NBPTS Upgrades Profession, Most Agree, Despite Test-Score Letdown

By Bess Keller

Back when the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards was launched in 1987, most of the talk in its favor cited one overarching problem: the weakness of the teaching profession. If professional standards were better defined, if professional rewards were greater, the argument went, schools and learning would improve.

These days, such improvement is still the goal. But rather than entertaining broad theories about what would lead to it, policymakers and the public are increasingly riveted on student test scores. And that has been at best a mixed blessing for the NBPTS, which last month found itself in an embarrassing fix as it tried to downplay the very study that it had at one time portrayed as the answer to those who zeroed in on scores.

The research, conducted at the board’s behest by William L. Sanders of the SAS Institute in Cary, N.C., concluded that nationally certified teachers were not significantly better than others when it came to growth in student achievement. ("Under Pressure, NBPTS Releases Full Study," May 24, 2006.)

While board officials were quick to point out that other studies had pointed in the opposite direction, the worth of the credential was called into question.

Still, NBPTS advocates favor the long view. Looking back, they say, the Arlington, Va.-based board has accomplished much of what it most specifically set out to do in the more than 10 years it has been awarding the country’s only national certification for experienced teachers. And they remain confident that the certification has strengthened the profession, paying dividends for student learning—though not yet enough.

Even those inclined to be critical say the board has raised the profile of teaching and thrown the weight of powerful groups—in and out of education—behind master teachers.

The organization’s board “was the broadest group ever brought together in the history of [American] education,” James A. Kelly, who led the NBPTS as president during its first 12 years, asserted in a recent interview. The standards the then-63-member board approved, he said, amounted to “a historic statement for what good teaching should be and represented a remarkable consensus.”
The standards in turn were the basis for the group’s assessments, which broke ground that up until then had been little plowed. Candidates must produce portfolios that include analyses of their practice, evidence of student learning, and classroom videotapes—approaches that have spread to teacher-preparation programs, professional development, and, in a few states such as Indiana, state licensure.

To date, the board has certified some 47,500 teachers in about 25 fields in a process challenging enough that only about half the candidates on average have passed on the first try. The number is less than half the mark the board set for itself when it began awarding the credential, but nonetheless impressive, especially given the slow going in the early years.

The NBPTS has also picked up impressive political support. All 50 states and the District of Columbia have offered some kind of endorsement of the credential, and about 30 provide financial incentives that amount to tens of millions of dollars annually. And with more nationally certified teachers every year, the dollar figure is growing, especially in the South, which boasts something like two-thirds of the teachers who have the certification.

The federal government’s investment has also been substantial—almost $150 million through 2005, with the recent annual figures hovering around $10 million, according to NBPTS figures.

The money has paid off for a profession that has had few effective ways of passing on the knowledge of its most skilled practitioners or advancing them, proponents say.

“The [NBPTS] was originally set up to try to help create a true profession of teaching because we didn’t agree on standards, and we didn’t assess teachers rigorously, and we didn’t have ways to move them along in the profession,” said James B. Hunt Jr., the former North Carolina governor who chaired the board for its first decade.

“It’s about raising the bar for all members of the profession,” added Joseph A. Aguerrebere Jr., the current president of the board, “and providing a mechanism for teachers to engage in ongoing improvement of their practice.”

By many accounts, the NBPTS has challenged teachers and laid out a credible path to improvement for both beginners and veterans.

“Today, the teacher-preparation process is mirroring the national-board process,” especially by expecting aspiring teachers to show they have a beginning knowledge of how to analyze their classroom work, contends Arthur E. Wise, the president of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, which accredits about half the college-based teaching programs in the country.

“I think the structure developed by [the NBPTS for its assessments] has permeated the work of university-based teacher programs and even nontraditional ones,” agreed Mary
Gendernalik-Cooper, the dean of the education school at Sonoma State University in Rohnert Park, Calif. “There’s a lot more close, analytic work in our programs.”

_Halo Effect?_

Nonetheless, there’s disagreement about how much the growing number of **nationally** certified teachers have been able to influence the life of schools beyond their own classrooms. A relatively small study in 2000 suggested that there was only a little ripple effect, but Mr. Hunt believes that is changing.

In fact, he chalks up some of the apparent lack of effect on student academic gains from **national** certification in Mr. Sanders’ study to a general improvement wrought largely by **nationally** certified teachers. One of the two school districts that provided the data for the study, the 120,000-student Wake County, N.C., system, has the second-greatest density of such teachers in the nation, Mr. Hunt noted.

“I believe there’s some kind of halo effect, having so many good teachers,” he said. “They have done a lot of sharing; they have benefited from what **board**-certified teachers have learned and shared.”

Proponents of **national** certification are bothered, too, by the single-minded pursuit of higher test scores, pointing out that desirable student learning is broader than what state tests can measure.

“This is not to downgrade [the importance of] the tests, … but teachers are trying to take these students to high levels that may not be represented on every test,” Mr. Aguerrebere said.

A question that has dogged the NBPTS for years is whether the certification process merely identifies accomplished teachers or helps create them. In surveys, the teachers who have undergone the process, whether they achieved the credential or not, endorse the structured reflection as a **professional**-development experience par excellence.

“They undoubtedly are pretty good teachers” going in, said Dennis Sparks, the longtime executive director of the **National** Staff Development Council, which promotes teacher **professional** development. “But I think they get better in the process; it makes sense to me that they do.”

_Better Distribution_

Whatever the final word on that, observers inside and outside the NBPTS agree that an important task now before the **board** is to find ways to leverage more learning inside schools from teachers with the credential.

One form that attempt takes is getting more **nationally** certified teachers into schools serving poor and minority students, where they are underrepresented. Another is to put them in roles where their expertise is widely used and the promise of advancement within the profession is fulfilled.
Gail V. Ritchie, a nationally certified teacher in the 163,500-student Fairfax County, Va., schools, coordinates a program that encourages teachers who seek the certification and provides stipends for successful candidates who work in high-needs schools or complete “leadership projects.” She also teaches in a master’s-degree program at George Mason University in Fairfax County designed around the board’s “core propositions.”

She and others say the credential has made the profession more attractive to newcomers and veterans alike. The teachers have found numerous ways to connect with one another, and the stamp of approval is a point of pride. It’s not uncommon, for instance, for business cards to carry the “national board-certified teacher” designation.

“I think the board has lived up to its original intention,” said Kate Walsh, the president of the Washington-based National Council on Teacher Quality, a research and advocacy organization. Still, as a matter of policy, Ms. Walsh says, states that have invested tens of millions of dollars in bonuses for nationally certified teachers should be asking how much of a return they are getting on their investment.

“By giving more attention to the fact that there are better and worse teachers, [the NBPTS] has at least forced policymakers to think about the distribution of quality,” said Frederick M. Hess, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think tank.

Mr. Hess, who has often aimed pointed questions at the NBPTS, says his quarrel is as much with governors and legislators as with the NBPTS itself.

“My concern all along has been that the national board has allowed itself to be promoted as a one-stop solution to the [teacher-quality] problem,” he continued.

“There’s a lot less certainty about what it takes to be an [outstanding] teacher” than the picture the board paints and many of its supporters accept unquestioningly, he said.

Confidence Unshaken

Still, it appears that school improvement efforts that draw heavily on nationally certified teachers are here to stay. One example is the Chicago Public Education Fund’s 6-year-old push to put teams of such teachers into schools that could use a boost.

Janet Knupp, the president of the independent fund, which supports the district’s public schools, said her confidence in nationally certified teachers as one component of improving schools remains firm.

“Our effort,” she said, “is really about creating a team of people—accomplished teachers, principals, and new teachers—who are constantly reflective about their practice and have mastered subject content. … National-board certification is a legitimate way to identify [accomplished] teachers.”