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AT ISSUE

In Search of Education's Holy Grail

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A prospective teacher faces many obstacles when preparing to become an educator; one of the largest obstacles to overcome is teacher certification. Among the criteria that most states require of the prospective teacher is completion of an approved program of study at an accredited university and testing to assess the teacher's knowledge level in pedagogy and subject matter areas. Upon completion of the minimum requirements for certification, the teacher is faced with the uphill battle of obtaining employment and, more importantly, student success. Many proponents of improving student success believe the answer to education's woes is for teachers to obtain national board certification. Can National Board or American Board certification truly save the schools and improve student success? Is national board-type certification a viable option for career and technical education teachers?

The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001 emphasized the growing concern in our nation that a need exists for highly qualified teachers if children are to have a chance at succeeding in the 21st century.

With this legislation came a switch in the philosophy held by school officials in America. For years public education held to a behaviorist viewpoint where the methodology used was "teacher-centered didactic instruction focusing on practice and repetition (NBPTS, 2000, p. 1). However, with the need to focus more on student achievement to be in compliance with the current legislation, instruction is becoming more activity based and project oriented. Learning is viewed as the "construction of knowledge, and places a high value on instruction that encourages student initiative and inquiry" (NBPTS, p. 1).

These pieces of legislation and philosophical change to learning have opened the door to organizations that offer national teaching certificates and educator assessment instruments. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence, Education Testing Services, National Evaluation Services, and others provide programs and services by which teachers can obtain highly-qualified status through national certification. Many national and state political and education leaders have wholeheartedly endorsed these certification programs as being the savior to American education.

In 1987, the popular, but controversial, alternative to the certification areas offered by the various states was introduced when 177 National Board Certificates were awarded to teachers during the 1993-1994 school year. The number of National Board Certified teachers has increased each year since, with 8,204 certificates being issued during the 2002-2003 school year. According to information on the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards' (NBPTS, 2004) website, 32,139 National Board Certificates have been issued since the inception of the program.

The NBPTS was established to delineate outstanding practices and to recognize those teachers who achieve the rigid standards set forth by the NBPTS. According to Kruse and Dvork (2001), the national board certification process is not one to improve the teacher, but is instead one to identify successful teaching techniques.

Among the certification areas offered by the NBPTS is a credential for career and technical education. Is national board certification a viable option that will improve the teacher's employability and the education received by the students? Apparently, the belief is that it will.

According to Kruse and Dvork (2001), in the first two years that the NBPTS offered certification in career and technical education, nationwide there were 590 career and technical education teachers who completed the rigorous requirements and were awarded their national board certificates. The reasons they believed educators should strive for the certification is because "national board certified teachers expand their professional credentials and become part of an elite group of professionals who promote quality teaching" (p. 2).

The NBPTS is a nonprofit private organization that is committed to basic reform in education and recognizes that "teaching is at the heart of education and, further, that the single most important action the nation can take to improve schools is to strengthen teaching" (NBPTS, 2000, p. v). The National Board for Professional Teaching Standard's mission is to advance the quality of teaching and learning by:

- maintaining high and rigorous standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do,
- providing a national voluntary system certifying teachers who meet these standards, and
- advocating related education reforms to integrate "national board certification" in American education and to capitalize on the expertise of "national board certified teachers." (NBPTS, p. v)

In an article titled "Helping State Leaders Shape Education Policy", the author

(Education Commission of the States, 2003) writes that four key policy issues and questions must be answered concerning the effectiveness of teacher credentialing in hopes of identifying the best teachers for student success. These four issues are as follows.

- Do the state's certification/licensing procedures guarantee strong subject-matter competence? If so, how?
- Do the processes for granting continuing certificates include mechanisms to assess the teacher's influence on student achievement?
- What evaluation systems are in place to inform the credentialing process?
- Do these systems hold teachers accountable for student performance? (p. 2)

In attempting to implement these four policy issues, many state education leaders incorporate programs that they believe will help ensure the success of their education initiatives. These programs include teacher education program requirements, professional development programs, beginning-year teacher mentorship programs, and periodic supervisor evaluations. Will school officials continue to support these education systems and initiatives even without significant statistical evidence that shows the programs lead to student success?

Additionally, local school superintendents (vocational and common education) possess their own prejudices concerning certification when hiring teachers. In an informal survey of superintendents conducted by the author, one superintendent stated that she would only hire a person who had completed a certified and accredited teacher education program and had passed the certification tests with at least an 85% score. Another superintendent would not hire a person who had not completed the state's mandatory mentorship program for new teachers. A third superintendent stated that he would not hire someone for his vocational programs who did not have at least five years of practical experience in the field. When asked about national board-type certifications, each of the superintendents expressed indifference toward hiring someone who had the national certification versus someone who had not been nationally certified.

What school administrators must accept is that no known single teacher certification system alone can ensure success. If one program were found that did guarantee student success, then surely every school official in the nation would adopt it. With this in mind, why have our federal government and many states' education leaders accepted national board certification as the savior to America's education system? Is national board certification "the Holy Grail" of education reform? These questions should be answered before additional tax dollars are paid to a private certification firm in the belief that its certification will improve student success.

One fact that must be accepted is that the certification procedures and examinations used by the various states only do what they are intended to do: determine if a person has the minimum acceptable knowledge to pass a test based upon the criteria established by the state. But, will just passing a certification test or receiving a teacher education program director's recommendation for licensure ensure that the person will be successful as a teacher? With the increased emphasis in the nation on issues of student success, national board certification, and highly qualified teachers, one would think that most persons in positions of authority would believe not. The answer to this question will only come with time and research of student achievement relative to the various factors used to teach those children, such as national board certified teachers.

Another factor that has increased the popularity of being nationally board certified is that of employability. Once teachers obtain their initial license or certification, the question turns to ways to improve their chance of being hired as a teacher. One of the primary ways for a teacher to improve his or her employability is through obtaining additional certification areas offered by the state. For example, when a person with a license in social studies applies for a job, one of the first questions asked is whether or not he or she has certification as a coach. If

the answer is "no", then the teacher can probably anticipate a long job search. However, if the answer is "yes", or if the teacher has multiple certification areas, then the questions will probably turn to salary negotiation. An alternative to multi-certification, which often is not a choice for career and technical instructors, is to become nationally board certified.

Joining highly-qualified teacher status and employability as reasons to hold national certification are pay stipends offered by many states to persons holding the national credential. The Oklahoma legislature has bought into the apparent value of holding national board certification through NBPTS by paying a yearly stipend of \$5,000 to all national board-certified teachers working in their certification area. According to data at the NBPTS website (<http://www.nbpts.org>), the states bordering Oklahoma pay stipends or other incentives in the following amounts: Louisiana - \$5,000, Arkansas - \$2000 for the 2002-2003 school year, Missouri - 75% of the application fee (also supported by local school districts), Kansas - \$1000, Colorado - \$1000 to offset the cost of the application fee. Texas leaves monetary incentives up to the local school district, and information for New Mexico was not available. Many other states pay similar amounts to their national board-certified teachers, thereby joining the swelling ranks of supporters of this private nongovernmental certification program. Why have these education leaders bought into the national board certificates to the point that they are allocating millions of taxpayer dollars as incentives to obtain the certification? Where's the justification?

A review of the literature concerning national board certification will produce a vast amount of information, both for and against. According to [Goldhaber, Perry, and Anthony \(2003\)](#), national board certification is a process by which "outstanding teachers with demonstrated skills would be appropriately recognized" (p. 1). Supporters of NBPTS believe that teachers with national board certification will become the leaders in changing the culture of American education and that these changes will have "significant beneficial impacts on students" (p. 1).

In opposition to national board certification, [Goldhaber, Perry, and Anthony cite Wilcox \(1999\)](#) in claiming that the "NBPTS is an 'insiders' organization that bases its authority on the evaluation of its own members. The inclusion of two prominent educators' unions on the Board also raises red flags for some" (p. 1).

[Ballou and Podgursky \(1998\)](#) questioned the value of the national board certification. They cited many policy questions that remain unanswered in regards to this popular type of teacher certification.

Their first question is at the heart of the NBPTS's philosophy: "Is the national board able to identify superior teachers?" (p. 1). The answer to this question, according to [Ballou and Podgursky](#), is that "we simply do not know" (p. 1). Until the students of these so-called superior teachers have progressed through the system and have had their test scores compared with the scores of students who did not have a teacher holding national board certification, the cause-and-effect phenomenon cannot be known. Until that time, the experts can only surmise that the national board-certified teacher's students are more successful and that it was the methodology exercised by this "superior teacher" that caused the improved learning.

The second question addressed by Ballou and Podgursky centers on the economics of national board certification by asking, "Is national board certification a cost-efficient way to identify superior teachers?" [Ballou and Podgursky](#) state that the total nation-wide cost for national board certification as of 1998 equated to approximately \$49 million (1000 board certified teachers @ \$49,000 each). They suggest polling local administrators, other teachers, and parents as possibly being a more cost-effective way of identifying superior educators (p. 3).

[Ballou and Podgursky \(1998\)](#) continued their argument against immediate acceptance of

national board certification by raising questions concerning the potential fallacies of such certification by citing the few studies that have been conducted on the certification's effectiveness. Ballou and Podgursky wrote:

Relatively few studies which do assess the impact of NBPTS have been criticized both for a lack of independence from the organization and for a focus on teaching methods rather than student outcomes. There is also concern that significant amounts of federal and state funding have gone to support an institution that has yet to clearly demonstrate success in raising student achievement. (p. 2)

Another issue in national board certification is that of controlling cheating. NBPTS's national board certificate program relies heavily upon the teacher's developing a portfolio including essays and videotapes of classroom performance. According to **Ballou and Podgursky (1998)**, the board (at the time of their article) makes no attempt to determine the authenticity of the teacher's materials. With the substantial increase in salary that the national board-certified teacher will receive, the temptation to cheat is a very real threat to NBPTS. In a presentation to the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification's Professional Practices Institute in Louisville, Kentucky, in October 2003, Susan Woodard, Vice President of Standards and Assessments for NBPTS, discussed several instances in which applicants attempted to cheat the system. Some of the common methods found to help others pass the requirements for national board certification have been (a) sharing test questions by posting them on the Internet, (b) providing unauthorized assistance in preparing the portfolio, and (c) purchasing prewritten essays from others.

To date, the NBPTS has had six cases of substantiated wrongdoing. In four of the six cases, the only punishment that the teachers received was a one-year suspension of their application. The other two had their national certification revoked. A problem with these revocations is that the NBPTS organization does not notify any other credentialing jurisdictions of the action, nor does it require the teachers to return the invalidated credential to their headquarters. Therefore, a teacher could conceivably have his or her certificate revoked and continue to work with the certificate, drawing the stipend paid by the state.

Even with the uncertainty surrounding the value of national board certification, sufficient numbers of school officials at all levels have accepted it as the answer to their problems of filling their schools with highly qualified teachers. Support for the teacher pursuing national board certification is unprecedented when compared to other routes to become highly qualified. Only time and statistical data will tell if their faith in national board certification is warranted.

The choices of how best to prepare a teacher to become highly qualified to meet the demands of No Child Left Behind can be summarized with an analogy to the tale of the search for the Holy Grail. In the movie "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade", when Indiana Jones and two evil searchers of the "cup of Christ" finally reached the location where the true grail and many false grails were being protected by the last remaining knight from the crusade of a thousand years prior, they had the dilemma of selecting the one true grail that would provide eternal life. Seeing dozens of ornate and plain cups from which they could drink, the adventurers had to make a choice as to the one true cup that would provide eternal life. The response that the knight gave Indiana Jones and his unwelcome companions is the same that school officials must consider when seeking the answers to their problems about teacher qualifications: the knight advised them to choose, but to choose wisely

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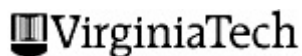
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