



CASCADE POLICY INSTITUTE

# CASCADE COMMENTARY

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## Summary

The Certificate of Advanced Mastery requires schools to emphasize career development. This marks a significant shift in educational priorities and will leave students and teachers with less time for academics.

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***“The decision to move forward with CAM seems destined to tangle educators, parents and students in a web of regulation.”***

## CAM: ~~Reading, writing and arithmetic~~ Jobs

*By Nick Weller*

Do officials in Salem have a vendetta against Oregon schools? Although many would point to the recent budget debate as evidence, there's more compelling proof. In March the State Board of Education announced that the Certificate of Advanced Mastery (CAM) will be linked to graduation requirements for the class of 2007.

Educators are still grappling with sweeping federal reforms mandated by Congress in January. They're also trying to quell widespread discontent with the Certificate of Initial Mastery (CIM). The decision to move forward with CAM seems destined to tangle educators, parents and students in a web of regulation.

Connecting classroom education with real-life skills can be an important part of education. I saw this powerful synergy when I worked at a charter school in California where 18 to 23 year olds could choose to join a program that combined work and academics. Because it was voluntary, only students who valued the program participated.

Oregon's CAM requires universal participation—but little else. As Steve Olczak, principal of Reynolds High School, told the *Oregonian*, “The requirement is basically that you play, not that you do it to a level of proficiency.” Having students simply go through the motions ensures that many parents and students will see it as a major waste of time, much like its younger sibling, the CIM.

Worse, the CAM will consume precious classroom and teacher time, adding to that already spent on the CIM. Career development will distract students from academic pursuits. Lesson plans will need to be scaled back. Teachers will be asked to function as career counselors and paper pushers rather than the history, English or math teachers they desired to be.

To fulfill career experience requirements many students will seek volunteer or internship opportunities. High school interns may be shunted into grunt-work positions that serve businesses, but not education. Low-priced student workers will distort the labor market and may increase unemployment. Of course, em-

ployers could minimize this by creating make-work jobs, but that would render the CAM futile.

CAM's vocational focus is most applicable to students who will not attend college. Further education and exposure to different ideas and careers will probably make the CAM irrelevant for college attendees. For these students, who comprise 70 percent of Oregon high school graduates, shifting attention from academics may make it harder to gain admission to out-of-state schools and place them at a disadvantage in college.

These practical concerns ignore an important question: should public schools emphasize vocational training at the expense of academics? Furthermore, is it appropriate for schools to set students as young as 14 on a career path? In our rapidly changing labor market, students are best equipped by having a firm command of academic subjects, giving them the ability to learn new skills and adapt to jobs that are not yet on the horizon. Limiting options at a young age is the wrong way to prepare students for future employment.

What is problematic about Salem's treatment of schools is not the funding – Oregon schools spend more per pupil than the national average – but rather the over-reliance on mandates. For some reason Salem officials think they know better what students in Enterprise, Molalla and Roseburg need than the parents and educators in those areas. The best prescription is to make CAM voluntary so local districts can choose policies for their individual situations.

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