

MAKING THE GRADE: WHO APPLIES FOR AND EARNS ADVANCED TEACHER CERTIFICATION?

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), founded in 1987 to advance teaching and learning by establishing standards for the certification of excellent teachers, represents a major effort to elevate the field of teaching. NBPTS began certifying teachers in the mid-1990s and has drawn significant investments from federal, state, and private sources over the past 10 years.

NBPTS's certification efforts have come under fire due (in part) to a lack of consensus on the best way to improve teacher quality. Central to this controversy is the fact that, while increasing and recognizing teacher quality are laudable pursuits, it is unknown if the NBPTS credential is any better an indicator of quality than other readily available measures, such as licensure status or academic degree.

Researchers at the University of Washington and the Urban Institute have begun a multistage evaluation of the effectiveness of NBPTS certification. Their initial study provides insight into who is applying for and gaining certification. Data were obtained from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, NBPTS, and the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data. Supplemental data were gathered from interviews with local school officials. The next step in this research will be to analyze, using student achievement data, how effective the certification process is at identifying high-quality teachers.

North Carolina was selected as the data collection site because the state provides generous incentives to those who become certified and consequently had, at the time of the study, about 25 percent of the nation's NBPTS-certified teachers. In addition, the state maintains extremely detailed databases that allow researchers to link students and teachers and track both over time.

Origin of the NBPTS

In 1986 two influential reports—*A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* by the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as

a Profession and *Tomorrow's Teachers: A Report of the Holmes Group*—called for restructuring the profession by adding career ladders and new, higher levels of certification. Partly in response to these reports, NBPTS was founded a year later as an independent, nonprofit organization to identify and certify effective teachers, aid in their recruitment and retention, and increase overall teacher quality.

To receive NBPTS certification, applicants undergo a rigorous and extensive performance-based assessment lasting 6 to 18 months. The assessment focuses on classroom practices, content and pedagogical knowledge, and community and professional involvement.

Belief in the ability of the NBPTS certification process to increase teacher quality has led to a substantial financial investment from states and the federal government. Since the NBPTS recognized its first round of teachers in 1995, approximately 24,000 teachers have become certified and more than \$200 million in federal and private funds has been spent in support of NBPTS and its certification program. States and local school districts have also spent significant funds on application fees and various financial incentives for those who are successfully certified. Despite these investments, until now little quantitative research has existed on the NBPTS applicant pool and which participants receive certification.

Who Applies? Who Passes?

The findings from the research's first phase show that women are more likely to apply for and gain certification than men. At the same time, African-American teachers have a high rate of application, but, among those who apply, a low rate of certification relative to their white counterparts. The characteristics of the school in which a teacher is employed also seem to play a role in the decision to enter the certification program, with teachers in low-poverty, low-minority, and high-performing schools much more likely to participate.

There are some interesting differences in applicant characteristics. Holding all else equal,

- Women are 75 percent more likely to apply than men.
- African-American teachers are 30 percent more likely to apply than white teachers.
- Teachers who earn higher salaries are more likely to apply.
- Teachers who perform better on standardized tests (such as Praxis and GRE) are more likely to apply.
- Teachers who have an advanced degree and a permanent teaching license are more likely to apply.

There are clear trends in the types of teachers who, given application, are likely to receive certification:

- Female applicants are about 30 percent more likely to be certified than male applicants.
- White applicants are about 65 to 70 percent more likely to be certified than African-American applicants.
- Applicants with higher standardized test scores are more likely to be certified.
- Applicants employed by more affluent schools are increasingly likely to be certified.

On average, successful applicants teach in schools with fewer minority and impoverished students. They also tend to be in schools that have met state accountability standards and progress expectations. At a district and community level, applicants and certified teachers tend to be in schools with

- fewer children in poverty;
- fewer minority children;
- higher performance according to state accountability standards;
- more college-educated residents; and
- higher median housing values.

Although the number of teachers applying for and receiving NBPTS certification increased significantly from 1997 to 2000, there is little evidence to support the notion that this may have occurred as a result of lowered NBPTS standards. Such an increase could be explained by changes in the applicant pool as a result of a growing awareness of the program or by incentives created to encourage participation. The analysis reveals that increased certification rates result primarily from changes in the NBPTS applicant pool. In North Carolina, at least, higher quality teachers (as measured by standardized test scores) are applying for certification.

Next Steps

These findings represent the first phase in understanding and evaluating NBPTS certification. A follow-up report will address the impact that NBPTS-certified teachers have on student achievement. In the past, research has demonstrated a connec-

tion between teachers' academic proficiency and improved student outcomes. The correlation in this study between teacher performance on standardized tests and NBPTS certification provides indirect evidence that NBPTS is identifying and certifying teachers who will raise student achievement. However, whether NBPTS certification provides value above and beyond the information conveyed by these tests remains an open question. Knowledge of the diagnostic value of NBPTS certification will help inform future policy regarding the NBPTS process as well as the decision to use NBPTS certification as a measure of teacher quality.

Additional studies will address such topics as the relative effectiveness of NBPTS-certified teachers and the impact of NBPTS certification on teachers' career paths. The striking discrepancy in application and certification rates for African-American teachers and applicants from disadvantaged schools also warrants more research.

Further Details

Goldhaber, Dan, Emily Anthony, and David Perry. 2003. "NBPTS Certification: Who Applies and What Factors Are Associated with Success?" Urban Institute, <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=410656>. This publication is also available at <http://www.crpe.org/workingpapers.shtml>.

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The University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education (www.crpe.org) studies major issues in education reform and governance to improve policy and decisionmaking in K-12 education. **The Urban Institute's Education Policy Center** (<http://epc.urban.org>) conducts research on education reforms involving such areas as accountability, school vouchers, standards, after-school programs, technology, and teacher quality. The Center on Reinventing Public Education and the Urban Institute will continue to collaborate on this study of NBPTS, with Dr. Goldhaber leading additional research on the impact of certification on student achievement and teachers' career paths.