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Commentary

Credit Where It's Due

Putting Nationally Certified Teachers Into the Classrooms That Need Them Most

By Andrew J. Rotherham

Put plainly, you're unlikely to find a national board-certified teacher in a school that is high-poverty, high-minority, or seriously struggling.

It's well known that low-income and minority students are less likely to get the best teachers. What is less known is that despite emerging efforts to deal with this problem, other local, state, and national policies reinforce the inequitable status quo. Obvious culprits include various seniority provisions in collective bargaining agreements, single-salary scales that offer little or no incentive for teachers to take challenging assignments, and archaic teacher-licensing systems.

But there are many subtler factors working against equity efforts, too. Most state incentives for national certification fall in this latter category. These well-intentioned incentives, designed to reward teachers who complete the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification process, are generally divorced from efforts to make the distribution of top-flight teachers more equitable. The result is that as policymakers and educators focus on the interrelated equity challenges of improving teacher quality and turning around low-performing schools, national board-certified teachers are largely out of the game.

Since its creation in 1987, the national board has certified more than 32,000 teachers as "master teachers" based on the standards and certification process it has developed. The board grew out of the influential 1986 report "A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century." The idea behind the board's creation was that teaching quality could be improved by identifying outstanding teachers through a rigorous process and rewarding them with a national certificate of expertise. Today, there are certifications for teachers in 27 subjects and four student age groups. The cost of applying for national certification is \$2,300, although sources of funding are available to help defray the cost for many candidates.

State and federal policies support the national board in various ways. The federal government has invested more than \$129 million to help the board develop its standards and certification process. Some states and school districts help cover the cost of candidate applications, which would otherwise be borne by individual teachers. The most notable form of support, however, is the creation of salary differentials for teachers with the certification. Forty-nine states and 530 localities offer some sort of incentive or recognition for these teachers. More specifically, 30 states and the District of Columbia offer bonuses or higher salaries for board certification. The Progressive Policy Institute estimates that, combined, even during the past few lean years for state budgets, states are spending at least \$100 million annually on board-related salary enhancements alone.

Contrary to the claims of some critics, this money doesn't appear to be ill spent. New research by Dan Goldhaber and Emily Anthony of the Urban Institute suggests that nationally certified teachers are at least marginally more effective than both average teachers and teachers who sought, but failed to earn, national certification. This new research is much more rigorous than previous studies of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and should be taken more seriously. Though more research is obviously needed, the Urban Institute researchers' finding is reason for cautious optimism that the certification carries some value in identifying especially effective teachers.

In terms of addressing the inequities in teacher distribution, however, the dispersion of board-certified teachers between high- and low-poverty schools is abysmal. Figures from the national board estimate that about 37 percent of board-certified teachers are teaching in high-poverty schools, which are defined as schools receiving Title I money. Yet Title I funding is an imprecise proxy for poverty. Fifty-eight percent of all U.S. public schools receive some Title I dollars. Thus, even this estimate of only about one in three probably overstates the true distribution of board-certified teachers in genuinely high-poverty schools.

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Better data indicate that this is in fact the case. A 2003 study led by Goldhaber found that nationally certified teachers in North Carolina were disproportionately teaching in more affluent districts, as well as districts with fewer minority students. A 2004 study by SRI International examined distribution in the six states with the most board-certified teachers—California, Florida, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, and South Carolina. These states account for about 65 percent of all board-certified teachers nationwide. The SRI researchers found that only 12 percent of nationally certified teachers teach in schools with more than 75 percent of their students receiving free or reduced-price lunch; only 16 percent teach in schools with more than 75 percent minority student populations; and only 19 percent teach in a school in the bottom third of performance for its state. Put plainly, you're unlikely to find a national board-certified teacher in a school that is high-poverty, high-minority, or seriously struggling.

That nationally certified teachers would be less likely to teach in poor schools is not surprising and in fact dovetails with substantial research showing that, overall, more qualified and experienced teachers are less likely to teach in such schools. Indeed, addressing these inequities was a primary rationale behind the teacher-quality provisions in the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Yet, despite this, states and the national board have done little to engage board-certified teachers in efforts to address the disparities. Nationwide, only three states—California, Illinois, and New York—offer robust salary incentives for board-certified teachers to work in low-performing or high-poverty schools. (In addition, the American Federation of Teachers' Connecticut affiliate offers incentives to teachers in that state who work in hard-to-serve schools.) It's worth noting that of the states SRI studied, California had a more equitable distribution of nationally certified teachers than any other.

So today, despite substantial inequities in teacher quality, the No Child Left Behind law's requirement that states address those problems, and the performance demands being put on low-performing schools, in virtually no state are incentives for nationally certified teachers awarded in a way that relates primarily to these goals. On the contrary, because such incentives are not targeted at these problems, in practice most state incentives work at cross purposes with efforts to improve educational quality for low-income and minority youngsters in struggling schools.

By making two interrelated changes, states can better align incentives for national certification with efforts to help high-poverty schools. First, states should make the maximum pay differentials and bonuses for nationally certified teachers more substantial than they are now. Only eight states offer incentives of \$5,000 or more. The incentives also must be sustained over time. Because of state-level budget constraints and growth in the number of board-certified teachers, some states are cutting funding for such programs. Small stipends and uncertainty about funding weaken the leverage of these incentives.

Second, states must link these incentives to their efforts to help hard-to-serve schools meet the No Child Left Behind law's highly-qualified-teacher mandate, or to otherwise help struggling schools improve. Ideally, states should tie bonuses and salary increases to service in high-poverty or low-performing schools. Short of this, states could make incentives conditional on service or mentoring as part of school improvement initiatives undertaken by states or districts.

Larger and better-targeted bonuses and pay differentials for nationally certified teachers will ultimately leverage greater educational improvement.

Fortunately, more states are beginning to look at this issue. In January, Gov. Mark Sanford of South Carolina proposed continuing that state's \$7,500 annual salary differential for all current nationally certified teachers and those on their way to earning the certification, but limiting it in the future to those with the credential willing to teach in high-poverty schools. New board-certified teachers not teaching in high-need schools would continue to receive a \$3,000 differential.

Next door in Georgia, state legislators also are seeking to better target salary differentials to encourage service in high-poverty schools while holding current and prospective board-certified teachers harmless. As one Georgia teacher told me: "I teach in a high-performing school and was going to pursue certification next year, so as a teacher, I'm bummed. As a citizen, I think they have done the right thing."

While ideally states would build on existing differentials for board-certified teachers, state finance is far from ideal. In fact, the obvious equity issue notwithstanding, proponents of differentials who are resisting state efforts to better target the incentives actually have a self-interest here as well. Without better alignment of these salary differentials with broader state policy goals, such as ensuring that at-risk students get top teachers, it's likely that in many states the differentials will simply be reduced in the future, as increasing numbers of nationally certified teachers make them unaffordable.

The federal government also should get into the game. Washington can partner with states and play a useful role here. During the 2004 campaign, Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry proposed offering federally funded incentives to board-certified teachers who teach in high-poverty schools. It's a good idea, and one straightforward approach to doing it would be for the federal government to match or otherwise enhance state-based incentives for board-certified teachers who work in high-poverty and struggling schools, thereby helping increase the impact of state dollars.

Finally, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards has a role to play. There are many strategies the board could employ to help address these disparities. Providing various financial incentives, waiving renewal fees for board-certified teachers in high-poverty schools, or even creating special certifications and endorsements for board-certified teachers accomplished in teaching in challenging schools are just a few ideas.

Helping struggling schools means that states must use *all* of their resources as effectively as possible. Larger and better-targeted bonuses and pay differentials for nationally certified teachers will ultimately leverage greater educational improvement than smaller and more diffuse incentives divorced from broader state and national school improvement efforts.

Considering the magnitude of today's teacher-quality challenge, policymakers cannot afford to leave this impressive cadre of teachers behind.

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