

National Board Certification

Increasing Participation and Assessing Impacts

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The authors present the findings of one of the first studies of teachers who have participated in the certification process of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and they offer recommendations for assessing the impact of such certification and for making it a more effective and widely used part of the education system.



CONVENTIONAL wisdom holds that student achievement will improve if we develop curriculum standards, give students more tests, and make teachers accountable for test scores. Among the fallacies underlying that wisdom is the assumption that accountability will enable teachers to apply new curriculum standards and teaching methods even if they are inconsistent with the teachers' previous training, with contemporary school practice, and with the accountability measures themselves. We have always tended to underestimate the gap between developing curriculum standards and implementing them in the classroom.

In the past decade, several education organizations have tried to address this problem by developing programs that would make teacher education and certification more consistent with the new standards. One of these, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, sets standards for teachers and certifies those who meet the standards. The National Board

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was highlighted in President Clinton's 1997 State of the Union address, which described its role this way:

[T]o have the best schools, we must have the best teachers. . . . For years, many of our educators, led by North Carolina's Governor Jim Hunt and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, have worked very hard to establish nationally accepted credentials for excellence in teaching. . . . We should reward and recognize our best teachers.¹

In this article we present the findings of one of the first studies of teachers who have participated in the certification process, and we offer recommendations for assessing the impact of National Board certification and for making it a more effective and more widely used part of the education system.

Background

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards was established in 1987 on the recommendation of the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession.² The mission of the National Board is "to establish high and rigorous standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do, to develop and operate a national voluntary system to assess and certify teachers who meet these standards, and to advance related education reforms for the purpose of improving student learning in American schools."³ It is governed by a board of 64 directors, the majority of whom are classroom teachers. A related goal of the National Board is to collaborate with other reform efforts to improve schools by increasing the supply of highly qualified teachers (with special emphasis on teachers from racial and ethnic minority groups) and by improving teacher training and professional development.

To achieve these goals, the certification process requires a substantial commitment on the part of applicants.⁴ In the first part of the assessment, teachers seeking certification submit portfolios based on student work, videotapes, and other examples of their teaching. The second part, conducted at an assessment center, requires teachers to perform a set of exercises, including evaluation of texts and teaching materials, analysis of teaching situations, and assessment of student learning based on knowledge of subject matter, teaching methods, and student needs.⁵

Under a grant funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, George Washington University and Norfolk State University worked with teachers who were seeking certification from the National Board. The findings reported below are based on telephone interviews conducted in 1997 with 28 of the 38 teachers who had been supported by the Pew grant project team over the previous three years. The teachers were interviewed to determine their views about the incentives to go through the certification process, the contribution of the process to their teaching skills, and the consistency between National Board standards and current teaching practices.

Policy and Research Issues: Benefits and Challenges

The case study findings show both the potential benefits of National Board certification and the challenges posed by attempting to expand participation nationally. Most of the teachers interviewed found that preparing for National Board certification provided a strong professional development experience. They described the process this way:

- "The most meaningful self-evaluation."
 - "The most dramatic and transforming experience."
 - "The most concentrated professional development."
 - "One of the best professional development experiences — it gave me lots of self-confidence."
 - "The certification process was a real eye-opener. I realized I've done an awful lot — the process helps document your accomplishments."
 - "It was like the final stages of a major graduate course or a cumulative comprehensive exam or thesis."
 - "The certification process far exceeds everything I've ever done, including my M.A."
 - "The certification process was more focused than a master's program and more valuable because it was what I was really doing in the classroom."
- Although most teachers responded favorably to the certification process as a professional development activity, a minority found it less useful in certain respects:
- "The process was an add-on — there were extra things I had to do that detracted from my classroom teaching."

• "Going through the process was more strenuous and lots of extra work."

• "I'm used to a one-day workshop where you get information. I didn't get much out of it. We weren't taught information."

Teachers were also asked about what changes, if any, they perceived in their teaching since completing the certification process. Most teachers reported positive changes:

- "I reflect more on what I am teaching and how it affects the kids."
- "I am much more aware of standards."
- "I've increased collaboration with other teachers."
- "I think more about why I'm doing something. I think more of the objectives — what I want to cover and why."
- "I have changed — definitely. It has made me a more insightful and aware teacher. I evaluate my teaching technique."

A few of the teachers interviewed did not perceive changes in their teaching as a result of having gone through the process. One teacher stated that the process did not teach her how to teach differently because no one gave her information on ways to improve instruction. Another perceived negative changes in her teaching and stopped because she felt the process was taking her in the wrong direction. A third teacher noted that, "even though the theory behind the process is good, you don't need to go through the National Board certification process to gain reflective skills."

The case study findings are supported by anecdotal evidence from teachers nationally. A large proportion of those who go through the certification process find it a powerful learning experience.⁶

Despite the generally positive reviews, participation and success rates nationally are low. Between 1993 and 1997, 911 teachers nationwide achieved National Board certification. The average success rate in the first three years of the assessment was about 35%; in the last year the rate increased to 45%. Without major gains in teacher participation, National Board certification is unlikely to have a significant impact on the quality of education, although it may be valuable for the relatively few teachers who participate.

In short, the process of National Board certification has recognized a small number of expert teachers rather than leading to the sort of broad participation that could contribute to general improvements in teach-

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ing. Several factors limit the program's potential to expand to the point of having a significant impact on the quality of education across the nation.

Many educators are either unfamiliar with the certification process or give it low priority. Successful completion of the process requires expertise in applying the standards, strong analytic skills, and a significant time commitment. The case study shows that most teachers had little prior information about either the skill or the time requirements of National Board certification. An additional impediment was the lack of support from colleagues. While some teachers reported that principals and peers were supportive by providing help with videotaping, granting leave time, or setting a positive tone, others felt that they received little or no support. Some teachers believed that their principals were simply unaware of the process; others noted that principals, while aware of the process, did not consider National Board Certification a priority. As one principal put it, "I have too many other priorities. National Board certification goes to the bottom of the pile." A teacher commented, "My peers thought I was crazy." Thus National Board Certification is rarely one of the primary options considered when teachers and administrators seek opportunities for professional development.

Only limited incentives exist to encourage teachers to take part. Relatively few teachers nationally receive salary incentives that would induce them to participate in National Board certification, although recently eight states and 25 school

districts have provided some support. The following states offer salary increases to teachers who achieve Board certification. Georgia offers a one-time 5% increase in salary, and South Carolina offers a one-time bonus. The other six states offer a salary supplement each year for the life of the certificate: Delaware, \$1,500 for a maximum of 30 teachers; Kentucky, an average of about \$2,000; Mississippi, \$3,000; North Carolina, 12% of the state-paid salary; Ohio, \$2,500; and Oklahoma, \$5,000. In addition, some states and school districts provide other types of incentives — fee supports, licensure renewal, continuing education credits, and license portability.⁷

There were no financial incentives for candidates in the case study except for payment of the fee for taking the assessment. Teachers who chose to participate cited other factors — opportunities for professional development, the prospect of increasing the professionalization of teachers, and the importance of national standards — as their main incentives. It is questionable whether these incentives are sufficient to attract a much larger set of teachers nationally.

There also are disincentives to participation — the process is long and difficult, and many candidates do not achieve National Board certification. It is not surprising, therefore, that the number of participating teachers remains a small proportion of the total eligible teaching force.

Many teachers do not have access to support services. Review materials (such as those routinely provided to students studying for law, business, or medical boards) are not yet available to teachers seeking National Board certification. Indeed, there are few support services of any kind available to teachers nationwide, although universities and school systems in some regions have begun to sponsor workshops, and efforts are also under way to develop training manuals to assist teachers preparing for the certification process.

Teachers participating in the case study, who had received support services from the Pew grant project team, reported that services were essential in a number of different areas — for example, learning the standards; reviewing subject matter, teaching methods, and developmental theory; studying assessment strategies for different learning styles; practicing writing and videotaping skills; and understanding the complexities of the assessment format and

the criteria by which the assessment is scored. Teachers also expressed interest in having access to examples of successful portfolios. The current lack of support services and training materials nationally further reduces teachers' incentives to participate and diminishes the likelihood of success.

Board standards are often inconsistent with teachers' educational experience and contemporary school practice. Wide discrepancies exist between the standards and current practice in many colleges of education, professional development programs, and school districts.⁸ And, in some cases, discrepancies exist between the National Board standards and the standards and assessments currently being implemented by states and school districts in developing accountability measures. Thus many teachers have not had the prior training and experience needed to meet the requirements for National Board certification. Beginning teachers lack the preparation for the assessment, and they often do not gain that experience as part of their teaching responsibilities or in subsequent professional development programs.

While most teachers in the case study felt that the National Board standards were consistent with their own teaching practices, some reported inconsistencies between the standards and the practices within their schools. These discrepancies arose either because of differences in educational philosophy or simply because the realities of the school environment — for example, large class sizes — made the standards difficult to implement. Further, one teacher raised a concern about the potential lack of congruity between the National Board standards and the new standards for learning scheduled to be implemented in Virginia in 1997-98. If, indeed, there is to be consistency between the two, the overlap would need to be more specifically delineated if it is to be helpful to teachers and administrators.

It is not surprising that to date less than half of the teachers who have completed the process have actually obtained certification. That proportion may increase, however, as the National Board institutes its new "banking" policy, which permits teachers who do not achieve certification to retake only those sections of the assessment for which they did not meet the standards. The banking policy, however, does not address the basic problem: the discrepancy between National Board stan-

dards and teachers' other experiences.

Research information is not yet available about the impact of the certification process on the quality of teaching. While most of the teachers who participated in the case study were positive about the process as a professional development experience, no research evidence exists about its impact on the quality of teaching either for individual teachers or for schools that have a critical mass of teachers taking part in the process. If research showed a positive impact, teachers would have a stronger incentive to go through the process, and states and school districts would have the data to justify allocating resources to encourage the participation of large numbers of teachers.

Implications

While evidence from the case study suggests that the process of participating in National Board certification provides a potentially powerful learning experience, current constraints severely limit teacher participation and, in turn, our ability to assess the impact on school quality of a national certification program. We do not have the critical mass of teachers needed to document the effect of the program even on the standard of education in an individual school district, much less on the quality of education in school districts and states nationwide.

The point is that National Board certification can have little impact on the quality of education nationwide without substantial increases in participation and success rates. These rates, in turn, can increase significantly only with major increases in incentives, greater consistency between National Board standards and contemporary school practice, and a wider availability of support services. Thus it would be useful to provide the research evidence that school systems and universities need in order to assess the merits of allocating substantial resources for this purpose.

The following interrelated activities are designed to increase participation of teachers in National Board certification. Such an increase would, in turn, make it possible to acquire the research data needed to demonstrate the impact of the National Board standards on school improvement.

1. *Develop and disseminate materials that will assist schools of education in incorporating the standards for National Board certification into their course of-*

ferings. While some schools of education have begun to incorporate the National Board standards into their course offerings, it would be useful to assist a larger number of schools in accomplishing this goal and to assess the impact on the quality of teacher education. Any effort along these lines could be designed to address one of the basic impediments to large-scale participation in National Board certification: the lack of prior training needed to meet certification requirements. The work would be consistent with current policies of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, which has aligned its standards with those of the National Board.

2. *Develop and disseminate information that will assist school systems in aligning their professional development programs with National Board standards.* The lack of congruence between teacher education programs and National Board standards is often observed when teachers enter the work force and take part in professional development programs. Many of these programs do not focus on the skills that are assessed by the National Board certification process. While review materials designed specifically to support teachers preparing for national certification can be helpful, they are not a substitute for professional development programs that reach a wide range of teachers throughout their careers. Some school systems have begun to incorporate the standards for National Board certification into their professional development activities. We might draw on this experience to help school systems align their professional development activities with the standards.

3. *Design professional development materials that support teachers preparing for National Board certification.* This work could build on the two activities described above to develop courses for teachers preparing for National Board certification.

4. *Conduct research to assess the contribution of the certification process to teachers' professional development and to the quality of educational programs in schools with large proportions of Board-certified teachers.* The purpose would be to assess the contribution of the certification process both to the expertise of individual teachers and to overall school quality.

With so few teachers currently participating in National Board certification, schools do not have the critical mass of

nationally certified teachers needed to make a difference in the overall education program. The program now functions as if it were based on a "master" or "lead" teacher concept rather than on the type of broad-based certification that exists, for example, in the legal, medical, or financial communities.

The few Board-certified teachers can have little catalytic effect on the school environment. Previous experience shows that an individual teacher (no matter how expert) is unlikely to have a significant impact on overall school quality unless specific steps are taken to incorporate the teacher's skills into the general educational environment. In a recent study of innovative educational models, for example, teachers and administrators recommended that "training should be widespread — available to all staff, not just a few. Teachers leveled strong criticisms at teams that provided training to only a narrow set of teachers . . . which use lead-teacher or train-the-trainer models."

Thus it is important to assess the impact of the certification process on schools

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SOUTHWESTERN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH CONFERENCE SATURDAY, MARCH 28, 1998

PKD Co-Chairs
Dr. Minnie Andrews
Northern Arizona University
&
Dr. Stephen Powers
Creative Research Associates

Place: Holiday Inn City Center
181 W. Broadway
(520) 624-8711
Registration: 8:00a.m. - 8:30a.m.
Opening Session: 8:30a.m. - 9:00a.m.
Conference: 9:00a.m. - 4:00p.m.
Lunch Included

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with large proportions of teachers who have completed the process. It could be helpful to develop a pilot project and assess the contribution of Board-certified teachers to the quality of education in selected schools. Such a project would need to have a critical mass of Board-certified teachers in the project schools (and in selected certification areas within these schools). For example, all or most of the teachers in an elementary school might undergo

the certification process and take the early childhood/generalist or the middle childhood/generalist assessment. Teacher participation would be voluntary, of course, but only schools with a large enough proportion of teachers interested in participating would be selected for study. Teachers could receive strong incentives to go through the process in the form of course credits and bonuses.

5. *Disseminate the findings to states and school districts.* The research findings could be used by school systems to weigh the costs and benefits of allocating resources to the National Board certification process. School systems currently have little research evidence on whether the professional development opportunities offered by National Board certification lead to significant improvements in the quality of education.

Funds now used for professional development offer a potential revenue source. The report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future describes the status of current professional development programs this way:

District staff development is still characterized by one-shot workshops

that have very little effect on practice, rather than more effective approaches that are linked to concrete problems of practice and built into teacher's ongoing work with colleagues. These workshops tend to offer ideas for classroom management or teaching that are not tied to specific subject areas or problems of practice, that do not offer follow-up help for implementation, and that are replaced at the next workshop with another idea — the new "flavor of the month" — offering little continuity in building practice. . . . As one New York teacher commented of his frustration with his district's top-down approach to managing staff development: "They're offering me stress reduction workshops when I need to learn how to help students meet these new standards. My stress comes from not having the tools to help my students succeed!"¹⁰

The objective of National Board certification is to help provide the tools that a teacher needs. It can become an integral part of the U.S. education system only if substantial numbers of teachers have both the incentives to participate and the expertise to succeed.

1. *State and Local Action Supporting National Board Certification* (Southfield, Mich.: National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, October 1997), p. 1.
2. Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (New York: Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986).
3. *Leading the Way: 10 Years of Progress, 1987-1997* (Southfield, Mich.: National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1997).
4. National Board certification was offered in the following fields during the period of this study: 1993-94: early adolescence/generalist and early adolescence/English language arts; 1994-95: early adolescence/generalist, early adolescence/English language arts, early childhood/generalist, and middle childhood/generalist; 1995-96: early childhood/generalist, middle childhood/generalist, early adolescence and young adulthood/art, and adolescence and young adulthood/mathematics. In 1996-97, National Board Certification was offered in each of the six fields listed above, and a seventh, adolescence and young adulthood/science, was added. Additional areas for Board certification will be offered in subsequent years.
5. *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future* (New York: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996).
6. *Ibid.*
7. *State and Local Action.*
8. *What Matters Most.*
9. Susan Bodilly, with Susanna Purnell, Kimberly Ramsey, and Sarah J. Keith, *Lessons from New American Schools Development Corporation's Demonstration Phase* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1996).
10. *What Matters Most*, pp. 40-41.

