



What Does Washington State Get for Its Investment in Bonuses for Board Certified Teachers?

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RAPID RESPONSE

Washington State is set to spend nearly \$100 million in the next two years on pay bonuses for teachers who receive national board certification. This investment is supposed to improve the state's teaching force and encourage the most capable teachers to work in high-poverty schools. Does it accomplish those goals?

On December 15, 2010, Washington's Governor Christine Gregoire released her 2011–13 budget proposal, which called for suspension of annual \$5,000 bonuses for national board certified teachers (NBCTs) and the additional \$5,000 bonuses paid to NBCTs who teach in low-income "challenging" schools. Suspending these incentives is projected to save the state \$99.5 million over the biennium. Since then, advocacy groups, op-ed writers, and public officials have taken sides for or against suspending the bonus program.

This paper examines the available evidence in an effort to shed light on what the NBCT bonus program set out to do—namely, to reward strong teachers across the state and encourage them to teach in high-poverty schools—and whether it is achieving the desired effects. A study of the four years since the current incentive program began reveals that:

- The number of NBCTs statewide has nearly tripled, causing the state's program costs to escalate by about \$10 million per year;
- Even with an additional \$5,000 "challenging schools" bonus, fewer than 1% of Washington's NBCTs move from low-poverty to high-poverty schools each year;
- The proportion of NBCTs teaching in challenging schools is increasing, but only because teachers already in those schools are gaining certification and because the state's challenging schools list has grown each year;
- Washington's NBCTs appear no more likely than other teachers to stay in challenging school assignments;
- Some districts have worked hard to garner more bonuses for their own teachers. Per-pupil state NBCT bonus funding varies by a factor of more than 15 to 1 from one district to another, raising the question of whether bonuses are being distributed equitably across schools in the state.

As legislators consider whether to restore the program to the proposed state budget, they may want to review and adjust the program as it now operates and consider whether it is achieving what they had hoped.

Evidence on national board certification is mixed

Studies have produced conflicting findings on the benefit of NBCT certification. Some research has found that succeeding in the certification is a signal of a good teacher.¹ Other research shows that NBCTs, on average, do not produce better test score gains than non-NBCTs.² The effect of NBCTs on low-performing students is more consistently positive.

However accurate the certification process may be at identifying effective teachers, the process itself does not improve their effectiveness. The research evidence indicates that board certified teachers on average get the same student outcomes after receiving certification as before. Researchers Goldhaber and Hansen characterize that finding this way: “...the existing studies showing positive NBCT effects on students do not show that the process of becoming NBPTS certified itself adds to a teacher’s human capital.”³

A decade of NBCT bonuses in Washington State

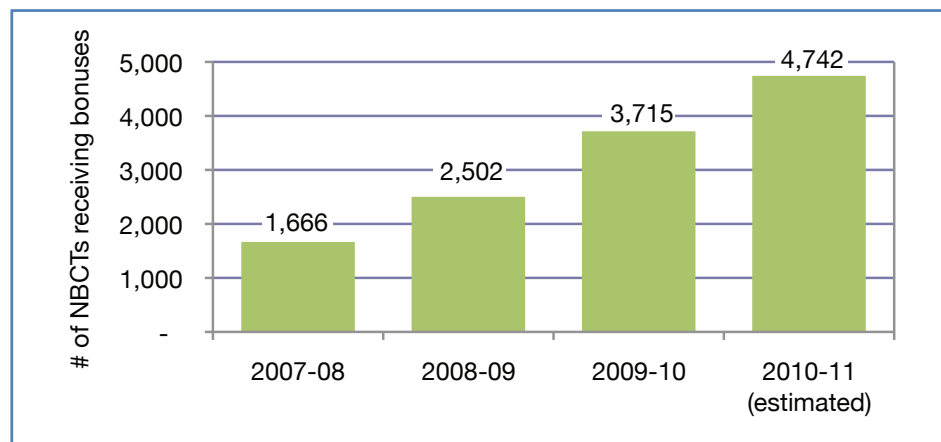
Monetary rewards for Washington’s board certified teachers are not new. In 1999, Governor Gary Locke supported the use of financial incentives to reward NBCTs. A pilot program paid bonuses of \$3,500 per year to NBCTs from 2000–01 through 2006–07.

In 2007, Washington State passed legislation that increased the annual base NBCT bonus to \$5,000, and created an annual bonus of \$5,000 for NBCTs who work in challenging schools (now defined as at least 70% free/reduced-price lunch for elementary schools, 60% for middle schools, and 50% for high schools). Both the \$5,000 base bonus and the additional \$5,000 challenging school bonus are payable for the ten-year certification period.⁴

The number of NBCTs—and the state’s costs—have grown since the 2007 legislation

Figure 1 shows the growth in the number of NBCTs receiving state bonuses since the 2007 legislation was passed. That growth has occurred statewide, as Figure 2 shows.

Figure 1: The number of NBCTs in Washington State has nearly tripled since 2007–08



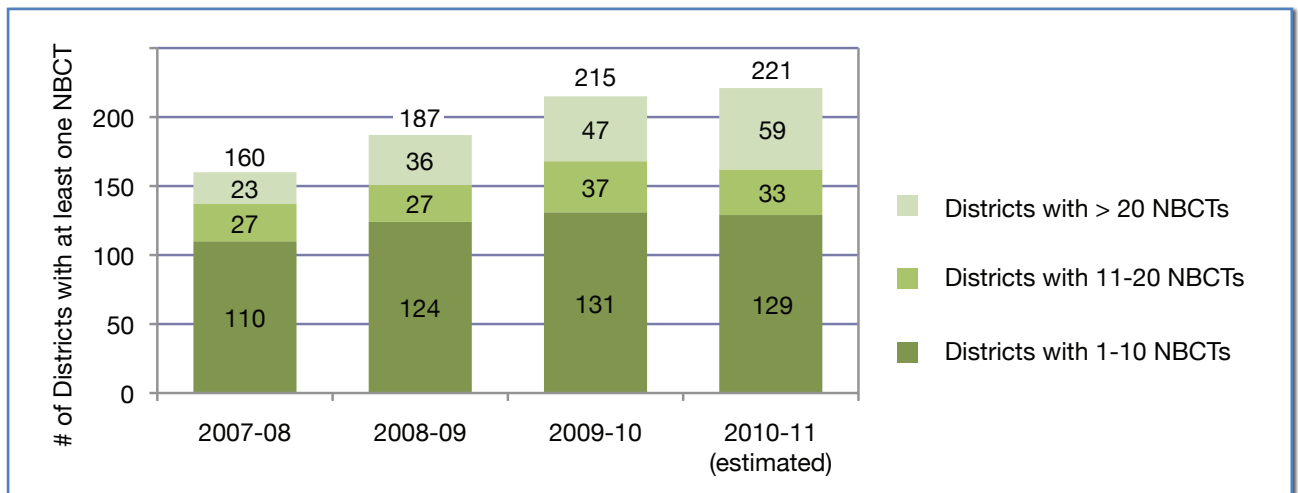
1 E.g., D. Goldhaber and E. Anthony, *Can Teacher Quality be Effectively Assessed? National Board Certification as a Signal of Effective Teaching*, Urban Institute, 2005.

2 E.g., S. Cantrell, J. Fullerton, T.J. Kane, and D.O. Staiger, *National Board certification and teacher effectiveness: Evidence from a random assignment experiment*, NBER Working Paper No. 14608, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2008.

3 D. Goldhaber and M. Hansen, *National Board Certification and Teacher Career Path: Does NBPTS Certification Influence How Long Teachers Remain in the Profession and Where They Teach?* CRPE Working Paper 2007_1R, Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 2007.

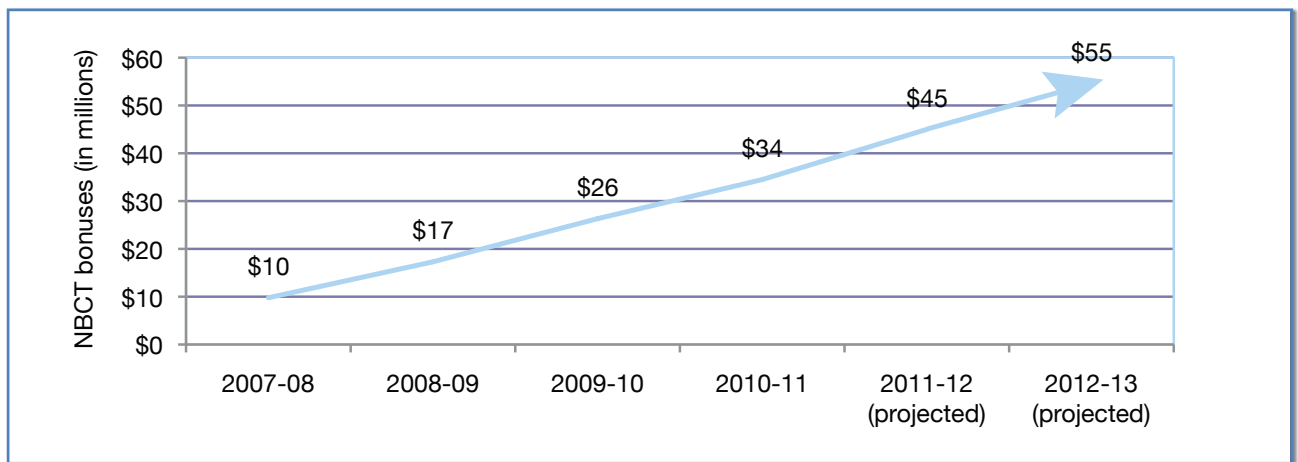
4 RCW 28A.405.415: “Bonuses – National board for professional standards certification” and WAC 392-140-973: “Salary bonus for teachers and other certificated staff who hold current certification by the national board – eligibility.”

Figure 2: By 2010–11, nearly 75% of Washington’s 300 districts employed at least one NBCT



The state’s annual bonus payments, which were under \$10 million in 2007–08, are expected to reach nearly \$35 million in 2010–11, and roughly \$55 million in 2012–13. Figure 3 shows the spending trend, including projections for the next two years that together total \$99.5 million, the amount that Governor Gregoire seeks to save by suspending the program.⁵

Figure 3: Annual cost of NBCT bonuses is increasing by about \$10 million a year



Are bonuses helping low-income students?

Less than 1% of NBCTs switched to challenging schools each year

In a 2006 survey⁶ of Washington State nationally certified teachers (391 respondents), 13% said they would be willing to switch to a high-poverty or struggling school with no special incentive. When asked whether they would consider switching if they were given a \$10,000 annual bonus, 46% said they would be “very willing” to move to a higher-poverty or struggling school, and 37% would be “somewhat willing.” Respondents in the Central Puget Sound region expressed even more interest, with 55% indicating that they were “very willing” to change schools if offered such a bonus.

⁵ *Proposed 2011-13 Budget and Policy Highlights: Education, Office of Financial Management*, retrieved Feb 12, 2011 at: <http://www.ofm.wa.gov/budget11/highlights/education.pdf>.

⁶ H. Loeb et al., *National Board Certified Teachers in Washington State: Impact on Professional Practice and Leadership Opportunities*, University of Washington College of Education, 2006, available at: http://www.cstp-wa.org/sites/default/files/impact_professional_practice_leadership_opp.pdf.

Legislators therefore had reason to believe that monetary bonuses would encourage migration of NBCTs to high-poverty schools. But in the four school years since the 2007 legislation, which provides NBCTs in challenging schools a total bonus of \$10,000 per year, less than 1% of NBCTs have switched each year to challenging schools.

When we consider net migration toward and away from challenging schools the picture is even less favorable. For example, of the NBCT teachers who had full-time teaching assignments in both 2009–10 and 2010–11, the migrations between challenging and non-challenging schools cancel each other out:

- 23 NBCTs switched from non-challenging schools to challenging schools
- 27 NBCTs switched from challenging schools to non-challenging schools

In total, the state saw a net migration of four NBCTs away from challenging schools. Teacher movements were slightly more positive in earlier years: among NBCTs continuously employed since 2007–08, there was a small net movement toward challenging schools.⁷

Explaining the paradox of increasing percentages of NBCTs in challenging schools

Published reports suggest a dramatic rise in the percentage of Washington NBCTs in challenging schools. According to one paper,⁸ the proportion of NBCTs in challenging schools increased from 14.8% in 2007–08 to 22.5% in 2009–10.

Given how few NBCTs switch schools, and especially how few switch poverty categories when they do, the reported annual increase in the number of NBCTs in challenging schools demands an explanation. In fact, there are two explanations—neither having to do with NBCTs switching schools to take jobs in high-poverty schools:

1. Washington State’s list of challenging schools has expanded each year, automatically increasing the percentage of NBCTs reportedly teaching in challenging schools—even when they do not switch schools.

Because of the way the “challenging schools list” is defined (schools join the list if they cross the poverty threshold, but schools that no longer qualify remain “grandfathered” on the list), the list has grown by 28% in the last two years. Of the schools now on the list, 37% would not qualify as challenging except for the grandfather clause.

About twice as many (6% vs. 3%) continuing full-time NBCTs gained challenging status simply by remaining at the same school from 2007–08 to 2010–11, and having their existing school take on challenging status, than by purposefully switching to a challenging school. In this way, the implementation of the challenging schools list turns out to have an impact on the reported percentage increases of NBCTs in challenging schools.

2. An increasing percentage of new NBCTs are already teaching in challenging schools.

The reported increases in the percentage of NBCTs in challenging schools have less to do with NBCTs switching to those schools than with the fact that an increasing percentage of teachers gaining national board certification are already teaching in challenging schools.⁹ In the 2008–09 school year, just under 25% of new NBCTs were already in challenging schools. In 2009–10 that number increased to more than 30% and remained at almost 29% in 2010–11.

⁷ Not all teacher migration toward or away from challenging schools is voluntary. For instance, 6 of Bellevue’s roughly 300 NBCTs had been teaching at Robinswood, the district’s only challenging school, until its closure required them to switch schools.

⁸ *Profiles in Excellence: Washington State*, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, retrieved March 6, 2011 at: <http://issuu.com/nbpts/docs/wacasestudy>.

⁹ To test whether new NBCTs switched to challenging schools during the certification process, 93% of the 1,195 full-time NBCTs receiving bonuses for the first time in 2009–10 can be traced back through the state’s personnel database to reveal that 30.3% of them already taught in challenging schools in 2006–07, before the challenging schools legislation was enacted.

Given that the NBCT certification process itself has not been shown to improve teachers, the lack of migration of NBCTs to challenging schools might be cause for concern.

NBCTs appear no more likely to stay in challenging schools than other teachers

The migration of NBCTs toward high-poverty schools envisioned by legislators in 2007 has not materialized. But if paying a \$5,000 annual bonus helps reduce turnover of good teachers in high-poverty schools—as some have claimed¹⁰—it might be viewed as money well spent.

Table 1 shows the retention of teachers in challenging schools for all continuing teachers between 2007–08 and 2010–11. In the 2007–08 school year, 3,389 of Washington’s teachers were in challenging schools; 119 NBCTs were in challenging schools. Four years later, 94% of NBCTs continued to teach in a challenging school, compared with essentially the same proportion, 93%, of all teachers statewide. On balance, continuing NBCTs appear no more likely than other continuing teachers to remain teaching in challenging schools.¹¹

Table 1: Washington State’s continuing NBCTs are no more likely to remain in challenging schools than other teachers

	07-08 through 10-11 (4-year period)	
	All teachers	NBCTs
Number of continuing teachers in challenging schools in 2007 – 08 school year	3,389	119
Of those who started in a challenging school...		
...Percent that remained in the same school	84%	78%
...Percent that switched to another challenging school	9%	16%
...Total percent remaining in challenging school	93%	94%

Do NBCT bonuses reach excellent teachers across the state?

Districts with extra resources are especially successful in leveraging state funds

Although Figures 1 and 2 suggest a broadly based increase in NBCTs across the state, a closer look reveals wide variations in state bonuses to teachers in individual districts.

Figure 4 represents the 100 largest school districts in Washington State. The horizontal axis is a measure of a district’s relative poverty (free/reduced-price lunches as a percentage of all pupils), and the vertical axis represents total state NBCT bonus payments to each district in 2009–10, including challenging school bonuses.

If NBCTs were distributed evenly in schools across the state, the districts would lie on a line that slopes upward—because NBCTs in poorer districts are much more likely to receive challenging school bonuses than NBCTs in more affluent districts (almost all of Yakima’s schools are labeled

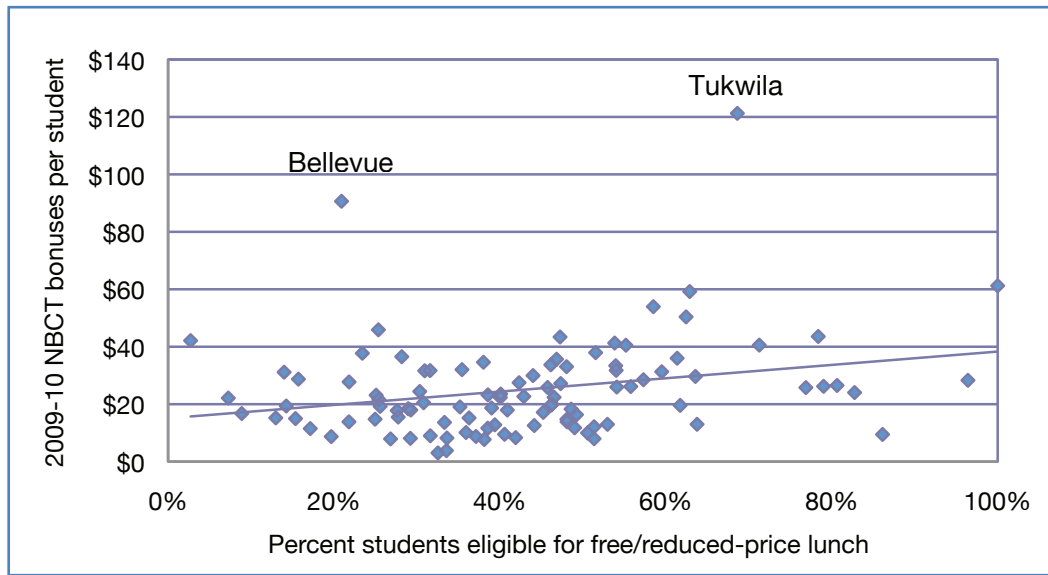
10 E.g., in testimony before the Washington State House Ways and Means Committee against HB 3193 2009-2010, retrieved March 6, 2011 at: <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/documents/billdocs/2009-10/Pdf/Bill%20Reports/House/3193%20HBR%20WAYS%2010.pdf>.

11 For simplicity of analysis, this study considers only teachers who had a single full-time assignment in the years under consideration, and does not consider teachers who left the state or left the profession entirely. It would be instructive to perform a more thorough analysis to see if differences can be discerned between NBCTs and other teachers with similar characteristics—but this look at the available evidence suggests that NBCT bonuses have not improved retention in challenging schools in Washington State.

challenging, whereas none of Lake Washington’s are). Indeed, Figure 4 reveals a positive correlation between state spending per student and district poverty.

However, two districts gain a disproportionate share of the state’s bonus money. In fact, the most conspicuous features of the plot are its two outliers, Bellevue and Tukwila.

Figure 4: Two districts demonstrate how local spending can influence state funding



Bellevue teachers are four times as likely—and Tukwila’s three times as likely—to have national board certification as teachers statewide. In 2009–10, Bellevue’s per-student state bonus payments were \$91, and Tukwila’s payments of \$121 were even higher because about 70% of Tukwila’s NBCTs received the additional \$5,000 challenging school bonus.

These districts capture disproportionate shares of state bonus money by investing significant amounts in helping teachers get certified:

“One thing Bellevue candidates have going for them is a level of support that enables them to have much higher passing rates than the national average. This extra support, which comes from the district and the Bellevue Schools Foundation, takes the form of help with fees, facilitators, a program coordinator and help with their video entries.”¹²

“In 2003, the Tukwila School District received a three year grant from the Stuart Foundation for the purpose of supporting a district-wide culture of accomplished teaching. The goals of the grant were to focus on powerful instruction and improve student achievement through two teacher certification pathways that are now an embedded part of Tukwila’s professional development model.”¹³

Both districts have taken advantage of private foundation financing to create a support infrastructure for NBCT candidates, with the result that more state funding per student flows to their districts. Other districts with a similar need to upgrade and reward their teaching forces might not be able to leverage state funds in this way.

¹² Bellevue School District, retrieved February 21, 2011 at: <http://www.bsd405.org/Default.aspx?tabid=2222>.

¹³ Tukwila School District, retrieved February 21, 2011 at: http://www.tukwila.wednet.edu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=56&Itemid=230.

Implications

The data related to Washington State's national board certification bonus program reveal some clear successes, not the least of which is the growth in the number of teachers motivated to undergo a rigorous certification process.

But the data presented here also reveal some areas that policymakers might want to consider when discussing the future structure and funding of this program:

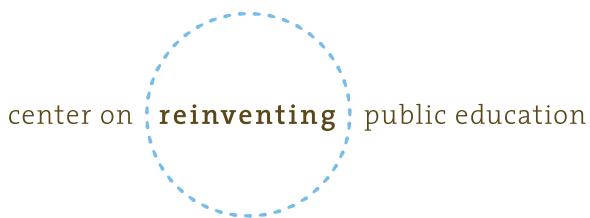
- The legislation has been ineffective at encouraging NBCTs to migrate to challenging schools, and NBCT bonuses have not improved teacher retention at challenging schools compared to all continuing teachers statewide.
- Local public and private money spent to boost candidates' pass rates in turn affects the flow of state funding, to the advantage of districts that can subsidize teachers in their certification process. If the goal is to reward outstanding teaching statewide, then the influence of local spending on state bonus payments might be cause for concern.

Methodology

The results reported here are based on data retrieved from Washington State's K-12 personnel database S-275 (final editions of 1999-00 through 2009-10, and the preliminary 2010-11 edition), and financial records supplied by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's (OSPI) NBCT program office. NBCT bonus eligibility continues throughout the school year; this paper makes use of information reported to OSPI through mid-January 2011.¹⁴

In order to assure valid longitudinal comparisons when studying movement to and from challenging schools, we consider full-time teachers (duty root 31, 32, 33) who had a single, full-time teaching assignment in the years under consideration, and compare them to NBCTs with full-time assignments during the same periods.

¹⁴ Our comparison of several years' data revealed that three medium-sized districts had not yet reported their bonuses to OSPI; to permit year-to-year comparisons, our data structures were amended to include entries for those districts.



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