

Turning Schools Around: The National Board Certification Process as a School Improvement Strategy

by Ann Jaquith and Jon Snyder



About This Series

Findings from SCOPE's *Turning Schools Around: The National Board Certification Process as a School Improvement Strategy* are published in a cross-case analysis and a research brief.

To see the full series please visit <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/publications/pubs/1432>

This research is made possible by the generous support of the Stuart Foundation and The National Board of Professional Teaching Standards.

“What kind of writing activities does Juan need to improve his writing? ... Why does he omit sounds when writing? How can I help him organize his ideas?” A first grade teacher, Nancy, who participated in the National Board Certification Project asked these questions about her student, Juan, and about her own teaching. Looking carefully at Juan’s work in order to describe how she was supporting his learning prompted these questions. Although this teacher had taught for fourteen years, this was the first time she had watched videos of herself teaching. The project provided opportunities to look closely at her students’ work with her colleagues. Through her participation in the project, Nancy experienced what can happen when teachers make their teaching practice public. Nancy described the importance of getting “to know your class and the needs and the necessities of your students, because if you are aware of that, it’s easy for you to find different ways to differentiate in the class and to help [students]. ... Now when I plan my lessons, I really think of my students, what they need... what else can I give them to achieve the [learning] goal?” Nancy learned to think deeply about the opportunities she is providing for her students to learn in her classroom every day.

This study examines a project that used the National Board Certification process as a strategy for supporting the improvement of schools where large proportions of students score below grade level on standardized tests. The project attempted to seize and capitalize upon the learning opportunities embedded in the certification process, particularly opportunities to learn from teaching and the relationship between teaching and student learning. In addition to engaging individual teachers in the pursuit of certification, which distinguishes a teacher as accomplished, the project provided three concomitant components intended to promote individual, as well as school, learning:

scope
Stanford Center for
Opportunity Policy in Education

Stanford Center for
Opportunity Policy in Education
505 Lasuen Mall
Stanford, CA 94305
scope@stanford.edu
edpolicy.stanford.edu

1. A school cohort (group of teacher candidates from within the same school);
2. An expert NB Support Provider to each school cohort;
3. On-site support to candidates in two ways: a formal support role for an NBCT at the school and monthly certification support meetings for candidates facilitated by the expert Support Provider in collaboration with the school support provider.

As an improvement strategy, we examined the ways that the certification process and concomitant support enriched teaching, regardless of whether or not a teacher candidate was actually certified. We also studied how, if at all, this particular use of the certification process affected school culture. More detailed information about the study, our findings, and a full explanation of our recommendations are available in the full report <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/publications/pubs/1432>.

Project Setting and Participants

Our project was set in three schools in two urban districts with diverse student populations. Our comparative analysis describes the project in two schools, Hollow Tree School located in West District and Central Elementary located in East District (see Table 1). The schools were similar in many respects: student-teacher ratio, student demographics, and historically low student performance. In each school, fewer than half of the students were proficient on state

English language arts and math standardized exams, over half the student population qualified for free and/or reduced lunch and spoke English as a second language. In addition, each school had a large proportion of teachers on staff interested and willing to pursue NB Certification and each school had a principal who agreed to support teachers’ participation in the project. Finally, each school had at least one NBCT on staff willing to participate in the project as an on-site support provider to candidates and to work with the NBRC “expert” support provider to do so.

Although students in the two districts were similarly diverse with approximately 50% of the students receiving free or reduced price lunch, there were also important differences between the two districts with respect to: the supports and resources they provided to encourage teachers to pursue NB Certification; the degree to which the district’s instructional approach cohered with the teaching approach promoted by NBPTS; and the number of NBCTs in each district. These differences influenced ways teachers at Hollow Tree and Central Elementary experienced this project in several important ways (see Table 2).

Given the different incentive structures in the two districts, it is not surprising that in 2013 West District had 208 NBCTs while East District had only 20 NBCTs. Our analysis of the intervention effects in the two schools considered how these differences in district environments may have influenced teachers’ learning opportunities.

Table 1: Features of Participating Schools

School Features	Hollow Tree (West District)	Central (East District)
# of students	450 in grades K-8	400 in grades K-5
# of teachers	30	28
# of National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) on staff	5	2
# of teachers participating in project	10	11
# of participating teachers who certified in 2014	4	0

The Study

This study provides examples from both schools of teachers who made improvements to their teaching, increased students' opportunities for learning, and altered the way they worked with school colleagues so that teachers were able to learn in and from their own teaching with each other. This project, which leveraged participation in the NB Certification process as an approach to collective professional learning within schools, documents how collective learning experiences focused on examining the relationship between instruction and student performance can begin to shift the teaching culture within schools, particularly in schools where teachers are accustomed to working in isolation and are not used to closely examining student work with their colleagues for evidence of learning.

This study highlights several important design features that are necessary to leverage the NB Certification process for collective learning. The findings also suggest some promising directions that state and local policymakers can take to make it possible for more schools and districts to engage in this capacity-growing use of the NB Certification process. Without state and local policies that make it possible for the

NB Certification process to become a lever for growing the collective instructional capacity within all our educational communities, examples where such teaching and learning occurs will remain relatively rare and modest in scale.

Study Findings

We found the project had positive influences on individual teachers and the schools in which they worked. Specifically, we found:

1. Teachers strengthened aspects of their instruction through their participation in the project;
2. Pursuing NB Certification with a group of school colleagues who received ongoing support from onsite NBCTs as well as from an expert support provider increased teachers' opportunities for learning; and
3. The project, as designed, laid the initial groundwork for changing aspects of school teaching culture—such as creating a community of teachers in which teaching became “de-privatized,” where teachers had a common focus on improving student learning, and where practices developed to support teacher learning about instruction.

Table 2: District Incentives and Supports for Pursuing National Board Certification

District Incentives	West District (Hollow Tree)	East District (Central)
Stipend awarded to NBCTs for duration of certification	\$5,000 annually	\$2,500 annually
Teacher stipend for working in difficult-to-staff schools	\$2,000	None
Provides supports to NB candidates	District has a part-time NBCT staff person to recruit teacher candidates within the district and provide supports to candidates	None
Formal recognition of NBCT status	Superintendent honors new NBCTs at an annual ceremony	None
Number of NBCTs	208	20

These are all important elements of cultivating professional communities for teacher learning that are strongly associated with improved student performance.

Instruction

With respect to teachers strengthening their instruction, teachers in both schools made changes to the way they designed student tasks, delivered individual and whole class instruction, and assessed students' performance. This was true for teachers of every subject and grade level who participated in the project, both veteran and less experienced teachers. As candidates demonstrated their commitment to students and their learning, a Core Proposition of NBPTS, they made changes in their instruction that seemed to increase students' opportunities for learning. Specifically, we found teachers looked more closely at what their students did and said than they had in the past. As a result, teachers came to know their students' strengths, interests, and needs well. In doing so, they gained insight into specific content areas that particular students needed to learn as well as how to best help those students learn that content. For example, one teacher made a sentence chart and a thinking map for a student to use to organize his thoughts. A middle school math teacher discovered that the use of language in math class might be interfering with some of his students' ability to learn concepts and to demonstrate mathematical understanding on performance tasks. We found a reciprocal relationship between teachers looking closely at students' work and becoming better able to design instruction to meet the specific strengths, interests, and needs of their students.

The School-based Cohort Model

Regarding the school-based cohort model of pursuing NB Certification, we found that this structure, coupled with the support providers, seemed to increase teachers' opportunities for learning. This design for providing support to candidates illuminated the important role that support providers can play in developing

teachers' learning and in creating the conditions for collaborative inquiry into teaching practice. We found that support providers in the project—both those located within and outside of the school—played different, but each important, roles in stimulating and supporting improvements in teaching.

The juxtaposition of the various types of support the providers offered revealed the specialized knowledge and skills that National Board support providers need as well as some ways that newly certified NBCTs can develop this expertise. On-site providers, new to a support role, needed to develop their skills in providing feedback to colleagues and how to facilitate candidates' evidence-based conversations. Working alongside an experienced support provider could help NBCTs develop these skills. Finally, the district and school conditions, including the number of support providers available within a school, affect the support that on-site providers are able to offer their colleagues.

Organizational Culture

In only one year, early indicators show that the NB Certification project aided participating schools in developing organizational cultures that support continuous teacher learning. Specifically, evidence in both schools suggests that project teachers began to work differently with one another and that they developed more trusting and supportive professional relationships. This more collaborative way of working together to examine teaching and learning led to small, but meaningful, changes in the teaching cultures at each school. These changes also aligned with cultural changes the principals were championing. For example, at Central Elementary, there was some evidence that teachers began to view and interact with families differently—a change the principal was also advocating and modeling. Changes to the teaching culture at Hollow Tree were more pronounced, and the school conditions at Hollow Tree, especially the principal's goal to have teachers develop and use formative assessments regularly to guide their teaching, closely aligned with the

National Board Core Proposition that teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning. At Hollow Tree, there was evidence that participating teachers became more open to making their instruction public and were more likely to examine student work with their colleagues. They described having “more professional respect for each other.” In addition, the team of special education teachers at Hollow Tree changed their approach to working with their students and how they worked with general education teachers. Their conversations with general education teachers had “a different tone; [one that was] inquiry-oriented” and “incredibly responsive to students’ needs.” They asked teachers questions such as: “What do you need? What are some things you already tried? How can I help?” Designing instruction to better serve the particular needs of these students also involved creating new and more flexible structures for working with the special education population at Hollow Tree. For example, these teachers created schedules to support students in the classroom as they “observed behavioral issues” and “kids not participating.” They also developed a “learning center where [exceptional needs students] could be pulled out [for] small-group instruction.”

The study suggests that organizing and supporting cohorts of teachers within the same school to pursue NB Certification aids multiple beneficial outcomes. The study also suggests, however, that additional supports are necessary to sustain a substantive alteration of a school’s professional culture. For instance, when the NB Certification practices were not integrated into other instructional improvement work going on in the schools, the professional community that developed among NB Certification Project participants existed in relative isolation from the rest of the teachers in the two schools and from the principals. The study revealed that the principal has an important role to play in connecting NB Certification work to other instructional improvement efforts going on in the school and district.

Based on our analysis, we offer four recommendations to districts (which could also be supported at the regional and state levels) for using the process of NB Certification to support instructional improvement in low-performing schools.

Recommendation 1: *Create opportunities and incentives for cohorts of teachers from within the same school and district to participate together in a NB Certification project.*

Recommendation 2: *Educate district and school administrators about how to use the NB Certification process as an approach to school-wide professional learning in order to promote a coherent approach to improving teaching and learning.*

Recommendation 3: *Establish and support local National Board Hubs as networked communities of educators committed to the exploration and use of the NBPTS accumulated body of knowledge for accomplished teaching to improve student learning.*

Recommendation 4: *Use the NB Certification processes to inform evaluation processes at the local level.*

We also offer suggestions to states about what they might do to encourage this improvement strategy.

This brief summarizes a full report published by the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education. The full report can be downloaded at <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/publications/pubs/1432>