

Education Matters

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Testing the System

What passes and what fails in high school exit exam policies

By Sally Kilgore and Drew Johnson

Most states began administering exit exams to potential high school graduates in the 1980s. These exams differed greatly from those used in many states today. The older exit exam, known as a “minimum competency exam,” responded to public concerns that America’s high schools were awarding diplomas to students who could not read, write, add, or subtract.

As the label implies, these exams evaluated basic literacy competencies—most often competencies associated with an eighth-grade curriculum—and the majority of students found them amazingly easy. States established passing scores at a level low enough to ensure that nearly all students passed these exams, and, with proper course credits in order, marched into their high school gyms to receive diplomas.

Proficiency exams emerged in the 1990s, as political and business leaders from all regions and political affiliations argued that

the basic literacy captured by the minimum competency exams was insufficient for the challenges our young adults would face in the twenty-first century. Not only is the substance of these exams more challenging, but also the passing level is set much higher than that of the earlier minimum competency exams.

Initial calls for an improved exam system came as international comparisons of student performance in the early 1990s demonstrated that American students performed substantially below their cohorts in industrialized nations in mathematics and science. Concurrently, college professors reported their alarm at the lack of adequate preparation of entering freshmen. With over 25 percent of entering freshmen assigned to one or more remedial classes, few could disagree.

To address that challenge, states introduced proficiency exams—usually replacing minimum competency exams—that



varied in their approach and rigor. Some states, like Georgia and New York, require students to pass end-of-course exams in courses such as Algebra I and biology. Most states require standards-based exit exams more generic in scope, such as in language arts and mathematics. To date, twenty-four states require, or will require by 2008, that students pass one or more proficiency exams to attain a high school diploma.

Benefits of Standards-Based Exit Exams

Theoretically, a standards approach to improving student learning can have profound and healthy implications. First, standards can improve equality of opportunity. Standards give students, parents, and teachers access to clear statements of what a student needs to know and be able to do to succeed at the next level of education or to attain a meaningful career (rather than just a job) after high school.

Assessing students' mastery of standards



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can also improve our evaluation of school performance. Evaluating schools in terms of the proportion of students meeting academic standards theoretically allows all schools or students to perform well, or all can perform poorly. This is a profound and important change.

The standards-based approach also eliminates some illusions that inevitably emerge with percentile-ranked test reports. It is possible, for instance, for a student to answer only 60 percent of the items correctly, but place in the 95th percentile because everyone did worse than he or she did. Proficiency exams based on capably crafted standards constitute a shift toward valuing what students actually know, not simply just how they rank.

Complications

Faced with abysmally low passing rates on high school proficiency exams, some states are backing away from fully implementing them. Recently, California's State Board of Education voted unanimously to postpone applying penalties for poor results on its statewide assessment—a move that spared 92,000 students from failing.

New York recently voided the results of its math exam based on disproportionate failure rates among minority groups. In these two cases, a central issue was whether students received a fair opportunity to learn: Were the students actually taught the material? Were teachers sufficiently prepared to teach the material? Were the exit exams really aligned with academic standards published by the State? No one really knows.

Other states committed to proficiency exams adjusted their ratings because of faulty questions. For example, the Texas Education Agency gave almost 5,000 sophomores credit for an item on the mathematics portion of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) for which they were initially denied.

Human errors also occur in statistical manipulations—norming scores, equating tests, and transferring data. In 2000, scorers incorrectly applied norming formulas to a number of individual student and school scores in California. These errors resulted in inflated scores for twenty-two schools—resulting in erroneously given

teacher bonuses. In Virginia, the cut scores for the 2002 writing test were set one point too high, leading officials to raise the scores of over 5,000 students in the fifth and eighth grade from fail to pass upon the discovery of the error.

Making Diplomas Mean Something

The new high school exit exams are designed to make a high school diploma "mean something." However, a high school diploma already means something. Its value is embedded already in various job entry and college admission requirements. For most employers, a diploma means that the holder has, at the very least, demonstrated basic literacy skills and shown some tenacity in sitting still even when things are boring. Requiring students to pass a new high school exit exam then is not giving "meaning," it is *changing* it.

Students deserve, and employers could use, more discriminating signals about the knowledge and abilities gained by an individual as a result of his high school experience. Since high school diplomas already have meaning in the marketplace, why not add more information to the high school diploma? Delaware, for instance, has three levels of a high school diploma: basic, standard, and distinguished—partially determined by a student's score on their statewide exams.

Providing a differentiated diploma system, by itself, will not resolve all the concerns surrounding high school exit exams. Supporters of high school exit exams will remain fearful that students lack a meaningful incentive to work hard.

How can states maintain a meaningful incentive with less ominous penalties? Students could not only have the opportunity to have a higher octane diploma, but also earn the opportunity for scholarships to post-secondary institutions. Michigan, for instance, provides scholarships to students demonstrating proficiency rather than denying diplomas to those who cannot do so. If, however, states choose to follow such a strategy, they must prepare financially to



The Education Policy Institute estimates that the number of annual state assessments administered in this country will more than double—from approximately 400 to 850 within three years.

support a system where nearly all students become eligible for them.

Guaranteed admission to public universities and colleges is also a useful motivator. Texas currently guarantees admission to some state universities based on class rank. Press reports suggest, though, that some students game the system by transferring to high schools where they can improve their chances of getting into the “top ten percent.” Yet, if scholarship eligibility required both high grades *and* strong performance on the state’s exit exams, every student would have a reason to excel *and* attend schools with challenging curriculums.

Rewarding schools not only for increasing the proportion of students eventually passing, but also for ensuring that students are adequately prepared the first time they sit for an exam introduces incentives to prepare students adequately the first time. Such a plan would save money and time administering exams and reduce the number of discouraging performances by ill-prepared students.

The Need for Change

If things stay the same, the pressure of states and administrators to lower the expectations on high school proficiency exams will continue and the bar will be lowered until only the most unprepared students will fail to make the grade.

Standards-based expectations are an extremely important shift in our approach to education, one that deserves aggressive protection. Such protection can occur only if policymakers fearlessly consider alternative ways of structuring most state accountability systems.

The American tradition of finding and nurturing talent should encourage efforts to raise standards for all young people. Our children deserve to be challenged to achieve excellence in the arena of their choosing—be it academic, artistic, mechanical endeavor, or public service. They also deserve to enter adulthood with the proficiencies that can allow them a meaningful career in the workforce. Without reconfigured state accountability systems

of standards and testing, the pressure to lower standards will overwhelm the most committed reformers—leaving our youth ill prepared for the economic opportunities and societal responsibilities they will face. ■

Sally Kilgore is president of the Nashville-based Modern Red SchoolHouse and served on the advisory board for the National Center for Education Statistics for almost a decade.

Drew Johnson is president of the Tennessee Center for Policy Research, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute committed to responsible government.

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Thinking On

One school's hybrid approach to learning

By Bill Wellhouse

Jenny is a typical senior at River Valley Charter School, a very untypical school near San Diego, California. She has a full day of classes on Wednesdays and Fridays. Because of her flexible schedule, she has enrolled in a French class on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons at the local community college. On Thursday mornings, she volunteers in kindergarten at a private school. Jenny hopes that this experience will allow her to discover whether she is truly interested in pursuing a career in early childhood education. On Monday mornings, she meets with the student government to plan school-wide social events. On most Monday afternoons she meets with her physics teacher for extra tutoring. Although Jenny usually studies at home, sometimes she comes to school to meet in a study group to prepare for a government test or to complete a literature project.

Traditionally, high schools are organized around "seat time" within classrooms—usually six or seven 50-minute periods, five days a week. Legislation gives charter schools flexibility to try innovative ways to improve student learning. River Valley Charter School, serving students from 7th to 12th grade, uses a "hybrid" system, in which students spend part of each week

in classes and the remainder in various learning activities beyond the classroom. This includes extensive homework assignments, a weekly community volunteer

75-minute core class twice a week. Because teachers teach every day, class sizes are halved, ranging from ten to eighteen students. This allows teachers to engage



Students of River Valley Charter School performing at a local bookstore.

project, the use of technology to extend learning experiences, individual tutoring, student-organized study groups, teacher-led review sessions, as well as many traditional extracurricular activities.

Students at River Valley attend each

students more and maximize instructional time. All students participate in a volunteer project aligned with their career interest. Monday afternoons are reserved for tutoring when core teachers are available to meet with students individually or in

Implementing this hybrid model has enabled River Valley to achieve one of the highest API scores in San Diego County: 862.

Outside the Box

[and the classroom]

small groups. Students also have time in their schedules to meet with specially hired tutors. When exams approach or a large project is due, students often work in groups in open classrooms or in the school's media center. In this program, students manage their heavy study schedules and are well prepared for the time management challenges of college.

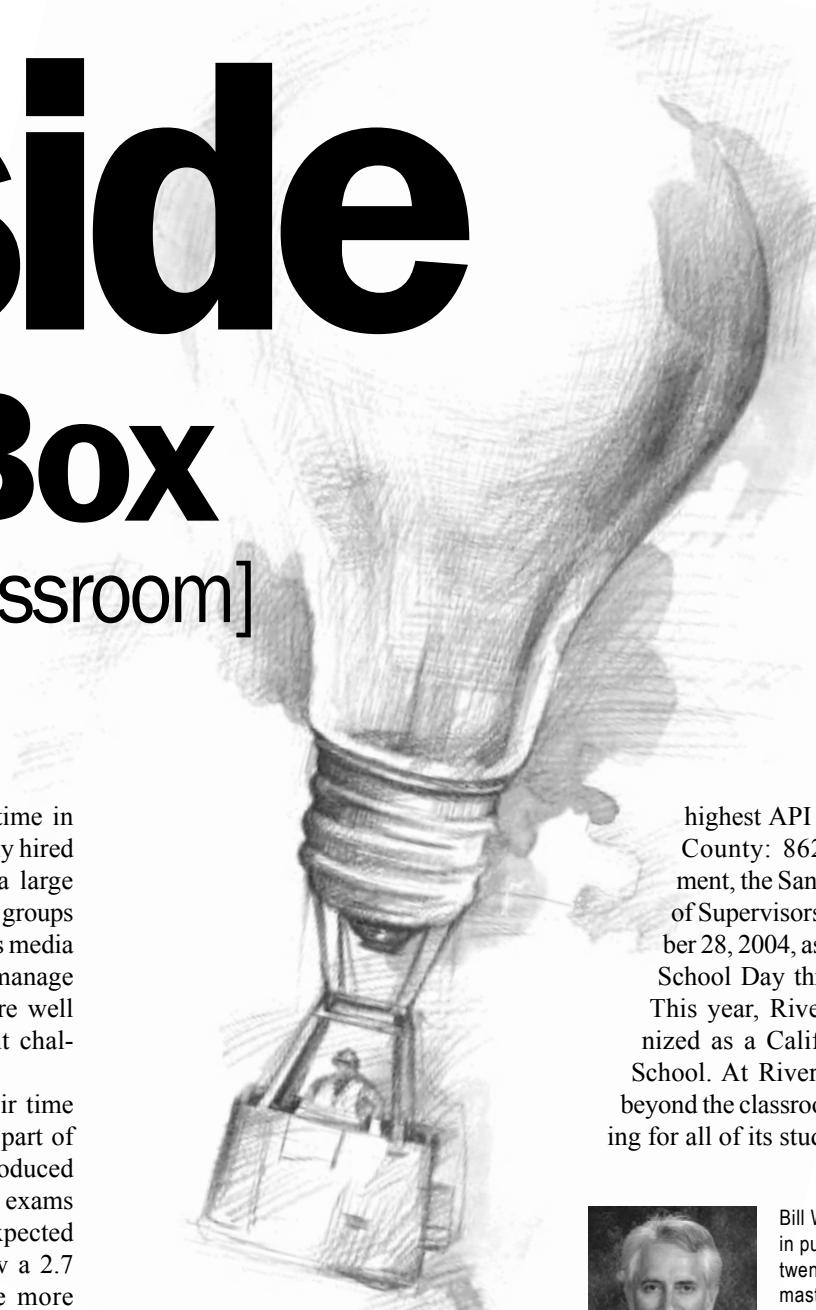
Students are accountable for their time outside class because a significant part of their grade is based on the work produced independently. Rigorous classroom exams make them accountable for the expected learning. When students fall below a 2.7 GPA, teachers monitor their time more closely and require them to attend a study skills class. As a school with high expectations, River Valley is committed to the state standards, and measures its success, in no small part, by student success on the STAR tests. These school-wide learning results are presented to the sponsoring district every fall in an exhaustive analytical report.

The payoffs from these learning activities beyond the classroom include:

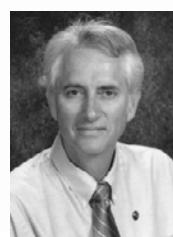
- Students taking responsibility for the work they do independent of the classroom
- Students having time to participate in the adult community in volunteer projects

- Students expressing less boredom with school because of the variety of experiences during the week
- Students engaging in more opportunities for one-on-one learning with teachers and tutors
- Teachers being provided with realistic and powerful teaching opportunities in small classes and one-on-one interventions that allow them to meet the needs of all students
- Increased student learning

Implementing this hybrid model has enabled River Valley to achieve one of the



highest API scores in San Diego County: 862. For this achievement, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors proclaimed September 28, 2004, as River Valley Charter School Day throughout the county. This year, River Valley was recognized as a California Distinguished School. At River Valley, experiences beyond the classroom enhance the learning for all of its students. ■



Bill Wellhouse has worked in public education for over twenty-five years. He holds master's degrees in Applied Mathematics and Educational Administration and is the principal of River Valley Charter School.

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A Character Ed Program that Scores with NCLB

Teachers can now use the first standards-based character education workbook and blackline masters that specifically track with No Child Left Behind.

Positively For Kids, Inc., a multimedia content provider that specializes in character education materials, has partnered with PTA National Outstanding Educator of the Year and AAE advisory board member Gene Bedley to develop the Character in

Action character education program.

The Character in Action program emphasizes meaningful messages that build character and values, while helping kids develop their reading and writing skills.

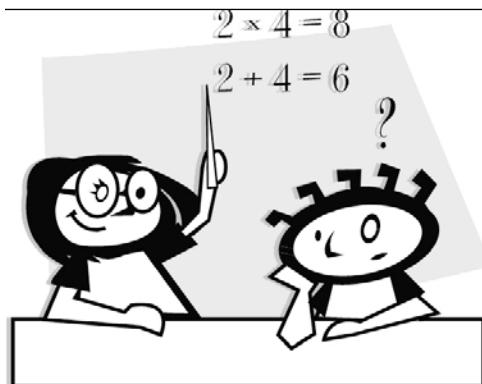
"Parents and teachers face a real challenge in finding good role models," said Russ Riggins, president of Positively For Kids. "By grabbing their attention through sharing the life stories of

famous athletes, we think kids will really connect to the messages found in our Character in Action program."

"Parents will welcome Character in Action lessons into their schools," remarked Gene Bedley. "The professional athletes' life stories serve as an inspiration for their own children to overcome various obstacles as each athlete does in the stories."



All books are available at major retailers including Barnes & Noble and Amazon.com. Consumers will also be able to order the books directly from the Positively For Kids website www.positivelyforkids.com.



What Works with Math?

From a systematic search of published and unpublished research, the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), a branch of the U.S. Department of Education, identified ten studies of five curriculum-based interventions for improving mathematics achievement for middle school students. These include all studies conducted in the past twenty years that met WWC standards for evidence.

The five curricula having at least one study of effectiveness that meets WWC standards for evidence include *Cognitive Tutor®*, *Connected Mathematics Project*, *The Expert Mathema-*

tician, I CAN Learn® Mathematics Curriculum, and *Saxon Math*.

Only five of the more than forty middle school math interventions known to be available for adoption have any studies of their effectiveness that meet the WWC evidence standards. For more information, visit the What Works Clearinghouse at www.whatworks.ed.gov.



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Houston's Attempt to Revive Merit Pay

After firing nearly 40 percent of the teachers at three underperforming schools, Houston's superintendent Abelardo Saavedra is turning to the carrot of merit pay to recruit and keep good teachers.

Although last year Houston gave 80 percent of its teachers a piddling bonus of \$440, next year Saavedra will be modifying the program, giving a smaller number of teachers the opportunity to earn something a bit more meaningful: up to \$3,000 through combined individual and schoolwide bonuses. Teachers who teach



Abelardo Saavedra

subjects tested on the Texas state test will be eligible for \$1,500 bonuses if their students' scores improve substantially. There's also the lure of an additional bonus of \$500 for all teachers for each subject area in which schools' test scores improve—provided the teachers showed up to work on a regular basis.

Making merit pay a year-round incentive, this summer Saavedra has also hired teachers to tutor high school seniors who failed the state test, giving these teachers a \$100 bonus for every student they help to pass the test. ■

Bible Literacy Lacking

New Study Reveals Teens' Ignorance of the Bible and Why It Hampers Their Education

American high school students are deficient in their academic knowledge of the Bible, and it is limiting their ability to study literature and understand art, music, history, and culture, according to a new landmark national study of high school English teachers funded by the John Templeton Foundation and published by the Bible Literacy Project.

"Leading English teachers reported students without Bible knowledge take more time to teach, appearing 'confused,' 'stumped,' 'clueless,'" said report author and principal investigator Marie Wachlin, Ph.D. "Teachers told us that Bible knowledge gives a distinct educational advantage to students."

The research report, entitled "Bible Literacy Report: What do American teens need to know and what do they know?" also includes new, nationally representative findings from a Gallup survey about the knowledge of the Bible among American teens.

Teachers in Dr. Wachlin's study cited multiple reasons of

why knowledge of the Bible is so important to education:

"It is difficult to pick up a work of literature that doesn't have some reference to the Bible."

"I think all of the more complex works of literature reference it."

"I wouldn't say [literature] is steeped with it. It's saturated with it."

"When they don't have Biblical knowledge, they're really missing part of what the author has to say. And typically, I don't have time to go back and explain all the Biblical allusions."

The qualitative study of leading high school English teachers from ten states—recommended as "best" by their peers—shows that 40 out of 41 teachers, more than 98 percent surveyed, believe Bible literacy gives a distinct educational advantage. It also reveals that 90 percent of English teachers interviewed believe that Biblical knowledge is crucial for a good education, according to Chuck Stetson, founding chairman of the Bible Literacy Project, which published the report.

In conjunction with the study, pollster George Gallup, Jr. reported on new Gallup poll results of what teenagers actually know and do not know about the content of the Bible. The Gallup survey was of a na-

tionally representative sample of 1002 teenagers between the ages of 13 and 18 years old. It indicated, for example, that one quarter of teens believed the sentence "David was king of the Jews" was a false statement; and when given a choice of four quotations from the Bible, almost two-thirds of teens could not correctly identify a quotation from the Sermon on the Mount. Also according to the poll, almost one out of ten teens believes that Moses was one of the twelve Apostles.

In reference to the study and Gallup poll results, Charles C. Haynes, senior scholar at the First Amendment Center, noted there continues to be confusion and false thinking among educators and the public-at-large that somehow academic study of the Bible is not permissible in public schools, when, in fact, it is permissible.

The Bible Literacy Project, Inc., is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to research and public education on the academic study of the Bible in public and private schools.

This month, it will launch a unique, new textbook for academic study of the Bible in public schools—the first of its kind in nearly thirty years. The textbook is reviewed, critically acclaimed, and respects the views of major faith groups, while endorsing none.

For more information and the national report, go to www.bibleliteracy.org. ■



One preparation guide for the Advanced Placement Literature and Composition exam lists more than 100 allusions students should know—sixty percent are Biblical references, including the Prodigal Son (depicted above in Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1636, etching).

Biblical Allusions in Classic Literature

Absalom, Absalom!
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
All the King's Men
Animal Farm
Brave New World
The Brothers Karamazov
The Canterbury Tales
East of Eden
The Grapes of Wrath
Great Expectations
Hamlet
Hard Times
The Hollow Men
Jane Eyre
Lord of the Flies
Macbeth
Moby Dick
The Old Man and the Sea
Paradise Lost
Pilgrim's Progress
The Rime of the Ancient Mariner
Romeo and Juliet
The Scarlet Letter
To Kill a Mockingbird
A Separate Peace
The Sound and the Fury
A Tale of Two Cities
Uncle Tom's Cabin

www.bibleliteracy.org

"Yahoo" and Other Biblical Characters

The history of the Jewish people begins with Abraham, Issac, and their twelve children. Judaism was the first monolithic religion. It had one big God name "Yahoo." Old Testament profits included

Moses, Amy, and Confucius, who believed in Fidel Piety. (One of the only reasons Confucius was born was because of a Chinese tradition.)

Moses was told by Jesus Christ to lead the people out of Egypt into the Sahaira Desert. The book of Exodus describes this

trip and the amazing things that happened on it, including the Ten Commandments, various special effects, and the building of the Suez Canal.

Noah's ark came to its end near Mt. Arafat. David was a fictional character in the Bible who fought with Gilgamesh

while wearing a sling. He pleased the people and saved them from attacks by the Philipines.

Excerpted from actual student term papers as quoted in Non-Campus Mentis: World History According to College Students. Compiled by Professor Anders Henricksson, Workman Publishing, NY, 2001.

Education Mandates

How regulations are stifling educational progress

By David Kirkpatrick

It is perhaps nothing short of amazing that, with the huge amount of money spent on various research projects over the years, none of it has gone toward studying the impact of education regulations.

A few years ago, some education experts were asked about studies on regulatory burdens. They were unaware of any. One said he not only knew of no such study but also felt that, despite the many rhetorical complaints on this topic, even raising the question was novel.

A school superintendent in suburban Philadelphia once said he had to comply with 1,027 mandates, 70 percent of which were unfunded. Then-Governor, now-U.S. Senator George Voinovich of Ohio, estimated that school administrators in his state spent 50 percent of their time filling out federal forms, which accounted for only 6 percent of education funding there. A U.S. Department of Education's Paper Reduction Act estimated that department requirements necessitate 48.6 million hours of paper work, the equivalent of 25,000 full-time employees. One state chief school officer said it took 165 of her staff, 45 percent of the total, to manage federal programs, which comprised only 6 percent of her budget. That's in line with an estimate in Pennsylvania that half or more of that department's staff was there because of federal programs,

funding, and requirements.

There is also the problem of the federal government not delivering on a promise, whether the program involved is justified. For example, a 1976 federal statute required districts to provide "a free appropriate education in the least restrictive environment" for all disabled students ages three to twenty-one and promised the federal government would pay 40 percent of the excess costs by 1982. It has never come close to doing so.

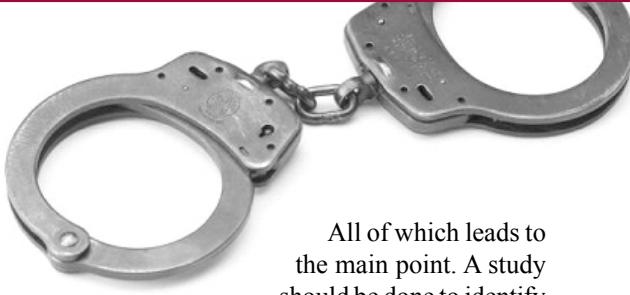
If the federal government has billions of education dollars to spend, it could begin by first paying for the things it has already mandated and promised to support. That would free up local money for other needs.

If the federal government has billions of education dollars to spend, it could begin by first paying for the things it has already mandated and promised to support.

Better yet, if it would reduce or eliminate many of the unnecessary, unworkable, ineffective, or inefficient mandates now in place, it could save local districts billions of dollars with no additional expenditures at all.

Many, if not all, states do not do much better. The California school code is said to be nearly eight times as long as Indiana's. This raises an interesting question about mandates at the state level. No two states have the same school code, whether in length or detail. So how important or necessary are requirements that only one or a few states have, while the rest do very nicely without them?

A tally a few years ago in one district showed the most common area where relief was sought by teachers was in the provisions of the union contract, so it isn't just government that is to blame for overregulation.



All of which leads to the main point. A study should be done to identify some of the most egregious

problems presented by specific mandates as viewed by those involved. A variety of individuals including teachers, administrators, school boards, parents, and public officials should be asked what they consider to be the major problems caused by a particular regulation or law.

Researchers should ask: If you could abolish only one mandate, what would it

be? What mandate seems to be the most unnecessary? What mandates are redundant? What mandate is reasonable in concept but faulty in design; that is, how would you suggest amending it to better achieve its intended goal? What mandate is the most needlessly expensive, or ineffective, or inefficient?

Answers to these questions might be surprising, to say the least. ■



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