

Testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Labor, Health, and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies
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Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Specter, and members of the Subcommittee. It is an honor to testify on this distinguished panel on the topic of Improving Teacher Quality. I especially appreciate the opportunity to provide the “teacher voice” to the debate, a voice that is unfortunately too often missing during policy discussions on education reform. I am a National Board Certified Teacher serving in the role of a K-5 Learning Strategist for the College Community School District in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I am also a Ph.D. candidate in Curriculum and Supervision from the University of Iowa. I am privileged to work with energetic students, excellent teachers, and visionary administrators. Speaking from this vantage point, I would like to share two strategies for improving both teaching and learning in today’s schools, as we strive to produce students better prepared to meet tomorrow’s challenges in the workplace.

1) National Board Certification, a voluntary assessment program aimed at recognizing accomplished teachers who have met high and rigorous standards based on what teachers should know and be able to do, and

2) Forming teacher learning communities where the underlying assumption is that all students can and will learn under the direction of well-prepared educator mentors who have placed student learning and achievement at the forefront of teaching.

NATIONAL BOARD CERTIFICATION

Becoming a National Board Certified Teacher, in the Middle Childhood Generalist certificate area, has been the single-most transformative professional experience I have ever had the pleasure of undertaking. No other form of professional development has had such an impact on who I am as a teacher. I chose to attempt this process at the urging of my father-in-law, also a National Board Certified Teacher. As I read through the requirements, I immediately knew that this challenging, reflective experience was exactly what I desired to improve my teaching. This intense process involved hundreds of hours of planning, researching best practices, listening to my students, analyzing student work, creating engaging lessons, viewing and analyzing videotaped learning experiences of my classroom, writing, reflecting, growing, and realizing that through my own art of teaching, I had a powerful impact on student learning and achievement.

The process required me to create four portfolio entries—one centered on analyzing student work samples of writing; two videotaped entries in which I recorded small group learning experiences in math, science, and social studies; and entries highlighting my work as a learner, a leader, and increasing parent and community involvement. I also had to complete six computerized constructed response exercises that assessed my content knowledge. As I traveled through this professional growth adventure, I discovered my ability to build innovative, creative instructional units that ultimately led to increased student learning and achievement.

I am one of 64,000 NBCTs across America. We teach in and are recognized in all 50 states and over 700 school districts. But do we make a difference? Does National Board Certification improve teaching and learning? There are at least three ways to respond. First, a 2007 survey of NBCTs throughout the country reported that:

- 1) Nearly 91% of NBCTs felt that the process improved their teaching practice;
- 2) Over 89% of NBCTs felt that the process improved their ability to think systematically about their teaching practice;
- 3) 84% of NBCTs felt that the process taught them to more effectively focus curriculum activities on active student learning and exploration;
- 4) Almost 81% of NBCTs felt that the process taught them to try more innovative teaching approaches or ideas; and
- 5) Close to 91% of NBCTs responded that the process reinforced their commitment to their students and their learning.

Secondly, research confirms what NBCTs believe. Several independent studies indicate that students of National Board Certified Teachers do better on standardized tests than students of non-National Board Certified Teachers. A forthcoming study conducted by labor economist Dan Goldhaber and Emily Anthony of the University of Washington and the Urban Institute provided “direct evidence that the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) is identifying and certifying teachers who will raise student achievement” and the results “could put to rest some of the controversy in education circles surrounding the national certification.” In particular, the study concluded that National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs):

- 1) Are more effective at raising student achievement in math and reading than teachers who pursue, but fail to obtain, NBPTS certification
- 2) Are more effective at raising student achievement – outside of the year in which they apply – than teachers who do not pursue NBPTS certification
- 3) Have a greater impact with younger students

A study by L. Vandervoort of Arizona State University demonstrated that students of National Board Certified Teachers showed learning gains equivalent to spending an extra month in school. Other studies, for example, show that students of NBCTs exhibit greater comprehension of classroom instruction and better writing abilities and are able to apply knowledge more successfully than students of non-NBCTs. NBCTs create more challenging curricula, present subject matter in greater depth and provide better feedback to students than students of non-NBCTs. They are better able to adapt their teaching strategies to reach diverse student learning styles within their classrooms.

Research also shows that teachers benefit from the National Board Certification process. A study by Lloyd Bond of the University of North Carolina, Greensboro shows that National Board Certified Teachers consistently outperform their peers in knowledge of subject matter, ability to adapt instruction, and ability to create challenging and engaging lessons. It also reported that participation in the program gives teachers the time and the opportunity to analyze in a systematic way their professional development as teachers, successful teaching strategies, and the substantive areas in which they teach.

Finally, independent validation of the effectiveness of National Board Certified Teachers is made every day by the high percentage of NBCTs recognized by educational organizations. Four of the last seven National Teachers of the Year have been NBCTs, as well as 40 percent of the honorees in the National Teacher's Hall of Fame, one third of the recipients of the Presidential Awards for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching, and high percentages of Disney Teacher Award winners, the Milken Family Foundation National Educator Award recipients and USA Today All-USA Teacher Team Awardees. These numbers are especially impressive when you consider that NBCTs make up just over 2 percent of K-12 teachers in America.

These powerful results speak to the impact of National Board Certification on teaching and learning. However, an exciting thing happens when a NBCT seeks to build the capacity for success in schools and influence change. Leadership activities abound for willing NBCTs. In addition to working with special populations of students in my school, which accounts for most of my day, I am able to help sustain a school culture focused on students through many leadership and mentoring activities. I work with my building leadership team to focus on school improvement initiatives; plan for differentiated professional learning opportunities; carry out our building improvement plan; strategically organize instruction so that co-teaching becomes a norm; work with teachers to plan common lessons; facilitate our instructional decision-making process to provide support for all students; and participate in collaborative partnerships which maintain a collective focus and responsibility for improving students' learning.

BUILDING LEARNING COMMUNITIES

At the core of every National Board standard is the collaborative efforts of teacher learning communities. Talbert and McLaughlin, in No Child Left Behind and the Reduction of the Achievement Gap: Sociological Perspectives on Federal Educational Policy, state that "building school-based teacher learning communities is key to improving education quality and equity" (Sadovnik, O'Day, Bohrnstedt, & Borman, 2008). To improve teacher quality, teachers create a community of learners in which a shared purpose to serve all students drives decisions. In addition, teachers make instructional choices in the context of best practices research and real student data. Teachers form highly collaborative teams to analyze student work, co-create engaging lesson plans, deprivatize practice by observing one another teach, and reflect on lesson quality. This in turn leads students to develop a greater grasp of content, increases their engagement and performance, and ultimately, narrows the inequality in student achievement, according to the authors.

In my own experience, my district places a great emphasis on creating teacher learning communities in which we strive to do what's best for our students. We have a built-in time for collaboration once each week. During this time, teachers use student data to formulate a professional learning focus. Teams of teachers investigate new content, research best practices, and allow the data to drive decisions in regard to instruction and learning. Through the analysis of student work, teams of teachers innovate and create new ideas and concepts to include in daily instruction. Through common lesson study, the collaborative team designs a unit or lesson of instruction, collectively makes all the important decisions regarding teaching, teaches and observes one teacher teaching the lesson, debriefs the lesson together, and then through

reflection, redesigns the lesson through modifications and improvements. To be part of that team is an exciting process that sheds light onto the continuous improvement of teaching and learning.

Teacher learning communities, in my opinion, hold real value in helping schools “reculture” themselves to promote student learning and achievement. Teachers work together to improve instruction, student engagement, and learning. A premium is placed on changing practice through the implementation and application of professional learning. My district also devotes one morning session each week to professional learning during which we work on building and district initiatives to improve students’ learning. Part of my job role as a strategist and as an NBCT mentor is to help teachers through this learning process as we strive to improve our teaching practice.

The development of teacher learning communities as embedded in all National Board standards elevates the quality and effectiveness of all teachers who work in these environments. This concept leverages the presence of one or just a few NBCTs to help improve the practice of all teachers with whom they work.

FEDERAL FUNDING FOR NATIONAL BOARD CERTIFICATION

This Subcommittee must grapple with determining the most appropriate way to allocate limited federal dollars to support the many worthy educational endeavors. The past funding generously provided by this Subcommittee to the National Board has been instrumental to the success of the organization. Initially, the funding supported the development of the 25 different standards and assessments that are offered by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Now the majority of the funding is allocated to candidate support via the states to support teachers wishing to pursue National Board Certification. In the last few years, a growing percentage of the federal funding has enabled the National Board to expand its effort to ensure that growing numbers of NBCTs teach in the highest need schools. This program, called the Targeted High Need Initiative (THNI) is growing rapidly and there are currently almost 90 THNI sites operating across the county in low performing, high poverty urban and rural schools and districts. Sufficient funding is the only obstacle to continued rapid growth for this exciting initiative.

Additionally, earlier this month, the Board of Directors for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards voted to establish a new Instructional Leader/Principal certificate to help provide the type of strong and effective school leadership that is essential to a high performing school. You cannot sustain a high performing school without effective leadership, and the National Board is committed to bringing its standards expertise to this critical area.

I wholeheartedly urge the members of this Subcommittee to help ignite the passion for teaching and learning through funding of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards at the requested \$15 million in fiscal year 2009. National Board Certification works. It identifies and develops more effective teachers and enhances student learning and achievement. It is exactly the type of program worthy of federal investment. Thank you for allowing me to testify today.