

**National Board Certification:  
Is North Carolina Getting Its  
Money's Worth?**

*By George C. Leef*

**A Policy Report  
from the**



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# National Board Certification: Is North Carolina Getting its Money's Worth?

## Executive Summary

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) is a private organization formed in 1987 with the goal of establishing standards for teaching effectiveness and certifying those teachers it identified as especially capable. NBPTS has written standards that purport to show what accomplished teachers “should know and be able to do” and has established a certification procedure that relies on videotapes, portfolios and written essays. There are currently more than 16,000 National Board certified teachers in the United States, more than 20% of them in North Carolina.

North Carolina encourages teachers to seek NBPTS certification with incentives that exceed that of any other state. The state pays the application fees (\$2,300) for as many teachers as wish to pursue certification any year, and grants an automatic 12 percent salary increase to those who receive certification. Many other states have chosen to give far less support to the NBPTS program, and some give no support at all.

Despite the large amounts of tax money that have been spent promoting certification, there is no evidence that the certification process does anything to elevate a teacher's ability to instruct students. Furthermore there is no evidence that certified teachers are better at producing high student achievement than are non-certified teachers. The only study that looked at measured student learning found that NBPTS certified teachers were no more likely to produce exceptional student progress than were other teachers, and that some certified teachers had abnormally low student progress.

The NBPTS standards and certification procedure have little to do with teaching competency per se, but instead are loaded with ideas drawn from “progressive” education theory. Those ideas have very little to do with instructional competence, but instead mirror the education establishment's fixation on educationally questionable doctrines such as constructivism and multiculturalism. Under the NBPTS approach, it is quite possible that teachers who are not especially good at imparting knowledge and skills to their students could receive certification, while teachers who are especially capable might not.

North Carolina's heavy expenditures to promote NBPTS certification are unproductive and should be ended.

# National Board Certification: Is North Carolina Getting its Money's Worth?

By George C. Leef

## Introduction

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards was established in 1987. This private, nonprofit organization has as its mission the improvement of teaching in American primary, middle, and high schools. It seeks to accomplish that goal by developing standards for accomplished teaching practice standards that elucidate what teachers should know and know how to do. Teachers who have had at least three years experience and hold valid state teaching licenses are eligible to apply for National Board certification. This requires submission of videotapes of the teacher's class, portfolios showing how the teacher handles various aspects of the job, and the writing of four essays on teaching at an assessment center. Candidates who pass receive certification for ten years.

Former North Carolina governor Jim Hunt promoted National Board certification as a way to strengthen teaching in the state. He supported and signed into law provisions that 1) pay the cost of application for an unlimited number of candidates in the state each year, currently \$2,300 per teacher; and 2) guarantee an automatic pay increase of 12 percent for each teacher who holds National Board certification. The total cost of the program has now reached \$25.6 million annually. These strong financial incentives have boosted North Carolina to the top of the nation in National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs). As of July, 2002, the state has 3,667. By comparison, Florida has 2,252, California 1,305, South Carolina 1,292, Virginia 277, Texas 59, Pennsylvania 47 and Tennessee 42.

The great differences among the states reflect the fact that some have chosen to create strong incentives for teachers to pursue National Board certification, while others have not. Texas, for example, gives no state funding for the application fee and no salary increase for having achieved certification. (Some local jurisdictions in Texas have chosen to provide financial incentives, however.) Texas and other states that have not legislated any support for NBPTS certification incur no expense, but also have very few National Board certified teachers. North Carolina incurs a substantial and rapidly escalating cost each year for its support of NBPTS.

The question is whether the benefits are worth the costs. Does the Texas approach of indifference toward NBPTS make more sense than the North Carolina approach of creating strong financial incentives for teachers to pursue certification? Or is it the case that gains in teaching quality justify the costs to the state budget? This paper will attempt to provide some answers.

## I. NBPTS Standards

The National Board secured the funding it needed to begin operations (a grant of \$1 million from the Carnegie Foundation) with the contention that it would be able to develop standards for highly competent teachers and raise the level of teaching quality in the United States. This would be done by encouraging teachers to incorporate those standards in their classrooms. NBPTS employed an analogy to the field of medicine. Just as special certification by medical boards encourages doctors to improve their knowledge so that they can obtain that certification, so would its certification of master teachers improve teaching competence.

Because the NBPTS certification program is built around teachers adherence to its standards, close attention must be paid to those standards. Do they really describe what teachers should know and be able to do? Do they clearly distinguish accomplished teachers from those who are not? Or is it the case that the standards do not enable observers to confidently identify teachers as accomplished or not? Is it possible that an ineffective teacher could obtain certification by giving the appearance of meeting most of the standards, while an effective one might not receive certification because he does not embrace (or at least pretend to embrace) all of the favored teaching behaviors?

*“The National Board makes lofty claims about its standards... but a careful examination of them leads one to doubt that they are truly the prescription for good teaching.”*

The National Board makes lofty claims about its standards, saying that they have forged national consensus on what teachers should know and be able to do, but a careful examination of them leads one to doubt that they are truly *the* prescription for good teaching.

The standards contain many items that are of very questionable worth in teaching, and fail to include others that are of proven value. Let us look at some examples.

### A. Long on Generalities and Political Correctness

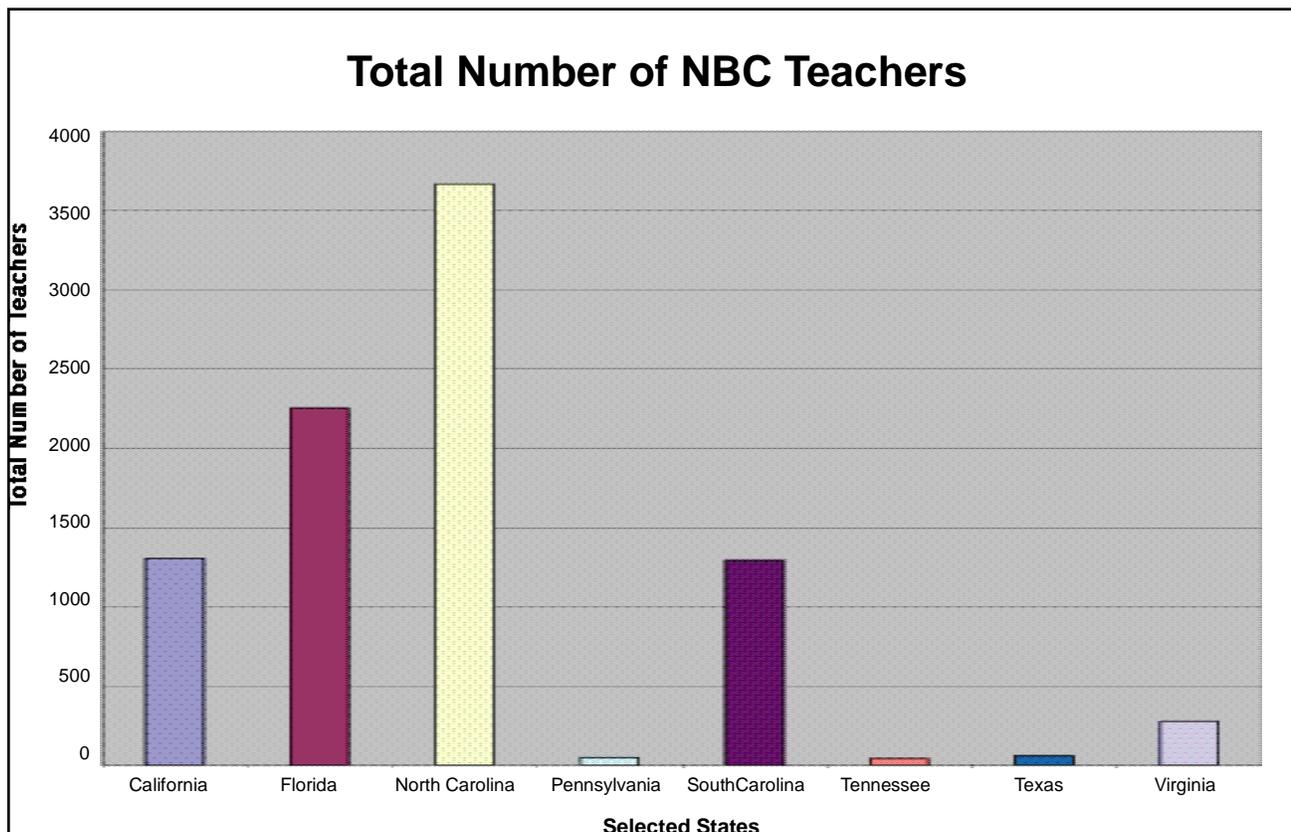
Standard I for Adolescence and Young Adulthood English Language Arts Teachers (middle and high school English teachers) calls for teachers to acquire “Knowledge of Students.” Immediately, the standard says “Accomplished...teachers create classrooms in which all students take pride in their growing language facility and in their increasingly adventurous explorations of literature and other texts.”<sup>1</sup> That is a laudable *goal* for a teacher, but it is not a *method* or *useful knowledge* a teacher can employ. And there is no way of knowing whether any or all of the students “take pride in their growing language facility.” At many points, the NBPTS standards (not just this English Language standard) contain similar material results to be hoped for, rather than useful guidance in achieving them.

The next point made under Standard I is again typical of all the standards--an admonition to the teacher to learn about each student’s background: “Because language development builds on prior achievements and experiences, English teachers make it a point to learn early in the school year about their students--who they are as individual learners--and then use this

knowledge to help shape decisions in the classroom.” Accomplished teachers are expected to have an awareness and appreciation of the student’s cultural, linguistic and ethnic heritage; family setting; prior learning experiences; and personal interests, needs and goals. That is a tall order, and one consistent with the “learner-centered” theory of education that tells educators to adjust their teaching to the students rather than expecting the students to adjust to the teacher. In a high school class studying any work from *MacBeth* to *Moby Dick*, the details about the student’s background are of little or no relevance to the material being presented. Trying to somehow make the material more relevant to a student named Sanchez by stretching to find some connection with his supposed Latino culture does not enhance the learning experience of Sanchez or the other students.

It is, no doubt, helpful for the teacher to gain a sense of each student’s “capacity to read, write, speak, and listen,” as Standard I continues, but that will become apparent through ordinary interaction in class and in the grading of exams. There is nothing to be gained by insisting that teachers attempt to delve deeply into the family history and psyche of each student.

Standard I further states that accomplished teachers make themselves “familiar with various aspects of youth culture such as the television programs and movies students watch, the music they listen to, the sports they play and the street language they use in order to take those cultural considerations into account in the day-to-day conversation of the classroom.” But is it really true that one cannot be an effective English teacher unless he tries to “relate” to the students by gaining knowledge about “youth culture,” which is not necessarily uniform



among students? It might sometimes be helpful to be able to make a point, but English (and other subjects) can be taught well without references to popular TV shows, sports, and street language. Indeed, the teacher might be a better model for students by not trying to import elements of youth culture into the classroom.

Standard II for English teachers covers “Knowledge of English Language Arts.” It begins well enough by specifying that English teachers should be “familiar with a large and diverse array of literary works, authors and genres from throughout the world. They are particularly well-versed in the substance and history of American literature and its various traditions, regional variations, and cultural influences.” Teachers of any subject should be highly knowledgeable about that subject. Note, however, the lack of specificity in this standard. No works are singled out as being vital for a teacher to know. Moreover, as we shall see later, the evaluation process does not follow up on the language of the standard. There is no rigorous test to ensure that English teachers, in fact, do have a deep knowledge of literature.

The standard then proceeds to deal with instructional theory: “They are familiar with the research concerning the constructive nature of the reading transaction and its instructional implications.” However, the research on the nature of the reading transaction is not homogeneous. Inclusion of the word “constructive” seems to indicate that NBPTS thinks English teachers should adhere to the whole language approach to reading, which posits that students “construct” the meaning of a passage by looking at contextual clues, rather than by phonetically deciphering the written code. In any case, is it true that one cannot be a capable English teacher without spending time to keep up to date on the theoretical work being done in reading? By the time they reach this level (middle and high school), students are usually set in their reading habits and for those who have difficulty, specialized remedial courses are needed.

*“Teachers of any subject should be highly knowledgeable. Note, however, the lack of specificity in this standard. No works are singled out as being vital for a teacher to know.”*

Like the standards in other disciplines, the English standards contain many points that do not apply exclusively to “accomplished” teachers, but rather would apply to all but the most incompetent. Consider this discussion on classroom control and discipline: “They calibrate their leadership of classroom activities between a too rigid control, which saps initiative, and an excessive looseness, which fails to hold students accountable for reaching worthwhile language goals.” Virtually everyone, from the most experienced teacher to the novice, realizes that he needs to find the ideal degree of control to exert in the classroom. Only a very incompetent teacher would persist in keeping a demoralizing iron hand on the classroom, or trying to teach with such looseness that the students paid little attention. This isn't a standard for teaching *excellence*; rather, failure to adhere to it would be woeful incompetence.

An emphasis on “multiculturalism” is seen throughout the NBPTS standards. Standard IV for English teachers, for example, says that in grouping students for cooperative assignments, they frequently bring individuals from varying backgrounds in contact with one another to

provide a forum where experiences can be shared and mutual understandings of core similarities and differences deepened. Within groups, they may establish leadership roles to prevent gender or other stereotypes from restricting participation. Assume for the sake of argument that group projects are educationally beneficial and not a waste of time as some teachers maintain. The idea that the groups should be selected for the purpose of fostering multicultural understanding, rather than selecting students on the basis of their desire to work together or for other reasons relating to the course material, is of dubious educational merit. Nevertheless, the NBPTS standards make it a hallmark of “accomplished teaching” to place multiculturalism at the top of the list of reasons for making decisions.

Similarly, Standard VI states that, “Teachers know that providing an introduction to a variety of texts from many cultures and many viewpoints is a critical learning requirement for all students. The goals of English language arts instruction include preparing students to live in an increasingly diverse society.” This standard implies that a teacher who concentrates on and teaches well the traditional classics of American and European literature is not accomplished while the teacher who insists on bringing in works of African or Asian authors is or at least may

be. The demand for diversity in the choice of works to be studied leads to the substitution of less educationally worthwhile books for more worthwhile ones. Race, gender, nationality, or other personal characteristics of the author are poor grounds for choosing books and by making it a hallmark of “accomplished teaching,” the NBPTS standards actually undermine educational excellence.

Also on the subject of “instructional resources,” Standard VI says that teachers should “bring a diversity of guest speakers into their classroom to enliven discussion, share experiences with students and challenge opinions.” Is doing so really an essential part of good teaching? In many cases, bringing in guest speakers is not going to add anything to the capable teacher’s presentation of Shakespeare or Melville or Bronte; on the contrary, it is apt to be a distraction.

The “multicultural” emphasis that is found throughout the NBPTS standards is again evident in Standard XI: Language Study. That standard offers the view that teachers “recognize that each person speaks what is, in effect, a dialect reflective of a particular regional upbringing, ethnicity, occupation, age and socioeconomic class. Teachers continually affirm their students’ entitlement and pride in the variations of English that they and their communities enjoy.” The influence of the self-esteem theorists is evident here. While teachers certainly should not belittle the variations of English their students may speak, it is just a diversion of important classroom time for a teacher to go out of his way to tell students that it is fine and good for them to speak the way they do. The standard goes on to say that teachers should also strive to get students to adopt standard English usage where appropriate. But these two goals are apt to lead to either confusion on the part of students, or a sense that the teacher is

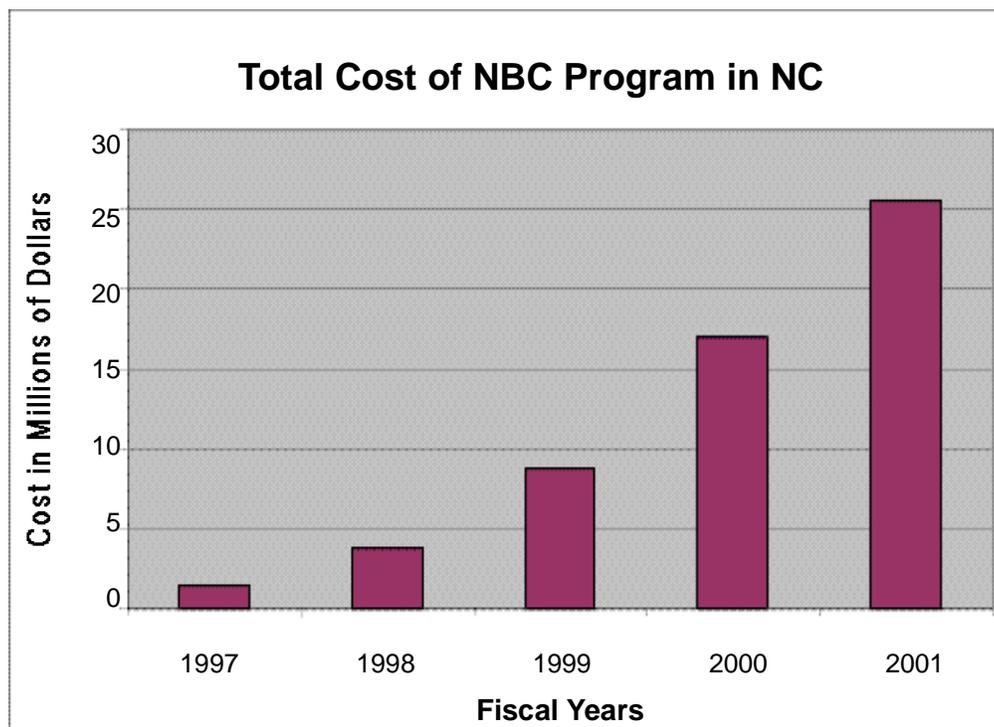
*“While teachers certainly should not belittle the variations of English their students may speak, it is just a diversion of important classroom time for a teacher to go out of his way to tell students that it is fine and good for them to speak the way they do.”*

pandering to them in affecting praise for their vernacular.

Standard XII deals with testing and grading (“assessment”). The single page devoted to this subject is full of statements that are perfectly obvious, such as that teachers “communicate the results of these assessments to students, concerned school officials and families,” and that teachers “prepare reports of their evaluations that communicate to parents and appropriate school officials the kind and quality of progress their students are making.” What substantive statements there are on testing all favor “progressive” methods. For example, we are told that good teachers “assess the real purposes of student language learning, not formalistic details.” The standard does not explain what it means by “formalistic details,” but it suggests that teachers should not be fussy over writing mechanics or factual accuracy. Unfortunately a lack of attention to such details may convey to students the impression that precision and perfection in writing are not important.

Furthermore, Standard XII advocates that teachers use “portfolios filled with authentic entries,” which are said to be “an effective source for gauging student language growth and the intellectual life in the classroom.” “Authentic” writings that allow students to freely express themselves are a recent fad in English instruction, but they are, again, a distraction from the main business of learning the material at hand.

In sum, the standards for “accomplished teaching” consist of many points that would be obvious to any but the most incompetent teacher, others that are of doubtful educational value, and some that actually impede teachers from making the best use of their time with students. Whether the subject is English, as in the standards discussed above, or any of the



other teaching areas for which NBPTS has developed standards, teachers will find in them remarkably little practical guidance to help them improve their ability to educate their students.

My comments have been on the NBPTS' high school English standards, but those standards are typical. The standards for science, math, foreign languages, history and other fields are quite similar. Commenting on the history standards, for example, University of North Carolina history professor Roger Lotchin writes: "The guidelines are flawed by their assumption that the United States is and should be a multicultural society...Most of the supposed cultural groups in America are quite mainstream in most matters. People of race, class, gender, sexual preference, and so forth are not cultural groups; they are political pressure groups. Thus, the teacher standards assume that teachers should inculcate a cultural paradigm in their classrooms that does not exist in society."<sup>2</sup> He notes also that the guidelines are "weighted toward pathology." The events a teacher should emphasize are mostly negative, designed to heighten the feeling of injustice and polarization. "Seldom," Lotchin writes, "do they emphasize the commonalities or shared experience and culture that bind a society together."

## B. Short on Substance

Although the standards for each area of teaching specialty go on for many pages, they are notable for what they do not say. Perhaps the most important function of a teacher is to *explain the material to the students*. English teachers need to be able to explain everything from the proper use of the semicolon to Shakespeare's imagery in Hamlet. Math teachers need to be able to explain everything from how to subtract fractions to the trigonometric functions. Unfortunately, one does not find such statements in the NBPTS standards. Perhaps reflecting the progressive education view that teachers should not impart knowledge but instead help students to discover it on their own, the standards do not clearly insist that "accomplished teachers" are those who are good at explaining the subject matter.

*"...the standards do not clearly insist that accomplished teachers are those who are good at explaining the subject matter."*

Nor do the standards say that an accomplished teacher is one who is very good at answering questions. Teachers have to field a wide array of questions, ranging from the "dumb questions" of students who haven't grasped the material at all to the probing questions of bright students who want to push beyond the material presented to explore its implications. Sadly, the standards do not say that the ability to answer student questions is an attribute of an accomplished teacher.

Whether a teacher can write tests that show clearly which students have learned their lessons well and which ones have not is also an important ability, yet the standards on assessment do not insist that it is. Many teachers use standardized tests provided by the publisher of the textbook, tests that may be fairly easy and utilize objective questions in a "true or false" or multiple choice format. Excellent teachers craft their own questions where students can't simply guess right, but must explain themselves. The ability to write good tests is not discussed as one of the things that "accomplished teachers" do.

The lengthy NBPTS standards may appear impressive at first glance, but they do not provide a blueprint for the development of teaching excellence. Thomas Bertonneau, who teaches English at SUNY-Oswego, writes: “Real standards need to be specific and say in plain English what students need to learn and in what order they need to learn it. Real standards need to say what teachers need to know in order to teach students in the graduated levels of elementary and secondary instruction. It would be refreshing to see a set of education standards that began, for example, with the following: Teachers need to show a substantive major in the subject or subjects that they intend to teach...”<sup>3</sup>

An accurate summing up of the NBPTS standards was given by Chester E. Finn and Danielle Dunne Wilcox of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, who write that: “(T)he 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.”<sup>4</sup>

## II. The National Board Certification Process

The weakness of the National Board’s standards is matched by the weakness of its certification process. It is quite possible for mediocre teachers to achieve National Board certification simply by carefully giving responses calculated to elicit a favorable reaction--a great deal of information is available to candidates on the Internet to help them say the right things. Conversely, it is quite possible for excellent teachers not to achieve certification because they employ teaching methods other than those favored by the National Board’s evaluators and they decline to pretend to follow teaching standards that they do not. Moreover, the certification process at best gives a snapshot of a teacher’s practice at the time the materials were prepared and answers written; it provides no assurance that a teacher, once certified, will remain diligent and committed to maximizing student learning.

### A. Requirements That Tell Us Little

Teachers who apply for National Board certification must complete four “portfolios” and write answers to six essay questions. The portfolios involve examples of student work and teacher commentary, videos of classroom performance, and documentation of their professional commitment outside of school; they are completed over a span of months. The essays are answered at an “assessment center” on a Saturday morning, the exercise lasting several hours.

The precise nature of the portfolios varies somewhat with the level of certification sought. Requirements for teachers seeking certification as an “Early Childhood Generalist” are different from those of a teacher seeking the high school science certification.

After the applicant has submitted his portfolios by the spring deadline, they will be scored during the summer by teams of evaluators. The evaluators are teachers who teach in the field

for which the applicant seeks his certification; they may or may not have already earned NB certification. Although it makes sense that teachers will not have to evaluate those who teach subjects and student age groups with which they are unfamiliar, there is no guarantee that a teacher's submissions will be evaluated by individuals with his same degree of expertise. A high school math teacher who teaches the most advanced courses could have his portfolios and essays scored by a less experienced teacher who does not teach the advanced courses.

The other part of the NBPTS certification process requires the applicant to appear at an assessment center on a Saturday to write answers to six open-ended essay questions. Those questions (or "prompts," as NBPTS designates them) are oriented chiefly toward pedagogical style, but sometimes call for the teacher to display some familiarity with the subject matter he teaches. Applicants are given a list of suggested readings ahead of time so they go into the essay portion knowing what material they should be prepared to discuss.

The essay questions do not constitute an examination in the teacher's subject matter. American history teachers, for example, are not required to display their understanding of history; rather, they have to explain how they approach the teaching of history. To do well

on the essay questions, it is more important for the teacher to say the approved things about teaching technique than to give correct answers about the subject he teaches. The essays are scored by teacher-evaluators, as the portfolios are. Among the admonitions from NBPTS is not to downgrade candidates for errors in spelling, punctuation, or English usage in their essays.

*"A teacher who feels that he has done enough by teaching good classes, grading well-written tests, and showing students their errors and declines to participate in professional activity outside of school is ruled out."*

Do the portfolios and the essay answers provide the NBPTS with unambiguous evidence of teaching excellence to reward with NB certification? Does this evaluation process really enable us to say with confidence that the best and only the best teachers have been singled out for the reward? No. It is quite possible that very competent and effective teachers who do not use and will not pretend to use the progressive teaching theories in which the NBPTS is steeped would not bother with the time-consuming process, or if they did so, would fail to pass. On the other hand, it is also possible that teachers of no great distinction who are well coached on how they should prepare their portfolios and what sorts of answers are looked upon with favor in the "assessment center" phase will impress the evaluators and obtain NB certification. The NBPTS evaluation process uses only a small amount of information, carefully prepared by the candidate. The evaluators have no evidence on the ability of the teacher to explain material and answer questions. They have no evidence about the success of the students in mastering the subject matter. Pronouncing a verdict of "master teacher" (or not) without such information is sheer folly.

## **B. The Portfolios**

Teachers applying for National Board certification must complete and submit six "perfor-

mance-based assessment portfolios” as the first step in the process. While there are differences in the precise material requested depending on the particular certification sought (early childhood generalist, middle school science, high school math, etc.), the general plan of the portfolios is consistent. First, they require the teacher to present examples of student work along with commentary by the teacher “on the goals and purpose of instruction, reflections on what occurred, the effectiveness of the practice, and the rationale for the teacher’s professional judgment.”<sup>5</sup> Second, the portfolio requirements have the teacher submit videotapes to “provide as authentic and complete a view of their teaching as possible and portray how they interact with students, the climate they create in the classroom, and the ways in which they engage students in learning.”<sup>6</sup> (The last element of the portfolios calls for the teacher to document his “work outside the classroom with families and the larger community and with colleagues and the larger profession.”)<sup>7</sup>

Here is an example of the portfolio requirements for the Middle Childhood/Generalist certificate in a recent year. One portfolio was entitled “Writing: Thinking Through the Process.” The teacher was instructed to demonstrate his use of writing to develop student thinking and writing skills. Evidence of the teacher’s accomplishments was to come from two assignments, one relating to a social studies/history lesson and the other calling for a fictional narrative. The students’ responses were to be sent in, along with a twelve-page commentary in which the teacher discusses their progress, how he has encouraged them, and what additional things he might have done.<sup>8</sup>

Observe that the point of this exercise is not to show how well the students learned the material, but the teacher’s handling of the lessons and the students. The crucial element is the teacher’s commentary. Those who can produce a commentary showing obeisance to numerous NBPTS standards will stand in good stead. An accomplished teacher may indeed be able to craft such a document, but it does not follow that his success in teaching is connected in any way to his ability to write a 12-page commentary about teaching. It is also quite possible that a teacher who is not accomplished might be able to produce an impressive portfolio. That is especially true in view of the many opportunities for coaching on the portfolios that exist on the internet.

*“The lesson plan and student work will naturally be chosen with an eye toward showing the evaluators that the teacher has been influenced by NBPTS’s standards, but that is not the same as a high degree of student learning.”*

Another portfolio calls for the teacher to show his pedagogical expertise in science by writing a lesson plan for a six-week science unit and submitting some examples of work by two students. According to the directions, “The focus is on the (teacher’s) practice, not on the level of student performance.”<sup>9</sup>

Of course, lesson plans for middle school science have been in existence for many years and it would be difficult if not impossible for the NBPTS evaluators to know if the teacher had merely copied a lesson plan already in use somewhere. And no matter how refined the lesson plan, the critical part of teaching is conveying the information to the students. The only evidence of that is the work of two handpicked students. The lesson plan and student work will naturally

be chosen with an eye toward showing the evaluators that the teacher has been influenced by NBPTS's standards, but that is not the same as a high degree of student learning.

Another portfolio requires a fifteen minute video in which the teacher is supposed to show how he "builds community" in the classroom. The candidate must also submit an essay discussing how the episode helped to build community.<sup>10</sup>

It is good if students feel that they are part of a "community" in the classroom, but that is not the same as learning key skills and knowledge. A video of the teacher explaining a point and then answering questions might have some value in demonstrating excellence in teaching, but a video showing "community building" is peripheral to the main work of teaching. Making it a large part of the process of evaluating a teacher is like evaluating a surgeon based on how well he assuages patients' preoperative fears rather than on how well he performs the operation. Moreover, candidates will probably not have the video camera taping at the moment when a "community building" event happens to occur. The event probably will be created (and perhaps rehearsed) for NBPTS consumption. One must wonder if anything about a teacherss day-in and day-out classroom conduct can be learned from videos he selects.

*NBPTS assumes that good teachers are necessarily active in the teaching profession. But why should such activity, perhaps involvement in the state teachers' union, be thought an indicator of teaching excellence?*

In another portfolio, the teacher was required to film a student discussion of a math lesson. The teacher had to explain a math concept, and then videotape for 20 minutes the students discussing it among themselves. One teacher, for example, discussed the concept of measurement, then taped his students sitting in a circle on the floor working with meter sticks to figure out how they might build a playground. As usual, the teacher was also required to submit an essay commenting on the taped scene.<sup>11</sup>

Student interactions are interesting and something about a teacher's ability might be learned from his ability to direct a student discussion, but this is rather peripheral to the main business of teaching. The comment above on the lack of evidentiary value in a short, stylized video also applies here, of course.

A portfolio falling in the final category required the teacher to keep a log of all professional activity outside of school.<sup>12</sup>

NBPTS assumes that good teachers are necessarily active in the teaching profession. But why should such activity, perhaps involvement in the state teachers' union, be thought an indicator of teaching excellence? A teacher who feels that he has done enough by teaching good classes, grading well-written tests, and showing students their errors and declines to participate in "professional activity" outside of school is ruled out. On the other hand, those who are highly active (and evidently the precise nature of that activity doesn't matter) will look good in the eyes of the evaluators.

Another “outside activity” portfolio instructed the applicant to show his level of contact with the families of his students, again by keeping a log of parental contacts, submitting letters to parents, and summaries of events held for families. One teacher told about an event he organized to “promote literacy.” He invited parents and students to come to school at night in their pajamas for a bedtime story night.<sup>13</sup>

This requirement no more gets at the essence of teaching than do the previous ones. A really accomplished teacher may have few times when parental contact is necessary. Portfolios such as this merely cause teachers, whether excellent or not, to conjure up a lot of parental contacts and invent silly events so they can score well. Those activities do not necessarily indicate excellence in teaching.

The portfolios, as the examples given show, are woefully thin evidence of a teacher’s ability to instruct students.

### C. The essays

In addition to the portfolios, the candidate teacher must go to an “assessment center” on a Saturday and respond to six prompts. NBPTS gives the candidates a considerable amount of guidance as to the kind of questions to expect, often providing a list of readings that may be useful in answering the “prompts.” The questions presented to candidates are not principally aimed at testing their subject matter knowledge, although some is definitely helpful. Instead, the questions deal mainly with teaching technique and the more the candidate can show adherence to the standards, the better his answer will be. Some sample questions will be useful here.<sup>14</sup>

Here is a question that was given to middle school teachers seeking the Early Adolescence/Generalist certification. The candidate was sent a short story to read prior to the assessment center date. At the center, three student responses to the story were given. The candidate’s “prompt” was to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the student work, then design instruction that builds on and extends the student’s understandings.

An “accomplished teacher” can undoubtedly analyze the strengths and weaknesses of student writings. But to score well on this question, the teacher needs to do so within the parameters of the NBPTS standards, showing due concern for “knowledge of students,” “knowledge of English language arts,” and other matters emphasized in the standards.

Capable analysis that does not touch on the standards from the same perspective as the scorers may earn a poor score. A less insightful teacher who makes a point of weaving in a lot of references to NBPTS standards may do very well. The requirement to “design instruction,” is not the same thing as good teaching or even knowing the subject well. This question, in sum, does not ensure that the most effective teachers will clearly outshine less effective ones.

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Another question for teachers seeking that certification required them to analyze student responses on a question calling for reflective thinking. The candidate was to discuss the student writings “in terms of the student’s social and emotional development and well-being and then design one activity for use with these particular students that builds on their current social and emotional needs and deals directly with self-esteem and social relationship issues.” That “prompt” shows clearly the influence of ‘progressive’ educational theory. It does not deal at all with how to teach students anything, but how to use school time for an “activity” to respond to perceived emotional needs and social relationship problems. The assumption here is that “accomplished teachers” are those who devote class time to amateur psychology. Again, a teacher who is not effective in conveying knowledge and imparting skills to his seventh graders might do a great job on this question, at least in the eyes of the scorers.

*“The candidate was to... ‘design one activity for use with these particular students that builds on their current social and emotional needs and deals directly with self-esteem and social relationship issues.’”*

Another question, for teachers seeking the Middle Childhood Generalist certification, deals with curriculum resources, asking them “to display your capacity to plan instruction for students between the ages of 10 and 11 in a 5th grade class using a range of instructional materials.” Candidates were sent a package of instructional resources prior to the assessment center exercises: some art works, some literary works, and some contemporaneous artifacts. The candidate is to imagine that he is planning “an interdisciplinary unit on immigration for a class where the students have a range of ability levels.” Now he has to answer several questions:

- What are the three main learning objectives for the unit?
- Which four of the listed curriculum resources would you choose, and why?
- What are two lessons you would design for your immigration unit?
- What strategies would you use to assess student learning?

This question is quite artificial. Why require the candidate to choose among a list of resources none of which he may regard as optimal? It also invites subjective scoring based on the willingness or ability to give the kinds of answers that appeal to the scorers. The question on the main learning objectives, for example, is supposed to be evaluated to whether the objectives “are appropriate to typically developing 5th grade students and nurture their growing capacities to think concretely, symbolically and abstractly.” That could mean almost anything. It raises the possibility that a teacher who has successfully taught immigration to 5th graders in the past might be graded poorly because the scorer thinks that the learning objectives are not “appropriate” or that the teacher doesn’t use what the scorers regard as the best “strategies” to assess student learning.

The above questions are representative of those that teachers seeking National Board certification must answer. NBPTS assessment center exercises do not call for a great display of subject matter knowledge by the teacher. (It should be said, however, that in some fields, a

candidate lacking in subject matter knowledge would be hard-pressed to give an answer. For example, a teacher seeking certification in high school science could be asked to answer a question like this: “How does the amino acid sequence of an enzyme determine its shape and its consequent functions?” That question allows the scorers to clearly divide those who know the answer from those who don’t. Questions like that, however, are rare except for those seeking certification in math and science.) The emphasis, instead, is on teaching methods where there are no right or wrong answers, but only favored or disfavored approaches from the perspective of NBPTS.

Neither the portfolios nor the essay questions give the evaluators any solid grounds for deciding that some teachers are “master teachers” deserving of whatever special awards the state or locality gives those who receive certification and that other candidates are not good enough. The process is deeply flawed in that people who have never actually seen the candidates at work in the classroom or spoken with anyone who has direct evidence about their ability to get students to learn, have to pass judgment on them. This assessment is based on a small sampling of highly contrived writings and videotapes that prove at most that the candidate adheres to the kinds of teaching practices that some education theorists advocate. It is as if auditions for positions in an orchestra were conducted by having each musician submit several photographs of himself playing his instrument, statements by people who like his playing, evidence that he is active in the local musicians union, and then having him answer some essay questions on orchestral playing without ever insisting that he play his instrument. If the musician doesn’t play very well, all the peripheral matters are irrelevant.

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The NBPTS certification process is like that. It focuses on matters that are peripheral to teaching excellence, and infers teaching excellence if all the peripherals appear to be right. Observe also that neither NBPTS nor the scorers have anything to gain from making “right” decisions (certifying teachers who are truly excellent or not certifying those who aren’t) or anything to lose from making “wrong” ones (failing to certify teachers who are excellent or certifying teachers who are less than excellent). There is no feedback loop to show NBPTS that the teachers it certifies actually produce superior learning outcomes among their students. The NBPTS certification system is a highly unreliable method for identifying excellent teachers.

### III. The Evidence

As I have argued above, it does not seem that the standards and the certification process would have any appreciable effect. The connection between student learning and the variety of factors that the NBPTS considers in its evaluation of teachers seems far too tenuous to provide any assurance that those whom it certifies as “master teachers” are in fact teachers who get their students to achieve the most. But perhaps there is empirical evidence of success

For a program that has been around as long as NBPTS has and has received as much governmental support as it has, NBPTS has not been subjected to any independent oversight by governmental bodies. The General Accounting Office has never done an evaluation of the program for Congress, nor has the North Carolina General Assembly done an evaluation of the effects of NB certified teachers on student learning.

One study that was done on the effectiveness of NBPTS certification was released in October 2000 by the Center for Educational Research and Evaluation at UNC-Greensboro.<sup>15</sup> The three researchers concluded that “The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, through its series of comprehensive performance assessments of teaching proficiency, is identifying and certifying teachers who are producing students who differ in profound and important ways from those taught by less proficient teachers.” NBPTS president Betty Castor immediately hailed the study in a press release, saying, “This study tells parents and the community, educators, and policymakers that National Board certification is a distinction that really matters.”

Does this research conclusively prove that NB certified teachers are significantly better at imparting knowledge and skills to students than are comparable non-certified teachers? The UNC-G study does not prove that. Initially, the paper rejects the use of student test scores as a means of telling how much educational progress they have made 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...It is in their uses as measures of individual teacher effectiveness that such measures are particularly inappropriate.”<sup>16</sup>

*“The UNC-G study does not purport to show any casual connection between a teacher’s adherence to NBPTS standards and increased learning gains by his students and therefore does not provide a justification for North Carolina’s policy.”*

While testing is not a perfect measure of student learning, it is absurd to dismiss it completely. If certified Teacher A and non-certified Teacher B both teach beginning algebra in a school, the test scores of the students in each class might shed some light on the hypothesis that Teacher A’s students should be doing better. But the study nevertheless dismisses test scores as a means of measuring teacher effectiveness. Instead, the researchers advance 13 principles of good teaching, such as:

- Experienced expert teachers adopt a problem-solving stance to their work.
- Experienced expert teachers aim at creating an optimal classroom climate.
- Experienced expert teachers are passionate about teaching and learning.

The 13 principles are all vague and subjective. What is an “optimal” classroom climate? How do we know if a teacher is sufficiently “passionate” to bring about good student performance?

The study then proceeded to measure the extent to which two groups of teachers did or did

not manifest the principles of good teaching. The first consisted of 31 teachers who had achieved NB certification and the second, 34 teachers who had attempted to earn certification but had failed to do so. The researchers found that the certified group outscored the non-certified group and that the results were, in most cases, statistically significant.

This study, however, is wholly unreliable as proof of the benefits of NB certification. The central difficulty is that it boils down to an exercise in circular thinking. University of Missouri economics professor Michael Podgursky, in a cogent analysis of the study writes: “In effect, the report really tells us only that teachers who were certified by the National Board were more likely to display the types of behaviors the National Board favors. Such a circular exercise does not necessarily prove that National Board-certified teachers do a better job of raising student achievement.”<sup>17</sup>

If we are to justify the state’s large expenditure on NBPTS certification, we would have to see research that unambiguously demonstrates significant gains in student learning owing to the fact that the teacher is not only NB certified, but consistently follows NBPTS standards. (Otherwise, it might be the case that an accomplished and certified teacher produces excellent results, but not due to any input from NBPTS.) The UNC-G study does not purport to show any causal connection between a teacher’s adherence to the NBPTS standards and increased learning gains by his students and therefore does not provide a justification for North Carolina’s policy.

One independent study has been done on the effectiveness of NB certified teachers. That study, by East Tennessee State University education professor John E. Stone, uses the annual measurement of learning progress by students done under the Tennessee Value Added Assessment System (TVAAS). In grades 3 through 8, Tennessee tests students so as to be able to

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measure their progress year by year, thus making it possible to compare the learning gains of students who were taught by NB certified teachers with those who were not. Stone found that NB certified teachers did not produce exemplary gains in their students. 15 percent of the NB certified teachers had student scores in the “A” range (at least 115 percent of the average score), but 11 percent had “F” scores (85 percent of the average or below) and the rest were around the average range.<sup>18</sup>

Stone’s study is based on a small sample. There were only 16 NB certified teachers in the grades covered by TVAAS. But that does not detract from the probative value of his work. If it is true that NB certification makes such a profound and important difference in teaching capability, how does one explain the evidence that, based on objective test scores, NB-certified teachers did not consistently score well above average? And how does one explain the instances where students of NB certified teachers performed significantly below average?

To date, the Stone study is the only one that analyzes the value of the NBPTS program based

on student achievement and it strongly undercuts the assumption that adherence to NBPTS teaching methods leads to better learning by students.

## IV. The Test of the Market

While the NBPTS program has met with political success in quite a few states, that fact does not indicate that the program actually raises the quality of the teaching corps. Many laws and programs that seem appealing to politicians produce results that do little or nothing to solve the problem that motivated their enactment. Because political action entails one group of people (politicians) deciding to spend money belonging to another group (taxpayers) on things that are supposed to benefit a third group (students and parents), it is difficult to know whether the benefits are worth the costs.

Market activity, however, is different. Individuals or institutions are free to decide how they will spend their own money. They will avoid spending on things that don't produce sufficient value to be worth the expense. As Milton Friedman, Nobel Laureate in economics simply puts it, "No one spends other people's money as carefully as he spends his own."

With that axiom in mind, we should ask how the NBPTS program has fared among schools that are not run by government, but have to obtain their revenues from people willing to pay for their educational services. If the NBPTS program did in fact make for substantially better teachers, it would stand to reason that independent schools would be quite supportive. Having a better faculty would help them to attract and retain more students.

*"How do we explain the fact that NB certification is so rarely sought by teachers in independent schools?"*

Among independent schools, however, one finds that NB certification is not a credential that is much valued. Looking through the list of the 1,263 teachers in North Carolina who received NB certification in 2001, it appears that not one is employed in an independent school.<sup>19</sup> In about 4 percent of the cases, the teacher did not indicate where he was employed; in the other 96 percent, the teacher is listed as employed in a public school. In no case do we find that the teacher is listed as employed in one of the hundreds of independent schools in the state. Looking at other states, one sees the same thing: the NBPTS program thrives only where it receives heavy governmental support.

How do we explain the fact that NB certification is so rarely sought by teachers in independent schools? It might be the case that the school administration does not think that there is any connection between NB certification and improved teaching, or it might be the case that the school administration believes that the cost of seeking certification exceeds whatever benefit it might bring to the school. Whatever the explanation, the indifference shown by the private educational sector to a program that on its face should be at least as appealing to it as to public education ought to provoke legislators to wonder if they have not been unwise in throwing state support behind NBPTS.

There is yet another aspect of the nature of the NBPTS program that deserves mention at this point. Let us ask what benefit teachers get from it other than the possibility of certification. If a teacher, whether NB certified or not, is looking for practical help with teaching problems, what does NBPTS have to offer? Nothing. If a teacher is looking for help in, for example, explaining the difference between voltage and amperage, does NBPTS have any documents or books for sale that give advice on teaching middle-school science? No. The NBPTS website has a “Marketplace” section, but everything there is geared toward helping teachers become certified, as though that were an end in itself, and in publicizing the NBPTS.<sup>20</sup> It does not offer anything for the teacher who wants specific advice on classroom problems. Teachers who need assistance in handling specific classroom problems will not find it at the organization committed to *professional teaching standards*, and claiming to know what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do.

Evidently, NBPTS does not even try to pass the test of the market. Its certification program only works where governments post large subsidies and it makes no attempt at earning revenue through the sale of materials that would be of immediate, concrete assistance to teachers. In the absence of governmental subsidies, NBPTS would undoubtedly collapse.

## Conclusion

North Carolina has an interest in retaining its best teachers. Paying them more will tend to accomplish that goal. Unfortunately, the NBPTS certification process does not give any assurance that the best teachers and only the best teachers will receive the automatic pay increases that go with NB certification. North Carolina also has an interest in getting its teachers to upgrade their classroom skills. But the NBPTS program will not accomplish that either, since it merely causes those who want the certification to discover what kinds of portfolios and essay answers will be most apt to impress the teachers who do the scoring. As we have seen, the NBPTS standards are in large part a compendium of education establishment nostrums that skirt around the vital matter of instruction. Even if a teacher who had not previously known about the NBPTS standards were to thoroughly embrace them and follow them religiously for the rest of his career which he need not do, since a teacher can use whatever methods he prefers after securing his certification--that would not necessarily mean that he'd be one iota better at getting his students to understand English, algebra, or history.

*“North Carolina should repeal its subsidy for the cost of applying for NBPTS certification and leave it entirely up to local governments to decide if they think it worthwhile to support the program.”*

As noted above, the cost to the state for its incentives for NBPTS certification will exceed \$25.6 million this year.<sup>21</sup> That amount will rise in future years as more teachers seek and obtain NB certification and as those who currently have certification move up the state's salary schedule, thus applying the 12% bonus to higher base numbers. If NBPTS raises its registration fee, the cost to the state will go up even further. This expenditure appears to be a waste of money.

There is no evidence to show that NB certification has any beneficial impact on student learning and no reason to believe that its standards and certification process do anything to enhance the ability of teachers to instruct their students. Subsidization of NBPTS diverts the time and energy of teachers into a quest for a paper credential that does not reliably identify teachers who are highly effective in advancing student learning. And of course it diverts millions in state funds away from more beneficial uses or tax reduction.

North Carolina should repeal its subsidy for the cost of applying for NBPTS certification and leave it entirely up to local governments to decide if they think it worthwhile to support the program. The state should also change its salary structure for public school teachers, taking out the increases for teachers who have NB certification.

The heavy support given to NBPTS certification by the state was ill considered, a case of hastily embracing a policy idea based on its laudable intentions and good publicity. There is no reason to believe that NBPTS certification is the best way for the state to improve the quality of teaching, or even that it raises it at all. We should stop throwing good money after bad.

## Notes

1. The NBPTS standards are all available on the organization's website: [www.nbpts.org](http://www.nbpts.org).
2. Personal correspondence.
3. Personal correspondence.
4. Board Games, by Chester E. Finn and Danielle Dunne Wilcox, *National Review*, August 9, 1999, p. 26.
5. [www.nbpts.org/standards/nbcert](http://www.nbpts.org/standards/nbcert)
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards: Can It Live Up to Its Promise? by Danielle Dunne Wilcox, in *Better Teachers, Better Schools* edited by Marci Kanstoroom and Chester Finn, Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, July 1999, p. 171.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p. 172
13. Ibid.
14. This and the following examples are drawn from *NBPTS Assessment Center Orientation Booklet, 1998-1999*.
15. The Certification System of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards: A Construct and Consequential Validity Study, by Lloyd Bond, Richard Jaeger, Tracy Smith and John Hattie, Center for Educational Research and Evaluation, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2000.
16. Ibid.
17. Defrocking the National Board, by Michael Podgursky, *Education Matters*, Summer 2001, p. 79.
18. The Value-Added Achievement Gains of NBPTS-Certified Teachers in Tennessee: A Brief Report, by John E. Stone, 2002 (available at [www.education-consumers.com](http://www.education-consumers.com)).
19. Lists of teachers who have NBPTS certification in each state, and their employing school or district are available on the NBPTS website, [www.nbpts.org](http://www.nbpts.org).
20. [www.nbpts.org/events.products.cfm](http://www.nbpts.org/events.products.cfm).
21. Cost analysis provided by Fiscal Research Division of the North Carolina General Assembly. The document is in the author's possession.

*“I look to the diffusion of light and education as the resource most to be relied on for ameliorating the condition, promoting the virtue, and advancing the happiness of man.”*

*Thomas Jefferson, 1822*



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