

Douglas B. Reeves

Avoiding the Land Mines

Who could possibly be against teaching social responsibility? Quite a few people, it turns out—as anyone who survived the controversy in the 1980s and early 1990s over outcomes-based education (OBE) can attest. A look back at that abandoned effort offers three lessons for those who advocate teaching values and civic virtue.



What Could Go Wrong?

The basic tenet of outcomes-based education was simply that schools should determine what students should know and be able to do on graduation, and that they should ensure that all students attain mastery of these outcomes. If you think this goal seems uncontroversial and almost stodgy in this era of

ubiquitous state standards and No Child Left Behind, think again.

Some educators objected to OBE on the grounds that it would undermine local control and would conflict with admission requirements of most colleges and universities (Education Commission of the States, 1995). But the real controversy was the tendency to include outcomes related to students' attitudes, feelings, and life skills instead of just factual information.

Charles J. Sykes (1995), writing in *Dumbing Down Our Kids*, complained that

OBE programs are less interested in whether students know the origins of the Civil War or the author of *The Tempest* than whether students have met such outcomes as “establishing priorities to balance multiple life roles” (a goal in Pennsylvania) or “positive self-concept” (a goal in Kentucky). (p. 246)

Critics like Sykes were not the only ones concerned about outcomes-based education. This early attempt to evaluate students on the basis of objective standards—the kind of evaluation

that is now a broadly supported, common practice—was destroyed just 15 years ago because of widespread opposition by community members who feared that teaching students “values” really meant teaching them someone else’s values. Failure to learn the following three lessons could make the most well-intentioned current efforts to teach social responsibility a political land mine for education leaders and board members.

Begin with Substance, Not Slogans

Teaching social responsibility begins not with teaching students what to think, but with teach-

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ing them how to behave—to take turns, share toys, respect the feelings of others, and respect themselves by always doing their best. When these practices become habits, they open the door for students to recognize that their actions influence others and their responsibilities are more important than their personal satisfaction.

This emphasis on behavior rather than beliefs might discourage what I describe as “T-shirt and pizza activism”—the kind of social responsibility we promote when we ask students to attend a Save Darfur pep rally at which they receive prizes in return for a minimal donation. Social responsibility is engendered not through a calculated economic exchange, but rather through understanding that we have an obligation to others. This understanding—which is difficult to cultivate but worth the effort—entails much more than the ability to parrot slogans opposing genocide.

Involve Private Enterprise

One characteristic of social responsibility that can alienate community stakeholders is the presumption that only governmental entities or nonprofit organizations are agents of social responsibility. One of the most socially responsible activities to which our students can aspire is creating or running a business that employs people, creating jobs and the financial security, housing, medical care, college opportunities, and other benefits that accompany those jobs. Indeed, every socially responsible governmental and nonprofit entity depends on the taxes and donations of the for-profit sector. Social activism curriculums and activities that spurn or diminish the value of business not only risk alienating community stakeholders, but also are based on ignorance. The

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Teach Universal Truths

Equating social responsibility with specific beliefs is not only sure to stir up controversy, but is also wrong. Our focus must be on universal truths like the Golden Rule—which is pervasive not only in the world's great religions but also in virtually every nonreligious school of thought—and the behaviors that spring from these truths. In teaching social responsibility, we invite stu-

dents to behave in ways that respect the general welfare.

We also offer students the opportunity to critically examine the extent to which advocacy is a matter of principle or opinion. Opposing poverty is in the former category, whereas supporting various proposals for tax and Medicare reform are in the latter. Supporting a literate population that can fully participate in a democracy is a principle; taking a position for or against specific standards and tests is not. Refusing to tolerate offensive ethnic jokes is a principle; forming an opinion about the pros and cons of affirmative action is not.

Both principles and politics are fair game for classroom discussions, but when it comes to teaching something the school labels “social responsibility,” school leaders and teachers must take care not to impose their own viewpoints. If we let political agendas co-opt these laudable efforts, then education for social responsibility will follow outcome-based education into oblivion.

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References

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