# Outcome Based Education: How the Governor's Reform... (IP-3-1996)

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Issue Paper

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## Executive Summary

The last third of this century has seen a fundamental shift in the way we determine educational quality. Previously, the conventional wisdom judged quality in terms of inputs: intentions and efforts, institutions and services, resources and spending. In the past several years, however, there has been an increasing focus on outputs: goals and ends, products and results, with a focus on core academic subjects. The primary question asked is less often "How much are we spending?" and more often "What are our children learning, and how well are they learning it?"

During the 1980s, the outcome-based approach began to win support in legislatures and among the nation's state governors, and beginning in the mid-1980s many states began to institute such programs. Now, however, many on the Right vehemently oppose outcome-based education. And most of the education establishment and many on the political Left have united in supporting the concept. Although it is not immediately clear why defining outcomes or results should meet with such an outcry, the issue has become a wildfire.

In this issue paper, Hudson Institute Senior Fellow Bruno Manno explains why there is such conflict over what seemed such a good idea at the start. When states began efforts to institute outcome-based education programs, they turned the crucial task of defining outcomes over to the very education establishment figures most threatened by the possibility of serious measurement of educational outcomes. Having paid lip service to the emphasizing academic outcomes, the educational establishment often creates a list of outcomes that emphasize values, attitudes, and behavior and often reflect political correctness.

Doctor Manno shows how this process occurred in various states. He then proposes a twofold policy strategy that provides a way out of the dilemma:

establish high, uniform academic standards and a system of accountability with real consequences for success and failure; and

create greater diversity in the kinds of schools we finance, how we pay for

them, and the ways educators produce solid academic achievement, with parents free to choose the schools that best meet their needs.

**Introduction**

Defining learning results that all students will master--what many call outcome-based education (OBE)--is an education issue over which many are doing fierce battle across America today. Those identified as "on the left" claim that opposition to OBE comes primarily from "ultraconservative" groups such as Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum and Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition. For instance, Matthew Freeman, research director for People for the American Way, says, "the national organizations taking [OBE] on are almost exclusively religious-right organizations."(1)

It is true that many of those identified as "on the right" do express pointed and passionate objections to outcome-based education. For example, Phyllis Schlafly, President of the Eagle Forum, says, "OBE is converting the 3 R's to the 3 D's: Deliberately Dumbed Down."(2) Peg Luksic, a nationally recognized leader of the OBE opposition, comments, "Bureaucrats really do believe that schools are the ones that should raise children. Our children are not and never will be creatures of the state. We will no longer sit quietly while the state forces its mandates on our schools and our children."(3)

Opposition to OBE, however, does not come from the right only. Some educators are glad to shun a focus on outcomes and results. They prefer to keep the focus on inputs and resources.

From another perspective, American Federation of Teachers union President Albert Shanker--hardly an ultraconservative--is just as pointed and passionate in objecting to OBE: "OBE's vaguely worded outcomes . . . encourage business as usual . . . and [do] nothing to raise student achievement." In saying this, Shanker appears to agree with many conservatives, such as former Secretary of Education William Bennett, who advocate a focus on student learning--academic outcomes--as the only route to accountability in education.

Ironically, it was conservative education-policy analysts who helped create the emphasis on outcomes. Some, therefore, are perplexed by the current state of affairs. Chester E. Finn, Jr., Assistant Secretary of Education during the Reagan administration, said, "The word 'outcomes' has become tainted. For several years, I was among those promoting the [focus on outcomes], never imagining the twist it would take. Mea culpa."(4)

It is not immediately clear why defining outcomes should meet with such an outcry. Nonetheless, the issue has become a wildfire.

Is OBE a promising cure to what ails public education? Or is it another disease

spread by education bureaucrats through an already ailing system known for succumbing to one fad after another? To answer those questions and provide a perspective on outcome-based education, this paper examines three issues and offers a policy strategy that charts a plausible way out of the conflagration.

First, I describe a radical and far-reaching shift in the way we judge educational policy: the shift from inputs to outcomes. This discussion includes a viewpoint on the meaning of education outcomes offered by one of the most important groups advancing U.S. education reform since the mid-1980s: the nation's governors.

Second, I present a conflicting view that has evoked much of the general public's negative reaction to outcome-based education (OBE). OBE has deep roots in the educational philosophy called progressivism, especially the thought of John Dewey and the idea that schools should make a "new social order." Its most well-known popularizers today are William G. Spady and those who preach the gospel of "transformational OBE."

Third, I examine what has occurred in two states--Virginia and Minnesota--that have implemented outcomes approaches. Their experiences are similar to those of other states. More than anything, in these efforts we see well-intentioned elected public officials blindly handing responsibility for specifying outcomes to groups dominated by education administrators who oppose the rigorous academic standards the public officials thought they were mandating. The typical result is a list comprising mostly transformational outcomes that arise from the progressive idea that schools should make a "new social order." This discussion illustrates how "the devil is in the details" whenever reformers advocate an outcome-based approach to education.

Finally, I outline a twofold strategy for resolving differences between supporters and opponents of OBE and chart a plausible future course for outcome-based education.

**The Aspiration for Rigorous Academic Outcomes**

The last third of this century has seen a fundamental shift in the way educational quality is determined. Previously, the conventional wisdom judged quality in terms of inputs: intentions and efforts, institutions and services, resources and spending. The only other way to gauge educational quality and effectiveness is to focus on outputs: goals and ends, products and results, outcomes and effects.

The conventional wisdom received a radical challenge in the mid-1960s, when the U.S. Office of Education asked sociologist James S. Coleman to conduct a major study of the equality of educational opportunities in America. His report, released in 1966, suggested that inputs might not have a strong effect on

equality of student achievement. Coleman explained:

The major virtue of the study as conceived and executed lay in the fact that it did not accept [the input] definition, and by refusing to do so, has had its major impact in shifting policy attention from its traditional focus on comparisons of inputs (the traditional measures of school quality used by school administrators: per-pupil expenditures, class size, teacher salaries, age of building and equipment, and so on) to a focus on output.(5)

When judging educational quality, either we focus on what schools spend--or on proxies for spending, such as teacher/student ratio--or we focus on what students achieve. Those who advocate a focus on outcomes in judging educational quality hold one common belief: we must specify what we expect all our children to learn, and we must test them to determine whether they have learned it.

In an outcome approach, success is measured by the extent to which the inputs raise educational achievement. Changes are worth making if there is a realistic possibility that they will produce the expected outcomes. The question then becomes, toward what outcomes should the schools aim?

The focus on outcomes won some converts in the years after Coleman's study. Nonetheless, the resource approach to judging quality continued to dominate American education.

The event that galvanized the nation's attention and began a widespread call for fundamental reforms that would improve student achievement--the outcomes of education--was the April 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. This study declared America to be a "nation at risk . . . [whose] educational foundations . . . are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people."(6) The report's basic criticism was that America's young people were not learning enough, and it made clear that the input focus and resource-based strategies of the mid-1960s and the Great Society had failed to improve the nation's education results significantly. Weak academic achievement, therefore, was the key education problem.

This conclusion was repeated in dozens of other reports that soon followed. These reports helped place exceptional pressure on politicians and policymakers to improve educational performance. This led to a development unprecedented in the history of U.S. education: the nation's states became hotbeds of education reform. Elected officials (such as governors, legislators, and mayors) and lay people (such as business leaders and newspaper editors) set out to wrest control of education from the education experts (school superintendents, school boards, and other members of the education establishment). These "civilians" began to demand that the "education

experts" make themselves accountable to the public.

Coleman's early work was of immense importance to the push for a focus on outcomes, as were the later efforts of elected policymakers and other civilians seeking to make educators accountable for results. Even some educators hinted at the need to focus on results and deregulate the "means" of education (what happens in the classroom). For example, in the 1970s, the move to establish minimum competency tests for students reflected a focus on results. In the 1980s, this competency focus spread to other areas such as preparation of teachers and administrators.

Also part of this movement was "mastery learning," an educational method popularized by Benjamin Bloom in the late 1960s, which became widespread beginning in the early 1980s. In Bloom's words, "Given sufficient time, 95 percent of students can learn a subject up to high levels of mastery."(7) In other words, outcomes are primary, and instruction, especially the time used to master outcomes, should vary. This approach reversed the usual practice of allowing for little or no day-to-day variation in time used for teaching different subjects. These and other such efforts set the stage for the watershed events that soon followed.

Perhaps the single most important effort to turn the focus toward outcomes was that of the National Governors' Association (NGA). The group gave the outcome approach far-reaching policy attention beginning in the mid-1980s, when it decided to devote twelve months to investigating one subject: education. The NGA focused on education for one direct and simple reason: "Better schools mean better jobs. To meet stiff competition from workers in the rest of the world, we must educate ourselves and our children as we never have before. . . . Schools and school districts [must] produce better results."(8) In short, the governors cast their lot with those arguing that the time had come to place primary emphasis on what people learn, the outcomes they achieve.

The approach endorsed by the governors gathered further momentum in 1989, when President Bush invited them to meet at an Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia. The president and the governors agreed to set six ambitious national education goals--outcomes--from early childhood far into adulthood that they would work to achieve by the year 2000.

Briefly, the goals state that by the year 2000:

All children will start school ready to learn.

At least 90 percent of all students will graduate from high school.

All students will demonstrate competence in challenging subject matter.

students will be first in the world in mathematics and science.

Every adult will be literate.

Every school will be safe and drug-free.

One fundamental idea underlay these goals. In the words of the summit participants, "We want to swap red tape for results, . . . [build] a system of accountability that focuses on results, . . . and issue annual Report Cards on progress."[(9)] In 1991, the U.S. Department of Education began supporting efforts to develop voluntary national education standards and tests.

Creating world-class standards involves three things. First, clear definitions, within subject areas, of what students should know and be able to do--content standards. Second, achievement levels that specify what depth of knowledge is "good enough"--performance standards. Third, tests that report whether children are learning what they are taught.

These standards and tests, however, should not be higher hurdles for fewer to jump. They must raise expectations and let all students know what to aim for. High standards should be the primary way to boost the academic achievement of all children and provide them with an equal opportunity to learn. Widespread access to high standards that reflect a rich and challenging curriculum advances the twin goals of educational excellence and equity.

Finally, standards need not lead to uniformity, standardization, or a national curriculum. The means to achieving them can and should be left to individual schools, teachers, parents, and communities.

**Outcomes in Practice**

Defined in the manner just presented, outcome-based education might have been expected to become quite popular. Most parents want to know what the schools expect their children to know and do and how well their children are learning what they are taught.

Indeed, the emphasis on education outcomes is rapidly growing. The Education Commission of the States recently reported that twenty-five states have developed or implemented an outcome-based approach to education, and that eleven others have made outcomes a part of the state accreditation or assessment process.[(10)] The concept, however, has met resistance from many quarters, spanning the political spectrum. Opponents have several objections, but one is primary: the outcomes are nebulous, hard to measure, and focus on affective matters. That is, many of the outcomes concern attitudes, values, beliefs, and emotions rather than academic achievement.[(11)] The following excerpt from an early draft (1991) of a Pennsylvania proposal illustrates this approach:

*Goal: Self Worth*

All students understand and appreciate their worth as unique and capable individuals and exhibit self-esteem. All students act through a desire to succeed rather than a fear of failure while recognizing that failure is part of everyone's experiences.(12)

*Goal: Arts and Humanities*

All students advocate the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage and traditions, including works of art, presentations and performances in the local and global community as a function of good citizenship.(13)

*Goal: Wellness and Fitness*

All students analyze community and environmental health problems and plan personal, family and community actions to reduce or eliminate hazardous situations.(14)

Clearly, these are not the kinds of outcomes the governors called for. Many educators and much of the education bureaucracy, on the other hand, have shown a decided preference for such outcomes, rather than a more rigorously academic orientation such as that advocated by the NGA. In recent years, the individual most often associated with the more nebulous approach is William G. Spady, director of the High Success Network in Eagle, Colorado, established in January 1980.

Spady began work on this approach in the late 1960s, after the release of the Coleman report. For Spady, exit outcomes are not only curriculum content. Rather, they are ". . . the knowledge, competence, and orientations (our word for the affective and attitudinal dimensions of learning) that you deem critical for assuring success."(15)

Exit outcomes of this type thus treat the ability to function successfully in life-roles such as being a consumer, a producer, a citizen, a family member, an intimate friend, and a lifelong learner. Spady calls this approach transformational outcome-based education. In this approach, educators expect students to "demonstrate those behaviors that denote a positive social, emotional, and physical well-being."(16)

These two approaches to defining outcomes, of course, conflict seriously. And as elected and appointed state officials lead the charge for education reform under the banner of OBE, they quickly become ensnared in a conundrum. In talking about outcome-based education, are they reflecting the governors' position or the expanded view Spady calls transformational OBE? This question has wrought political havoc in the education-reform process, as the

following discussion illustrates.

**Repudiation of OBE in Virginia and other States**

Recent experiences in Virginia reflect the political difficulties inherent in trying to implement outcome-based education when there are two completely different approaches available. In November 1992, with the approval of then-governor L. Douglas Wilder, a Democrat, the Virginia Department of Education circulated draft copies of a plan called the World Class Education Initiative. It included a proposal for a Common Core of Learning, which described the outcomes students should master. Joseph A. Spagnolo, Superintendent of Public Instruction, called it "a statement of educational expectations for Virginia's public schools."(17)

The Core proposal specified 38 student outcomes, categorized under seven "dimensions of living": Personal Well Being and Accomplishment; Interpersonal Relationships; Lifelong Learning; Cultural and Creative Endeavors; Work and Economic Well Being; Local and Global Civic Participation; and Environmental Stewardship.

Local school boards and parent groups rallied against the plan. The boards viewed it as an encroachment on their authority, and parents objected to its focus on vaguely defined values at the expense of academic achievement. The state released another draft of Common Core in February 1993. This version referred to its approach as "transformational outcome-based education" and included a slightly revised set of the seven life roles: fulfilled individual; supportive person; lifelong learner; expressive contributor; quality worker; informed citizen; and environmental steward.

In May 1993, after more revisions, the state Board of Education approved a draft of the Common Core proposal. It listed 33 specific outcomes students needed to master by the 10th grade. These were organized under six headings that mixed Spady's life roles with reference to both values and traditional content: citizenship; the natural world; cultural and creative endeavors; responsibility; learning; work. This "compromise" provoked more controversy.

In September 1993, Governor Wilder ordered the Virginia Board of Education to withdraw the plan. He said that the proposal "was introduced with the best of intentions . . . [but has] become tied to other fashionable approaches to curriculum reform. Make no mistake, I do not now, nor have I ever, endorsed changing Virginia's education standards to encompass values-based education. Knowledge and proficiency of basic skills must remain the basis for education in our Commonwealth."(18)

In several other states this general pattern has been repeated: the governor or state legislature appoints a commission to establish learning outcomes for

the state's public schools; well-intentioned elected officials blindly hand responsibility for specifying outcomes to groups dominated by education views antithetical to those the public officials thought they were mandating; the commission develops a laundry list of outcomes, many embodying transformational OBE; a wide cross-section of the public raises an outcry; and the state government cancels the plan or at least the most offending parts of it. States as varied as Colorado, Kansas, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Washington, Ohio, Iowa, and Wyoming have had such experiences.

***Minnesota***

For instance, in Minnesota, the effort to establish an outcome-based approach to student learning began in the 1970s. In 1972 the state Department of Education began development of "Some Essential Learner Outcomes" (SELOs) which specified the content students would be taught. Through the years, the department's collection of outcomes grew and evolved as different subjects and grades were chosen for testing.

In 1983, in response to the state legislature's request for a report on education (spurred by the national debate inspired by A Nation at Risk), Minnesota Commissioner of Education Ruth Randall set forth several radical proposals. There were two primary recommendations. First, Randall wanted to change the graduation rule, replacing traditional "seat time" graduation standards with "measurable learner outcomes." Second, she urged the legislature to provide for the creation of state achievement tests for individual students, tests that could measure whether outcomes had been learned. Other recommendations included developing learner outcomes that promoted "higher level thinking skills," involving the department in creating model outcomes, and giving districts the option of developing more rigorous outcomes than those provided by the state Department of Education.

The legislature was dissatisfied with Randall's report, and little action was taken. The business community then entered the discussion in a dramatic way. The Minnesota Business Partnership produced a report in 1984, the Minnesota Plan, which called for a major reorganization of K-12 education. The plan recommended that all students master "common core competencies" and that the state develop uniform achievement tests to measure whether students attained them. Education-policy makers, opinion shapers, newspaper editors, and the business community saw both these proposals as an endorsement of Randall's suggestions.

Having agreed to require outcomes, the various players--the governor, the legislature, the education department, the state Board of Education, the business community, a new Task Force on Education Organization, a new Office of Educational Leadership in the state education department, and many others--set out to decide what they would be. The Spady approach quickly

assumed dominance. (Indeed, the Task Force had invited Spady to address its members in early 1989 when it was beginning to formulate its outcome system.) The state Board of Education's 1991 "Outcome-Based Graduation Rule" listed the following proposed Graduation Outcomes:

"In order to lead productive, fulfilling lives in a complex and challenging society and to continue learning:

The graduate demonstrates the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential to:

Communicate with words, numbers, visuals, symbols and sounds;

Think and solve problems to meet personal, social and academic needs;

Contribute as a citizen in local, state, national and global communities;

Understand diversity and the interdependence of people;

Work cooperatively in groups and independently;

Develop physical and emotional well-being;

Contribute to the economic well-being of society."[(19)]

This proposal evoked strong, organized opposition, particularly from grass-roots groups of parents concerned about exit outcomes describing values and attitudes. One exit outcome, for example, stated, "a Minnesota graduate performs as: A community contributor who appreciates and understands diversity." It was not immediately clear to the public just what this meant, how it would be taught in a public school, and how it would be measured by a teacher.

Linda McKeen, cofounder of the Parent Education Network (PEN), became "a somewhat reluctant lightning rod for parental concerns." The network's newsletter described an alternative education agenda including a return to academic achievement based on but not limited to the following:

a basic academic curriculum that can be described and measured objectively

phonetic reading skills

reading comprehension using broad selections of classical literature

writing skills based on research and promoting proper grammatical usage

basic arithmetic skills with an emphasis on mental and written computation, including memorization when appropriate

geography, beginning with the U.S.

history, including ancient, Western civilization, principles of the American constitution, and world history

economics, including advantages of the free market system over other systems

The newsletter suggested that further options might include foreign languages, computer literacy, fine arts, and physical education and health habits.

This approach presented quite a contrast to the state board's proposal, of course, and had much more in common with the orientation to academic outcomes proposed by the NGA. Other organizations, including Taxpayers for Excellent Academics in Minnesota (TEAM) and Citizens Alliance for Responsibility in Education (CARE), sprung up to oppose the state board's proposal. These groups rejected any attempt to dismiss them as Christian fundamentalists. CARE leader Paul Larson, for example, noted that the five core members of his group included two conservative "Bible-believing Church members," a Catholic, an atheist, and a member of a Protestant mainline church.

This opposition, along with the state's inability to provide school personnel, community leaders, and parents with an adequate and appealing understanding of outcome-based education, reinforced public opinions that OBE was another confused educational fad imposed from the top. After three years in which all these groups haggled over the vague goals expressed in the state Board of Education's 1991 "Outcome-Based Graduation Rule," Minnesota Governor Arne Carlson, a liberal Republican, told the Board that he would support a move to delay OBE implementation if necessary to gain more widespread acceptance.

What news accounts called "Carlson's sermon to the Board" focused on three issues. First, he wanted them to drop "soft" content outcomes such as "Understands the integration of physical, emotional, and spiritual wellness." Second, he told them that "bright students shouldn't be held back." Third, he expressed his hope that school districts would retain the traditional A through F grading system rather than using a system where students do not fail.[(20)]

In mid-December 1993, the Minnesota Department of Education circulated another draft of the graduation rule, for Board and public discussion. The Profile of Learning described thirteen competencies for the Minnesota graduate, as follows:

Comprehends, interprets, and evaluates information received through reading, listening, and viewing;

Uses strategies to understand and apply information from technical reading,

such as manuals and research documents;

Writes and speaks clearly for academic, technical, and personal purposes with a variety of audiences;

Analyzes patterns and functional relationships in order to solve problems and determine cause/effect relationships;

Applies data handling and measurement techniques to solve problems and justify conclusions;

Applies methods of inquiry needed to conduct research, draw conclusions, and communicate and apply findings;

Understands the past and continuous development of societies and cultures in human history;

Understands how principles of interaction and interdependence affect physical and social situations;

Applies informed decision-making processes to promote healthy lifestyles, social well-being, and stewardship of the environment;

Understands the processes and meaning of artistic expression;

Understands application of technological systems;

Understands the effective management of resources in a household, business, community, and government; and

Communicates using a language other than English.

Although students could graduate without fulfilling these competencies, students would receive a rating profile showing how well they achieved them. Districts would be required to select a student assessment system. A student would be able to graduate early by receiving the highest achievement levels in both the requirements and the profile of learning. The draft stated that a school would have "great flexibility" in the way it delivered the instructional program. And the Board reiterated that it would not prescribe any "scheduling pattern, instructional strategy, or curriculum."

After meeting to discuss the draft, the Board endorsed it. Thus the Minnesota program had moved from an initial interest in academically based outcomes to a more vague, affective type, to an uneasy mixture of the two. Sensing this confusion, Governor Carlson commented that the draft was a step in the right direction but still needed to be made more understandable: "We are turning the corner from the abstract to the semi-abstract [but] . . . it's still not understandable at the local barbershop. . . . Are they where I am persuaded that I would want to send my daughter, Jessica, age 10, through the system?

No." The governor went on to say that if draft four met with major public objections, there would be further drafts. "This is a healthy debate," said the governor. "But right now it's a muddled debate, it really is."(21)

Indeed, as one considers the travails over OBE in Minnesota and other states, there is no better word to describe the long debate than muddled. Clearly, for outcome-based education the "devil is in the details." Today, outcome-based education is a catch-all phrase describing a good idea gone wrong.

**With What Are We Left . . . or Is It Right?**

The OBE debate has raised four issues that are crucial for contemporary education policy:

how to judge quality in education

how to define outcomes

the Aquarian fallacy on the left

the nostalgist fallacy on the right

Fortunately, despite the complexity of the issue, there is a policy strategy that can support establishment of legitimate academic standards while avoiding the pitfalls of transformational OBE. After discussing the issues that currently impede a solution, I will outline this approach.

***Judging Educational Quality***

The first issue for education policy today is how to judge quality in education. As noted, the focus on outcomes began as a legitimate effort to hold individuals, schools, and school systems accountable for their efforts and to appraise quality by investigating what children are learning. The alternative is to focus on inputs and judge quality primarily by the resources going into the system--for example, costs per-pupil, number of courses taken or years spent in school, and teacher-to-student ratios. This approach, however, cannot tell us much about what children are learning.

Focusing on resources will not solve the problem of too many of our young people not learning nearly enough to live, work, and compete as adults. As a whole, American public schools spend plenty of money. Public school per-pupil expenditures have tripled in real terms since the 1950s and doubled since the mid-1960s, and they rose by a third during the 1980s.

Killing off accountability for results--as a focus on resources does--plays into the hands of education's special-interest groups (though not all members of these groups share such views). They are far more often the reason for the problem rather than the source of the solution to what ails America's schools

today. Eliminating accountability for results plays into the hands of the following groups:

civil-rights and child-advocacy groups who fear that tests and assessments will cause more poor and minority youngsters to fail

multiculturalists who believe that what children should learn and those from whom they should learn should depend on their race and ethnicity

teachers' unions, who do not want real consequences and unpleasantness to fall on educators whose incompetence causes their students to fail to learn

teacher-training institutions, the occupants of which believe that only graduates of accredited teacher- or administrator-training programs should be allowed to teach in or lead schools or school systems

retrograde educational progressives who believe that competition among students harms a child's self-esteem--or, when competition is applied to other levels of the school, will harm the reputation of a principal, a school, or a local or state superintendent

In sum, killing off accountability plays into the hands of almost every education interest group that has money set aside for it and is likely to lose that set-aside if the means of delivering educational services are radically deregulated and the focus turns to results.

The Clinton administration, in its recently enacted Goals 2000 Educate America Act, has abetted the effort to shift the focus from what our children learn to what education bureaucrats spend. Though ostensibly committed to some version of goals and standards, most of what this plan establishes in law will do more to harm than help American elementary and secondary education. There are three particularly onerous provisions in Goals 2000 that will undermine the establishment of genuine academic standards for all our children.

First, a nineteen-member panel--the National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC)--will certify education standards (on "content, performance, and opportunity to learn") that states "voluntarily" submit to it. In reality, it will be a sort of national school board whose members will be the usual education-establishment suspects--experts in school finance and equity and the long laundry list of educators, activists, and interest-group representatives. Goals 2000 will make these bureaucrats more powerful than, for example, the National Governors' Association's Education Goals Panel. For this reason, the NGA withheld their endorsement of the final Goals 2000 legislation.

Second, in judging educational quality, Goals 2000 creates NESIC-sanctioned national delivery or opportunity-to-learn standards. The latter term is simply

the new educational jargon for inputs and services. These standards will measure whether there is an "adequate" supply of money, programs, and other human and physical resources in every school, every district, and every state. These are standards for schools, not for students. Moreover, these standards will certainly provide the impetus for new lawsuits aiming to force states to redistribute resources among various schools and districts.

Third, new federal dollars disbursed under Goals 2000 may not be used for at least the next three years for "high stakes" tests that have consequences associated with them. This means that NESIC will not certify any test for promotion, high-school graduation, admission to college, or employment. The result will be neither a meaningful accountability system for educators nor any meaningful national testing system.

These three major aspects of Goals 2000--expanding federal control of education by the education establishment bureaucrats, emphasizing delivery standards for schools at the expense of performance standards for students, and blocking the development of an exam system--do not bode well for the effort to focus on results. Other pending federal elementary and secondary education legislation mirrors this alarming trend. None of this will provide our students with an enhanced opportunity to learn. It will, however, provide education bureaucrats with expanded opportunities to spend, litigate, and regulate.

Examining and clarifying the fundamental and unbridgeable difference between judging educational quality from an inputs or resources perspective as opposed to an outcomes or results perspective (as we have done here) is instructive. Such an investigation demonstrates that the better hope for true education reform is to place primary emphasis on outcomes and results. If we accept the outcomes focus, the next challenge is to define academic outcomes in a way that allows for a highly accountable education.

### *Confusion Over What Outcomes Define*

Today's educational fad--transformational OBE--has little in common with the content and performance outcomes in core academic areas espoused by those who gave the outcomes focus widespread national attention--particularly the nation's governors. Ironically, transformational OBE actually makes accountability impossible. Like many educational fads, OBE takes a sensible-sounding principle--focusing on outcomes--and hijacks its meaning so that its implementation will ensure that its original purpose cannot be achieved. This raises a second issue for education policy: what is the word "outcome" to define?

As we have seen in the previous discussion, the typical "transformational" outcomes are vaguely worded and show little concern for core academic content. They are largely in the affective domain. They describe mental

processes such as attitudes, dispositions, and sentiments--behavioral and social outcomes rather than knowledge, skills, and other cognitive outcomes.

The transformational outcomes often deal with issues that may not be proper concerns of a school. The following examples from draft state OBE documents describe mandatory outcomes for all students: In Ohio a graduate is expected to be able to "function as a responsible family member . . . [and] maintain physical, emotional, and social well-being." In Pennsylvania "each student shall gain knowledge and have exposure to different cultures and lifestyles." And in Minnesota, the state expects schools to ensure that "the graduate demonstrates the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential to . . . develop physical and emotional well-being." Unfortunately, such vague and inappropriate outcome statements are the rule rather than exceptions.

Furthermore, almost all OBE plans include long lists of outcomes, sometimes hundreds. The academic outcomes are few, and they are as vague as the nonacademic ones. They send no clear message about what knowledge, skills, and other understandings their designers expect children to master so that they can live, work, and compete successfully in the twenty-first century.

Having adopted, in principle, the idea and language of accountability--a focus on results--the education establishment presents governors, state legislatures, communities, and taxpayers with something else altogether. They propose outcomes--developed mostly by overreaching education "reformers"--that emphasize values, attitudes, and behavior and often mask politically correct ideology. The outcomes are so vague as to make it impossible to measure whether students are achieving them in any useful and valid way. This approach undermines efforts to track and compare educational progress or failure. In short, the meaning now given to the term outcome-based education--as reinterpreted by education "reformers"--turns the process on its head and all but precludes real "results-oriented" accountability.

Many educators have never been comfortable with a focus on outcomes that would enable parents, politicians, and the general public to judge whether children were learning more and achieving at higher levels. If such a focus were instituted, educators could be held accountable for these results and expect consequences to follow--positive or negative. Although politics made it impossible for educators to reject this orientation explicitly, they did continue their undercurrent of opposition. One important manifestation of this current is the effort to present an unclear and confusing definition of outcomes. In brief, education bureaucrats have used the language of accountability to avoid being held accountable.

How did this hijacking occur? Much of the problem occurs in the process and mechanisms used to generate the outcomes. Elected officials have given responsibility for specifying outcomes to panels or agencies dominated by people whose views on education do not agree with those held by the elected

officials themselves. The results are predictable: outcomes antithetical to the kind public officials thought they were mandating; accountability hijacked.

The fundamental problem with the outcomes being proposed by Spady and many others is in their conception of the purpose and role of education. This conception has deep roots in educational progressivism--particularly the writings of John Dewey and his followers--and in the viewpoint that it is possible and justifiable for educators to use the schools to create a new social order. Political analyst Irving Kristol provides a succinct description of this "progressive" viewpoint:

[It] aims to develop the "creative potential" of "the whole person" . . . which must not be discouraged by grading, tracking, strict discipline, a dress code, or intellectual discrimination of any kind. Intellectual excellence may be acknowledged, but not rewarded. Social cooperation, a warm and friendly attitude toward one's fellows, a capacity for enthusiasm about anything--from turtles to rap music--are all signs, of equal worth, that a youngster is being prepared to be a good citizen in a democracy.(22)

It is clear that those who oppose what is currently called OBE are expressing legitimate concerns. If OBE means a focus on values, attitudes, and social skills, there is good reason to question it. The education bureaucracy's attempt to hijack outcome-based education has created endless controversy and misunderstanding. Entrusting it with the process of specifying outcomes is a sure way to create a set of outcomes that trouble non-educators. This is evident in the surge of opposition that had its first large-scale manifestation in Pennsylvania and has spread to many states.

Thus there is fundamental confusion over the meaning of the word outcomes. Moreover, the process of defining what our children should know and be able to do is too important to be controlled by state and local education bureaucrats. And it is far too vital and personal an issue to entrust to the tender mercies of an expanded federal bureaucracy. It must be under "civilian" control. Under such an approach, it is the responsibility of policy-makers to ensure that we select the correct outcomes. It is the responsibility of parents, voters, and other taxpayers to ensure that the policy-makers do not lose their way. And the clear and unequivocal focus must be on core academic outcomes.

Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, says it well: "Those pushing for reform should wake up and realize that, as presently conceived [i.e., vaguely worded, numerous, fuzzy outcomes], outcomes-based education will do . . . nothing to raise student achievement."(23)

### *The Aquarian Fallacy*

Another important question is what sorts of outcomes the state can reasonably prescribe in government schools and what obligations it assumes in doing so. This is a fundamental issue confronting contemporary education policy.

Private schools as well as public magnet, specialized, and even the new independent public schools called charter schools are forthright in declaring what knowledge, skills, and understandings--even values, attitudes, and behaviors--they want to instill in students. These are schools of choice, however, and parents are not forced to send their children to them. Therefore, these schools feel obligated to express clearly what students will learn, and it is in their best interests not to harbor hidden political agendas, even if the curricula they embrace are sometimes controversial.

There is, however, a huge difference between what is required in these schools of choice and what a state can reasonably require everyone to learn in a public--that is, compulsory--school, especially where this involves the broad and controversial outcomes proposed by some OBE advocates.

Forcing parents to send their children to school is one thing. But for the state to declare that students cannot graduate from a government school they must attend unless they demonstrate values and attitudes the state prescribes--even when these values conflict with what those students and their families believe--has all the trappings of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Huxley's warning that the desire to use social conditioning in order to achieve stability could damage, or even destroy, the freedom to make meaningful choices is at least as true today as when *Brave New World* was published in 1932. All this is to say that the "Age of Aquarius" life roles and outcomes espoused by transformational OBE betray an unjustifiably grand view of what compulsory government schools can require of the students forced to attend them.

The situation becomes even more complicated when the state provides no means to assist the exit of children whose parents do not want to send them to public schools inculcating Aquarian conceptions of life roles. When a government prescribes outcomes that include values and attitudes, it takes on a correlative responsibility. It must provide families with the widest possible range of schooling options so that they may exercise a choice that meets their needs. If not, it should come as no surprise that the level of discourse on the issue of government-prescribed outcomes will be shrill--as it has indeed become.

If a state refuses to allow a wide range of alternatives and some means to support these choices, it is left with only one option: prescribing for government schools carefully circumscribed outcomes that reflect only the broadest public consensus on what students should learn. Such an agreement is most likely to be a consensus not on affective (e.g., "transformational") outcomes but on cognitive ones--academic knowledge, skills, and

understandings all children must master so that they can live, work, and compete successfully.

### *The Nostalgist Fallacy*

Many OBE supporters argue that their opponents are almost exclusively religious-right fundamentalist Christians. This *ad hominen* argument has no bearing, of course, on whether the OBE opponents are correct. Moreover, although it is true that fundamentalists generally oppose OBE, it is misleading to claim that they are the sole or even primary opponents, or that no one is raising valid objections.

For example, some analysts object that there is no widespread "hard" evidence that transformational OBE works. There are a few jurisdictions where some success seems to have been achieved, but there has been no overwhelming, widespread evidence of success with transformational OBE.

Other critics argue that transformational OBE will "dumb down" the curriculum. They say that schools using it will have to lower standards to the least common denominator because not all young people, especially the disadvantaged, have the same ability or motivation to learn to high standards.

A variation of this objection is that OBE will hold back gifted and talented youngsters. In schools offering OBE, such students will either have to wait for slow students to catch up, or be kept occupied by helping them keep pace through peer cooperative learning arrangements in which students are placed in groups to work together on a project or subject.

Moreover, almost everyone acknowledges that implementing OBE will cost more--and probably much more--money than the current system does. Teachers will have to be retrained, curricula revised, and new tests developed to take the place of traditional paper-and-pencil multiple-choice tests. This prospect leads some critics to ask the obvious question: Why spend more money on a wide-scale effort when there is no widespread evidence indicating that OBE works?

Pennsylvania has provided a telling example of opposition to OBE that was clearly not inspired by religious-right fundamentalists. The state affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers withheld endorsement of Pennsylvania's OBE proposal. The union believed that the state's OBE outcomes were not sufficiently academic.

While acknowledging that OBE has evoked a wide variety of objections and opponents, one can argue that many religious fundamentalists and others on the right generally unite behind one major objection. They believe that the schools and curriculum of a bygone era are sufficient for our children today. From this perspective, schools should not attempt to teach our children to think critically, weigh evidence, reason analytically and independently, or

reach conclusions contrary to "established tradition."

Robert Simonds, President of the California-based National Society of Christian Educators and Citizens for Excellence in Education, is recognized as a national leader in the fight to oppose OBE. In a recent article, he wrote, "To them [the supporters of OBE, among whom he includes Theodore Sizer and John Goodlad], 'critical thinking' means teaching children to empty themselves of their own values (transmitted from parents, church, and culture) and accept a set of suggested values."(24)

For Simonds and many others, critical thinking is an assault on religious faith and family values. In particular, to those whose world is bounded and defined by religious faith, it would be sacrilegious to oblige their children to become critical thinkers and independent questioners of authority.

One can understand and accept that parents become upset and dismayed when government schools teach doctrines that offend their deepest beliefs. And as mentioned, the situation is made more difficult when these families cannot exit the system unless they can afford a private school or the state allows families the option of home schooling. It is quite another thing, however, to believe that all government schools should refrain from teaching children the knowledge, skills, and understandings that allow them to become thoughtful, critical, and productive citizens.

This issue poses a fourth dilemma for contemporary education policy. Those committed to education reform--especially conservatives--must resist the easy temptation to support a nostalgic view that the content and approaches to teaching used in government schools when today's adults were in school are good enough for today's children. They are not.

We must insist that today's children learn to higher standards than those faced by most prior generations of Americans. This process involves combining an extensive knowledge of facts and specifics--those that make up what E.D. Hirsch calls our "cultural literacy"--with the ability to think critically, understand complex relationships, and solve complicated problems. To give all children a chance to develop those abilities is a legitimate aspiration for public authorities.

### *Unholy Alliance*

There is no single remedy, no "silver bullet" that will cure the core education problem America faces today: weak academic achievement even among those who complete formal schooling. I have argued that the first ingredient of a remedy must be a focus on outcomes, not inputs or resources. Decades of preoccupation with inputs have led to the current sorry state: America's young people are not learning nearly enough for their or the nation's good.

The challenge we face is daunting. We must define outcomes in a way that allows for a standards-driven, results-centered, highly accountable education. While allowing diversity--and the consequent competition--in the kinds of institutions we create and the methods and means we use to reach standards, schools must have one aim: to prepare our young people to live, work, and compete successfully in the next century.

The process of defining outcomes must be under civilian control. Policy-makers should ensure that we select the correct outcomes. Parents, voters, and other taxpayers must make sure that policy-makers do not lose their way. Professional educators must have primary responsibility in the classroom for making sure that students learn what is expected of them. And they need maximum freedom and flexibility to determine what means to use to accomplish this.

Unfortunately, both the left (the Aquarians) and the right (the nostalgists) are assaulting those who support the sound and common-sense notion that we should judge educational quality by what and how well children actually learn.

The Aquarians propose a collection of nebulous life roles, values, and attitudes rather than measurable academic outcomes. The standards they will create are federally sanctioned delivery standards that measure whether schools have enough resources to provide students with an "opportunity to learn." All this has one end: killing off accountability for results.

The nostalgists criticize the left's Aquarian life roles. Their grievances have more merit, however, than the alternative they propose: a return to the content and methods of a bygone era.

Even more unfortunate is the fact that most education reformers of a conservative perspective have joined the nostalgists' assault or remained silent on the issue. Rarely have they articulated a different view that tries to combine the virtues and values of the past with the changed requirements and demands of today's world. This reticence plays into the hands of those who focus on inputs and spending rather than achievement results.

Ironically, the silent surrender of these conservative reformers leaves the door open for an unvoiced, unholy, and bizarre alliance: the left and education establishment, who favor more money for education and equalizing resources regardless of need and the taxpayers' ability to support such changes, and parts of the right, who fear that public schools will never accommodate their values. The OBE debate shows that education policy--like politics--makes for strange bedfellows.

**A Two-Fold Policy Strategy**

I believe that a twofold policy strategy provides a plausible way out of this thicket. First, we need high, uniform, but sensibly drafted academic standards

for all our children and a system of accountability with real consequences for success and failure based on reaching those standards. Second, we need great diversity in the nature of schools and in the ways professional educators produce those results, with families free to choose those schools that best meet their needs.

### *Standards and Tests*

The nation's governors have continued to lead the chorus of those who speak forcefully on the need for high national outcome standards defining what all students should know and do so that they can live, work, and compete successfully as adults. Working through the bipartisan National Education Goals Panel, they reaffirmed this position in November 1993, approving a statement of five general principles that should guide adoption of national standards.(25)

First, national outcome standards should be voluntary. No federal effort should be inaugurated to require states and communities to use them.

Next, standards should address core academic areas. They should not deal with nonacademic concerns such as students' values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

Third, national standards must be world class. While being uniquely American, the standards should be as rigorous as what other countries expect of their students.

Fourth, policy-makers should use a broad-based, participatory, consensus-building process to develop outcome standards. This "bottom-up" process should include educators, parents, and community leaders.

Finally, standards must be useful and adaptable. States and communities must be able to design their own curriculum plans using the broad outlines suggested by the standards. And the number of standards should be limited to the most important knowledge, skills, and understandings we expect students to learn.

These standards clarify expectations about what we want all our children to learn. They are of two kinds. Content standards define what students should know and be able to do. Performance standards define what level of learning is good enough. Several national efforts now underway are doing useful work in developing these standards. But states and communities are where the action should be in defining these standards. It is at those levels that disputes are likely to be encountered and need to be resolved.

None of this should involve standardization or a national curriculum. There must not be any federal demand to read certain books, teach specific courses in a fixed order, or meet precise federal graduation requirements. These and

other issues should be decided by states and communities.

Also, good tests are needed, to determine whether and how well students are learning what is taught. These exams, however, would not be more of the same standardized tests we have now, where many of our children live in a Lake Wobegon world where everyone is above average. These would be tests that teachers teach to and that have consequences for graduation, employment, and higher education. For those who work in the schools, compensation and advancement would be based on these results.

These tests examining the academic learning of students also need to permit individual student results to be compared across schoolrooms, schools, districts, the states, the nation, and internationally. And although tests are an important indicator of success, they are not the only ones. Other types of timely, reliable, and comparable information such as college entrance rates and placement in the workforce must be collected and made understandable to the public.

We should begin using the best testing tools we have rather than wait for the perfect tests. To assure fairness, such a system should be implemented in phases and be independent of those who govern, manage, and teach in the schools.

Almost every modern society the U.S. trades or competes with has woven these elements into its education system. We owe at least as much to our young people, especially those we label "at risk and disadvantaged." For them in particular, expectations in school are almost always low and the curriculum watered down. Demanding less of these children does not provide equity. It is served by demanding much of all and helping everyone meet these standards.

In summary, standards and tests comprise one element of a sensible twofold education policy strategy we should pursue as a nation.

### *Diversity and Choice*

The second element of this twofold policy strategy is great diversity in the types of schools children can attend, the approaches to instruction professionals use, and the preparation individuals receive to become educators, with families free to choose the schools that best meet their needs. Whereas in other areas of life we tend to assume the superiority of freedom to choose among a variety of options, in education we have too readily allowed a highly restricted group of people to obtain and sustain a monopoly over the supply of a vital service.

For the most part, while the world, our country, and our families have changed, all of them quite dramatically, our schools have not. Though some diversity has always been a part of our nation's schools--open schools,

alternative schools, Montessori schools, magnet schools--it has been a minor element. The predominant model today is an 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. day, Monday through Friday, nine months per year, with one teacher trained by a university school of education, lecturing most of the time using little more than the technology of the book. We are too big and diverse a country to expect this one school model to fit everyone's needs. Schools must become much more customer-driven, to meet the variety of needs, values, and traditions of many different young people, families, and communities. This process is taking place, though far too slowly.

As states and communities begin to adopt standards and adapt them to their different situations, they will fo