

Executive Summary: Study of the Incentive Program for Washington's National Board Certified Teachers

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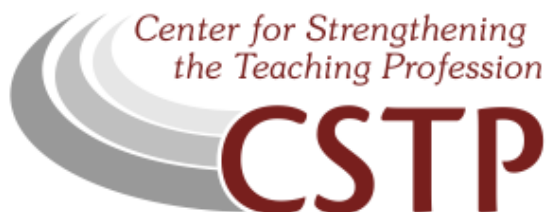
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Executive Summary

Introduction and Study Purpose

Across the nation considerable resources have been invested in supporting teachers through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) certification process and beyond as a means of improving the quality of the teacher workforce. The rapidly growing cadre of National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) in Washington state and the state policy incentives that support them prompt a closer look at their distribution within and across districts and schools. The purpose of this study is to provide research and analyses in relation to two statewide incentives for acquiring National Board (NB) certification and serving in challenging schools. Due to substantial investments in these policies, the State Board of Education is interested in baseline information on the initial impact of the policy incentive program. In this report, we describe these baseline results regarding the supply, distribution and retention of NBCTs in Washington state. In 2007-08, the Washington State Legislature increased the annual salary enhancement for NBCTs to \$5,000 and added an additional bonus of \$5,000 for those who work in the state's highest poverty schools. In this study, we examine the teacher workforce both prior to and after recent changes in the state's incentive program.

Study Methods and Findings

The study was conducted using surveys and secondary analyses of state databases to examine the characteristics of NBCTs, the types of schools and districts in which they work, the assignments they assume, their retention and mobility patterns, and the views of teachers and principals regarding NB certification and the state's incentives. Comparisons are made to all teachers statewide and to a similar group of teachers who have not obtained NB certification. Surveys of a sample of NBCTs, non-NBCTs and administrators were conducted during the 2009-10 school year. Secondary analyses of state datasets included all Washington NBCTs working in public schools over a four year period (2006-07 through 2009-10). This Executive Summary provides an overview of the major findings.

Increasing Numbers of NBCTs Statewide

From 2000 onward the number of teachers applying for achieving NB certification has grown considerably. Washington state ranked second in the nation for the number of new NBCTs in 2009 (1,251), and now ranks fifth nationally in the total number of NBCTs (4,006). The number of NBCTs working as classroom teachers in K-12 public education in Washington more than tripled from 2006-07 to 2009-10, raising the proportion of teachers who are NBCTs from 1.9 to 6.0 percent of the total teacher workforce. The vast majority of those who achieve NB status work as classroom teachers, both prior to and after NB certification.

Characteristics and Distribution of NBCTs has Changed with Increasing Numbers

Thirty-one percent of all Washington NBCTs certified in 2009. Washington NBCTs are increasingly younger with mid-career levels of experience, and a larger proportion are female or hold advanced degrees than teachers statewide. The NBCTs certified in 2009 reflect increasing proportions of teachers of color, though still lower than state averages. The regional distribution of NBCTs in teaching assignments roughly corresponds to the statewide pattern, with the exception of the Central Puget Sound region where 43 percent of NBCTs are located compared to 37 percent of teachers statewide. A slightly smaller proportion of NBCTs are located in schools within towns or rural areas, and a slightly larger proportion of NBCTs work in middle schools and high schools compared to other teachers.

While a larger proportion of NBCTs are located in low-poverty schools and in schools where students typically perform better on the state's student assessments (e.g., Washington Assessment of Student Learning), the proportion of NBCTs located in higher-poverty schools (over 60 percent students served by Free or Reduced Price Lunch program - FRPL) has increased in recent years and is growing closer to the state average (20 percent of NBCTs compared to 22 percent of non-NBCTs in 2008-09). NBCTs were located in schools with similar proportions of students of color compared to teachers statewide. Proportionately more NBCTs hold endorsements in mathematics, science and English/Language Arts than other teachers, though due to data limitations it is not possible to know if those holding a particular endorsement teach in their endorsement area.

Most NBCTs Remain in the Classroom; Few Change Formal Assignments

The overwhelming majority of Washington NBCTs (91 percent) work as classroom teachers for at least a portion of their formal assignment. The remaining 9 percent of NBCTs serve in other support, specialist or administrative roles. From one year to the next, approximately five percent of NBCTs working as classroom teachers change from a teaching position to another type of assignment, most often to a support staff, specialist or school administrative position.

NBCTs Add New Leadership Responsibilities

Survey results show that NBCTs hold a variety of both formal and informal roles, and that the types of roles they assume increase following certification. Surveys confirm that the most common types of roles taken up after certification include school-based coach or lead teacher, and district curriculum or subject matter specialist. The majority of NBCTs indicated they are somewhat or very interested in future leadership roles, particularly with regard to mentoring beginning teachers or experienced teachers in a content area.

Teacher Retention Rates Rise in Recent Years for Both NBCTs and Non-NBCT; NBCTs Move More Frequently but Exit at Lower Rates

Since 2006, the percentage of teachers who stay in the same school from one year to the next has risen from 83 to 87 percent, due in part to the recent economic downturn. Retention rates are similar for NBCTs and non-NBCTs, though NBCTs have higher rates of mobility from one school or district to another, and lower rates of exiting the workforce compared to teachers statewide. We also examined the retention and mobility patterns of NBCTs to a comparison group of teachers similar to NBCTs but who had not obtained NB certification. We found that NBCTs and the comparison non-NBCT teachers had similar rates of retention but that NBCTs showed a pattern of higher rates of mobility (movement between schools and districts) and lower rates of exiting the workforce. However, for both NBCTs and comparison non-NBCTs, as the proportion of students of color in a school increases, the percentage of teachers who stay in the school from one year to the next, declines. Retention rates do not vary substantially for teachers holding endorsements in mathematics and science, though they reflect higher rates of mobility among NBCTs in some fields. Analyses by regional location or school level (e.g., elementary, middle, or high) reveal minimal differences between NBCTs and comparison non-NBCTs, with differences driven in part by the NBCTs overall higher rates of mobility in and out of district.

Challenging Schools Are Among the State's Lowest Performing

The “challenging schools” criteria was established by the state specifically for the purpose of awarding the additional bonus of \$5,000 for NBCTs working in identified schools. The current challenging schools criteria, which is based on student poverty, captures most of the state’s lowest performing schools and reflects a segment of the student population that is struggling academically. Among the schools on the state’s school improvement lists (persistently lowest achieving schools identified as Tier I or II), all 26 Tier I schools and 19 of the 21 Tier II schools also are identified as challenging schools. The remaining two Tier II schools that did not meet the poverty criteria cut off included a middle school and a junior high. In our analysis of the challenging schools, very few of the schools served students who scored at or above the state mean on 4th, 7th or 10th grade reading or mathematics assessments in any given year. Overall, challenging schools also serve larger proportions of students of color than schools statewide.

Change in Challenging Schools Criteria Impacts Types of Schools and Number of Teachers Eligible for Incentive

The revision of the challenging schools criteria in 2008, which lowered the poverty cutoff for middle and high schools (from 70 percent, to 60 and 50 percent FRPL, respectively), increased the number of secondary schools eligible for the challenging schools incentive. The total number of eligible schools increased by 43 percent from 2007-08 to 2009-10. The change increased both the proportion of secondary schools and the proportion of schools with 800 or more students enrolled. The proportion of challenging schools located in Eastern Washington declined from 58 to 49 percent, though the actual number of schools identified as challenging increased in the region. Changing the school criteria also increased the potential number of NBCTs eligible to receive a bonus, either by NBCTs staying in a school now designated as challenging, or by increasing the potential options to move to an opening in a challenging school.

More NBCTs in Challenging Schools and Districts After Incentive, but Many Schools Still Have None

Both the overall number and proportion of NBCTs working in challenging schools and districts increased during the first three years of the incentive. The total number of NBCTs working as classroom teachers in challenging schools increased from 79 in the Baseline Year (2006-07) to 746 in Year Three (2009-10) of the incentive program. The increase is partly due to the changing school criteria after the first year. However, the percentage of NBCTs of the total workforce in challenging schools increased three percent alone in Year Three indicating that the number of NBCTs was increasing substantially, even after the change in criteria. The number of NBCTs located in a single school also increased during the first three years of the incentive. Fifteen percent of the challenging schools in Year Three had four or more NBCTs working as classroom teachers, compared to only two schools in the Baseline year. Prior to the incentive program, 69 percent of the districts with challenging schools had no NBCTs in their district. By Year Three, this percentage had dropped to 40 percent, and the number of districts with more than ten NBCTs jumped from two to 24.

Nevertheless, three years into the initiative, 42 percent of challenging schools had no NBCTs teaching in their buildings. A disproportionate number of challenging schools without NBCTs are located in rural areas, especially rural and remote areas, and in Western Washington outside of ESD 121. These challenging schools are also more likely to be small (enrollment under 200 students). However, among challenging schools that serve the highest percentages of students of students of color (75 percent or more), a similar proportion have NBCTs as those that have none.

More Teachers in Challenging Schools Earning NB Certification; NBCTs Stay in Challenging Schools

The most common pattern for increasing the number of NBCTs in challenging schools was for teachers within that school to earn NB certification. A small number of NBCTs moved from a non-challenging to a challenging school in any given year (between four and ten percent). While the policy encouraged more teachers in challenging schools to pursue NB certification than resulted in moves by NBCTs into challenging schools, it can be argued that both strategies are valid. Some would suggest that “growing your own” staff capacity within a high-need school is an effective strategy for school improvement. The study also found that NBCTs are retained at higher rates in challenging schools than other teachers in challenging schools, and NBCTs statewide. Survey responses confirm that among NBCTs certified in 2008 and working in challenging schools, 79 percent indicated that the bonus significantly or moderately contributed to their decision to stay. The fact that NBCTs tend to move at higher rates within their districts than other teachers suggests that they might also be willing to relocate to a challenging school, particularly if they didn’t have to change districts. However, the data also indicate that within the current economic climate, fewer teachers are exiting the workforce, and as a result, the number of opportunities to move from one school or district to another may be limited.

Challenging School Bonus a Factor in Teachers' Decisions to Pursue Certification

While many factors influence a teachers' decision to pursue NB certification, such as viewing the process as a professional development opportunity to strengthen their teaching (two-thirds of NBCTs report this as a strong reason), monetary factors have become another important consideration. Survey respondents in challenging schools provide evidence that after 2007, the monetary incentives were a strong factor in the decision of NBCTs to pursue certification. Seventy-three percent of NBCTs working in challenging schools who certified in 2008 or 2009 indicated that the potential for increased compensation was a strong reason to pursue certification compared with 33 percent of NBCTs working in challenging schools who certified in 2007 or earlier. Sixty-four percent of teachers in challenging schools who have not yet chosen to pursue NB certification reported that the bonus would have a "high impact" on their decision to pursue certification, and an additional 23 percent indicated a moderate impact on that decision. The survey responses of principals in challenging schools confirm that the challenging schools stipend had an impact on encouraging staff to pursue certification with 85 percent indicating a high impact and 15 percent indicating moderate impact. More than any other support or incentive offered, principals agreed that the challenging schools stipend was an important factor in the decision of teachers in their school to pursue certification.

NBCTs Positive Contributions to Instruction, Student Learning and School Community

Based on survey findings, NBCTs report that earning NB certification positively impacted their ability to evaluate individual student needs, use assessments to inform instruction, use multiple instructional strategies and make a difference in student achievement outcomes. In addition, NBCTs in challenging schools reported that becoming an NBCT impacted their ability to understand how cultural and linguistic factors, as well as poverty, affect student learning. Principals confirm that NBCTs had a positive impact on the teachers' ability to work with students and their contribution to the quality of the professional community. In particular, 78 percent of principals indicated a very positive impact of NBCTs' ability to contribute to the quality of the professional community, and 74 percent identified as very positive their ability to assume coaching and mentoring responsibilities.

Policy Implications

The current incentive program for NBCTs has served as an important policy lever in several ways. First, it has acknowledged and rewarded teachers statewide who earned NB certification. The current policy recognizes that all students should have access to high quality teachers, and by rewarding all NBCTs, it recognizes a high standard of professional practice across school contexts. The current policy also acknowledges that not all schools and students have equitable access to high quality instruction. By encouraging NBCTs to work in challenging schools, it promotes and supports their work in schools where they are most needed. Additionally, the incentive program has supported a mechanism for promoting high-quality professional development through the certification process itself, which may positively impact teachers' professional practices regardless of whether or not they earn the credential.

While a number of positive outcomes have occurred during the initial implementation of the incentive policies, there remain areas for improvement so that a greater impact can result across a broader range of school and district contexts. These areas of improvement include the following:

- **The policy is not yet reaching all schools.** While there has been an improvement in the equity of the distribution of NBCTs across schools and districts during this time period, areas of concern remain. There are proportionately fewer NBCTs in challenging schools that are small and in rural or remote areas of the state, particularly in Western Washington outside the Central Puget Sound region.
- **Additional attention is needed to further diversify both the overall teacher workforce and those who become NBCTs.** While the proportion of NBCTs who are teachers of color has increased over this time period, it is still lower than the statewide average. The striking mismatch between the proportion of students of color and teachers of color continues to be a challenge, both for all teachers statewide and for NBCTs.
- **Some academically struggling schools do not meet the current criteria for a “challenging school.”** There remain a few schools on the state’s list of persistently lowest achieving schools that are not identified as challenging (e.g., do not meet the poverty threshold).
- **The implementation of the incentive program is largely driven by individual teacher choice.** The challenging schools bonus is dependent on individual teachers locating and pursuing potential openings in identified schools, and also dependent on the frequency and availability of potential openings. These openings are influenced by regional labor market conditions and varying teacher retention rates. For some, the uncertainty of future legislative funding and the timing in late spring of the notification for eligible schools also may present unintended obstacles for those who might consider NB certification.
- **There is no explicit link to other state or local improvement efforts.** The incentive to support NBCTs could be linked to the state’s school improvement plans or other initiatives to support student learning. The current incentive does not contain any mechanism to systematically match teachers to schools where their skills may be most useful. Many NBCTs have interests and abilities in areas of leadership, mentoring and coaching that could be better tapped.
- **The current policy does not offer differential approaches to address local needs.** Giving districts greater discretion or capacity in identifying from among their own schools those they deem “most challenging” might help them tailor the placement of NBCTs in the most strategic way. This would allow districts to make adjustments to their individual contexts and conditions. The state policy does not address differential district ability to support candidates through the NB process. It is important to recognize that individual district capacity to support teachers through the NB certification process

varies greatly, and indeed less than half of the districts with challenging schools (58 of 136) currently offer any kind of local support for their candidates (e.g., release time or help with videotaping).

Potential Policy Options

Given the outcomes to date and the areas for potential improvement of the state's incentive program, there are a number of options for consideration by policymakers. Provided below are several suggestions that are intended as prompts for further policy conversations:

- **Continue with the incentives in place as they are currently constructed.** The incentives both reward accomplished teaching more broadly while strategically targeting the state's highest-need schools. If this option is selected, it would be important to further monitor whether the positive outcomes continue in subsequent years.
- **Make a minor adjustment to ensure that all schools identified as persistently low-achieving are included in the list of challenging schools.** The criteria for identifying challenging schools could be amended to consider both poverty and student performance by including any of the remaining Tier I or Tier II schools on the state's school improvement list that are not also identified as challenging (e.g., do not meet the poverty threshold). In any given year, this would likely be a small number of schools.
- **Consider strategies that may further support increases in the number of NBCTs in challenging schools, particularly those currently untouched by the policy.** As previously described, proportionately larger numbers of challenging schools in rural and remote areas of the state, have no NBCTs. One strategy to consider is to improve the access to information about NB certification to teachers in these areas. This could be accomplished by utilizing NBCTs to deliver informational sessions and have conversations with colleagues. Districts without access to NBCTs could be provided with supports and incentives for teachers who decide to pursue certification. Another approach would be to consider expanding the support for Take One, a professional development opportunity that allows teachers to complete one National Board entry. This strategy provides an introduction to the certification process. School teams could also be encouraged to participate in Take One together. Another strategy would be to develop specific incentives that would encourage groups of NBCTs to move together to challenging schools. This approach has been utilized in other states.
- **Focus on developing an information network that would assist in linking the specific staffing needs of challenging schools with teachers' skills and experiences.** One option would be to create an information system using online resources that encourages leaders to customize their communication with NBCTs who might be interested in relocating to a challenging school. This system could include information about a school's specific improvement plans and specify the types of teacher knowledge, skills, and abilities that are most needed in that context.

- **Give high-need districts greater discretion to decide which schools are “challenging.”** Another option would be for the state to consider giving high-need districts greater discretion or capacity in identifying from among their own schools those they deem “most challenging.” This increased flexibility might help districts tailor the placement of NBCTs in the most strategic way, given the individual contexts and conditions present within the district. There are considerable challenges implied in trying to design and implement a more flexible approach, and these factors would need to be weighed against potential benefits.

Future Lines of Inquiry

This study provides a baseline for understanding the initial impact of state policy on NBCTs and the teacher workforce statewide and in challenging schools. It is unclear if the current trends regarding an overall increase in NBCTs and their distribution in challenging schools will continue. Given tight budgets due to the economic downturn, it is not possible to predict the trends in hiring, staffing, and retirement rates that may impact the number and types of available openings for NBCTs to consider. Therefore, it will be important to continue to monitor the changing labor market conditions and its relation to the impact of the incentive program.

As the incentive program matures, it will be important to inquire about the impact of NBCTs on student learning. Given that the state is making progress in developing the capacity to link individual students and teachers, this type of inquiry will be possible in the future. In designing an inquiry of this type, it will be necessary to have a carefully constructed comparison group of teachers. Additionally, it is important to recognize that NBCTs are part of a larger solution for improving the quality of instruction in schools. Addressing achievement gaps and improving student learning is complex work in challenging schools. Thus, assessing the impact of NBCTs on student learning involves understanding the variance in the demographic conditions, access to resources and supports, school culture and community, and leadership dynamics within the schools and districts in which teachers work.

In sum, our analyses of the initial implementation of the state’s incentive program for NBCTs indicates that there is evidence of improvement in addressing the dual goals of increasing the overall numbers of NBCTs and providing increased access to NBCTs in challenging schools. It will be important to watch whether these trends continue in subsequent years.