenge the regular (first-chance) systems. This challenge can be of two kinds: (a) questioning the validity of the selection procedures by which some of the pupils were excluded from the option for further progress or mobility and (b) questioning the inputs and teaching processes of the regular system as inadequate for some of the pupils.

To address these challenges, we redesigned our procedures for validating student achievement in several important ways. First, we restructured our placement process around our outcome-based program. We decided that students' achievement of the prerequisites for each program should drive decisions about the most appropriate placement of our students. Teams of faculty members from our district worked together to develop program and course outcomes aligned with other general learner outcomes, and they also determined the prerequisites students must accomplish to ensure their success. Then they designed criterion-referenced assessments of these prerequisite outcomes. Consequently, these assessments are now available to help us determine the most appropriate placement for our students at the outset of their high school studies.

We have also adopted an outcome-based, rather than a time-based set of grading procedures. Under our redesigned grading procedures, our foremost concern is whether or not students achieve the essential outcomes, not when they succeed. For example, if a student experiences great difficulty in a particular course, re-takes the course in summer school, and earns an *A* or a *B* during the summer, the higher summer school grade is entered on the student's transcript, not an average of the two grades. What matters is not *when* the student achieves the outcomes but, rather, *whether* the student eventually achieves success. Once the student demonstrates success, that level of success is fully recognized. Much the same practice is followed within each grading period: once a student achieves the essential outcomes, whether it is the first week of the term or the day before the final exam, the full level of achievement is reflected in his or her grade.

Our restructured grading procedures also reflect our belief in the importance of establishing predetermined standards for student achievement of the outcomes, not predetermined distributions of achievement ("grading on the curve"). Consequently, if 80 percent of our students meet the standards for an

Fig. 4. District 214 Instructional Model

1. *Outcomes*. Course outcomes established by consensus of the district's teachers will be used as the basis for decisions regarding what will be taught. Individual teachers will clearly identify unit and lesson outcomes for students prior to each unit of instruction and each lesson.

2. *Strategies*. Teachers will design instructional strategies to maximize student achievement of the outcomes. The instructional strategies will include multiple learning opportunities for students. Teachers will provide frequent feedback to students concerning their achievement and will provide additional learning opportunities when necessary. Teachers will use a wide variety of instructional strategies. The selection of strategies will be based upon the nature of the outcomes and students' learning styles and needs.

3. *Assessments*. Teachers will reference their assessments of student achievement (tests, essays, projects, portfolios, performances) to course outcomes. Assessments may be drawn entirely or partially from a districtwide bank of teacher-developed and/or teacher-selected items which are referenced to the course outcomes.

A, it gives us reason to celebrate and not a reason to change the curve.

Further, our belief in the importance of establishing predetermined standards led us to disband the practice of honoring only one student per school as the class valedictorian. We realized that this practice of singling out one individual was based on our former way of relying on predetermined distributions. The formula called for only one student to be honored, and in many cases it was only one ten-thousandths of a decimal point that actually distinguished that student's performance. Now we celebrate with the young people in our schools who have met our Highest Honor Graduate standard, which is comparable to the levels of achievement of our former valedictorians. Last year more than 80 students from across the district's six high schools achieved this standard and were recognized at a special honors convocation.

One major component of the instructional support system we developed to facilitate the shift from a first-chance to a second-chance system is a districtwide instructional resource network. Thanks in part to funding from the Model Practices Grant program of the State of Illinois, we developed a computer-based network that provides a clearinghouse of instructional strategies and learning activities aligned with the essential outcomes. The network also serves as an assessment bank. Various forms of assessments of the learner outcomes designed by each faculty are made available to all teachers across the district to assist them in providing both formative and summative measures of student progress.

Arriving in the Future

Our struggle to define the direction learning should take for our students has taken us down a challenging road. The restructuring of our schools within an outcome-based framework rests on the conviction that we cannot afford to merely hope that outcomes of significance for our students might somehow become the consequences of our decisions. Rather, we believe that such outcomes must be the definers, the driving force behind each of our decisions, so that our students will arrive successfully in the future and not, like Alice, simply get "somewhere." In many respects, we have stayed the course throughout the process because of the power of our affirmations—affirmations of the potential of our students and affirmations of our ability to make a difference for the young people we serve. Today we remain optimistic and steadfast in our beliefs that all students can learn and that schools can indeed control the conditions of success.□

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