Every Child Deserves Success

Recommendations from Mississippi's National Board Certified Teachers on Supporting and Staffing High-Needs Schools

By
Melissa A. Rasberry
and
Barnett Berry
Center for Teaching Quality

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where teachers are central to improving schools

The Mississippi Association of Educators (MAE) is the state's largest professional education organization, dating back to 1878. MAE serves as the unified voice of education in Mississippi, promotes professional excellence and protects the rights, interests and welfare of Mississippi's education employees. Its 8,000 members include elementary and secondary teachers, higher education faculty, education support professionals, school administrators, retired educators and college students preparing to teach. The MAE's mission is to advocate great public schools for every child in Mississippi.

To obtain a copy of this report contact Beverly Brahan at the Mississippi Association of Educators, bbrahan@nea.org; 1-800-530-7998.

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From the rural Mississippi Delta to the inner city streets of Los Angeles, our nation faces an impending crisis as schools struggle to attract and retain teachers who have the preparation, resources, and support required for effective instruction of all students. The facts are daunting: Poor children and those of color are far less likely to be taught by qualified teachers—no matter how the term "qualified teacher" is defined. Studies consistently show that teachers who are better trained, more experienced, and licensed in the subjects they teach are more likely to be teaching in more affluent schools, serving more academically advantaged students.[1] The same is true for teachers who generate higher student test scores as well as those who earn National Board Certification.[2] The detrimental impact of this lack of human and fiscal resources on students is clear: our neediest students are more likely to be taught by teachers who are the least prepared. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that schools with large populations of high-poverty students continue to falter under the pressures of high-stakes accountability.[3]

Getting good teachers to high-needs schools[4]—and keeping them there—may be the toughest public education issue facing educators and policymakers today. While recruiting teachers to traditionally hard-to-staff schools represents a national imperative, nowhere is this issue more significant than in Mississippi. More than half of schools in the state are designated as "high-needs" and about one-third of districts are eligible for funds to help attract qualified teachers. While the state should be proud to boast its 2,554 National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs®), representing the sixth highest total and the third highest per-capita ratio in the country, more still needs to be done to ensure that these accomplished educators work with the highest-need students.[5] According to a study by the World Class Teacher Project, only 1 percent of the state's NBCTs are teaching in the state's lowest performing schools (i.e., either on "probation" or warned).[6]

To address this vexing issue, educators in Mississippi rallied together on August 18, 2007, marking an important day in state history. With leadership from the Mississippi Association of Educators (MAE) and the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE), over 200 NBCTs assembled in Jackson to meet with some of the state's leading policymakers, including Governor Haley Barbour, former Governor William Winter, and Superintendent of Education Dr. Hank Bounds, to generate policy recommendations on supporting and staffing high-needs schools. At the day-long event,

The vast majority of research to date shows that students of NBCTs tend to perform better on both standardized tests and more in-depth measures of academic learning (Bond, Smith, Baker & Hattie, 2000; Goldhaber & Anthony, 2004). Even when researchers find "mixed effects" of NBCTs on student achievement (as measured by current standardized tests), they also tend to find that as a group these teachers are more likely (than non-NBCTs) to "cognitively challenge" their students. The unique nature of the NBPTS assessment process was designed to capture how teachers think about their teaching and how they adapt their lessons to diverse learners, and the National Board can point to evidence that both of these objectives are being met to a certain degree. Surveys of NBCTs consistently reveal that teachers view seeking the advanced certificate as the best professional development they have experienced. One survey, administered by the National Board in 2001, found that 92 percent of candidates report the certification process made them a better teacher (NBPTS, 2001). NBCT Renee Moore of Cleveland, Miss., described the influence of the process in this way: "Teachers who pursue National Board Certification are willing not only to make a critical self-evaluation of their teaching, but also to put their work up for rigorous peer review. We're not just trying to pass a test; we're sorting out what really is and is not working in our real-life teaching practice. This isn't just professional development; it's scholarship."

NBCTs carefully studied the critical issues facing these challenged schools in small work sessions centered on eight different breakout topics, ranging from closing the achievement gaps to engaging families and communities. With the guidance of specially trained NBCT facilitators, teachers in the small groups utilized their knowledge and skills as accomplished educators to study the issues, apply their experiences from the classroom, and then brainstorm possible recommendations. A sampling of these recommendations was presented for reaction and feedback in the afternoon to a panel of state leaders, including Representative Kelvin Buck, MDE Assistant Superintendent Dr. Daphne Buckley, Governor's Education Advisor Johnny Franklin, Associate Dean Dr. Doris Gary (Alcorn State University), Board of Education Chair Claude Hartley, and Senator Gray Tollison. Teachers were also provided with the opportunity to rate and prioritize potential recommendations in terms of effectiveness and viability. Results from their survey responses are included in this paper, along with a more comprehensive overview of their collective ideas generated at the policy summit.

Indeed, NBCTs have much to say about how to ensure a quality education for every child, in every classroom, in every school in Mississippi. It's time that their voices are heard because every child deserves opportunities for success.

> "National Board Certified Teachers have demonstrated that they are master teachers and understand what is needed to succeed in the classroom. Through the summit and this report, they have provided education leaders and policymakers with their collective wisdom and concrete recommendations for changes that will help ensure that all boys and girls of Mississippi receive an excellent education."
> *—Dr. Hank M. Bounds, State Superintendent of Education*

The Recommendations

Teachers must have the resources and support they need to serve all students well. The Mississippi NBCT Policy Summit provided the opportunity for accomplished teachers to reflect upon and make recommendations that help to ensure high-needs schools have the teaching and learning conditions that will make them attractive environments for quality teachers. Comprehensive, sustained efforts to recruit and retain accomplished teachers to high-needs schools will harness the state's most important educational resource—its most talented teachers—to help every child in Mississippi learn. What follows are 20 provocative recommendations, organized within four domains, from some of Mississippi's finest educators on how to staff and support high-needs schools.

1. Growing Our Own

As in many other states across the nation, a great majority of Mississippi's high-needs schools are located in rural communities. While thousands of families call these rural areas home, it is often difficult to attract outsiders to teach there. Recent college graduates, in particular, tend to want to work in more cosmopolitan communities. Few options for housing may create even greater challenges for recruitment. Consequently, high-needs schools must focus their attention on developing talent from within, rather than merely attempting to lure educators from other regions. For example, outreach programs for high school students and paraprofessionals should be established to recruit local community members into the profession. In addition, pre-service programs—tailor-made to meet the challenges of working in high-needs communities—should be developed to ensure a caring, qualified, well-supported teaching profession.

For those already working in these communities, support should be provided to further cultivate their talent. One powerful tool for continued growth and development is National Board Certification. The National Board process offers an excellent opportunity for teachers to engage with their peers in conversations about student learning and teacher practice. Candidate support programs may facilitate progress by offering ongoing workshops and mentoring assistance for teachers pursuing certification. Mississippi is fortunate to have

an exceptional support system already in place. The World Class Teaching Program is a network for teachers pursuing National Board Certification, which offers summer trainings, a series of seminars throughout the year, and small group mentoring. Many teachers benefit greatly from the activities provided by the World Class Teaching Program affiliates across the state; however, these services must also be supplemented by additional time and support in their school community, especially in high-needs schools where teachers already face so many challenges in their daily schedules.

That is why the Mississippi NBCTs who attended the summit call for:

1A. Requiring more relevant courses of study in pre-service programs to prepare teachers to work with high-needs students (e.g., special education students, children of poverty, second language learners, etc.).

1B. Allowing teacher candidates to team teach with experienced teachers in order to share knowledge and reduce student-teacher ratios.

1C. Providing at least three professional leave days for teachers pursuing National Board Certification or renewal, as well as relief from extracurricular duties and assignments.

1D. Allocating state dollars to offer financial support and incentives for districts to implement the NBPTS *Take One!* program as a professional development opportunity for teachers in high-needs schools, using NBCTs as paid peer coaches and mentors.

1E. Requiring districts to support the World Class Teaching Program and provide a local coordinator for National Board Certification.

Over 45 percent of NBCTs surveyed at the policy summit ranked induction and mentoring support for new teachers as the *most viable* strategy for supporting and staffing high-needs schools.

2. *Ensuring Effective Professional Growth and Development*

Once teachers have been recruited into the classroom, they need "results-driven, standards-based, and job-embedded" professional development in order to sustain continued growth.[7] Well-planned professional development helps educators to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to ensure their students' success. Unfortunately, many teachers may never reap these rewards because they are forced to sit through in-service meetings that do not meet their individual needs.

For example, on the 2007 Mississippi Project CLEAR Voice Teacher Working Conditions Survey, 43 percent of teachers who responded expressed a need for professional development to help them with closing the achievement gap, but only 18 percent indicated that they have received at least 10 hours of such training in the past two years. On the other hand, only 25 percent expressed a need for training in methods of teaching, but 42 percent reported receiving a significant amount of such training. Worse still, little time is provided during the school day for follow-up and dialogue with peers about their teaching practices. On the 2007 Project CLEAR Voice survey, less than half (48 percent) of teachers agreed that the non-instructional time they receive was sufficient. Only one-fifth of Mississippi educators received at least an hour a day without student contact to plan and collaborate, and more than one-third (39 percent) received three hours or less each week. As a result, only half (51 percent) of teachers agreed that they have sufficient time available to collaborate with colleagues.

New teachers may face even harsher realities when it comes to professional development. Although they need tremendous attention and support while they navigate the myriad challenges of their first few years, many novices do not receive effective mentoring and induction services. On the 2007 Project CLEAR Voice survey, data

revealed a dearth of quality support for new teachers. Only one-half of the state's novices reported that they had been assigned a mentor. Even when they have mentors they may not be in the novice's same school or subject area. In addition, a number of novice teachers have been asked to serve as mentors themselves (397 out of 4,020 surveyed or about 10 percent). Granted, these numbers were not large, but the fact that there was any evidence at all of novice teachers mentoring other novice teachers is worth further investigation. High-needs schools, in particular, present myriad challenges for new teachers; therefore, strong mentoring and induction become a necessity to stop the "revolving door" of teacher turnover.

That is why the Mississippi NBCTs who attended the summit call for:

2A. Funding and implementing that state's mandatory mentoring program for all novices and/or teachers in need, supported by highly skilled, trained mentors who are compensated and provided release time from their daily schedule to collaboratively plan, coach, and observe their mentees.

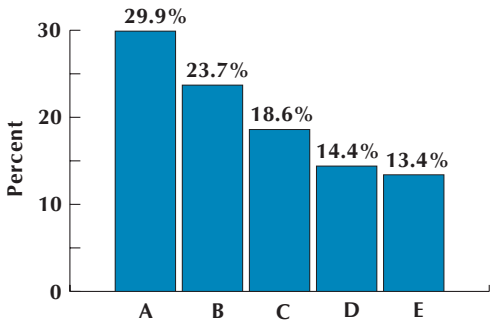
2B. Requiring all schools to distribute a PD needs assessment and establish a committee (led by teachers) to ensure learning opportunities that address those needs.

2C. Allocating one staff development coordinator position per high-needs school to provide PD support to staff (e.g., sustaining a resource room of curricular materials, organizing mentoring activities, demonstrating lessons in the classroom).

2D. Scheduling district-wide early release dates and allowing teachers within each school to decide how the time is spent.

NBCTs at the summit were asked which of the following professional development/support policies would be *most effective* in staffing high-needs schools with accomplished educators: 1) ensuring all professional development is aligned with NBPTS standards and providing support for *Take One!* (prioritizing high-needs schools); 2) creating a support network of NBCT PD providers and providing incentives to draw upon local teacher leaders for PD delivery; 3) creating a clearinghouse of PD materials, strategies and opportunities that are effective in high-needs schools (e.g., inclusion and cultural awareness); 4) creating incentives for districts to implement scheduling that allows job-embedded, high quality PD; and 5) requiring a school PD needs assessment and establishing a committee (led by teachers) to ensure learning opportunities that address those needs. Results of their survey responses are found in the graph below:

Percentage of NBCTs Agreeing that the Policy Would Be Most Effective



A. Creating a support network of NBCT PD providers and providing incentives to draw upon local teacher leaders for PD delivery

B. Requiring a school PD needs assessment and establishing a committee (led by teachers) to ensure learning opportunities that address those needs

C. Ensuring all professional development is aligned with NBPTS standards and providing support for Take One! (prioritizing high-needs schools)

D. Creating a clearinghouse of PD materials, strategies and opportunities that are effective in high-needs schools (e.g., inclusion and cultural awareness)

E. Creating incentives for districts to implement scheduling that allows job-embedded, high quality PD

3. Establishing Collaborative Leadership

In many of today's schools, principals harbor primary responsibility for leadership. During the course of any given day, administrators must provide guidance to their teachers, build trusting relationships with parents, and serve as ambassadors to the community, all while managing the daily tasks needed to operate a school building. Leaders must also ensure that their staff members have adequate facilities and resources, collaborative planning time, and ongoing professional development.

The nearly endless "to do" list of administrators lends credibility and support for the idea of collaborative leadership. A principal simply cannot do it all alone. As a result, effective school leaders should tap the knowledge and skills of NBCTs and other accomplished teachers to help organize and facilitate activities within their buildings. Unfortunately for the teachers of Mississippi, there is still a way to go toward establishing collaborative leadership in the state. According to the 2007 teaching and learning conditions survey, modest percentages of teachers report playing a relatively significant role in classroom decisions, such as selecting instructional issues (46 percent), setting grading and student assessment practices (48 percent), and devising teaching techniques (61 percent). Teachers are far less likely to report, however, that they or their colleagues play a significant role in school-wide decisions, such as hiring (5 percent), budgeting (5 percent), setting student discipline policies (20 percent), school improvement planning (17 percent), and determining professional development content (17 percent). In addition, only 40 percent of educators agree that they are centrally involved in decisionmaking about educational issues, and just half of educators agree that there is an effective process for making decisions and solving problems in their school buildings.

That is why the Mississippi NBCTs who attended the summit call for:

3A. Encouraging administrators and school leaders to remain current by participating in classroom instruction and working directly with students.

3B. Providing state funding to hire staff members to handle business and financial aspects of administration at high-needs schools, so that principals can lead and support their teachers more effectively.

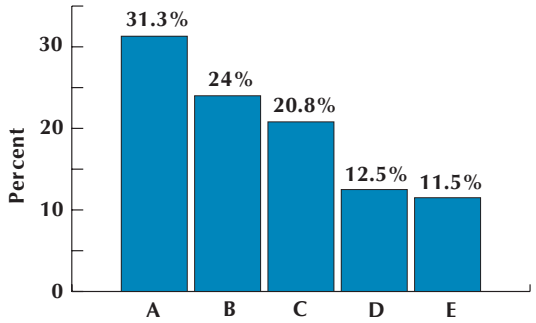
3C. Allocating funding to hire supervisory people to monitor duty areas (e.g., bus duty, lunch duty, etc.) so that teachers can participate in more leadership activities.

3D. Creating teacher advisory boards at all levels (school, district, and state) to ensure collaborative decisionmaking and input from classroom teachers.

3E. Enlisting accomplished veteran and practicing teachers to create videos to: 1) model effective teaching of specific grade level competencies; 2) demonstrate how to implement classroom management strategies; and 3) explain school policies and procedures.

NBCTs at the summit were asked which of the following leadership policies would be most effective in staffing high-needs schools with accomplished educators: 1) providing incentives for NBCTs to become school leaders; 2) ensuring principal preparation and professional development incorporate strategies to build professional learning communities and draw upon teacher leaders; 3) ensuring teachers have a voice in decisionmaking at the school, district, and state levels; 4) providing incentives to use NBCTs to create a clearinghouse of successful lessons and strategies for working with diverse learners in high-needs schools and districts; and 5) encouraging administrators and school leaders to remain current by participating in classroom instruction and working directly with students. Their survey responses are found in the graph below:

Percentage of NBCTs Agreeing that the Policy Would Be Most Effective



A. Encouraging administrators and school leaders to remain current by participating in classroom instruction and working directly with students

B. Ensuring teachers have a voice in decisionmaking at the school, district, and state levels

C. Ensuring principal preparation and professional development incorporate strategies to build professional learning communities and draw upon teacher leaders

D. Providing incentives to use NBCTs to create a clearinghouse of successful lessons and strategies for working with diverse learners in high-needs schools and districts

E. Providing incentives for NBCTs to become school leaders

4. Building School/Family/Community Connections

Teachers in many high-needs schools face tremendous challenges in building effective school, family, and community connections. In some instances, engaging family members can be difficult because the parents may still recall their own struggles in education. Teachers may have been viewed as enemies, rather than advocates. Consequently, school staff must work diligently to create warm, welcoming environments that encourage parents to visit and take active roles. In other situations, parents in high-needs communities may want to participate in their children's schooling but be strapped for time as they juggle multiple jobs to support their families. Teachers and administrators, therefore, must get creative when scheduling parent conferences and other important meetings.

Even with family involvement, the work of today's schools may require additional community resources. Teachers and administrators may be extremely devoted to helping their students, yet their children's needs may necessitate supplemental support from outside agencies. For example, intervention by social workers may be required to ensure a safe, orderly home life. Community volunteers may be needed to offer one-on-one or small group tutoring. Children's physical needs may call for medical and dental attention. Together, these sources of external support prove critical to the success of school reform.[8]

That is why the Mississippi NBCTs who attended the summit call for:

4A. Ensuring that teachers can regularly communicate with all parents and students by providing the necessary technological tools and translation services.

4B. Providing state incentives to school districts for achieving a minimum of 50 percent participation in family involvement events and activities.

4C. Scheduling regular forums to address community and parent needs at the district level.

4D. Implementing a "fair share" program to encourage family involvement by tracking participation at school-sponsored activities and then rewarding families with coupons and other incentives from community businesses.

4E. Utilizing school buildings for after-hours community events, such as health fairs, art shows, theatrical productions, and adult literacy classes.

4F. Tapping the knowledge and skills of NBCTs and other teacher leaders to serve as paid facilitators of family involvement activities and parent liaisons.

Conclusion

Insights from some of Mississippi's most accomplished teachers reveal that a variety of recruitment and retention strategies are necessary to attract and keep good teachers for high-needs schools. The NBCTs who attended the policy summit in Jackson eloquently expressed the importance of providing ongoing opportunities for professional growth and development, building collaborative leadership models, and establishing strong school-family-community connections. Most notably, the group also emphasized the dire need to focus on "growing our own" from within high-needs schools.

Even if accomplished teachers can be enticed to teach in struggling schools, they alone cannot be the sole answer to the teaching quality problems found there. Indeed, working conditions matter. Accomplished teachers must be provided with curricular resources to meet the needs of their diverse students. They must also work in modern school buildings with stocked science labs, up-to-date libraries, and reliable internet capabilities. They must have the time to collaborate with their peers to develop lesson plans, share ideas, and brainstorm solutions for improving student learning. They must be supported by their administrators to make sound instructional choices and offered opportunities to share in school-wide decisionmaking as well.

> "National Board Certified Teachers are among the most effective teachers in our classrooms today. The NBCTs who participated in this summit provided valuable input to build the best possible learning environment for Mississippi's students. This work is an example of how our National Board Certified Teachers are at the forefront of education reform."
>
> *—Kevin Gilbert, President, Mississippi Association of Educators*

One thing is certain: there is no silver bullet for staffing and supporting high-needs schools. The NBCTs' recommendations found in this report fly in the face of some of the assumptions that policymakers often hold. Without building awareness among policymakers, practitioners, and the public about what good teaching looks like in high-needs schools and the importance of National Board Certification for them, little progress will be made.

Fortunately, Mississippi has an untapped resource that has yet to be fully harnessed. The state recognizes the value of National Board Certification for improving teaching and learning and has invested heavily in supporting teachers through the National Board process. Policymakers should be proud of the state's 2,554 NBCTs and efforts to cultivate more. Continued investments in recruiting NBCTs to work in high-needs schools as well as connecting them–both virtually and face-to-face–with new and underprepared teachers in those buildings will reap benefits for years to come. Kevin Gilbert, president of the Mississippi Association of Educators, said it well: "National Board Certified Teachers are among the most effective teachers in our classrooms today. The NBCTs who participated in this Summit provided valuable input to build the best possible learning environment for Mississippi's students. This work is an example of how our National Board Certified Teachers are at the forefront of education reform."

Notes

1. Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wycoff, L. (2002). "Teacher sorting the plight of urban schools: A descriptive analysis." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* (24) 1, 37-62; Ingersoll, R. (1999). "The problem of underqualified teachers in American secondary schools." *Educational Researcher*. 28(2), 26-37; Mayer, D.P., Mullens, J.E., & Moore, M.T. (2000). *Monitoring school quality: An indicators report* (NCES 2001-030). Washington D.C.: NCES.

2. Sanders, W.L. & Rivers, J.C. (1996). *Cumulative and residual effects of teachers on future student academic achievement.* Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center; Cavalluzzo, L. (2004). *Is National Board Certification an effective signal of teacher quality?* Alexandria, Va.: CNA Corporation; Goldhaber, D. & Anthony, E. (2004). *Can teacher quality be effectively assessed?* Seattle, Wash.: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington; Vandevoort, L.G., Amrein-Beardsley, A., & Berliner, D. (2004). *National Board Certified Teachers and their students' achievement.* Educational Policy Analysis Archives. Retrieved on Sept. 8, 2006.

3. Alliance for Excellent Education (2007). *Understanding high school graduation rates.* Washington, D.C.: Author; Doherty, K. & Abernathy, S. (1998). *Turning around low-performing schools: A guide for state and local leaders.* Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Education.

4. High-needs schools are characterized by a mixture of interrelated student, teacher, and community factors, such as disproportionate numbers of students performing below grade level and those who move frequently from school to school. Other factors include large percentages of students who are second language learners or who come from single-parent or low-income families. Low-wealth communities that cannot afford to provide up-to-date school facilities and equipment, such as new technologies for students and teachers to have equitable access to teaching and learning resources, are also characteristic of high-needs schools. Still more factors include staffing patterns associated with disproportionate numbers of new, inexperienced, or lateral entry teachers, high teacher turnover rates, and low percentages of well-prepared, experienced teachers (e.g., National Board Certified Teachers).

5. According to the NBPTS website as of Jan. 22, 2007.

6. Swoger, P. A. (2002). *An investigation of National Board Certification in Mississippi.* Thesis (Ph.D.)—Mississippi State University. Department of Educational Leadership.

7. Information retrieved on Feb. 19, 2007 from www.nsdc.org

8. Shannon, G.S. & Bylsma, P. (2004). *Characteristics of improved school districts: Themes from research.* Olympia, Wash.: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. Retrieved Oct. 2, 2006 from http://www.k12.wa.us/research/pubdocs/DistrictImprovementReport.pdf

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