The Value of Expected Student Outcomes
by: Dr. Erin Wilcox
The Value of Expected Student Outcomes:
Updated for the Inspire Protocol and Flourishing Schools Research

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With the introduction of Flourishing Schools Research and the new accreditation protocol, the Association of Christian Schools International’s (ACSI) Inspire, schools have asked how expected student outcomes (ESOs) fit into the new models. Is this a 30-year-old concept that is retiring along with REACH or is it still important to clearly identify the distinctive schoolwide goals and objectives that should be accomplished in the lives of students for both academic and non-academic areas?

This article will look at how expected student outcomes have impacted our Christian schools over the years. It will also briefly review research related to both academic and non-academic outcomes in secular settings.

Clear and measurable student outcomes can help students achieve success by providing a framework for learning and a shared understanding among faculty of what students should know, believe, understand, and be able to do. They help us describe what flourishing students look like if we accomplish the mission (M. Essenburg, personal communication, May 8, 2023). The American Institutes for Research reviewed a variety of studies where student learning outcomes (SLOs) were introduced and followed in schools for several years. After a couple of years of implementation, one school stated the following:

…the majority of teachers agreed with the following three statements: “Using student learning objectives has improved my teaching,” “I often consider my SLOs when planning and conducting my daily work,” and “The student achievement results of using an individual SLO are worth the extra work” (Courtemanche et al., 2014, as cited in Lachlan-Hache, L. 2015, p. 3).

It is clear, from the concept of Understanding by Design, why identifying specific outcomes is so important (Wiggins et al., 1998). In a similar way, research supports posting instructional objectives. Both underscore the importance of clearly stating the focus of the instruction so that the instructor can coordinate efforts regarding instructional activities and materials. Communicating these goals is critical so students have increased knowledge of what they are learning and why (Jackson, 2009). By putting objectives in place, students become more actively engaged and more reflective on their learning.

Researchers on assessment recognize that an overfocus on standardized achievement leaves us unbalanced and therefore in danger of de-emphasizing the outcomes that really matter. Many of them call for educators to be clear on the use of desired outcomes and develop a variety of assessments because otherwise, we “reinforce the incorrect impression that we can reflect the very complex student characteristics we seek to develop in a single set of paper-and-pencil test items yielding a single score” (Stiggins, 1985, pp. 71-72).

All this makes sense to teachers who have been defining learning objectives in their classrooms for years. Keeping the short-term or long-term objectives clearly in focus when planning lessons, units, or other aspects of the school program, makes it much more likely to achieve them.

In an article in Christian School Education, Steve Dill, former Vice President for ACSI and one of the co-authors of the Exemplary School Protocol, discussed how a focus on flourishing schools and school improvement affects student learning. He sums up the value of ESOs in the following statement:

If you aim for nothing, you will hit it every time. To develop meaningful student outcomes, we must prioritize both process and content. …Exemplary schools must strive to have regularly reviewed, well-written student outcomes as well as faculty who will commit to the outcomes, develop ongoing assessments of student progress, and use assessment results to drive decisions about curriculum, programs, and school culture. Written outcomes are not a box to be checked-they are meaningful statements of student expectations that drive the decisions of an exemplary school (Dill, 2016).
The Flourishing Schools Research used the concept of ESOs as part of its development. It compiled the ESOs from 63 schools that agreed to participate in the study and categorized those outcomes into six areas (spiritual, academic, community, excellence, impact, and servanthood). The chart of the outcomes is available in the National Report Executive summary referenced in the resources. The report summarized the influence of the ESOs as follows:

This meta-analysis of ESOs provided insight into what Christian schools say is their why—the outcomes they care about, and toward which they are educating. The findings from the meta-analysis were factored into the development of the FSCI (Flourishing Schools Culture Instrument), alongside the conceptual basis derived from the literature review, to provide a robust background for instrument development (Swaner, et al, p. 8).

When the Flourishing research was complete, one of the concepts that was chosen for its significant impact on students was that process alone does not matter if it isn't producing results. The construct was summarized as needing to include an “outcomes focus.” This lines up clearly with the idea presented in John 15:8, “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.” (ESV Version) Most of us would assert that process does matter but the “proof is in the pudding.”

For the past 30 years, ACSI has noticed through its accreditation program that schools which appear to be delivering a truly Christian education have identified distinctively Christian schoolwide goals and objectives to be accomplished in the lives of their students regardless of what subjects they were teaching or curriculum they were using. Most schools included some goals related to the students’ spiritual formation, development, or maturity in addition to academic goals. These schools used both the academic and non-academic outcomes as the driving force for choosing and designing strategies and programs. In many cases, faculty hiring, budget allocations, and program development also hinged on the accomplishment of those goals and objectives. Those outcomes were so important, they characterized the experience of students at the school. New families knew the school would do everything in its power, with the resources entrusted to it, to accomplish those outcomes in the lives of their children. And they were willing to pay to see that happen.

The new *Inspire* protocol wholly supports that understanding. Standard 1 starts with “The school operates from a written mission and statement of faith that outline its biblical foundations and beliefs. The school identifies and assesses its expected student outcomes and uses results to drive decisions throughout operations and programs.” The *Why Statement* for the first standard underscores that with “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18). “Foundational documents identify the underlying principles upon which the Christian school is established. The mission, based on biblical principles, provides direction and purpose for the organization. *Expected Student Outcomes* bring the foundational values to life and chart the course for every area of school programs” (ACSI, 2023, p. 12).

Throughout the rest of the protocol, ESOs are supported in academic and non-academic areas. They connect the day-to-day instructional program to the overarching goals of the school. Schools without ESOs oftentimes find themselves discussing theoretical ends with little or no way to monitor the reality of how those are realized in the lives of students each year or at the end of their educational experience. Many times, ESOs are called the “Portrait of the Graduate” to help the students, families, teachers, and leaders remain focused that everything they do contributes to those long-term goals which summarize the core reasons for having a Christian school.

To give schools some suggestions of what outcomes are most common, 13 schools were reviewed in the summer of 2022. Like the analysis done by the Flourishing Schools Research, there were quite a few similarities between schools. The schools chosen were primarily ACSI Exemplary Accredited schools along with a few others known for their work in this area. The following chart is a synthesis of the outcomes from the schools reviewed.

This list may be used as a reference in the creation or revision of a school’s outcomes, but it is not an ACSI approved list of ESOs. ESOs are unique to each school. They should reflect the character values, spiritual aspirations, cultural norms, academic goals, and other characteristics of the school. Part of the benefit of
developing ESOs is the collaboration of faculty, staff, administration, and possibly parents and students in order to define the school’s distinctives. ESOs can be thought of as statements that operationalize the mission, core values, and ends of the governing body in a way that will translate into instructional activities, strategies, curriculum, and even decisions that affect hiring, resources, and training. Good examples include traits that are general as well as competencies that are more measurable so that teachers can determine how to work them into lessons and assessments. Too often there is a disconnect between the foundational statements (rhetoric) and the daily grind of lesson plans, assessments, and operational decisions (reality). Simply stated, schools ask themselves what their students should know, do, and believe upon graduation? If they are well-articulated, ESOs will effectively guide the school and give clear focus on the results that are most important to the school community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual</th>
<th>Academics</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Community</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Pursues a growing relationship with God</td>
<td>Prepares oneself for success at the next level through skills and content and has the ability to apply those when thinking critically, and solving problems</td>
<td>Demonstrates courageous character through humility and integrity</td>
<td>Collaborates and cooperates with others</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Knows the Bible and can apply it to life</td>
<td>Communicates effectively</td>
<td>Lives according to biblical principles</td>
<td>Serves others generously</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Makes Him known to others</td>
<td>Demonstrates a love of learning</td>
<td>Makes healthy and moral choices</td>
<td>Understands responsibility to the needy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Develops a Biblical worldview</td>
<td>Appreciates and participates in the arts and athletics as God has gifted</td>
<td>Displays stewardship of time, resources, and God’s creation</td>
<td>Engages in the broader community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Values self and others as created in the image of God</td>
<td>Utilizes technology responsibly</td>
<td>Utilizes spiritual gifts for the sake of others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Seeks to live for God’s glory</td>
<td>Respects all individuals as God’s creation</td>
<td>Demonstrates leadership as appropriate</td>
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Many schools prefer to elaborate on these ideas by adding competencies under each area within their internal documentation. Below are several examples:

1) For “Knows the Bible and can apply it to life” the staff of the school may decide on an approach to make Bible instruction practical, or how to include Bible memorization. When these elements fit into an overall outcome, it is easier to decide on specific action steps to make plans a reality.

2) For “Makes healthy and moral choices” the PE curriculum could include nutrition and physical lifestyle choices, rather than only focus on competitive team sports.

3) For “Understands responsibility to the needy” many schools require service hours. However, when the students are asked why they are doing this, responses such as “because we have to,” should be avoided. It would be beneficial to pair the service hours with a chapel and small group discussion on what Jesus says about the poor, and then add periodic reflective journaling after service opportunities. Reviewing those journal entries or allowing students to share from those would more likely address the heart of the outcome “Understands responsibility to the needy” than simply turning in a slip with the required number of hours.

4) For the outcome “Values self and others as created in the image of God,” one of the schools interviewed shared that they had attached the competency of “showing respect to others.” A Grade 6 Bible teacher stated that she uses that concept to have students discuss how that affects all their social interactions--during the school day, online, at home--and how sometimes they act differently to various groups of people. It greatly enhanced her lesson and she thought of several ways to have students reflect on their personal growth in communication.

5) One final example comes from the outcome “Demonstrates a love of learning.” One of the competencies created by a school that was interviewed was to be a “curious inquirer.” In a high school
art class, students were encouraged to demonstrate this trait as they studied works of various artists, incorporating new techniques into their own work. Then the students reflected on what they had learned and how these techniques worked within their own style. This process of always learning (curious inquirers) was valued and became the mantra of their class.

In earlier research, many ACSI schools indicated that they had ESOs, but they were not yet mature in their assessment or evaluation of their effectiveness (Wilcox, 2011). (Some ideas on how to assess them will be covered in a second article on the subject.) However, those that had well-developed ESOs were more clearly focused on what educators often call the “intangibles” of a Christian education, even though those areas are more difficult to assess. As a result, even if the assessments weren’t fully developed, teachers in those schools were more likely to include specific activities in their teaching targeting the desired traits. Those activities were incorporated more intentionally in lesson plans and in class discussions, similar to the examples above.

In recent interviews with administrators about their ongoing use of expected student outcomes, one of the benefits that was mentioned several times was the value of having a shared vocabulary. In several cases, outcomes had been clearly defined for the school community and when terms like “courage” or “integrity” were used, students knew what was meant by those concepts. These administrators commented that these same concepts were handy to use as ideals during discipline situations when describing why an act of selfishness or thoughtlessness was detrimental. They were able to quickly show the connection of an undesirable action to the loss of one of the outcomes that were held in high esteem in the school community.

The concept of the outcomes providing a common vocabulary was also important for schools in regard to parental communication. Parents can easily understand the academic expectations of a school, but it is more difficult to understand the non-academic outcomes the school is targeting. The ESOs of a school clearly identify those. This helps during the marketing and promotion of the school's overall educational program, granting the parents a more solid understanding of how Christian education is different. It can also be helpful when there are decisions made or even discipline administered that seeks to contribute to the overall maturity of a student rather than simply impart consequences. The purpose of the school’s actions should be to see the ESOs developed in the lives of the students. Any actions taken should truly be in the best interest of the student and hopefully, the higher values of the outcomes can help guide the conversation between home and school.

The final group that benefits from a shared vocabulary is the teachers. In addition to everything mentioned above, one school reported that they organize their hiring questions around their expected student outcomes. Conducting this process in such a manner has two benefits for them. First, it keeps them focused on choosing people who best exemplify those characteristics prior to hiring. Secondly, it clearly communicates from the very beginning the value of those ESOs to the new staff.

In reviewing studies referencing ESOs and observing schools that have used them as guiding and integrative values throughout the school, a common theme surfaces. Schools benefit from identifying what a school’s specific mission is and, more precisely, what that looks like in the lives of the students. In some cases, schools may find that they try to do too much and establishing ESOs has helped them focus their efforts or limit priorities. In other situations, schools had not identified what they hoped to achieve with their students and were at a loss when trying to communicate the value of their unique education to prospective students or parents. Identifying their distinctive goals, or ESOs, helped them market who they are, and what they commit to accomplish in the lives of students.

Schools with clearly identified ESOs have a guiding set of priorities or clear distinctives for their program that they can communicate and use for decision making and which prove useful in instructional and program planning. It seems that this intentional shared focus on a set of priorities, followed up with assessment and accountability, gives schoolwide outcomes the best chance of being accomplished.

(Stay tuned for a second article on assessing ESOs.)