

Teaching the three D's

Outcome marketing

If Outcome-Based Education were a product in the local shopping mall, consumer activists would be screaming about deceptive advertising.

OBE promises something for which Americans yearn: good, solid academic outcomes for the billions they spend on public education.

But what OBE mostly delivers is psychobabble, groupthink, dumbed-down standards, and politically correct indoctrination.

In Virginia, OBE is the instrument for the "World Class Education" that the state's educrats have been touting for more than a year. Now they are planning a slick campaign to market the program to the public.

But not once have they acknowledged that World Class Education basically is a canned OBE program marketed in more than 30 states by a Colorado-based consultant, sociologist William Spady, the acknowledged national guru for "transformational" OBE.

Virginia has been shelling out big bucks to OBE devotees from across the country at the average rate of \$2,000 a day — not just to Mr. Spady but to consultants from elite universities like Wisconsin, Cornell, and the University of California at Los Angeles. One training consultant from the Starshine Foundation in Del Mar, Calif., could rake in \$100,000 in fees.

The centerpiece of OBE is a Common Core of Learning (CCL), another blatantly misleading title. The CCL is less about academic core subjects (English, history, science) than what educrats call the "affective" realm — feelings and emotions.

As Virginians have begun catching on, opposition has started building. In an effort to head it off, the State Board of Education hastily adopted the CCL at its May 27 meeting in Williamsburg. That action came only hours after board members were handed the latest rewrite — and it ignored pleas of two dozen speakers that the CCL be scrapped or delayed.

The prospect of politically correct dogma being forced on children in the guise of hard-nosed instruction offends conservative activists like Phyllis Schlafly. But liberal parents are alarmed, too. One of the most astute among them is Sylvia Kraemer, the mother of two children in Alexandria public schools.

Ms. Kraemer, who currently works for the federal government's Senior Executive Service, describes herself as a "left-of-center Democrat and lapsed Episcopalian." She has a Ph.D. in history and has taught at Vassar, Southern Methodist University, and Maine. And she opposes OBE with a passion, calling it "a fundamentally anti-intellectual and behaviorist strategy for personality modification and group socialization."

The deconstruction of academic rigor is what most concerns Ms. Kraemer and other Alexandria parents who turned out in force to oppose the school system's junking of an honors Western Civ. course and

see HOLLAND, page E4



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HOLLAND

From page E1

the abandonment of ability-grouping.

OBE, or Mastery Learning, insists that all pupils work in one big egalitarian group toward achieving the common goals or outcomes. Instead of going on to more challenging material, faster students are put in a holding pattern or asked to serve as tutors until others catch up.

Ms. Kraemer has dubbed that provision the Virginia Trial Attorneys' Full Employment Act. "Half of our trial attorneys," she said, "can be kept busy litigating cases arising from the attempt of Virginia public schools to require high-achieving students to spend their precious in-school hours tutoring lower-achieving students.

"The other half will be busy litigating privacy statute violations arising from the 'Common Core's' necessarily intrusive 'assessments' to determine whether students are acquiring the 'attitudes' and personality traits required for their 'life-

roles.'"

In February, Ms. Kraemer points out, the State Board of Education quietly revised its regulations dealing with programs for gifted children to bring them in line with Common Core principles (three months before adoption of the CCL). The new requirements are for "services" rather than "programs," and pupils will be classified as gifted not on the basis of "ability" but "aptitude" and such fuzzy criteria as leadership potential.

Similarly, the Alexandria schools' proposed Strategic Plan anticipates a shift of resources to provide "diverse" pupils more "special services." To which Ms. Kraemer — noting the large numbers of social workers and psychologists already on staff — fires back: "At what point do we say the public school has become too much of a social service agency dispensing 'feel good' therapy?"

Surely, parents — whether in politically liberal Alexandria or the Southside Bible Belt — along with teachers, principals, students and local taxpayers should have a large say before any radical restructuring of

the school system begins.

One would think so. But in fact the State Department of Education has been spending millions of dollars to seed OBE throughout the state before the first public hearing has been held; indeed before many parents are even aware that Carnegie units in English, math, science, and foreign languages are to be replaced with three dozen outcomes, many of them having to do with their children's attitudes.

Here are some sample outcomes:

- "Use the environment responsibly." (So who decides what is responsible? What of a student who believes a jobs-creating development is a responsible use of the environment?)
- "Understand the views and needs of others." (What "others"? — Those living in alternative lifestyles?)
- "Analyze conflicts to discover methods of cooperative resolution." (Should a conflict with an evil force be solved cooperatively?)
- "Prepare for change and evaluate its implications for learning." (Will schools hire futurists to decide what change is coming?)

• "Identify community problems and negotiate solutions contributing to the public good." (Who defines the public good?)

So go these vague substitutes for traditional academic disciplines. And OBE could be expensive mush.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Joseph Spagnolo has scoffed repeatedly at critics' estimates that OBE-World Class Education, which will require re-education of more than 50,000 teachers and staff, may cost \$500 million to implement. But, pressed on that point, a board member said the cost probably would be 10 percent of the \$5 billion currently being spent on Virginia schools.

This looks like a good example of how OBE transforms a basic skill like arithmetic into a higher-order concept like "quantifying" (one of the five New Fundamental skills, along with collaborating, communicating, problem-solving, and thinking):

Five hundred million dollars no longer is \$500 million but rather shall be expressed as "10 percent of \$5 billion." At least for purposes of obfuscation.