

THE CERTIFICATION MYTH

Teacher certification does not improve student performance

S U M M A R Y : Like other states, North Carolina maintains a system of certification and licensing for public school teachers. Proponents of the system argue that certification standards will separate good teachers from poor ones, but there is no evidence that these standards determine teacher quality. A state-by-state comparison of teacher certification and student performance on the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) mathematics exam shows that certification standards and teacher testing did not improve test scores. Schools should be able to recruit and retain talented teachers whether they are certified or not.

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In September, Governor Easley vetoed House Bill 706, a bill that would have eliminated teacher testing requirements for incoming teachers deemed “highly qualified” in another state. During the press conference, the governor said, “we find the most important ingredient in a child’s education, and the predictor of their performance, is the quality of their teachers and the standards that we hold for our teachers.”¹ Many agree that standards like certification and teacher testing produce high quality teachers.

There is no question that high quality teachers produce high achieving students. The problem is that none of the standards that states traditionally use to identify high quality teachers has a significant effect on student performance. A large body of research shows that advanced degrees, years of experience, education courses, teacher test scores, and certification status do not improve teacher effectiveness. Unfortunately, state licensure policies continue to use these criteria to determine who can and cannot teach.

Teacher Certification in North Carolina

There are three main categories of certification in North Carolina. (For this analysis, “certification” and “licensure” are used interchangeably.) The state grants initial licensure to teachers who do not meet one or more state certification requirements or those who have less than three years of full-time teaching experience. The state grants continuing licensure to teachers who have three or more years of teaching experience (one year in North Carolina)

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and meet all state testing, professional development, and evaluation requirements. Career changers may obtain a lateral-entry license until they meet state requirements for an initial license.

The percentage of full (initial and continuing) certified teachers in North Carolina is approximately 85 percent, which is lower than the nationwide average of 89.5 percent.² Although recruitment efforts have focused on increasing the percentage of fully certified teachers to 95 percent and above, it has remained at around 85 percent for the past four years. The teaching force saw an increase in the number of newer teachers (initial licensees) and teachers that completed teacher preparation in another state (Table 1).

Table 1. Profile of Certification and Student Performance in North Carolina³

	2000 – 2001	2001 – 2002	2002 – 2003	2003 – 2004
Percentage of fully licensed teachers	84%	85%	84%	85%
Number of newly licensed teachers	6,753	9,452	9,679	N/A
Number receiving licensure that completed teacher preparation in another state	3,896	5,124	5,383	N/A
National Board Certified teachers	3,660	5,137	6,646	8,280

During this same time, the number of National Board Certified teachers has more than doubled in North Carolina. Since 2000, an additional 4,600 teachers received National Board Certification, a 125 percent increase (Table 1). National Board Certification is a program offered by the National Board For Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). To gain this credential, teachers must submit videotapes of their teaching, examples of their students' work, essays, and a passing score on a content knowledge test to NBPTS assessors. In North Carolina, the state will pay for the \$2,300 application fee, grant three days of paid release time, and pay a teacher who completes the program an additional 12 percent of their state salary for the 10-year life of the certificate. Individual counties often add additional benefits. Because of state and local incentives, North Carolina has more National Board Certified teachers than any other state.⁴

Table 2. NAEP Student Performance and Teacher Certification⁵

	<i>Percentage of students "at or above proficient" in 8th grade math</i>	<i>Percentage of teachers receiving certification waivers, population that are newly certified, 03-04</i>	<i>Percentage of teaching population that are newly certified, 02-03</i>	<i>National Board Certified Teachers</i>
Minnesota	35%	4.30%	21%	255
North Dakota	31%	2.10%	6%	22
Massachusetts	30%	2.10%	11%	418
South Dakota	30%	0.50%	10%	32
Wisconsin	29%	0.00%	8%	266
Montana	29%	0.10%	15%	40
Vermont	28%	2.20%	8%	75
New Hampshire	28%	0.20%	13%	15
Iowa	28%	0.00%	9%	459
Kansas	28%	0.00%	5%	178
Wyoming	28%	0.20%	8%	52
North Carolina	25%	7.60%	11%	8,282
National Average	22%	3.50%	10%	804

Certification Type and Status

Using the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 8th grade mathematics exam, a comparison of North Carolina and the top eleven performing states indicates that certification status, the percentage of newly licensed teachers, and National Board Certification had no effect on student performance.

Teachers who do not meet the state's certification requirements may receive a waiver in the form of a provisional, emergency, or lateral-entry license until they can meet the requirements for certification. School districts consider these teachers less qualified than those meeting all of the state certification requirements. Most of the high performing states need to grant few waivers because they have a low demand for teachers. Nevertheless, for a state like Minnesota, a high percentage of certification waivers had no negative affect on student performance relative to other states (Table 2).

Many school districts also believe that student performance increases the more years a teacher is certified. Yet, states with a high percentage of teachers who were newly licensed performed as well as states that had few newly licensed teachers. Five of the top eleven states met or exceeded the national average of new licensees. In addition, none of the top eleven states had a significant number of National Board Certified teachers (Table 2). Such credentials make little difference because they do not improve the teaching skills of teachers that impede high student achievement.⁶

The Praxis Test

To be fully certified, North Carolina requires teachers to have qualifying scores from the Praxis II test, which assesses content and specialty area knowledge. State requirements vary considerably. Some states do not require teachers to take a Praxis II test for certain teaching areas, and many states require a different test than North Carolina. Because of differences in state requirements, a certified teacher from another state may have taken a Praxis II test to meet another state's testing requirement and still would not be eligible to obtain a continuing license in North Carolina.

Students in states that required the Praxis II middle school mathematics test did not outperform students in states that did not require the test. In fact, five of the top ten performing states did not require testing for teachers at the time of the exam. Praxis II qualifying scores also made little difference. Kansas, the state with the highest score required for certification, did not perform as well as states like Minnesota and New Hampshire that required a lower score (Table 3).

Table 3. Praxis II Testing Requirements by NAEP Top Performers⁷

	<i>Statewide Teacher Testing, 2002-2003</i>	<i>Cut scores for Praxis II middle school mathematics test (#0069)</i>
Minnesota	Yes	152
North Dakota	No	148 (Effective July 1, 2006)
Massachusetts	Yes	N/A (Used National Evaluation Systems, Inc. test)
South Dakota	No	139 (Effective July 1, 2005)
Montana	No	N/A
Vermont	Yes	N/A (Requires an alternate Praxis test)
New Hampshire	Yes	151
Iowa	No	N/A
Kansas	Yes	158
Wyoming	No	N/A
North Carolina	Yes	141
National Median		163
National Average Performance Range		150 – 176

Conclusion

The National Council on Teacher Quality, a leading education reform organization, recently published a study called *Increasing the Odds: How Good Policies Can Yield Better Teachers*. This report found that master's degrees, years of experience, certification (which includes teacher testing), and education courses did not improve student performance. The teacher's knowledge of the subject played a smaller role than previously thought. The report showed that the best teachers are those who attended selective colleges and are outstanding readers and writers. In other words, high quality teachers are generally smart, motivated, and literate individuals.⁸

In North Carolina, state education leaders believe that they can improve student performance by enforcing teacher licensure requirements, even though there is little evidence that the requirements separate good teachers from poor ones. Unfortunately, state licensure policy often assures that mediocre but credentialed teachers remain in public schools while prohibiting talented but uncredentialed applicants from entering the teaching profession.

Our goal should be to recruit the highest quality teachers for our children, rather than finding teachers who have jumped through all the hoops.

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Notes

1. State of North Carolina, Office of the Governor, "Gov. Easley Vetoes Bill that Would Lower Teacher Standards," September 29, 2005, http://www.governor.state.nc.us/News_FullStory.asp?id=2473
2. Center for Education Reform, "The Teacher Certification Debate: Certified and Qualified are Not the Same," CER Action Paper, April 25, 2003.
3. North Carolina Education Research Council, "First in America" Data Reports and State Report Cards, 2001, 2002, and 2003, <http://erc.northcarolina.edu/content.php/system/fia.htm>. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "Testing and Accountability Results," <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/accountability/reporting/>. Westat, "Title II Reporting," <https://www.title2.org/data.htm>.
4. Karen Palasek, "Teacher Certification: Value-Added Doesn't Measure Up," Carolina Beat, March 11, 2005, http://johnlocke.org/articles/display_story.html?id=2281.
5. National Center for Education Statistics, "NAEP Mathematics Highlights 2003," pp. 4 – 10. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, "Fourth Annual Report on Teacher Quality," 2005, pp. 65 – 97.
6. See George Leef, "Teacher Certification: Little Benefit for the Money," Carolina Beat, March 23, 2004, http://johnlocke.org/articles/display_story.html?id=1449.
7. Op.cit. at note 10. Educational Testing Service, "State Requirements," <http://www.ets.org/praxis>. ETS, "Understanding Your Praxis Scores, 2004 – 2005," <http://www.ets.org/praxis>. Wisconsin was not included in this table because testing information was not available.
8. National Council on Teacher Quality, "Increasing the Odds: How Good Policies Can Yield Better Teachers," n.d. See also Dan Goldhaber, "The Mystery of Good Teaching," *Education Next*, Spring 2002, pp. 50 – 55.