



Education Policy Brief

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Opportunity to Learn

Accountability is one of the top priorities on educational agendas across the nation. Many states are attempting to develop systems that expect more of students and set challenging performance standards. With increased expectations for student performance comes the obligation of providing students with adequate “opportunities to learn”.

Opportunity to learn (OTL) was originally defined as the overlap between the information students were taught and the information on which they were tested. But as the push for accountability has increased, the definition of OTL has expanded to include the quality of resources, school conditions, curriculum, and teaching that students experience. All of these issues are considered critical for ensuring that students are able to meet the increased demands of performance-based accountability systems.

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Introduction

According to Delaware policymakers involved in creating the Delaware Student Accountability plan, one of the original goals of the effort was to create an educational system that expects more and provides more.¹ Indeed many experts in the area of accountability believe that those holding students and schools accountable are in turn accountable for creating conditions that promote learning and provide students with adequate “opportunities to learn”.

Opportunity to learn was originally defined as a measure of “whether or not...students have had an opportunity to study a particular topic or learn how to solve a particular type of problem presented by the test”.² In recent policy discussions, OTL has come to refer not only to the overlap between what has been taught and what is tested, but to a more proactive concern with providing appropriate learning opportunities for all groups of students. It has been expanded to include the resources, school conditions, curriculum, and teaching that students experience. Moreover, in standards-based reform, OTL has been defined as “***what the education system does to enable students to meet the expectations set by the content and performance standards***”.³

Research Findings

OTL is a critical issue for at least two reasons. First, researchers have long recognized that disparities exist between certain groups of students that place some students at a disadvantage academically. Secondly, several studies have found a positive relationship between OTL and student achievement.

- **Disparities Exist**

Disparities in instructional conditions between racial and ethnic groups have been well documented. Research indicates that non-white students are disproportionately represented in lower nonacademic tracks, remedial classes, and special education classes where opportunity to learn is restricted. In addition, there is evidence to suggest that less qualified teachers, less adequate instructional materials and fewer resources (i.e., computers, equipment, laboratories, etc.) are more likely to be found in low-income or high minority schools.⁴

- **OTL Affects Achievement**

Previous research has narrowly defined OTL as the amount of overlap between what is taught and what is tested. In these studies, information on the amount and the quality of exposure to new knowledge has been gathered through teachers’ self-reports, direct observation of classroom instruction, or by examining the curriculum materials used. Many of these studies have found positive relationships between the amount of content covered and performance in that content area, but many researchers argue that content coverage is just one facet of OTL.⁵

Beyond content coverage, several studies of programs in disadvantaged urban and rural schools suggest that OTL is also influenced by school factors. In Title I elementary school-wide project sites that showed small but steady gains in student achievement, changes in school and classroom conditions were made to improve the learning environment. These changes included more site-based management, more time for teacher planning and reflection, and changing the responsibilities of district personnel from supervisor/evaluator to instructional leader. These schools also allocated resources to

provide ongoing professional development activities and to implement incentives for teacher and student attendance and performance. Other conditions at the school level that had a positive effect on achievement included a school leadership team that worked together, a system for monitoring and recognizing student progress, and methods for involving parents.⁶

Previous research on OTL has been conducted in low-stakes settings where there were no consequences attached to performance. Many experts warn about the use of OTL data in high stakes settings: “**The history of testing suggests, in fact, that when accountability stakes are high, results can become corrupted. The same policies that give rise to the current interest in assessing OTL contain within them the potential for misuse and corruption of OTL data**”.⁷ Therefore many experts indicate that OTL information should be collected for the purpose of school improvement and not for the purposes of accountability.

Measuring OTL

Research indicates that OTL is a critical issue that is often difficult to measure. Part of the difficulty arises because of the complexity of the learning process and the number of factors related to learning. In addition, most strategies for collecting OTL information (teacher self-reports, classroom observations, etc.) are time consuming and costly.

Although there are disadvantages associated with assessing OTL, many researchers believe that they are far outweighed by the advantages of assessing OTL. Advantages include: monitoring curriculum, teaching, and instruction in order to meet individual student needs and improve offerings; ensuring that an accountability system is fair; providing feedback to teachers and schools about the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum and course offerings; and, developing priorities for professional development and resource allocation.

Though difficult to measure and often controversial, most researchers agree that measures of OTL should include information about the resources, school conditions, curriculum, and instruction to which students have access. The following table presents a list of factors associated with OTL that are most frequently cited in the literature.⁸

Factors Associated with OTL

Curriculum	Instructional Quality	Time	Resources	School Conditions
Aligned with content standards	Teaching experience	For lesson planning and collaboration	Adequate physical space	Instructional leadership on the part of administration
Integrated across content areas	Teacher Certification	For uninterrupted periods of instruction	Access to textbooks, technology and support materials	Policies promoting collegiality of school staff
Relevant to students and reflecting real life problems	Teacher turnover		School and community partnerships designed to address student health and social service needs	High expectations for student learning
Aligned with assessments for monitoring	Teacher attendance		Parental Involvement	Student attendance incentives
	Teacher commitment			Safe and orderly learning environment

student progress	Use of appropriate and varied teaching strategies		Quality Professional Development Equitable finance formulas within and between schools/districts	Teacher involvement in decision making
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DELAWARE SITUATION:

On November 13, 2000 the Delaware State Board of Education is sponsoring an Educational Summit designed to bring together teams of individuals representing parents, teachers, administrators, school board members, legislators, business people, community members, members of educational partner groups and other interested constituents. The goal of the summit is to celebrate Delaware's commitment to education reform and develop a plan for maximizing the opportunity to learn for all students in Delaware. Following the summit, the Delaware State Board of Education is expected to release a summary of the proceedings including a plan for continuing the commitment to education reform in Delaware.

POLICY QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

- How can the state change the emphasis of administrators' responsibility from supervision to one of instructional leadership?
- In order to provide quality learning opportunities for all students, should schools be funded differentially to "level the playing field"?
- How can the state ensure that all students experience quality learning opportunities in Delaware schools (i.e. systematic monitoring of OTL)?

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