

Opportunity *and* Responsibility for National Board Certified Teachers

by Andrew J. Rotherham

National and, increasingly, state education policy is focusing on the interrelated challenges of improving teacher quality and turning around low-performing schools. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 requires states to develop accountability systems that evaluate schools based on the achievement of *all* students and take steps to help schools that need improvement in order to close achievement gaps. In addition, NCLB requires that by 2006 teachers in all public schools hold full state certification and meet a minimal definition of “highly qualified,” based on expertise in the subjects they teach.¹

No Child Left Behind does not, however, tell states how to specifically accomplish these highly ambitious goals. To do so, state and national policymakers must put forward a broad and robust package of policy initiatives as well as ensure that existing resources are harnessed as effectively as possible. At the state level, one mostly untapped area is the growing cadre of teachers certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). More than 32,000 teachers nationwide now hold this designation, and 49 states and 530 localities offer some sort of incentive or recognition for them. More specifically, 30 states and the District of Columbia offer bonuses or higher salaries to National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs).²

States and the federal government have made a substantial investment in NBPTS certification. Since 1987, NBPTS has received \$129 million in federal funding and an additional \$143 million from philanthropic and private sources. States and localities are making substantial additional investments in NBPTS through various bonuses, differentials, and incentives for NBCTs. The Progressive Policy Institute estimates that states are spending more than \$100 million annually on these

incentives *in addition* to local school district incentives and reimbursements for fees incurred during the certification process.³

Currently, however, NBCTs are disproportionately working in more affluent schools that are less likely to be struggling or having trouble meeting NCLB’s teacher quality mandate. Only three states—California, Illinois, and New York—offer robust salary incentives for NBCTs to work in low-performing or high-poverty schools.⁴ Thus, in most states, incentives are awarded in a way largely unrelated to broader school improvement goals and possibly work at cross purposes with the task of improving educational quality for low-income and minority youngsters in struggling schools.⁵

State policymakers should resolve this mismatch by making two related changes to NBPTS incentives:

- ▶ First, states should make the maximum differentials and bonuses for NBCTs more substantial than they are now. Only eight states offer incentives of \$5,000 or more.⁶ These incentives must also be sustained over time. Due to state-level budget constraints and growth in the number of NBCTs, some states are cutting funding for these programs. Small stipends and uncertainty about funding weakens the appeal of these incentives.⁷
- ▶ Second, states should link these incentives to their efforts to help hard-to-staff schools meet NCLB’s highly qualified teacher mandate or to otherwise help struggling schools improve. Ideally, states should tie NBPTS bonuses to service in high-poverty and/or low-performing schools. Short of this, states could make bonuses conditional on service or mentoring part of school improvement initiatives undertaken by

states or school districts. Due to the magnitude of the challenges facing states, larger bonuses or salary increases should be targeted toward NBCTs doing the most to help states address these issues.

Helping struggling schools demands that all resources be used as effectively as possible. Larger and better-targeted bonuses and differentials for NBCTs will ultimately leverage greater educational improvement than smaller, more diffuse incentives divorced from broader state and national policy goals.

Background on the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

Since its creation in 1987, the NBPTS has certified more than 32,000 teachers as “master teachers” based on standards and a certification process developed by the board. The NBPTS grew out of the influential 1986 report, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century*.⁸ The basic idea behind NBPTS is, through a rigorous process, to identify and reward outstanding teachers with a national certificate of expertise.

The board currently certifies teachers in 27 subjects and four student age groups. Candidates for NBPTS certification complete a process that includes a formal assessment of skills and knowledge, and compile a portfolio of work and evidence of professional mastery. The NBPTS certificates are valid for 10 years and then must be renewed. The cost of applying for NBPTS certification is \$2,300, although various funding is available to help defray the cost for many candidates.

State and federal policies support NBPTS in various ways. The federal government has invested more than \$129 million to help NBPTS develop its standards and certification process. Some states and school districts help cover the cost of NBPTS applications, which would otherwise be borne by individual teachers. However, the most notable form of support is salary differentials for teachers with NBPTS certification. Even given the relatively small size of these bonuses and differentials, the growing number of teachers seeking NBPTS certification

has led some analysts to estimate that more than \$1 billion could be spent on additional salaries by 2006.⁹ That estimate likely overstates the total expenditure on salaries, but PPI calculates that, combined, states are currently spending at least \$100 million annually on NBPTS-related salary enhancements.

National Board Certified Teachers and Student Achievement

The primary assumption behind rewarding NBCTs is that they are more skilled and effective than the average teacher, and thus worthy of additional salary. And since both major teachers unions support NBPTS, it essentially functions as a form of merit pay that passes political muster.

Until very recently, evidence about the effectiveness of NBCTs relative to other teachers was sparse and mixed. One quasi-experimental study of NBCTs in Tennessee indicated that board-certified teachers perform, on average, no better than other teachers.¹⁰ It is risky, however, to generalize from this study because of the small sample size, although further research supporting this finding would call into question the effectiveness of the NBPTS process.

A second study of NBPTS teachers, also using a small sample, found that NBCTs were more likely than other teachers to exhibit certain traits that have been identified by NBPTS as positive and important to effective teaching. The circular nature of this research design, as well as the lack of a standardized measure of student learning, limits the usefulness of this study as well.¹¹

In March 2004, however, researchers from the University of Washington and the Urban Institute released a study showing that NBCTs were more effective than other teachers.¹² This study, by economist Dan Goldhaber and Emily Anthony, focused on NBCTs in North Carolina and found them more effective than both candidates who had sought but not passed the National Board’s credentialing process, and those in a random sampling of North Carolina teachers. In particular the study found a *greater impact for low-income students*. Although additional research is obviously necessary, this

study, the first large, randomized study of NBCTs, offers reason for cautious optimism about the value-added of this certification.

To continue to address the research gap, NBPTS and the U.S. Department of Education are sponsoring a research initiative supporting multiple studies by a variety of researchers to help policymakers evaluate the impact of the NBPTS.¹³ At a cost of approximately \$6 million, this research should help policymakers continue to learn more about NBCTs and the National Board process.

Where National Board Certified Teachers Teach

There is evidence that NBCTs are more likely to work in affluent schools than poor ones. A 2003 study led by Goldhaber found that NBCTs in North Carolina were disproportionately teaching in more affluent school districts, as well as districts with fewer minority students.¹⁴ Data on the dispersion of NBCTs between high- and low-poverty schools are imprecise.¹⁵ Figures from NBPTS indicate that, nationwide, about 37 percent of NBCTs are teaching in schools that receive Title I funding. However, even the analytic utility of this figure is limited because Title I itself is an imprecise proxy for poverty. Fifty-eight percent of all U.S. public schools receive Title I dollars.¹⁶ It is safe to assume that the percentage of NBCTs teaching in genuinely high-poverty and/or struggling schools is lower than even 37 percent.

The fact that NBCTs would be less likely to teach in poor schools is not surprising, considering substantial research showing that more qualified and experienced teachers overall are less likely to teach in these schools. In fact, addressing this inequity was a primary rationale behind the teacher quality provisions in NCLB.

There is some evidence that NBCTs are taking on additional leadership responsibilities *within* schools, including important activities such as mentoring new teachers.¹⁷ Yet, while valuable, these activities do not alter the inequitable distribution of these teachers in the first place.

Highly Qualified Teachers and Turning Around Low-Performing Schools

No Child Left Behind requires states to ensure that by 2006 all teachers meet the definition of “highly qualified.”¹⁸ Different communities face varying degrees of difficulty attracting and retaining teachers who meet this definition.

For example, “out of field” teaching (when teachers are assigned to subjects for which they have not trained) is a more acute problem in urban and rural communities. In addition, studies show that poor and minority students are not only less likely to be taught by teachers with experience and other characteristics linked to greater effectiveness, but that more qualified teachers migrate away from high-poverty/high-minority schools.¹⁹ This matters because teacher effectiveness is the most important in-school determinant of student learning, but poor and minority students are less likely to have teachers with subject matter expertise and other characteristics associated with quality teaching. Financial incentives alone will not solve these distributional problems, but can be an important part of a package of initiatives to ensure a more equitable supply of teachers. States and school districts are experimenting with a variety of such initiatives to attract and retain teachers in hard-to-staff schools.²⁰

The most important consequences for schools that do not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) based on their state’s accountability system can be found in Section 1116 of NCLB. It requires states and school districts to intervene in schools that have not made AYP for two consecutive years. Adequate yearly progress is defined individually by each state based on its own standards, but within parameters established in NCLB. As a result, what constitutes AYP and how many schools are identified as needing improvement varies from state to state, although the requirements for states and school districts’ actions do not.²¹

During the first year a school is identified as “needing improvement” for not making AYP, the school district must offer public school choice options to students in these schools and design

and implement a school improvement plan to address the problems the school is having. If the problems are not remedied during subsequent years, school districts and states must undertake an escalating series of interventions including overhauling curriculum, changing personnel, and ultimately restructuring the school or the specific programs that are not making AYP.

These interventions are, however, easier to design than implement, and state experiences are decidedly mixed.²² Successful interventions require sustained and intensive assistance for struggling schools. Right now, states are attempting a variety of initiatives to provide assistance to low-performing schools. These range from modest interventions, such as additional professional development for teachers and curricular changes, to substantial efforts involving “turnaround specialists” who work with low-performing schools on an ongoing basis.²³

One key step in meeting the “highly qualified” teacher goal and fixing low-performing schools is involving talented educators who can work with their peers in struggling schools or teach in those schools themselves. Here, NBCTs can help in two ways. First, by encouraging NBCTs to work in high-poverty schools and schools needing improvement under NCLB, state policymakers can help address these inequities immediately. Second, states are increasingly

undertaking initiatives to help low-performing schools. These initiatives take a variety of forms, but a commonality is sustained assistance for struggling schools. Many NBCTs presumably have expertise in teaching that could be valuable in a variety of ways. To be sure, just because a teacher is effective and talented in one realm, does not mean that he or she will be effective as a “turn-around specialist” or in some other school improvement capacity (of course, the opposite is true as well). However, as states build the capacity to intervene in low-performing schools, NBCTs represent an important pool of potential talent.

Policy Options

There are multiple ways that state policymakers can revamp NBPTS incentives to better align them with school improvement efforts. Most important is to link incentives to activities that benefit high-poverty and/or low-performing schools. The table below outlines the programs offered in California, Illinois, and New York, each of which has advantages and disadvantages. For example, while California and New York offer more generous incentives, NBCTs choosing not to work in hard-to-serve schools are not eligible. In Illinois, by contrast, more NBCTs are eligible for various incentives, but state efforts are smaller, not as intensely focused on struggling schools, and make no provision to encourage

State National Board Certified Teacher Program Incentive Programs for Hard-To-Serve Schools

State	Hard-to-Serve Incentive	Conditions	Notes
California	\$20,000 in equal installments over four years	NBCTs must teach in low-performing schools	—California will recognize out-of-state NBCTs as credentialed —No other state-level financial incentives for NBCTs
Illinois	\$3,000 annually	NBCTs must mentor teachers in schools identified by the state as needing improvement or in high-poverty schools	Illinois also offers a \$3,000 annual bonus for all NBCTs and an additional \$1,000 incentive for mentoring in any public school in the state
New York	\$10,000 annually for three years	NBCTs must teach in a low-performing school and mentor new teachers	No other state-level financial incentives for NBCTs

Source: National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and Cal., Ill., and N.Y. Departments of Education.

NBCTs to work in underperforming schools.

An ideal state system would create a three-tiered approach that provided larger bonuses for more intensive service. For example, states could offer modest recognition for all teachers who achieve NBPTS certification, while offering more substantial salary differentials for those participating in school improvement efforts, and reserving the most substantial bonuses or differentials for NBCTs who teach in hard-to-serve schools.

Other options include:

- ▶ Tying incentives to the in-school distribution of NBCTs. More experienced teachers are less likely to teach struggling students not only on a school-by-school basis, but also *within* schools;
- ▶ Offering a sliding scale of bonuses based on the number of hours a NBCT works annually on state school improvement efforts, and providing funding to school districts to cover the costs of providing instruction when NBCTs are absent;
- ▶ Requiring NBCTs to mentor less-experienced teachers in high-poverty schools and/or schools needing improvement, or as a condition of receiving bonuses; or
- ▶ Creating programs allowing NBCTs to serve full time as part of school improvement efforts for a fixed period while holding them harmless for benefits and seniority.

States can also partner with teachers unions, the philanthropic community, and the private sector to encourage matches for bonuses and differentials and other strategies to further reward NBCTs engaged in state school-improvement efforts. The most important characteristic of state policies should be ensuring that NBPTS incentives are working in tandem with state efforts to help struggling schools, rather than being unrelated to these efforts.

For its part, NBPTS can likewise modify its own policies to better support efforts to improve low-performing schools and the equitable distribution of teachers. For example, NBPTS could waive fees for all NBCTs teaching in high-need schools when they seek renewals of their certificates. Over time, NBPTS could also take steps such as developing a specific certificate for NBCTs with demonstrated expertise helping struggling schools, working with low-income youngsters, or mentoring new teachers. States could subsequently link these credentials with incentives and rewards.

Conclusion

National Board Certified Teachers cannot, in isolation, be expected to help turn around low-performing schools or solve the teacher quality problem. However, state policymakers can work to ensure that NBCTs are more directly involved in these efforts than they are today. Currently, state policies aiding NBCTs are not aligned with the overarching goal of improving education in underserved communities. If states provide bonuses and salary differentials to NBCTs, they should ensure that these efforts are acting in concert with overall state policy goals and are improving educational equity.

Obviously, if ongoing research raises questions about whether NBCTs are on average more effective than other teachers, it will raise larger questions about the efficacy of the National Board process. Current research, however, indicates that NBCTs may be more effective than the average teacher. This only underscores the need for designing policies that encourage NBCTs to work with the most disadvantaged students. States must ensure that policies providing benefits for NBCTs are coordinated with the goal of improving student learning in low-performing schools. At present (despite the substantial resources currently being invested in these teachers), NBCTs are an underutilized pool of talent in this effort.

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Endnotes

¹ The NCLB Act requires that teachers hold at least a bachelor's degree, have full state certification as a teacher or have passed the state licensure exam, and hold a license to teach and demonstrate competence in each academic subject in which he or she teaches. The NCLB Act defines how this competence may be demonstrated, which differs for grades taught and level of experience. Briefly, new secondary teachers must demonstrate subject matter competence by either passing a rigorous subject exam or possessing an academic major or equivalent coursework, graduate degree, or advanced certification or credentialing in the subject taught. New elementary school teachers must pass a rigorous test of subject matter and teaching skills in reading, writing, math, and other basic subjects of the elementary curriculum. Veteran teachers may demonstrate subject competence through these same options or by meeting an objective, uniform standard set by the state to determine subject competency. See: "Improving Teacher Quality State Grants: Title II Part A Non-Regulatory Draft Guidance," *Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education*, 2002; *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, 107th Congress, H.R. 1.

² Unless otherwise specified, all figures on NBPTS are from the NBPTS website. NBPTS has an interactive searchable database of state incentive policies at: <http://www.nbpts.org>.

³ A Progressive Policy Institute calculation based on state budget allocations for 2003-2004.

⁴ The American Federation of Teachers Connecticut offers incentives to teachers who work in hard-to-serve schools. Likewise, some school districts also offer their own incentives. For example, Fairfax County, Va., offers \$3,500 annually to NBPTS teachers who teach in hard-to-serve schools.

⁵ In addition to New York, six other states offer some sort of incentive for NBCTs who mentor other teachers, although in some states the mentoring is for candidates seeking NBPTS certification.

⁶ An additional five states offer salary differentials based on a percentage of overall salary or the state funded share of salary.

⁷ See, for example: Sack, Joetta L., "Board Stamp For Teachers Raising Flags," *Education Week*, November 12, 2003.

⁸ Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, "A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century," *Carnegie Corporation*, 1986.

⁹ Podurfsky, Michael, "Defrocking the National Board," *Education Next [Education Matters]*, Summer 2001.

¹⁰ Stone, J.E., "The Value-Added Achievement Gains of NBPTS-Certified Teachers in Tennessee: A Brief Report," *Education Consumers Consultant Network*, 2002. See also: "Synthesis of Reviews of 'The Value-Added Achievement Gains of NBPTS-Certified Teachers in Tennessee: A Brief Report,'" *Education Commission of the States*, 2002.

¹¹ Bond, Lloyd, Richard Jaeger, Tracey Smith, and John Hattie, "The Certification System of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards: A Construct and Consequential Validity Study," *Center for Educational Research and Evaluation, University of North Carolina at Greensboro and National Board for Professional Teaching Standards*, 2000. Also see Podurfsky op cit. for one critique.

¹² Goldhaber, Dan and Emily Anthony, "Can Teacher Quality Be Effectively Assessed," *Evans School of Public Affairs and Urban Institute, University of Washington*, 2004.

¹³ See: Archer, Jeff, "National Board is Pressed to Prove Certified Teachers Make A Difference," *Education Week*, January 30, 2002. Also see information on the research initiative at: <http://www.nbpts.org>.

¹⁴ Goldhaber, Dan, David Perry and Emily Anthony, "NBPTS Certification: Who Applies and What Factors are Associated with Success?" *working paper*, May 2003. This paper also noted that NBCTs are more likely to do well on standardized tests, which has been linked to higher student learning.

¹⁵ The data are based on NBCTs in Title I schools with no additional indication of the percentage of students in poverty at the school site.

¹⁶ "Fact Sheet on Title I, Part A," *Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education*, August 2002, <http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/disadv/title1-factsheet.pdf>. Sixty-seven percent of elementary schools and 29 percent of secondary schools receive Title I funding.

¹⁷ "Leading From The Classroom," *National Board For Professional Teaching Standards*, 2001, http://www.nbpts.org/pdf/leading_from_the_classroom.pdf. Also see: Archer, Jeff, "Virginia Sees Va. School Sees Board-Certified Teachers As Key to Turnaround," *Education Week*, May 30, 2001.

¹⁸ See endnote 1.

¹⁹ See, for example: Jerald, C., and R. M. Ingersoll, "All Talk, No Action: Putting an End to Out-of-Field Teaching," *The Education Trust*, 2002, and Hanushek, E. A., J. F. Kain, and S. G. Rivkin, "Why Public Schools Lose Teachers," *Journal of Human Resources*, Spring 2004.

²⁰ See, for example: "NCLB: Teacher Quality Promising Practices," *National Governors Association*, April 2003, http://www.nga.org/center/divisions/1,1188,C_ISSUE_BRIEF^D_5268,00.html. The Education Commission of the States maintains information on state efforts in this area at <http://www.ecs.org>.

²¹ For a primer on AYP see: "The ABC's of AYP," *The Education Trust*, 2003.

²² See, for example: Brady, Ronald, "Can Failing Schools Be Fixed?" *Thomas B. Fordham Foundation*, 2003.

²³ See, for example: "State Interventions in Low-Performing Schools and School Districts," *Education Commission of the States*, 2002. ECS maintains information and analysis about state policies in this area at: <http://www.ecs.org>. Also see: "Reaching New Heights: Turning Around Low-Performing Schools," *National Governors Association Center for Best Practices*, 2003, <http://www.nga.org/cda/files/2003.0803REACHING.PDF>.