LEAP OF REASON

MANAGING TO OUTCOMES
IN AN ERA OF SCARCITY

An Integrated Approach
to Outcomes Assessment

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Nonprofit and educational leaders often wish they had a simple tool-kit for determining whether their programs are working to improve the lives of those they serve. Unfortunately, no such silver bullet exists. Nor should it. The only way for schools and other organizations to get a full, useful sense of what's working and what's not is to invest significant time in developing an integrated, comprehensive approach. The organization can't just settle for information that's easy to measure. It must clarify what's *important* to measure and then determine how best to do so using both qualitative and quantitative means.

At the Lawrence School, an independent, private day school in Northeast Ohio serving students in grades one through twelve who learn differently, we are beginning to define desired outcomes for our students and gather data to determine what works (and what doesn't). We hope that these experiences will serve as a precursor to the development of an outcomes-driven performance framework. Although we are still in the early stages of this work and recognize that the outcomes we are defining are very specific to our school and its unique population, I believe that we're learning important lessons that are applicable to other organizations providing direct services to children and youth.

Beyond #2 Pencils

As a psychologist specializing in assessment, I spend much of my time reminding students, families, and educational leaders to consider what each kind of data truly measures and how much it matters for an individual or organization at that particular moment. We're learning that meaningful outcomes assessment requires flexibility; a clear focus on the right outcomes with measurement of each student's incremental gains; and dedication to observing the whole student. Accepting the level of ambiguity that comes with the progression of small steps toward achieving ultimate outcomes (e.g., a diploma) is necessary in these early stages.

Intelligent use of independent testing (e.g., standardized tests given to groups or individuals) is one critical component of outcomes assessment. Unfortunately, the hyper-polarized political climate regarding testing has obscured both the value and the limitations of standardized measurement methods and has triggered a holy war between "More testing!" on one side and "Get rid of all testing!" on the other.

But test data alone are insufficient in our work with students who learn differently. Looking at "functional outcomes" in combination with test scores provides a more complete picture of the developmental progress and impact we seek. Functional outcomes are the real-life variables that often matter most to a person or an organization. For example, consider these questions that speak to important functional outcomes:

- If my child goes through your program, will she be more likely to graduate from high school and college?

- Are youth from my program on a strong path to independent adulthood (i.e., less likely to be incarcerated, living on public assistance, or unemployed)?

- Can this student balance a checkbook, follow a budget, read a bus schedule?

Functional outcomes are often qualitative in nature, but this does not mean that such data should be considered "soft" or less valuable. Functional outcomes data provide critical evidence about the real-world impact of an intervention on a child's life, both in terms of change on a personal level (e.g., she reads more books) and the attainment of important milestones (e.g., she earns her bachelor's degree).

Determining which functional outcomes we are trying to effect, why we are trying to effect them, and how we can do so provides a framework within which we focus, communicate, and demonstrate our efforts. Determining critical functional outcomes is often as simple as rewording your organization's main goals, which might look something like this:

- I want our kids to stay in school longer.

- I want to reduce turnover within key organizational areas.

- I want our kids to keep a job for two years.

A good functional outcome is one that matters, is easy to see, and requires no special skill for understanding its relevance.

Outcomes Assessment in Action

At the Lawrence School, we use a multi-faceted approach to outcomes assessment. Lawrence students often arrive feeling defeated, deflated, and disappointed despite their valiant attempts to learn in a general-education environment that neither understood nor honored their unique approaches to problem solving. As a result, they enter the school with reading, writing, and math skills that are well below average.

Because our students learn differently, our approach to assessment varies in both structure and intent. We believe that the overall success of an individual student's development and our intervention strategies is best measured through frequent, standardized assessments combined with individualized attention.

We use tests, administered by trained professionals, that are intentionally *not* tied to our curriculum. Results therefore reflect a completely independent evaluation, in much the same way that a company's finances are audited by outside accountants. Each student is tested before admission and again at the end of the school year, and average and individual scores are tracked to identify programmatic and individual areas of need. Teacher observations and performance on daily class work are also factored equally into a student's progress evaluation, as are reports from parents about improvements in quality of life at home and in behavior at school.

Our integrated perspective helps trained teachers explain these data to parents *and* students in the context of curricular and functional domains so that the scores have appropriate meaning. Our careful approach to gathering data also provides opportunities for teachers to adjust their teaching strategies, integrate support, and otherwise personalize the delivery of curriculum.

Do We Do What We Say We Do?

At Lawrence, we focus on three areas—curriculum mastery, functional outcomes, and performance on scientifically developed standardized tests—which shift in relative importance as the student gets older. Preliminary results from tracking students in grades one through six show that, after three years, the average Lawrence student is indistinguishable from a typical student his or her age in basic reading, math, and writing skills. Note the conceptualization of the data: We see getting back into the *normal* range as an important outcome for children with learning differences, since a primary need involves addressing academic deficits. When we can tell parents that their child, who cried and fought to get out of school because he was

so far behind his friends, is now reading like any other child his age, the emotional impact of our institutional goals is palpable.

By providing unambiguous evidence of improvement in basic academic skills, these data indicate a promising start and show that we are doing what we say we are doing. But it's a marathon, not a sprint. We will continue to follow each student to see if gains are maintained and to ensure that our efforts are yielding benefits as a program and for each individual student. Additionally, we must determine the relationship between gains on these tests and a student's progress in curriculum and functional domains so that the results can be integrated and communicated in an effective way that leads to positive changes (e.g., more efficient allocation of limited resources) in our organization. If our data cannot be used to help *both* individual students *and* the program as a whole, we are wasting our time.

Yet, using this integrated approach is not without obstacles. Not every organization has easy access to a psychologist or other professionals trained to administer tests individually. It takes considerable time and resources to record and track data; determine which functional outcomes to measure and how to measure them; and ascertain how the data will be used for the benefit of individual students and the program as a whole. But this is the exciting part. After all of this work, we are left with a plan that is real, not theoretical, and concrete ideas about how to do more of what's working and eliminate what's not.

Programmatic victories can't be claimed overnight. We are still working on how best to measure basic skill development in our Upper School students, since deficits in older children are more likely to be resistant to intervention and since testing in basic skills does not address the complex problem-solving and abstract-thinking abilities that are so critical. We also can't say definitively that Lawrence students are more likely to graduate from college, because there have been only six graduating classes; we need many more years of data. Still, we can say that Lawrence graduates attend two- and four-year

colleges at a rate of about 96 percent, compared with 16 percent of children with learning differences who don't go to Lawrence. So, after several years of work, we can declare, "We have preliminary data indicating that we are succeeding, but we have a long way to go."

Conclusion

Vanessa Diffenbacher, head of Lawrence's Lower School, explains the underlying rationale for our integrated approach to outcomes assessment: "We want to teach our students the foundational skills of lifelong learning, not just passing the next test. We teach them how to become independent learners, not what to memorize, and no single test suffices for measuring that kind of progress. Our approach reflects our emphasis on the whole child and lets us know if we are succeeding both as a program and for each individual student. Yes, it's a huge amount of work for us, but our students deserve it."

An integrated approach to assessment helps us construct appropriate learning environments and develop instructional approaches and practices that make stepping stones out of stumbling blocks for both students and teachers. It requires a great deal of institutional courage to refuse to default to a one-size-fits-all, cookie-cutter view and instead to pursue meaningful measurement for each student, but we've found the payoff worthwhile. Perhaps Lou Salza, Lawrence head of school, put it best when he said, "Learning is a personal experience: one size fits few." Meaningful outcomes measurement follows that same maxim.