

# Evaluating Education Reform

## Changes in Education

It's the end of your child's first semester of high school and you are expecting the usual report card. Instead, he brings home a portfolio of work which exemplifies his progress towards achieving a series of educational goals established by the district. What's a parent to think?

Or perhaps you have just found out that your first grader will be attending a multi-aged classroom next year which utilizes a cooperative education format and a whole language, interdisciplinary curriculum. What should a parent do?

How about finding out that your fifth-grade daughter attends a school that endorses mastery learning, site-based management, and an effective schools administrative plan? Is it time to panic?

In such circumstances, what is the proper course of action? Should you pull your children out and home school them? Or, should you enroll them in a private school?

Educational reform, which seems to be never ending, often places Christians in a difficult position. Frequently it's hard to know which reforms are hostile to Christian truth, which are merely poorly conceived ideas, and which are actually worthwhile changes in the way we educate children? Many Americans, Christian or otherwise, are becoming cynical regarding educational reform. Every new innovation promises to revolutionize the classroom, and yet things seem to get progressively worse. The last decade has brought more sweeping reform to our schools than ever before, yet few seem to be convinced that our elementary and secondary schools are performing as we would like them to.

In this essay we will evaluate the notion of educational reform in America's public schools. First, we will consider how one might evaluate reforms in general and then look at specific reforms that are currently being debated. These debates often center on five concerns, or what some call crises, in our schools. They are the crisis of authority, the crisis of content, the crisis of methodology, the crisis of values, and the crisis of funding. The term *crisis* is used here to connote "a turning point" rather than "collapse or abandonment." Although your local school district may not be embroiled in all five of these concerns, each are widespread throughout the country.

Never have so many Americans been so unsure of their public schools, and many of these people are looking for answers, any answers that will solve the problems that they feel are destroying the effectiveness of education in America. This time of crisis coincides with a split in our society over some very basic notions of what America should be and on what intellectual and moral foundations its institutions should rest. This makes our response to these crises as Christians even more significant. It is also a time of opportunity to have considerable impact on the way our schools operate.

Although the terminology surrounding these crises can be esoteric, they are anything but ivory tower issues. Not only is a great deal of money involved, literally billions of tax dollars, but how our children or perhaps our neighbor's children will be educated will be determined by the resolution of these issues.

Each crisis also represents an opportunity for the Christian community to be salt and light. In order to act as a preservative we must be a discerning people. Too often the Christian community responds to societal change with anger or passivity, when neither are appropriate. Once we gain an understanding of what is happening to our schools we need to respond in a biblically informed manner that seeks the best

for both our children and those of our community.

## How to Evaluate Reform

Your local school district has just announced that it is installing a new grade school curriculum based on the most recent innovations from brain research. The staff touts the program as widely implemented and research based. As a parent you have yet to take a position on the program, waiting until you have more information, but you feel at a loss as to what type of questions might be appropriate to ask in order to begin your evaluation.

The first step is to understand what is meant by a research-based innovation. For a school program to be truly research-based, an incredible amount of effort must be invested. Unfortunately, few educational reforms are based on such foundations. Two professors of education, Arthur Ellis and Jeffrey Fouts at Seattle Pacific University, have written a book titled *Research on Educational Innovations* that offers some realistic guidelines for evaluation. The first step in evaluating any reform is to realize that "Theories of human behavior have real, lasting consequences when we try them out on human beings." For that reason alone we should be careful when applying theory to our classrooms.

There are actually three levels of research that need to be finished before proponents of a theory can claim that their curriculum or innovation is truly "research-based." The first level is what might be called "pure research." This often consists of medical or psychological discoveries from clinical experimentation. This kind of research is most effective when specific in focus and highly controlled in methodology, but it might be also be the result of philosophical inquiry. The thinking and writing of Jean Piaget on the development of the intellect is an example of a theoretical source for educational reform that was derived from both observation and philosophical speculation. Unfortunately, this is where the

research support of many programs ends, but in order to be called research-based much more needs to be done.

The second level of research involves testing and measuring a theory's implications for actual learning. Here, the theory discovered in the laboratory or minds of philosophers must be implemented in a classroom setting. With the help of carefully controlled groups, researchers can determine whether or not the innovation actually aids in achieving stated educational goals— that kids really do learn more. A third level of research requires educators to discern if this innovation can be applied successfully school-wide and in diverse settings.

To complete research on an innovation at these three levels takes time, money, and tenacity, three things that are often found lacking in our schools. With the incredible political and social pressures to fix our system, educators often turn to programs that make dramatic promises yet lack the necessary testing and trial periods to substantiate the claims of their promoters.

For the Christian parent, establishing whether or not an educational reform is adequately researched is just the beginning of the evaluation process. Even if a program works in the sense that it achieves its stated goals, not all goals are equally desirable. Every reform must be weighed against biblical truth, because they often make assumptions about human nature, about morality, and the way we should answer some of the other big questions of life. Christian parents can never sit idly on the sidelines regarding their children's educational experiences, because education, in all its many facets, helps to shape our children's view of what is real and important in life.

## **Current Reforms**

Outcome-based educational reform is causing some very heated debates throughout the country. At its core OBE is a fairly

simple framework around which a curriculum may be organized. It shifts schools away from the current focus on inputs to outcomes, from time units to measured abilities. It assumes all kids can learn, but not at the same speed. Instead of having all students take U.S. history for two semesters of sixteen weeks each, students would be given credit when they master a list of expected behavioral and cognitive outcomes. Not all students will complete the objectives at the same time. The focus is on the tasks to be accomplished, not the time it takes to accomplish them.

OBE would not qualify as a research-based innovation. It claims little or no research at the basic or primary level. At the classroom level, much of the associated research has been done on the concept of mastery learning. There has been considerable amount of work done on this teaching method, and many think that it is a good thing. Others, like Robert Slavin, argue that mastery learning produces short-term or limited results. This still leaves much of the OBE system without a research base. Level three research which seeks to determine if a reform innovation actually works at the district or school level is mostly anecdotal. Stories of how districts have been turned around by OBE are rarely published in journals for critical review.

This doesn't mean that OBE is without merit; the point is, we really don't know. What most people get upset about is how many in the educational bureaucracy have used OBE to establish a somewhat politically correct agenda as educational outcomes, often dealing more with feelings and attitudes than with knowledge and skills.

Another reform which creates conflict is the implementation of thinking skills programs. The idea is to formulate content neutral classroom exercises that will enhance thinking skills across the curriculum. This assumes that there are skills that can be isolated from content and be taught to students. Unfortunately, there isn't an agreed upon list of skills that

should be included. Brain research, cognitive science, and information processing theories are possible sources for such a list, but according to Ellis and Fouts in their book *Research on Educational Innovations*, these have not been tied to basic research programs yet. Since there are ambiguities at the basic level, little level two research has been done to decide if learning can indeed be effected. One study done in 1985 (Norris) concluded that we don't know much about critical thinking and that what we do know suggests that it tends to be context sensitive which strongly argues against the entire notion of thinking skills courses.

School or district wide analysis of these programs tends to consist of "success stories" with little analysis. Again, at this point there is very little evidence that thinking skills can be taught independently of content.

Both outcome-based reform and higher reasoning skills programs are examples of ideas that have found great favor among educators, but little support among Christian parents. This often reflects the imposition of naturalistic or pantheistic assumptions via these reforms by some educators, rather than a critical evaluation of the reforms methods themselves. Unfortunately, some Christians have resorted to personal attacks on the reformers motives, rather than a careful study of the innovation or methodology itself.

Some school reforms are questionable from the beginning—comprehensive sex education being one that comes to mind. But others may contain helpful attributes and yet be poorly implemented or grow into a dogma that drives out other good or necessary parts of the curriculum. Cooperative education and whole language programs can often fit this description.

The two methodologies are different in that cooperative education has a well established research base supporting it, while whole language lacks much beyond the level one or basic research. Christians have generally been against both

concepts, but for different reasons. Let's first describe the innovations themselves.

Cooperative education grew out of Kurt Lewin's research in the 1930s on group dynamics and social interaction. One description, offered by an advocate states, "cooperative learning methods share the idea that students work together to learn and are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own." The idea is to use group motivation to get individuals to excel and grow. Most models of cooperative learning programs stress:

- *interdependence of learners*
- *student interaction and communication*
- *individual accountability*
- *instruction on social skills*
- *group processing of goal achievement.*

Advocates of cooperative learning have been charged by some Christians with wanting to do away with personal excellence and using group pressure to get children to conform to secular moral norms. I am sure that both of these complaints have justification, but this doesn't have to be the case. In fact, many advocates of cooperative learning don't want to do away with the competitive aspect of schooling, they just want to moderate it and to help students to develop the skill of working in groups. Working in groups does not conflict with Christian thinking. In fact, Christian schools and seminaries make use of similar techniques all the time.

A problem occurs when over-zealous promoters of cooperative learning declare all competitive learning to be dangerous, or offer cooperative learning as a schooling panacea equivalent to a cure for cancer. Some teachers fail to hold students accountable for their work which can lead to unequal effort and unjust rewards for individuals. This lesson damages student motivation and the integrity of the teacher.

Whole language has much less research to support its claims, most of which is at the theoretical or basic level. Whole language theorists argue that language is acquired by actually using it rather than by learning its parts. It rejects a technical approach to language which encouraged learning phonics and grammar rules rather than the simple joy of reading and writing. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that this approach teaches students to read and write well. A large study done in 1989 by Stahl and Miller concluded (1) that there is no evidence whole language instruction produces positive effects, and (2) that it may well produce negative ones.

This is not to say that some whole language ideas might not be implemented beneficially with the more traditional phonics, spelling, and grammar instruction. Its emphasis on reading actual literature, not basal readers, is a positive step, as is encouraging students to write often on diverse topics.

There are a number of problems from a theoretical viewpoint that I have with what is promoted as whole language theory, but my response as a Christian should be to work with the teacher and school my child attends, or to find a setting that teaches in a manner that satisfies my expectations. In any case, a Christlike humility should pervade my contact with the teacher and school.

## **Educators vs. The Public**

In spite of the fact that most Americans see the need for improving our public schools, there has been tremendous resistance to reform, both from parents and many teachers. Information found in a recent study titled *First Things First: What Americans Expect From the Public Schools*, published by the Public Agenda Foundation might give us some reasons why.

Focusing on parents of public school children, and particularly on Christian and African-American families, the



report found that these groups support most of the same solutions to our school's problems. Both groups want higher educational standards and clear guidelines for what students should know and what teachers should teach. They reject social promotions and overwhelmingly feel that high school students should not graduate without writing and speaking English well. African-American parents were even more dissatisfied with their schools than others, and more concerned with low expectations on the part of educators.

A second finding was that school reform was viewed in fundamentally different ways by educators and the public. Most educators believe that schools are doing relatively well while the public feels that much improvement is needed. In Connecticut, 68% of educators felt the schools are better now than when they were in school. Only 16% of the public agreed. Educators and parents differ radically in their explanations for our school's problems. Educators blame public complacency, taxpayer selfishness and racism. Although the public supports integration and equal opportunity, it rejects the notion that more money will automatically fix our schools.

Parents' chief concerns are safe, orderly, and focused schools. Nine of ten Americans believe that dependability and discipline will help our students learn better than reforms in test taking or assessments in general. Three out of four parents support permanently removing students caught with guns or drugs from our schools and temporarily removing those who misbehave. Unfortunately, educators rarely make these issues the center of reform proposals. Other findings include the belief that stable families are a more decisive factor for determining student success than a particular school setting is and a perception that educators are often pushing untested experimental methods at the expense of the basics.

Educators and parents were far apart on a number of classroom methods as well. Parents find nothing wrong with having kids memorize the 50 state capitals and where they are located, or

to learn to perform math functions without the aid of a calculator. Educators are much more likely to stress higher-order reasoning skills and early use of calculators. Parents in general are less preoccupied with the need for sex ed, AIDS education, multicultural experiences, and even school prayer. They tend to want schools to be safe, orderly, and academically sound.

There seems to be much common ground that the vast majority of parents, and other taxpayers, agree on. As Christians, we probably would be much happier with our schools if they were safe, orderly, and academically sound. Most Christian parents understand and accept the fact that their public schools will not be overtly Christian. On the other hand, they feel that the Christian faith and its presuppositions should receive fair treatment when reforms are instituted. In recent years many Christian parents have seen their schools initiate programs that both challenge and ridicule their beliefs. This isn't necessary, and it has alienated the very people who must fund and support the schools if they are to be successful.

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# **Outcome Based Education**

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Times are changing. The pressure on our public schools to improve, and change, has become intense. Since 1960 our population has increased by 41%, spending on education has increased by 225% (in constant 1990 dollars), but SAT scores

have fallen by 8% (or 80 points). Although few would argue that the schools are solely to blame for our children's declining academic performance, many are hoping that schools can turn this trend around.

The decade of the 80s brought numerous education reforms, but few of them were a dramatic shift from what has gone on before. Outcome-based education (OBE) is one of those that is new, even revolutionary, and is now being promoted as the panacea for America's educational woes. This reform has been driven by educators in response to demands for greater accountability by taxpayers and as a vehicle for breaking with traditional ideas about how we teach our children. If implemented, this approach to curriculum development could change our schools more than any other reform proposal in the last thirty years.

The focus of past and present curriculum has been on content, on the knowledge to be acquired by each student. Our language, literature, history, customs, traditions, and morals, often called Western civilization, dominated the learning process through secondary school. If students learned the information and performed well on tests and assignments, they received credit for the course and moved on to the next class. The point here is that the curriculum centered on the content to be learned; its purpose was to produce academically competent students. The daily schedule in a school was organized around the content. Each hour was devoted to a given topic; some students responded well to the instruction, and some did not.

Outcome-based education will change the focus of schools from the content to the student. According to William Spady, a major advocate of this type of reform, three goals drive this new approach to creating school curricula. First, all students can learn and succeed, but not on the same day or in the same way. Second, each success by a student breeds more success. Third, schools control the conditions of success. In other words, students are seen as totally malleable creatures. If we

create the right environment, any student can be prepared for any academic or vocational career. The key is to custom fit the schools to each student's learning style and abilities.

The resulting schools will be vastly different from the ones recent generations attended. Yearly and daily schedules will change, teaching responsibilities will change, classroom activities will change, the evaluation of student performance will change, and most importantly, our perception of what it means to be an educated person will change.

## **What is OBE?**

Education is a political and emotional process. Just ask Pennsylvania's legislators. That state, along with Florida, North Carolina, and Kansas, has been rocked by political battles over the implementation of outcome-based educational reforms. The governor, the state board of education, legislators, and parents have been wrestling over how, and if, this reform should reshape the state's schools. Twenty-six other states claim to have generated outcome-based programs, and at least another nine are moving in that direction.

Before considering the details of this controversy, let's review the major differences between the traditional approach to schooling in America and an outcome-based approach.

Whereas previously the school calendar determined what a child might do at any moment of any school day, now progress toward specific outcomes will control activity. Time, content, and teaching technique will be altered to fit the needs of *each* student. Credit will be given for accomplishing stated outcomes, not for time spent in a given class.

The teacher's role in the classroom will become that of a coach. The instructor's goal is to move each child towards pre-determined outcomes rather than attempting to transmit the content of Western civilization to the next generation in a

scholarly fashion. This dramatic change in the role of the teacher will occur because the focus is no longer on content. Feelings, attitudes, and skills such as learning to work together in groups will become just as important as learning information—some reformers would argue more important. Where traditional curricula focused on the past, reformers argue that outcome-based methods prepare students for the future and for the constant change which is inevitable in our society.

Many advocates of outcome-based education feel that evaluation methods must change as well since outcomes are now central to curriculum development. We can no longer rely on simple cognitive tests to determine complex outcomes. Vermont is testing a portfolio approach to evaluation, in which art work, literary works, and the results of group projects are added to traditional tests in order to evaluate a student's progress. Where traditional testing tended to compare the abilities of students with each other, outcome-based reform will be criterion based. This means that all students must master information and skills at a predetermined level in order to move on to the next unit of material.

## **Implementing OBE Reform**

Reformers advocating an outcome-based approach to curriculum development point to the logical simplicity of its technique. First, a list of desired outcomes in the form of student behaviors, skills, attitudes, and abilities is created. Second, learning experiences are designed that will allow teachers to coach the students to a mastery level in each outcome. Third, students are tested. Those who fail to achieve mastery receive remediation or retraining until mastery is achieved. Fourth, upon completion of learner outcomes a student graduates.

On the surface, this seems to be a reasonable approach to learning. In fact, the business world has made extensive use of this method for years, specifically for skills that were

easily broken down into distinct units of information or specific behaviors. But as a comprehensive system for educating young minds, a few important questions have been raised. The most obvious question is who will determine the specific outcomes or learner objectives? This is also the area creating the most controversy across the country.

## **Transitional vs. Transformational OBE**

According to William Spady, a reform advocate, outcomes can be written with traditional, transitional, or transformational goals in mind. Spady advocates transformation goals.

Traditional outcome-based programs would use the new methodology to teach traditional content areas like math, history, and science. The state of Illinois is an example of this approach. Although outcomes drive the schooling of these children, the outcomes themselves reflect the traditional content of public schools in the past.

Many teachers find this a positive option for challenging the minimal achiever. For example, a considerable number of students currently find their way through our schools, accumulating enough credits to graduate, while picking up little in the way of content knowledge or skills. Their knowledge base reflects little actual learning, but they have become skilled in working the system. An outcome-based program would prevent such students from graduating or passing to the next grade without reaching a pre-set mastery level of competency.

The idea of transformational reform is causing much turmoil. Transformational OBE subordinates course content to key issues, concepts, and processes. Indeed, Spady calls this the "highest evolution of the OBE concept." Central to the idea of transformational reform is the notion of outcomes of significance. Examples of such outcomes from Colorado and Wyoming school systems refer to collaborative workers, quality

producers, involved citizens, self-directed achievers, and adaptable problem solvers. Spady supports transformational outcomes because they are future oriented, based on descriptions of future conditions that he feels should serve as starting points for OBE designs.

True to the spirit of the reform philosophy, little mention is made about specific things that students should know as a result of being in school. The focus is on attitudes and feelings, personal goals, initiative, and vision—in their words, the whole student.

It is in devising learner outcomes that one's worldview comes into play. Those who see the world in terms of constant change, politically and morally, find a transformation model useful. They view human nature as evolving, changing rather than fixed.

Christians see human nature as fixed and unchanging. We were created in God's image yet are now fallen and sinful. We also hold to moral absolutes based on the character of God. The learner outcomes that have been proposed are controversial because they often accept a transformational, changing view of human nature. Advocates of outcome-based education point with pride to its focus on the student rather than course content. They feel that the key to educational reform is to be found in having students master stated learner outcomes. Critics fear that this is exactly what will happen. Their fear is based on the desire of reformers to educate the whole child. What will happen, they ask, when stated learner outcomes violate the moral or religious views of parents?

For example, most sex-education courses used in our schools claim to take a value-neutral approach to human sexuality. Following the example of the Kinsey studies and materials from the Sex Education and Information Council of the United States, most curricula make few distinctions between various sex acts. Sex within marriage between those of the opposite

sex is not morally different from sex outside of marriage between those of the same sex. The goal of such programs is self-actualization and making people comfortable with their sexual preferences.

Under the traditional system of course credits a student could take a sex-ed course, totally disagree with the instruction and yet pass the course by doing acceptable work on the tests presented. Occasionally, an instructor might make life difficult for a student who fails to conform, but if the student learns the material that would qualify him or her for a passing grade and credit towards graduation.

If transformational outcome-based reformers have their way, this student would not get credit for the course until his or her attitudes, feelings, and behaviors matched the desired goals of the learner outcomes. For instance, in Pennsylvania the state board had recommended learner outcomes that would evaluate a student based on his or her ability to demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of families. Many feel that this is part of the effort to widen the definition of families to include homosexual couples. Another goal requires students to know about and *use* community health resources. Notice that just knowing that Planned Parenthood has an office in town isn't enough, one must use it.

## **Parents vs. the State**

The point of all this is to say that transformational outcome-based reform would be a much more efficient mechanism for changing our children's values and attitudes about issues facing our society. Unfortunately, the direction these changes often take is in conflict with our Christian faith. At the core of this debate is this question, "Who has authority over our children?" Public officials assume they do. Governor Casey of Pennsylvania, calling for reform, told his legislature, "We must never forget that you and I—the elected representatives of the people—and not anyone else—have the ultimate



responsibility to assure the future of our children.” I hope this is merely political hyperbole. I would argue that parents of children in the state of Pennsylvania are ultimately responsible for their children’s future. The state has rarely proved itself a trustworthy parent.

Outcome-based education is an ideologically neutral tool for curricular construction; whether it is more effective than traditional approaches remains to be seen. Unfortunately, because of its student-centered approach, its ability to influence individuals with a politically correct set of doctrines seems to be great. Parents (and all other taxpayers) need to weigh the possible benefits of outcome-based reform with the potential negatives.

## **Other Concerns About OBE**

Many parents are concerned about who will determine the learner outcomes for their schools. One criticism already being heard is that many states have adopted very similar outcomes regardless of the process put in place to get community input. Many wonder if there will be real consideration of what learner outcomes the public wants rather than assuming that educators know what’s best for our children. Who will decide what it means to be an educated person, the taxpaying consumer or the providers of education?

If students are going to be allowed to proceed through the material at their own rate, what happens to the brighter children? Eventually students will be at many levels, what then? Will added teachers be necessary? Will computer-assisted instruction allow for individual learning speeds? Either option will cost more money. Some reformers offer a scenario where brighter students help tutor slower ones thereby encouraging group responsibility rather than promoting an elite group of learners. Critics feel that a mastery- learning approach will inevitably hold back brighter students.

With outcome-based reform, many educators are calling for a broader set of evaluation techniques. But early attempts at grading students based on portfolios of various kinds of works has proved difficult. The Rand Corporation studied Vermont's attempt and found that "rater reliability—the extent to which raters agreed on the quality of a student's work—was low." There is a general dislike of standardized tests among the reformers because it focuses on what the child knows rather than the whole child, but is there a viable substitute? Will students find that it is more important to be politically correct than to know specific facts?

Another question to be answered by reformers is whether or not school bureaucracies will allow for such dramatic change? How will the unions respond? Will legislative mandates that are already on the books be removed, or will this new approach simply be laid over the rest, creating a jungle of regulations and red tape? Reformers supporting outcome-based education claim that local schools will actually have more control over their programs. Once learner outcomes are established, schools will be given the freedom to create programs that accomplish these goals. But critics respond by noting that although districts may be given input as to how these outcomes are achieved, local control of the outcomes themselves may be lost.

Finally, there are many who feel that focusing on transformational learner outcomes will allow for hidden agendas to be promoted in the schools. Many parents feel that there is already too much emphasis on global citizenship, radical environmentalism, humanistic views of self-esteem, and human sexuality at the expense of reading, writing, math, and science. They feel that education may become more propagandistic rather than academic in nature. Parents need to find out where their state is in regards to this movement. If an outcome-based program is being pursued, will it focus on traditional or transformational outcomes? If the outcomes are

already written and adopted, can a copy be acquired? If they are not written yet, how can parents get involved?

If the state is considering a transformational OBE program, parental concerns should be brought before the legislature. If the reform is local, parents should contact their school board. Parents have an obligation to know what is being taught to their children and if it works. Recently, parental resistance halted the OBE movement in Pennsylvania when it was pointed out to the legislature that there is no solid evidence that the radical changes pro-posed will actually cause kids to learn more. While we still can, let's make our voices heard on this issue.

## Notes

1. "Beyond Traditional Outcome-Based Education," *Educational Leadership* (October 1991), p. 67.
2. "Taking Account," *Education Week* (17 March 1993), p. 10.
3. "Beyond Traditional," p. 70.
4. "Amid Controversy, Pa. Board Adopts 'Learner Outcomes,'" *Education Week* (20 January 1993), p. 14.
5. "Casey Seeks Legislative Changes in Pa. Learning Goals," *Education Week* (3 February 1993), p. 19.
6. "Taking Account," p. 12.