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## **The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards:**

### ***National Teacher Certification in the Works***

*By Caleb Kershner*

Teachers unions are the most powerful and influential lobbying group in 43 of the 50 states. Home schoolers present a major threat to these unions because children leaving public schools decrease the schools budget which means less money to pay and hire teachers. Consequently, teachers unions actively target home schoolers. Just this year, the National Education Association (NEA) passed a resolution calling for mandated teacher certification for home school parents.

The premier mechanism being used by the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers to promote teacher certification is the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). Beginning in 1989, Home School Legal Defense Association's National Center for Home Education has successfully worked to reduce the amount of funding for the NBPTS. This year, we worked with the U.S. House to pass the Teacher Empowerment Act (H.R. 1995), a bill that expunged all NBPTS appropriations, only to see it funded again in the U.S. Senate. In the year 2000, we will lobby once again to zero fund the NBPTS.

In a recent study conducted by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, Danielle Dunn Wilcox explores the NBPTS. The following is a summary of this study.

### **The Board's Beginning**

The NBPTS began in 1987 as a private organization with the purpose of certifying master teachers in various subject areas for different age levels. The Board consists of 63 members. Key provisions of its bylaws require that a majority of the board be active teachers. Fourteen board members must be NEA/AFT leaders.

### **Funding**

In 1988, Senator Christopher Dodd (D-CT) pushed legislation through Congress, which allocated \$19.3 million over four years to the board's research and development of teacher certificates. Since then the board has received \$70 million in federal aid.

### **Certification**

To date, NBPTS has fully developed certificates for 12 of 33 fields of study slated for certification. The certification process evaluates the teacher in the act of teaching but involves no objective tests. Teachers must submit evidence of accomplishments, evaluations of their

students' work, videotapes of in—class teaching and answer four timed-essay questions about hypothetical teaching situations.

Applicants must have a bachelor's degree, hold a valid teaching license in states that require it and have three years of teaching experience. Entries are scored by “assessors” who are themselves certified in the area being tested. Assessors must go through a four-day, anti-bias training course that stresses the right way to score candidates but insists that “there is not one right answer for the candidate.”

## **Problems with NBPTS Standards**

There is absolutely no empirical evidence that the standards used in this certification process produce better teachers. The board develops these standards through round table discussions: One teacher will share what works best for her, and another will share his positive experience. Standards are built on “experiential research.”

NBPTS provides no evidence that these rigorously developed teaching standards contribute to student learning. One committee member explained that they “did not have time to [provide research evidence] and this was also not the committee's priority.”

Under the board's current structure, this “what feels good” method of standard setting is not likely to change anytime soon because directors of the board handpick their new members.

## **Knowledge Requirements**

The NBPTS certification rests on the belief that teaching is a complex discipline requiring a firm understanding of pedagogy—the art of teaching. As a result, content requirements in many subject areas are ignored. For example, two math experts, Branden and Raimi, who recently passed their certification, expressed their surprise at how much attention the NBPTS math standards devoted to the ways in which teachers should interact with students at the expense of basic content—such as long division. Instead of stressing  $2 + 2$  equals 4, teachers are exhorted to include different cultural approaches to mathematics.

How can teachers teach what they don't know? The NBPTS certification requirements sacrifice content and in its place stress the importance of pedagogy.

## **Scoring Substance (Are These Teachers Really More Qualified?)**

Teachers are not required to stress content knowledge for their students. Instead, teachers are given passing grades based upon how well they can justify their teaching decision. In one example lauded by the board, the teacher explained that she gave a student an “A” in the name of self-esteem building—even though the student had several misspelled words on his paper.

The board attempts to eliminate “all” bias in the scoring process. At the scoring institute (where evaluators are taught to assess the applicants), assessors are asked to overlook content errors. Only if the lesson is “blatantly wrong” will it be counted against the teacher being tested. Errors about people's names, dates, formulas, or writing are considered insignificant and receive no correction from the tester. One official leading the scoring sessions said, “The writing is not counted. We're just looking for substance. For teachers, writing is just not their strength.”

## **Government Entanglements**

In 1989, NBPTS claimed that public funding would not be necessary in a couple years because the organization would be self-reliant via application fees. Ten years later, the board still claims future self-reliance, yet it continues to accept government funds.

## **No Accountability**

Ironically, no one oversees the funds given to NBPTS. The board does what is right in its own eyes, freely spending taxpayers' dollars. NBPTS did initially pledge to submit reports to Congress every year and have its accounts audited by the General Accounting Office. However, now 10 years later, the board has never submitted records to Congress and has never been audited by the GOA.

## **Union Entanglement**

Nearly two thirds of the NBPTS board is made up of union members—19 from the National Education Association and nearly as many from the American Federation of Teachers. Board chairman Barbara Kelly, a teacher from Maine, is an NEA member.

Because unions control NBPTS, they can confidently tell their members to trust the board. Furthermore, politicians who are indebted to the teachers unions curry favor with the NBPTS and are more likely to vote for its continued funding.

Union board members have incentive to be biased toward policies that dumb down teacher certification requirements—providing easier certification and increased pay for the certified teachers. In short, this creates a conflict of interest between unions, which are dedicated to advancing the economic welfare of their members, and the NBPTS whose purpose is to identify and reward the best teachers among them.

## **National Certification by Default**

Despite the fact that the NBPTS says that certification will always remain voluntary, state and local governments are moving toward a licensure process that reflects the NBPTS standards. Fifteen states have taken up this banner and established their own teacher licensing boards that adopted the National Board rules. By default, the NBPTS is creating a nationally recognized teacher certification test.

## **Conclusion**

As a consumer of taxpayer dollars, the NBPTS has a responsibility to show that its teacher certification effectively serves a need in society. However, the board has provided zero evidence that its efforts are boosting the educational achievement of America's children.

HSLDA believes that NBPTS is a threat to the future of American education in several ways:

First, the very structure of the organization creates a conflict of interest, favoring the teachers and their pocketbooks without benefit to the students. As long as the board has over 50 percent union members, its certification standards will reflect the agenda of the education

establishment-not parents and students. Benefiting teachers will always be their number one priority.

Second, Congress is funding a certification process without congressional oversight. NBPTS is answerable to no one but itself. This arrangement deviates from the checks and balances of our American constitutional system and leaves the door open for tremendous abuse of the taxpayer and America's children.

Third, NBPTS poses a significant threat as it moves toward creating a nationally standardized teacher certification test. It has already influenced a number of states-implementing standards that are formulated at a national level. In other words, as this national teaching certification is adopted by states, it is likely it will be mandated by the states for all teachers ... including home schooling teachers.

Funding for the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards should be rescinded by Congress to protect the American taxpayer from a system that forces them to pay for a program with no proven benefit. If our children are going to achieve academically, Congress must continue to return educational decisions and standards back to parents and local control.