

ECF Research Brief

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Distinguished Teacher Certification National Board of Professional Teacher Standards (NBPTS) vs. American Board for the Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE)

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From the standpoint of the policy objectives of most states, the ABCTE Distinguished Teacher Program is clearly superior to the NBPTS National Board Certification program.

The two programs differ in terms of how they define superior teaching. ABCTE defines teacher effectiveness primarily in terms of objectively measured student academic achievement gain. NBPTS defines teacher effectiveness in terms of whether teachers use certain teaching practices—ones that the organization believes will produce student achievement gain.

NBPTS assesses teacher quality primarily by reviewing videotapes submitted by the teacher. Highly rated teachers are those who exhibit teaching practices preferred by NBPTS. Teachers are also required to respond to essay questions that assess their commitment to the teaching ideals on which the preferred practices are founded.

The problem with NBPTS is that the practices it idealizes are founded mostly on theory, not evidence of demonstrated effectiveness. Seven large-scale studies and several reports since 2002 have found only trivial differences between the ability of NBPTS-certified teachers to lift student achievement and that of the average teacher (see http://www.education-consumers.com/ecc_news_nbts.php).

In contrast, a study of Tennessee teachers who passed ABCTE's Passport to Teaching assessment (see http://www.abcte.org/system/files/AERA_2007_Conf_Pres.pdf) found substantial differences in the value-added achievement gains of their students.

The irony is that while states across the nation are supporting education reforms that make student achievement gain the most important criterion for judging schools, they are also spending millions to encourage teachers to become NBPTS-certified—a mixed message at best.

State-level school accountability programs send a clear message that academic achievement gain is the most important outcome. By contrast, rewards for teachers who become certified by the NBPTS tell teachers that student achievement gains are less important than adherence to pedagogical doctrine. Teachers are faced with an unfair and unnecessary choice: teach in a way that maximizes student achievement or teach in a way that maximizes your income.

Limitations

The primary limitation of NBPTS certification is that it has little relationship to the student achievement aims of public education policy. Studies of NBPTS-certified teachers have repeatedly found little difference between them and other teachers regarding increased student achievement in their classrooms.

In contrast, ABCTE's Distinguished Teacher certification is strongly aligned with the aim of increasing student achievement. It is, however, hampered by the availability of value-added achievement data in all grades and in all states.

In effect, ABCTE's greatest limitation is related to its greatest strength. Measurement of student achievement gain requires access to data that is currently available in only a few states. In Tennessee, for example, teachers receive very sophisticated value-added "teacher-effect" reports with which they can document student achievement gains. Ohio and Pennsylvania are in the process of implementing systems that will provide similar data. A number of other states including Florida, for example, use a somewhat different but suitable form of value-added assessment. Even Tennessee, however, compiles value-added data only for the elementary and middle school grades.

Several states are in the process of developing databases that will permit users to track individual student gains and match teachers to students—a minimum requirement for value-added assessment. They include Arkansas, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, South Carolina, Utah, West Virginia, and Wyoming. Eventually, all states will need to develop this capability to comply with standards recently set by the U. S. Department of Education.

Summary and Conclusion

NBPTS Certification and the ABCTE Distinguished Teacher designation both have limitations, but the ABCTE program is far superior with regard to its alignment with the aims of public education policy. ABCTE's Distinguished Teachers are demonstrably more effective in lifting student achievement than their peers. NBPTS Certification is available to a wider range of teachers and approved for use by many more states, but its fundamental worth as a complement to educational policy aims must be questioned. There simply is no clear evidence that NBPTS-certified teachers are any more effective in raising student achievement than any other teachers.

The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com