

New Studies Affirm Impact of Board-Certified Teachers

Policy implications of research weighed

By Stephen Sawchuk

The evidence continues to mount that teachers who earn national-board certification are more effective than other teachers, both at the high school and elementary levels.

Two recently released studies show higher test scores by students who are taught by board-certified teachers. The findings are in line with previous research.

That's a boon for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, the group that runs the certification program. Its president, Ronald Thorpe, has been making the case that, as in other professions, board certification should be the aspiration—indeed, a professional norm—of the nation's 3.5 million teachers, rather than an exception.

"There definitely seems to be a predictable trend that when you have teachers who have this understanding about their job, this depth of their knowledge, their skills set, they get these results and they're replicable," Mr. Thorpe said.

Candidates seeking board certification must take a series of assessments in content and pedagogy, including submitting videotape docu-

menting their teaching skills. The process takes an estimated 200 to 400 hours, sometimes over the course of several years, and costs \$1,900.

There are currently about 110,000 board-certified teachers in the United States.

Hoping to drum up numbers, the NBPTS has taken steps to make the certification process easier and cheaper to negotiate. It's currently piloting a leaner set of exams, though board officials insist they will maintain the same validity.

An Effective 'Signal'

The first study, funded by the NBPTS and conducted by the Arlington, Va.-based CNA Analysis and Solutions, is based on the analysis of scores of thousands of Chicago and Kentucky secondary students between 2000 and 2012 linked to their teachers—an important addition to the research, because most prior studies have been based in Florida and North Carolina and focused on the lower grades.

In addition to looking at student performance on an ACT suite of assessments, the researchers also observed a subsample of teachers pursuing board certification and used a common framework to track growth in their abilities.

In all, the study found that board certification served as an effective "signal" of teacher qual-

ity, with students taught by those teachers doing better than students not taught by them, controlling for a variety of background characteristics.

A second study released last month, by James Cowan and Dan Goldhaber, both of the Center for Education Data & Research at the University of Washington Bothell, looked at the test scores of students taught by elementary and middle school teachers in Washington state; it found similar results to those of the CNA study.

The overall effect sizes of holding the certification were fairly small, across the two studies, but they were statistically significant.

One new wrinkle surfaced by the University of Washington researchers had to do with the board's policy of allowing teachers who don't initially achieve certification to retake the elements that tripped them up. Researchers found that, except in middle school math, those teachers' performance, even after they obtained certification, was statistically indistinguishable from teachers who never sat for the exams.

"To me, that suggests that the signal of being board-certified is not as strong for those who fail the first time. Maybe it's because you can bank your scores," Mr. Goldhaber said. "I think it's an important result for them to consider."

So far, the NBPTS does not have

plans to revisit its retake policies, officials said.

Obliquely, the studies also underscore how challenging it may be for the more than 25-year-old organization to incite education leaders to build policy off the positive findings. All else being equal, board certification matters—but there are far fewer proof points on the best way to use it as a lever to improve teacher quality more widely, the researchers note.

Neither study found definitive evidence that going through the board-certification process itself improved teachers' skills, meaning that good teachers may just be more likely to choose to pursue certification. And while data from NBPTS suggest board-certified teachers are taking leadership roles in schools, most of those transitions seem to be the result of informal rather than strategic decisions.

The CNA analysis postulated that districts and states might do better by attaching the certification more formally to teacher-quality structures than they currently are.

"For example, school systems could use National Board certification as a gatekeeper for tenure, implemented at a later point in the teaching career path than the criteria most school systems currently use for those decisions," its authors suggest.

National-board leaders said they are eager for more schools and

districts to reach a critical mass of board-certified teachers, which would set the stage for policymakers to embrace such policy ideas.

"The numbers are so paltry," Mr. Thorpe said. "There is some num-

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RONALD THORPE

President, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

ber out there and when you hit that number, something changes in the whole way the school functions with kids, and it shows up in their learning and their achievement.”

Incentives Matter

Some new research also suggests a promising, if costly way, to help boost the number of board-certified teachers in low-income schools, which have tended to have fewer teachers holding the credential.

A second study by Mr. Goldhaber and Mr. Cowan, for example, looked at a Washington state bonus program in effect since 2007 that was designed to encourage board-certified teachers to work in high-poverty schools. The program paid out up to \$5,000 to the teachers in those schools who became certified.

The quasi-experimental study compared the staffing outcomes of schools eligible for the bonuses with those schools that fell just below the eligibility threshold for awarding the bonuses.

The bonus did help boost the number of board-certified teachers in the participating high-poverty schools by about 2 to 3 percent over the first year of implementation, both by helping the schools recruit more of those teachers up front, and increasing the probability that teachers at the bonus-eligible schools decided to pursue certification, the study found.

The two CEDR papers were partly funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which also provided \$3.7 million in grants to help the NBPTS tighten its certification process. (The philanthropy also helps support *Education Week's* coverage of the implementation of college- and career-ready standards.)

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