

How to Create a Support Network for National Board Certification Candidates

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The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was established in 1987 and is supported by the U.S. Department of Education and private funding. Its mission is to operate a national voluntary system to assess and certify teachers who meet its rigorous standards of teaching performance, including a high level of professional commitment, subject area expertise, responsible monitoring of student learning, frequent reflection on the teaching practice, and interaction with fellow teachers as members of learning communities. The certification process is designed to engage teachers in teaching for individual student attainment. (For comprehensive information, see the NBPTS Web site at <www.nbpts.org>; see also McLean 1999.)

Several education organizations endorse National Board certification, including the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, and Pi Lambda Theta, the International Honor Society and Professional Association in Education. Updated certification and licensure standards for several states reflect the learner-centered orientation emphasized by NBPTS. Standards are being incorporated into preprofessional teacher education programs, school-university partnerships, graduate education programs, and inservice learning opportunities for teachers (Arnold and Sikula 1999; Auton, Browne, and Futrell 1998; Blackwell and Diez 1999; Browne, Freund, and Futrell 1999; Darling-Hammond 1996; Darling-Hammond 1999; Dilworth and Imig 1995; Ingvarson 1998; Moss and Schutz 1999; Weiss and Weiss 1998).

The certification process requires that each candidate develop a school-site portfolio reflecting various

aspects of teaching. Candidates show evidence of teaching practice through student work artifacts, videotapes of classroom interaction, and written reflective commentaries. A few common characteristics, such as use of group work in class, family involvement in the classroom, and participation in educational activities beyond the classroom, must be shown by all candidates in all certification areas, whether early childhood education, elementary school, middle school, or high school. Candidates must also pass a written examination on age-appropriate and content-appropriate teaching strategies.

Recognizing the Rigors of the Certification Process

Certification is a rigorous process. From 1987 through 1997, the passing rate for NBPTS candidates was about 25 percent. This offered a worrisome picture to prospective candidates and may have discouraged teachers from candidacy (Rotberg, Futrell, and Lieberman 1998). A few teachers have published accounts of the challenges and rewards of engaging in the NBPTS process (Areglado 1999; Benz 1997; Mahaley 1999; McReynolds 1999; Roden 1999; Swain 1999). Those reports attest to the difficulty of going through the process on one's own.

In recognition of the demands of the certification process, many state and local bodies initiated programs of instruction, mentoring, and support for candidates. Some programs also include financial incentives as candidate compensation. (The National Board Web site provides links to descriptions of states' support programs.) Mitchell (1998), Siciliano et al. (1999), and Shakowski (1999) describe different types of support

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efforts. Notably, Wolfson (1999) detailed how the effective contributions of mentors and a support network increased the rate of teachers who attained certification. In 1997, when the support initiative began nationally, there were 912 certified teachers in the United States. By 1999, the National Board roster had grown to 4,804, including candidates certified that year.

A Program of Support

My purpose in this article is to describe how a collaborative team of teacher education faculty and National Board-certified teachers led a program of support for candidates for National Board certification. The Northeast Regional NBPTS Support Network at Cleveland State University mentored nearly one hundred teachers in a three-year period. Ninety percent of candidates completed the series of working sessions and 70 percent submitted portfolios to the NBPTS. Over 50 percent received certification upon the first submission of their work and nearly all were certified upon resubmission of revised work. I will present an overview of the actions of the support network and a brief summary of program evaluation data. The State of Ohio provided funding for the project in the amount of about \$35,000 per year. Additionally, Ohio paid candidacy fees and offered a compensation package for teachers upon attainment of certification.

With hopes of not wearing out a gambit, I attribute the success of our support network to a series of factors that coincidentally begin with the letter F: focus, funding, familiarity, functionality, feedback, fear of failure, freebies and food, and fun.

Focus

Focus on the part of the support network planners is essential. Our core team consisted of a CSU College of Education faculty member who served as project director and program evaluator, a grant (budget) manager, and three NBPTS-certified teachers (NBC teachers) who served as facilitators during ten working sessions. Six other NBC teachers were hired to coach about five to seven candidates each.

We began by preparing a month-by-month action plan (see figure 1) of the main events that would take place. The project director coordinated all efforts that took place outside the working sessions, and the facilitators coordinated everything that took place during the working sessions and supervised the coaches. All of the NBC teachers described the sense of accomplishment they felt from having been given the opportunity to expand their roles as teachers to include facilitation of the professional development of their peers.

To foster candidates' success, the support network team planned a series of ten working sessions that would supply information about what the certification process entails, familiarize candidates with what to

FIGURE 1
Plan of Action

| Month | Action |
|------------|---|
| Sept.-Nov. | Recruit candidates Secure personnel commitments (contracts) Establish budget management protocol Make catering, parking, and accommodation arrangements Make distance learning arrangements |
| Oct. | Hold start-up meeting |
| Nov. | Begin working sessions (continues through end of April) |
| Dec. | Hold personnel meeting, share program evaluation to date |
| Feb. | Hold personnel meeting, share program evaluation to date |
| March | Make concentrated efforts with candidates |
| April | Hold personnel meeting, share summative program evaluations, reflect |
| June, July | Prepare final report and share with personnel, grantors |

expect, and provide advice regarding time management, preparation and selection of portfolio entries and artifacts, and videotape production. Approximately ten certified teachers (some from our team and some guest presenters) would show their own portfolios and videos. Facilitators would offer information on exam preparation. Considerable time was to be spent on peer and facilitator editing of drafts and critique of videos. All sessions would meet on campus; however, a few interactive distance learning sessions would be broadcast via real-time to another location to be more geographically convenient for some participants.

The project director attended every working session and met with the three facilitators immediately after each session for debriefing and planning. Personnel meetings brought the whole team together. Figure 2 presents the annual agenda for the support network. Each session lasted two hours (held on a weekday during the early evening) unless it is listed as a full-day, six-hour session (held on weekdays).

Funding

Funding covered compensation for the project director, grant manager, and NBC teachers. We also compensated guest speakers (university education faculty, a video trainer, and guest NBC teachers who shared their portfolios and videos). No one was expected to work without pay. Costs were mostly related to amenities for candidates (refreshments, parking passes, a final celebration, etc.) and materials and supplies (NBPTS guidebooks for each certification area, a variety of microphones for loan, etc.) The project funded two

FIGURE 2
Annual Schedule

| | |
|------------|---|
| SESSION 1 | Welcome Overview of the process Personal experiences Tips to get started Discuss timeline, determine time commitments |
| SESSION 2 | "What to do now that your box has arrived" Discuss National Board standards What is reflective writing? |
| SESSION 3 | Videotaping advice and practice Meet with video trainer |
| SESSION 4 | Certification area focus NBC teachers share examples of portfolios and artifacts |
| SESSION 5 | View passing videos: Identify how a video meets standards. View candidates' videos in small groups |
| SESSION 6 | Share videotapes, portfolios, provide feedback (ALL DAY) |
| SESSION 7 | Advice from education faculty. Edit portfolios and videos (ALL DAY) |
| SESSION 8 | Edit portfolios and videos |
| SESSION 9 | Edit portfolios and videos |
| SESSION 10 | Prepare for Test Center Assessment. Do scoring exercises |

graduate credits per participant. Importantly, we covered the cost of substitute teachers for candidates and NBC teachers for two days per person so that we could hold two full-day work sessions. Also, the facilitators were sent to NBPTS facilitator training institutes. Money allowed for dissemination of information about the project (Pershey 1998, 1999; Pershey et al. 1999) and covered other normal costs such as mailing, phoning, and copying.

Outside of the ten working sessions, two information sessions were held each year, one to provide orientation to prospective candidates (attended by over eighty teachers) and one to provide outreach and information to school administrators and community stakeholders. The latter session was offered to a live audience and also via distance learning.

Familiarity

The facilitators and project director made it a priority to get to know every candidate during the ten working sessions. The team was available to candidates by phone and e-mail throughout the process. Each coach worked with small groups of candidates who were attempting the same area of certification as the coach's (or a closely related area). During ten hours of coaching per candidate, emphasis was to be placed on critiquing portfolio entries, but coaches were free to respond to candidates' needs related to other parts of the process. Bonding within these small groups was an

important aspect of the support network. Small group members peer-edited entries and peer-critiqued videos. The ten-hour coaching commitment was also used for small group sessions, individual sessions, phone calls, and reading and responding to entries. Additionally, all coaches were present for the full-day sessions. Each coach kept a log of the time spent with each candidate. In total, with eight two-hour sessions, two six-hour sessions, and ten hours of mentoring, each candidate could access thirty-eight hours of support. Our team concluded that successful facilitation of teacher-to-teacher relationships was the strongest part of the support network.

Functionality

A certain amount of time was spent on transmission of information, primarily at the beginning of the process. This included providing guidance and advice, modeling, and answering questions. The candidates needed to see several examples of finished portfolios and listen to NBC teachers share their time management strategies. Most needed videotaping basics: how to work a video camera, where to place it, what doesn't work on camera (e.g., shiny transparencies or dry erase boards), which kinds of microphones work best when taping cooperative learning lessons, and so on.

The candidates mostly needed time to work in groups to help each other plan, write, and edit. Sessions were abuzz with conversation. The difference between writing to reflect versus writing to summarize, analyze, or critique was stressed over and over again. Two session agendas exemplify the emphasis on sitting down and getting to work. The first, a working session agenda, given as figure 3, happens to be a distance learning session. The objective on that day was to identify whether a video meets NBPTS standards. Candidates looked at videos that had passed, examined their content, and then compared their own videos in progress.

The second agenda, a full-day agenda (see figure 4), reflects a day when most candidates brought their laptop computers to engage in concentrated writing and/or brought printouts for peers, facilitators, and coaches to edit. We also wanted to have time for candidates to meet with education faculty to discuss any concerns they might have regarding theory, pedagogy, current research, and such. During the first year of the support network, a

FIGURE 3
Working Session Agenda

| | |
|------|--|
| 4:30 | View videos at host sites, discuss |
| 5:30 | Break |
| 5:40 | Plan which videos to share via distance learning |
| 5:50 | Show videos across sites, discuss jointly |
| 6:25 | Wrap up, plan for next week |

FIGURE 4
Full-day Agenda

| | |
|-------------|---|
| 8:30–8:45 | Continental breakfast |
| 8:45–9:15 | Science Educator "Big Ideas in Science Instruction" |
| 9:15–10:45 | Work time: peer-edit, view videos, meet with facilitators, work in small groups, or work on student artifacts |
| | Breakouts with science educator: |
| | 9:15–9:45 early childhood |
| | 9:45–10:15 middle childhood |
| | 10:15–10:45 science specialists |
| 10:45–11:00 | Break |
| 11:00–11:15 | Self-check: What am I accomplishing today? |
| 11:15–12:45 | Work time continues |
| 12:45–1:00 | Support network business |
| 1:00–2:00 | Lunch |
| 2:00–3:00 | Work time continues |

poll of the candidates revealed that they wanted the advice of a faculty member in science education. Documenting science teaching was difficult for the generalist educators. Plus, as this was the first year for certification in science, there were no available models for the science specialty candidates. We invited a university science education faculty member, who discussed teaching "big ideas" using crosscurricular theme cycles—ideas like migration, transformation, expansion—concepts to which all candidates related in some way. He then met individually with all candidates who needed to include science teaching in their submissions.

Feedback

To formatively evaluate the effectiveness of the program, short-answer or forced-choice feedback sheets were distributed at the end of each session. The facilitators and project director met after every session, reviewed the sheets, and acted on suggestions and concerns as possible. Some of the comments given after the distance learning session and the full-day session are reproduced below.

Q. How did you like our distance learning session today? What were the positive and negative aspects of this?

A. Rather cool! Like anything you do experimentally, there were a few glitches, but the technology is interesting. I thought it was great giving as much feedback as we could to different videos.

A. There was a chance for one-on-one contact during this session.

Q. How useful to you was the presentation by the professor of science education?

A. The "big idea" man was very helpful. I received clarification on my big idea.

A. Very! He helped me brainstorm general possible topics for my discussion tape.

A. He was a wonderful resource. He helped with my overall goal.

A. Super! He was a very smart man that gave super handouts and ideas.

A. Very helpful—it gave me some focus.

A. He verified that what I am doing is correct.

A. Outstanding! I was lost until today!

Q. How useful to you was it to have a full day session? What did you accomplish today?

A. I pulled everything together in my theme unit. I needed time!

A. Plenty. The uninterrupted time away from the classroom was super. Entry #5 is almost done!

A. I accomplished a more complete draft for "Documented Accomplishments." Today was perfect. I needed this time to be set aside for this purpose. Continue to provide the same opportunities: work time, readers, peer sessions.

A. Sharing finished pieces and work to complete math section.

A. Finished typing entry 1. Got feedback on my video, Exchanging ideas. The time off to focus and work on this project is super valuable.

A. A full day work session was always my desire.

A. I was able to outline the three remaining entries so that I can understand my direction in each. It was very useful to me because I had peace and quiet to think and organize. A facilitator read my entries and another facilitator critiqued my video.

A. Had an opportunity to work and interact with others.

A. I resolved my "big idea" and topic for entry 2. I received "approval" for my entry 4 video. I received clarification for entry 3's video. I need time to present material, get feedback, and reflect.

A. Got more organized. Gave me some concentrated time to work on my stuff. I like this format.

A. I appreciate the opportunity of having this time and feedback. Time is so valuable. You need large blocks of time to get anything accomplished!

We planned that our summative evaluation would assess the effectiveness of support in four areas: the portfolio process, the videotaping process, the examination, and the utility of interactive distance learning. In postproject surveys, candidates reported that they needed the most support in writing portfolio entries—writing clearly, writing to standards, and writing reflectively. Second, candidates needed help in producing videotapes: gaining technical skill, planning lessons that come across well on tape (lively, visual, etc.), and desensitizing themselves and their students to the presence of the camera. Exam preparation is important, but exam content is very unpredictable. Rather than trying to second-guess content, candidates needed practice writing

answers to mock questions while under time pressure and working on unfamiliar computer equipment. A representative from the testing site visited to introduce candidates to the computer set-up. That proved useful. Candidates evaluated interactive distance learning as a neutral contribution to the program. For most it was not more geographically convenient, and therefore it was not of any real benefit. Had the availability of distance learning saved travel time, it might have been a more useful contribution to the project.

Fear of Failure

Some candidates entered the NBPTS certification process without any outward signs of trepidation. For others, their anxiety was palpable from the start. Some had been singled out by administrators to go through the process. Others were worried about "losing face" among colleagues if they failed. Some were worried about having to take so much time away from family and work. Some did not feel that they were good writers and/or good time managers. Some just didn't like risk.

At the early working sessions, our NBC teachers offered some homespun advice: Don't undertake the certification process if the time is not right in your life. Don't try to get married, have a baby, build a house, get a master's degree, maintain a long-distance romance, or earn a supplemental income while undertaking certification. (Advice notwithstanding, with each year of our support network came the birth of a beautiful baby to a candidate mom!)

A local administrator was very helpful to the candidates from his district. He phoned each of them once a month and asked three questions about their progress: "What are you doing now?" "What are you supposed to be doing?" "How can we help you do (or continue to do) what you need to do?" Those are good questions to be asked by anyone coaching or supporting an NBPTS candidate.

Freebies and Food

The NBPTS process can be expensive. There is a sizeable candidacy fee and NBPTS materials are costly. In many states and districts, candidate subsidy and compensation plans mitigate those costs. When possible, freebies help alleviate stress on the candidate's pocketbook. We provided free parking, a free e-mail account and Internet access, access to a fax for local transmissions, and two graduate credits. We also loaned NBPTS materials and a variety of microphones to candidates.

As trite as it sounds, we found that candidates, like the infantry, travel on their stomachs. There's nothing worse than a room full of cranky, hungry teachers trying to concentrate at six p.m., so we offered healthy and satisfying snacks at each evening session. We started our full day sessions with breakfast and allowed

plenty of time for candidates to go out to lunch on their own.

Fun

It's not possible to complete a rigorous process like this without maintaining a sense of humor. We were fortunate that many of our sessions were kept on the lighter side by clever, witty teachers. It was fun getting to know one another and keeping tabs on everyone's spouses, children, students, and occasional mini-vacations. After portfolios were submitted we held a celebration dinner for candidates and their companions. We met again for dinner in November to celebrate confirmation of NBCT status.

The National Board certification process prompts teachers to inquire into their impact on individual students' learning. It can strengthen collegial relationships, build communities of learners within the classroom, and provide professional growth experiences with other educators. Given that candidate support doubled the expected passing rate for our candidates, our team came to believe that mentoring by NBC teachers is valuable and that programs of candidate support can actualize districts' and states' commitments to enhance opportunities for teachers and prepare our teachers and students for the twenty-first century.

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