



Iowa and NBPTS: Improving Teacher Quality or Squandering Money?

by George C. Leef

Everyone wants competent, effective teachers for America's schoolchildren. The question is how to go about getting them.

One program that says it leads to better teachers is the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). Formed in 1987, NBPTS has written standards for teachers that, it says, "have forged a national consensus on what accomplished teachers know and should be able to do."

The key to the NBPTS approach is its teacher certification program. Teachers with at least three years of experience can submit a required set of portfolios of student work and videos of classroom performance, and answer a set of essay questions on teaching designed to assess their pedagogical abilities. Teachers who teach the same level and subjects as the applicants evaluate the submissions. Those whose scores are high enough earn their certification.

The states have not responded uniformly. Some, such as North Carolina, give it great encouragement by paying the application cost for as many teachers as want to try for NB certification in any year, and also by guaranteeing a large salary bonus for those who receive it. On the other hand, some states have done nothing to encourage the NBPTS program, Texas being an example.

Iowa provides moderate incentives for teachers to become NBPTS certified. Teachers who obtain it receive an automatic \$2,500 annual raise for the life of the certificate. Moreover, the state reimburses teachers half of the \$2,300 application fee — and the other half if the teacher achieves certification. At the end of 2001, Iowa had 322 National Board certified teachers — more than neighboring states Missouri (74), Minnesota (203), and Wisconsin (74).

Is Iowa wisely spending money to upgrade the quality of its teachers? Or is it wasting funds on one of those programs that sound good, but accomplish nothing?

There has never been a reliable study that verifies NBPTS' claim of effectiveness. We have no proof that students taught by teachers with National Board certification learn more or faster than do students taught by teachers without it.

One study on the impact of NB certification was done in 2000 by a team of researchers at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.¹ It purported to find that National Board certified

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600 North Jackson Street

Mt. Pleasant, Iowa 52641-1328

Phone: 319-385-3462 Fax: 319-385-3799

E-Mail: public.interest.institute@limitedgovernment.org Web Site: www.limitedgovernment.org

teachers were more effective than non-certified teachers. But University of Missouri economics professor Michael Podgursky subsequently pointed out major flaws in the UNC-G report.²

For one thing, it didn't use student test scores as a measure of teacher effectiveness, dismissing the idea with this rhetorical blast: "It is not too much of an exaggeration to state that such measures have been cited as a cause of all the nation's considerable problems in educating our youth." Furthermore, Podgursky observed, the study was an exercise in circular reasoning. "In effect," he writes, "the report really tells us only that teachers who were certified by the National Board were more likely to display the types of behaviors that the National Board favors."

Another study was done in 2002 by East Tennessee State University education professor John Stone.³ Stone found that in Tennessee, there was no discernable improvement in student learning when students were taught by NB certified teachers. A crucial difference between Stone's approach and that of the UNC-G study is that he did rely on student test scores. Tennessee has a system of "value-added" educational reports that measures annual learning gains by students in grades 3 through 8. After evaluating the student achievement data, Prof. Stone concluded that Board certified teachers "cannot be considered exceptionally effective in terms of their ability to bring about student achievement."

If one looks closely at the NBPTS standards and certification process, it isn't hard to see why they would bring about little or no improvement in teacher effectiveness. Chester Finn, President of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, put his finger on the problem when he wrote, "The Board actually rewards teachers for being good at the opposite of what most parents think teachers should excel at. Its idea of a great teacher is one who embraces 'constructivist' pedagogy, 'discovery' learning, and cultural relativism — not one who imparts to students fundamental knowledge, or even has it himself."⁴

Iowa's support for NBPTS looks like big waste of money.

ENDNOTES:

¹"The Certification System of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards: A Construct and Consequential Validity Study," Center for Educational Research and Evaluation, UNC- Greensboro, October 2000.

²"Defrocking the National Board," *Education Matters*, summer 2001.

³"The Value-Added Achievement Gains of NBPTS-Certified Teachers in Tennessee: A Brief Report," June 17, 2002, <<http://www.education-consumers.com>> (December 13, 2002).

⁴Danielle Dunne Wilcox and Chester E. Finn Jr., "Board Games," *National Review*, August 9, 1999, p. 27.

George C. Leef is Director of the Pope Center for Higher Education Policy, Raleigh, NC

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