

New Wave May Cast Education Adrift

By Kenneth Smith

Summary: A new approach to teaching is leading the nation's schools further away from the basics, critics say. Outcome-based education puts an emphasis on hands-on problem solving, but does it really better equip students for the work world?

William Sloane was skeptical when Peg Luksik arrived at the office carrying two crammed briefcases. An aide to Pennsylvania state Rep. Huck Gamble, he had been the victim of vehement lobbyists before.

When, four hours later, Luksik finished explaining her opposition to a bill on a new approach known as outcome-based education, Sloane and Gamble sat stunned. Recalls Sloane, "Huck turned to me and said, 'This sounds terrible. Can we stop this?'"

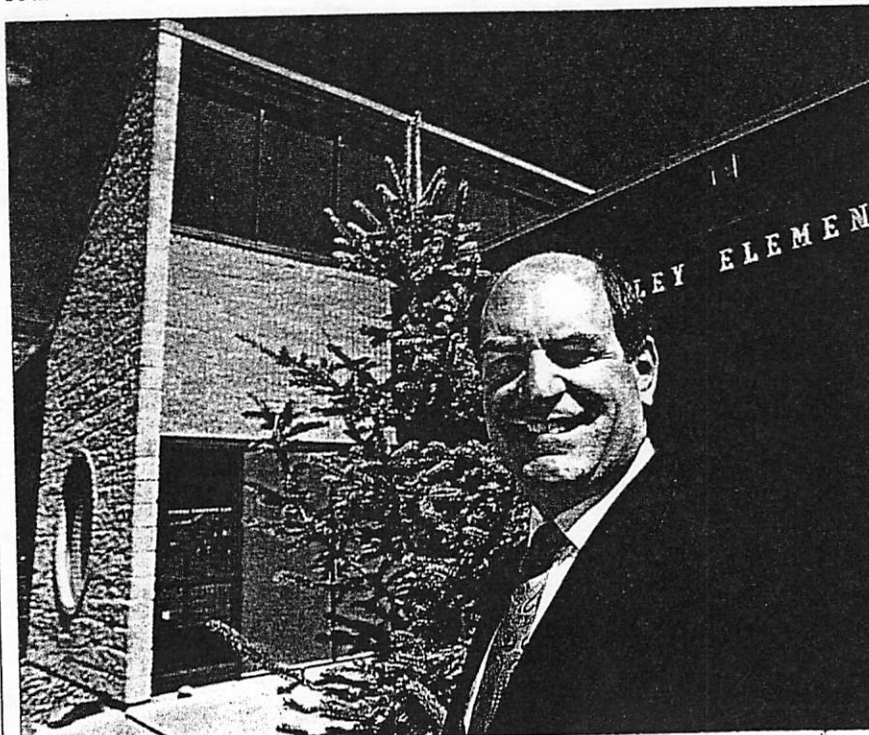
What they and a growing number of parent groups are trying to stop, or at least slow down, is a reform movement that has taken root in an estimated 42 states and countless local school districts. Outcome-based education, sometimes called mastery learning, radically changes not only what, but how, students learn. While school choice and vouchers preoccupy Washington, the battle over outcome-based education is likely to affect the course of education far more for the foreseeable future.

Pennsylvania state Sen. James Rhoades, the ranking Republican on the Senate's Education Committee and a supporter of outcome-based education, says he never expected so much opposition. "When you're trying to do something positive, people usually respond positively," he says. Rhoades is part of a powerful coalition of education theorists, state officials and business leaders in key states such as Pennsylvania who are counting on the new approach to transform an educational system they believe is incapable of turning out competent graduates.

In fact, outcome-based education is a response to a 1983 report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, "A Nation at Risk," which portrayed a country plagued with declining educational standards and performance. A decade later, the problems seem more urgent than ever. The Department of Education last month issued the results of recent surveys that found 90 million adult Americans functionally illiterate — unable to read a street map or calculate the cost of a purchase — and 25 percent of high school seniors, 31 percent of eighth-graders and 41 percent of fourth-graders unable to read and understand simple passages for students at their levels.

"It paints a picture of a society in which the vast majority of Americans do not know that they do not have the skills they need to earn a living in our increasingly technological society and international marketplace," said Education Secretary Richard Riley.

The solution, say advocates of outcome-based education, requires a new educational paradigm. Discrete academic disciplines are replaced by classes and projects designed to show students how to use their knowledge. Traditional grading is discard-



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Luksik's grass roots movement has been dismissed as Christian fanaticism.

ed in favor of demonstrations of learning that occur at "culminating points" in the educational process.

"Our traditions are killing us," William Spady says bluntly. A former Harvard University sociologist and now a reformer whose Colorado organization, High Success Network on Outcome-Based Education, is most often credited, or blamed, for the revolution, Spady has quietly collected a "deeply committed cadre" to the cause.

At its most "transformational," outcome-based education is about stripping away existing time frames, such as nine-month school years. Some students may require more time to achieve than others. Under the outcome-based approach, a class doesn't necessarily end with the semester; it ends when all students have achieved the goal.

Theoretically, students can test and retest to make the grade, while high achievers take on advanced work. "We don't want bell curve standards, expectations and results," says Spady.

Standard teaching in individual academic disciplines merges into complex problem solving, such as this hypothetical study on homelessness described in material distributed by the Virginia Board of Education: "The students could research the cause and effect of homelessness;

study how other countries handle the issue; survey community attitudes; analyze data from the survey; discuss solutions; and present their conclusions individually or in groups through displays, school newspaper articles or letters to community officials.

"What have students learned through this activity? They have learned about the problems of homelessness. And they have also learned reading comprehension, library research skills, social studies, writing, mathematics, arts, etc. They have learned about all the subjects we remember when we went to school. But instead of learning them as a series of isolated facts, they understand how they fit together."

In practice, however, critics see a politically correct agenda behind the pedagogy and a further drift away from teaching the basics. Pennsylvania's Board of Education defined its outcome-based curriculum as the means to achieving specific "knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors." In response to parental opposition, it dropped "attitudes and behaviors" from the definition. Nevertheless, one board-approved "learning outcome" requires that "all students evaluate the implications of finite natural resources and the need for conservation, sustainable agricultural development and stewardship

of the environment." Another: "All students demonstrate an understanding of the history and nature of prejudice and relate their knowledge to current issues facing communities, the United States and other nations."

Such goals have made outcome-based education a target for traditionalists, but parents across the political spectrum worry that the unconventional approach may discourage students from taking traditional education benchmarks seriously and perhaps may even delay the progress of high achievers.

The grass roots efforts by Luksik, who runs the Pennsylvania Parents Commission, have generated overwhelming opposition to outcome-based education in the Pennsylvania House, which voted 148-51 to make the approach voluntary. The efforts also have generated a hot time for Rhoades and his fellow senators, who will consider the bill in November. "We've got the floor votes," says Luksik, who campaigns against outcome-based education wherever she can and has taken her fight to 10 states.

When one sorts through all the jargon about "paradigms," "life contexts" and "culminating outcomes of significance," as well as the approach's many permutations — such as the traditional, transitional and transformational forms, thematic learning and more — outcome-based education seems aptly named. What most people think of as education starts with a curriculum stressing reading, writing and arithmetic, which a student completes over a set period to become an academically competent graduate. The new approach has a different goal: the competent future citizen. From there, it works backward with a curriculum designed to achieve that end.

The distinction between the two approaches has centuries-old roots. Seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke preferred a utilitarian approach — in which knowledge is a means to some other end: "Could it be believed, unless we have everywhere amongst us examples of it, that a child should be forced to learn the rudiments of a language which he is never to use in the course of life that he is designed to, and neglect all the while the writing a good hand, and casting accounts, which are of great advantage in all conditions of life, and most trades indispensably necessary?"

The eminent Victorian John Henry Cardinal Newman defended a

liberal education — in which knowledge is free of any end but itself: "Not to know the relative disposition of things is the state of slaves or children; to have mapped out the Universe is the boast, or at least the ambition, of Philosophy."

Spady calls the dichotomy false, although outcome-based education seeks to train students for outcomes Locke never dreamed of: cooperative behavior, respect for others, environmental awareness — all part of the competent future citizen. Ernest Martin, assistant superintendent of the Virginia Department of Education, says parents tell him they want schools to teach the basics and that they will show their children how to apply them. Teaching the basics is a good first step, he says. "But we've got to go beyond that." He wants students to know how to use those basics in a "real world situation."

The debate may be less a false dichotomy than *deja vu* all over again. In the 1920s and 1930s, American philosopher John Dewey called for "child-centered education" and "learning by doing" and challenged a school system "burdened with lumpy subject matter, humdrum teaching and indifferent students," says Richard M. Gummere Jr., author of *How to Survive Education*. "He urged that young people cooperate, not compete; that they focus on questions, not answers; that they depend on exploration, not memory; that they learn to think for themselves." Like outcome-based education, Dewey's "student-centered classroom" emphasized projects: Third-graders who watched ships sail up the Hudson River were encouraged to pursue their interest through history, science and art, to build models of Phoenician triremes and Viking dragon ships, and to use math to calculate displacement for cargo.

Dewey, a liberal professor at Columbia University, also anticipated his critics, who feared his brand of pragmatism or mistook his progressivism for indulgence: "Let us admit the case of the conservative; once we start thinking, no one can guarantee where we shall come out, except that many objects, ends, and institutions are doomed."

But pragmatic, real world situations, however defined, are something Luksik understands. In addition to raising five children, she runs a network for single parents and their children designed to help the children get an education and, ultimately, jobs. Outcome-based education, she

believes, is counterproductive to her efforts.

From her kitchen table she tracks the supposed success stories of outcome-based education around the country and seeks to discount them one by one. The Center School in New Canaan, Conn., listed by Pennsylvania officials as a model outcome-based school, has been closed for 10 years, she wrote in a compilation titled *To Tell the Truth: Will the Real OBE Please Stand Up*.

Luksik says that in Minnesota, which Spady credits as a "real pioneer," test scores have fallen precipitously. Cheri Yecke agrees. A teacher and Minnesota native, she and her family left the state in 1982 for Stafford County, Va., where she was named teacher of the year in 1988 and where her children got a solid but what she calls "average" education.

On returning to her old school district in Minnesota in 1991, she found both that it had implemented outcome-based education and that her eldest daughter tested out of her peers' Spanish, English and history classes. Her youngest daughter was looked down upon for working hard. The prevailing attitude among students, Yecke says, was, "Why study? I'll just take the test and fail it. I can always take the retest later." When an opportunity to return to Stafford County presented itself, she and her family jumped at the chance, only to discover that Virginia was also on the road to outcome-based education.

Perhaps nothing captures the confusion surrounding the debate better than a 1987 Johns Hopkins University study on outcome-based education, which warned that taking time away from high achievers to help low achievers might lead to a "leveling process that would in its extreme form be repugnant to most educators." But the study's author is also on record as saying that its use against outcome-based education "is totally irresponsible and inappropriate." Consequently, both sides cite the same study for wholly different reasons.

And neither side is above getting personal to score points. Opponents of the new approach say that while education reform has been a lucrative business for Spady, he is hardly in a position to debate the matter given that he has no classroom teaching experience. Spady dismisses Luksik's opposition as part of a well-orchestrated campaign by right-wing Christian groups to "paralyze" public

education and so win government subsidies for religious schools.

Opponents of outcome-based education, however, say their ranks cut across political, religious and racial lines. Such criticism, they say, is part of a calculated pattern of attack. A bipartisan panel of Michigan lawmakers issued a report saying that education officials there had resorted to labeling to undermine opposition to an outcome-based derivative called the Michigan Model: "Top officials from the Departments of Education and Public Health used taxpayer funds to hold training sessions around the state for local school officials on how to discredit Michigan Model opponents. . . . Any parent or teacher who got in the way of implementing the Michigan Model . . . was to be labeled as a right-wing, fundamentalist Christian fanatic."

Such exchanges aren't likely to end soon. Business officials say it's hardly unreasonable to expect high school graduates to be able to hold a job. "As soon as a young person leaves high school and goes into the work force, they're evaluated from day one on the basis of what they can accomplish," Ed Donley, a former chief executive officer of Air Products and Chemicals, based in Allentown, Pa., said in the *Harrisburg Patriot-News*. "They should be accustomed to being tested in schools by their accomplishments."

But some parent groups see outcome-based education distancing their children from the basics, more and more critical in this fast-paced, complex world. Says Eileen Hunt, leader of a predominantly black group of Richmond women organized to deal with inner-city problems, outcome-based education "will breed laziness. We have enough of that."

Federal officials appear ready to join the fray. The House of Representatives is scheduled to take up a Clinton administration measure to provide federal funds for outcome-based education. A substitute measure introduced by Rep. Dick Arme, a Texas Republican, would prohibit recipients of federal funds from using tests to measure so-called affective outcomes — those that bear on values, beliefs and attitudes — and also would require parental notification before students could participate in psychological testing or sex surveys.

Peg Luksik appears determined to fight on. "The rights you don't protect," she says, "are the rights you lose." ●