As the largest and most highly publicized initiative to improve teaching in American schools, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) has raised great expectations. It has created rigorous standards for teaching and a system to assess and certify teachers meeting these standards; it has promoted financial incentives to reward National Board-certified teachers (NBCTs) and pushed for their use to leverage improvement in education. In its 18 years of existence, with nearly $400 million in support from government, corporate, and foundation grants, plus candidate fees, the NBPTS has certified more than 40,200 teachers (see Figure 1), about 1 percent of the U.S. teaching force. In the urgency of today’s ethos of accountability and “No Child Left Behind,” what has been the impact of this high-profile venture on improving American public education? Has it made its effects felt beyond the 1 percent of board-certified teachers? Is it the most cost-effective way to improve teaching? And is it raising the standards and performance of the teaching profession and the achievement of students? Or is it, as some critics have argued, a costly and largely misguided and ineffective effort to improve teaching and student achievement?
The answers to these important policy questions are strongly disputed by both supporters and critics of the NBPTS. Considering the opportunity costs of the millions of dollars spent on the NBPTS and with research documenting that the quality of teaching is the most important within-school variable determining student success, the stakes involved could hardly be higher. In this article, we consider these questions in light of published material and research on the NBPTS and telephone interviews we conducted with prominent stakeholders, leaders of the NBPTS, and policy analysts and researchers holding varied views, pro and con, on the topic.

History, Purpose, and Approach of the NBPTS
The idea for the National Board, first articulated in a speech in 1985 by American Federation of Teachers president Albert Shanker, was a centerpiece of the 1986 report of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy’s Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, titled “A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century.” The report called for the creation of a national board for professional teaching standards “to establish high standards for what teachers need to know and should be able to do, and to certify teachers who meet that standard”; to restructure schools “while holding them accountable for student progress”; to “restructure the teaching force, and introduce a new category of Lead Teachers …”; and to “relate incentives for teachers to school-wide student performance.”

Launched in 1987, the NBPTS describes itself as “an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan, and nongovernmental organization” whose “mission is to advance the quality of teaching and learning by maintaining high and rigorous standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do, providing a national voluntary system certifying teachers who meet these standards, and advocating related education reforms to integrate National Board Certification in American education and to capitalize on the expertise of National Board Certified Teachers.”

At the outset, the founders of the NBPTS had no idea how time-consuming and expensive the pursuit of its goals would be. It took six years of debate, planning, and development of the standards and assessment process before the first group of teachers was certified by the National Board. While the board originally thought its plan might cost around $50 million, few anticipated how much developing its standards and certification process and campaigning for its acceptance and adoption across the nation would ultimately cost. Total costs to date are about $400 million.

All the standards are based on the five core propositions of the NBPTS: 1) teachers are committed to students and their learning; 2) teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students; 3) teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring students’ learning; 4) teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience; and 5) teachers are members of learning communities. National Board assessments consist of two main parts: portfolio entries and assessment center exercises. Specific entries and exercises vary among content areas (at first just 2, but now 27), but the major parts are consistent. The portfolios consist of videotapes, student products, teaching artifacts, and candidate analyses of their teaching practice. Assess-
ments reflect specific knowledge of content areas and are meant to validate the content of the portfolios.

The fee for certification by the National Board is $2,300. According to the board, “A candidate’s efforts to achieve National Board Certification will likely take the better part of a school year and involve a total of 200–400 hours of work.” Certification must be renewed after ten years. One of the National Board’s accomplishments has been maintaining a high and rigorous standard for certification. Only about 50 percent of candidates are successful in their first effort at certification; this has helped the credibility of the venture with business and political leaders by demonstrating that not everyone meets the board’s high standards. At the same time, the cost-effectiveness of the board’s approach, its focus on what teachers should know and be able to do rather than on the student outcomes associated with teaching, and its methods of assessing teacher quality, are features that have attracted strong criticism—issues we will return to later in this article.

Whatever the criticisms of the NBPTS, its accomplishments are impressive considering the odds against the effort when it began in 1987. Efforts to create rigorous standards for teachers, to evaluate them against such standards, and to offer differential or “merit pay” fly against the egalitarian ethos of the teaching profession. Such initiatives have always faced strong resistance from teacher unions. Further complicating matters, the two national unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), were very much at odds at the time. Moreover, before the development of the NBPTS, there had been no demand from policymakers or the public for the creation of a cadre of master teachers. As Jane Hannaway and Kendra Bischoff of the Urban Institute have written, the NBPTS “had significant hurdles to clear—both on the supply and demand side. The organization had no certification process, nor was there an existing research basis for assessment. In addition, it was unclear why teachers would opt for this special certification given the prevalence of the single salary schedule.”

How did the NBPTS overcome these obstacles? In a nutshell, it gained extraordinary support from foundation and government leaders through a powerful combination of astute leadership, political savvy, skillful lobbying, and an organizational structure and process that gained legitimacy with educators by giving a majority of the places on the National Board to teachers—two-thirds of the 63 seats on the board, in fact. This led to long-standing criticisms that the board is controlled by the teacher unions, but it is another example of the political savvy of its founders.

As the early leaders of the board sought to reach teachers, they also sought to build the board’s legitimacy among state and federal policymakers as well as business and foundation
leaders. Among those working to build support were AFT president Al Shanker, a key force behind the idea from the earliest days, and Mary Futrell of the NEA. Along with this key union leadership, indispensable and remarkably effective leadership came from North Carolina governor Jim Hunt, chair of the board of directors for the first ten years, and James Kelly, president of the board for its first 12 years and a veteran of years of work in education and social policy for the Ford Foundation. Hunt and Kelly were ideal for their roles because of their prominence and wide acceptance as leaders in their respective arenas of politics and foundations. Both were well liked, effective in bipartisan efforts, and extraordinarily well wired into national networks of influence.

As part of the effort to cultivate acceptance of the National Board, Kelly told us that not only was the board composed of a wide array of “blue ribbon” representatives, in an effort to “get all the players to the table,” but also board members were allowed to bring guests to the meetings. Further, Kelly and Hunt traveled together and met with many key business and political leaders across the country. After the NBPTS began certifying teachers, outstanding board-certified teachers were often invited to meetings with governors to discuss why they had sought certification and what they thought about it. The enthusiasm, commitment, and testimonies of these teachers often helped governors see the value of supporting the NBPTS effort with incentives for teachers. Eventually, a nonpartisan policy environment at the state level was established in support of teachers certified by the NBPTS. All 50 states now offer regulatory or legislative support for National Board certification, and a number of states and more than five hundred school districts offer financial incentives. According to the NBPTS, these incentives range from grants to cover the $2,300 certification fee to a $6,000 salary increase in South Carolina and a 12 percent salary bump in North Carolina.

Assessing the Effectiveness of the NBPTS

The NBPTS can be evaluated in terms of its effects on institutional change, student achievement, and cost-effectiveness. On the institutional front, the development of national standards for teaching has clearly had a significant effect on the teaching profession in the United States. As several experts told us, the NBPTS has “changed the conversation” about teaching, within the profession if not outside it. As K–12 students are increasingly held to higher standards, the same is becoming true for teachers. But critics wonder what the NBPTS standards really tell us about the quality of teachers where it counts most: their impact on students and student achievement. Advocates of the National Board refer to the rigor of the standards as well as the process of certification to support their claims that National Board–certified teachers will improve the quality of teaching.

As evidence of the NBPTS’s impact on the profession, David Imig, the former president of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, notes how the standards have affected the design of many teacher-preparation programs. For instance, many master’s candidates expect their program to provide some preparation toward National Board certification. Further, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) now requires that teacher-preparation programs show the influence of NBPTS standards as a condition for accreditation. For example, education schools must provide evidence that their graduates can teach successfully.

As part of the way the NBPTS has “changed the conversation” about teaching, it has gained increasing acceptance in the education profession (including the national teachers’ associations) for performance assessment and for differential certification and pay for outstanding teachers. Even getting the door opened partway on these controversial items has been an accomplishment. Through its growing cadre of NBCTs, moreover, the board is potentially in a position to foster and aid real education reform through the expertise and leadership potential of the NBCTs as mentors, coaches, and school leaders.

At the same time, serious questions remain about the effects of NBCTs on student achievement and about the cost-effectiveness of the NBPTS’s approach to improving the standard of teaching. Certification remains quite expensive in both time and fees, and NBCTs still compose only 1 percent of the U.S. teaching force. In recent years, some state policymakers have begun to question their state’s ability to continue to pay the financial incentives created to encourage teachers to undergo the arduous board-certification process.

Beyond cost-effectiveness, however, a number of critics continue to regard the NBPTS as misguided and question the value of the whole enterprise. In his book, Common Sense School Reform (2004), Frederick Hess says, “In theory, [the NBPTS] is an interesting idea,” but “in execution, it is a disaster.” He sums up his criticisms as follows:

The NBPTS approach undermines commonsense efforts to link teacher compensation or recognition to their effectiveness as a classroom teacher, faculty colleague, and member of the school community. Instead, it has constructed an exhausting, expensive process that wastes time and money while suggesting that the measure of teacher quality is not whether students learn but whether teachers write sufficiently passionate essays about their “commitment” and “reflectiveness.”

Similarly, in a 1999 National Review article, Danielle Dunne Wilcox and Chester Finn wrote, “After a dozen years of R&D and the investment of $120 million, [the NBPTS] cannot
demonstrate that its blue-ribbon winners actually produce higher-achieving students. Worse, the board actually rewards teachers for being good at the opposite of what most parents think teachers should excel at. Its idea of a great teacher is one who embraces ‘constructivist’ pedagogy, ‘discovery’ learning, and cultural relativism—not one who imparts to students fundamental knowledge or even has it himself.” Thus, as some of our interviewees agreed, “The NBPTS is focused on inputs rather than outputs. It is all about the quality of the teacher and not about the impact the teacher has on students.”

A lack of research evidence about the effects of NBCTs on students made the National Board especially vulnerable to criticism. This was highlighted in the fracas that occurred in 2002 when one of the critics, J. E. Stone, of East Tennessee State University, released a seven-page report, “The Value-Added Achievement Gains of NBPTS-Certified Teachers in Tennessee.” Stone found that none of the 16 board-certified teachers in Tennessee who taught grades 3–8 (the only grades for which value-added scores were available) met a standard for exceptional teaching set by an incentive program in Chattanooga. Stone concluded that his results “present a serious challenge to NBPTS’s claims” and that “they suggest that public expenditures on NBPTS certification be suspended.”

In a “Goliath takes on David” scenario, this tiny report by a single professor prompted no less than the Education Commission of the States to empanel four independent experts to review the validity of Stone’s research. The panel acknowledged that Stone had addressed an important policy question and that the absence of studies of this type was due in part to “the Board’s own approach in identifying excellent teachers—examining practices rather than the learning of their students,” but concluded that Stone’s study was badly flawed (primarily because his sample of 16 teachers was too small to enable generalizations) and his claims were therefore completely unsupported.

This did not slow down Stone, who, in a recent paper with George Cunningham, claimed, “NB teachers don’t come close to producing the learning gains produced by teachers who have been identified as highly effective by means of a value-added assessment.” In this paper, Cunningham and Stone assert that a “good value-added assessment is more likely to accurately identify teachers who really pack a punch than the less accurate, more expensive process used to identify and certify National Board teachers.”

The idea of measuring and certifying teacher quality by student performance is being pursued by a recent alternative to the NBPTS, the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE), which was founded in 2001.

The ABCTE says that its proposed master-teacher certification “not only tests candidates in subject area knowledge, requiring them to perform at the distinguished level, but also requires teachers to demonstrate classroom effectiveness over time, as determined by a longitudinal study of student academic achievement. This link between classroom experience and student achievement distinguishes American Board certification from other master teacher programs—the students, not the process, are the central focus.” The ABCTE’s program will be less expensive and time-consuming than the NBPTS process, but it is also less recognized by states and school districts, in large part because it is not yet operating, due to trouble developing a practical measure of the effects of teachers on student achievement.

The NBPTS has endeavored to answer its critics by commissioning 22 independent studies. These research awards, funded by the U.S. Department of Education and private
donors, were based on an independent review process
designed and managed by the RAND Corporation. Three
studies completed in 2004 showed a positive correlation
between board-certified teachers and student success. The
first and most rigorous of the studies, by Dan Goldhaber and
Emily Anthony of the Urban Institute, found that on aver-
age North Carolina students in grades 3–5 whose teachers
were board certified scored 7 to 15 percent higher on tests
than students whose teachers attempted but failed to gain
NBPTS suggests. It is unclear how simply identifying more
effective teachers will improve teaching. Also, NBCTs were
actually less effective in the year they applied for the program,
perhaps because of the burdens of the application process.
Finally, all the reported differences between NBCTs and non-
certified teachers are relatively small, especially given the
program’s cost. Thus, for critics, these findings do not make
the NBPTS a resounding success.

Critics continue to question the National Board’s cost-
effectiveness and its ability to identify better
teachers. They wonder if the board’s process is
making anyone better, or if certification is sim-
ply a “gold star” given to the best teachers. In
response to the latter criticisms, the NBPTS points
to letters it receives from candidates for certification
saying that the board’s certification process
is the best and most valuable professional develop-
ment they have ever experienced.

Conclusions
Clearly, criticism and skepticism about the board
continue to exist. But it is also clear that the
NBPTS has changed the conversation about teach-
ing within the profession by setting and gaining
acceptance of its high standards and by persuad-
ing teachers and their unions to begin to accept
performance evaluation and differential certifica-
tion and pay for teachers. Considering how hard
it is to change the character and momentum of an
institution and a profession, this is no small
accomplishment. But one of the issues the NBPTS
is struggling with is getting the board-certified
teachers into the schools that need them the most.
Several studies have shown the positive impact of
board-certified teachers on low-income and
minority students, but several other studies have found that
a disproportionate number of these teachers are in high-
performing schools serving advantaged students, not where
they seem to be needed most (see Figure 2).

A major remaining bone of contention is the cost-effec-
tiveness issue surrounding the NBPTS. To complaints about
the costs for developing and campaigning for the accep-
tance of the NBPTS, Jim Kelly replies that the “total, one-time
capital costs should be [viewed] in the context of annual
expenditures on public education in the U.S. of about $400
billion dollars during the period of NBPTS development.
Thus, the proper public finance perspective is to ask, Is the
creation of this system justified at a total one-time investment
of [approximately] $200 million, about half of which was pri-
ately financed, during a period when total public expendi-
tures on public education were something on the order of

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$6 trillion?” About cost-effectiveness, Kelly adds that salary incentives for board-certified teachers should be compared with public education’s notoriously weak and sometimes perverse incentives, which actually reward teachers for getting out of teaching and becoming administrators.

Nevertheless, critics continue to question the NBPTS’s method and focus for measuring quality teaching and to call instead for what they believe should be simple and direct measures of effects on student achievement. The idea is attractive, but in a penetrating discussion of quality teaching, in the January 2005 issue of the Teachers College Record, Gary Fenstermacher and Virginia Richardson of the University of Michigan make clear that appraising teaching is not a simple matter. They differentiate between the task of teaching and the student achievement that one hopes will (but does not always) occur. Any adequate appraisal of teaching must consider both the teaching itself and the learning that results from it. Attention to just one or the other is inadequate and incomplete. National Board certification, in fact, requires that teachers gather and present evidence of their students’ learning as well as evidence of their teaching. However, critics, such as Dale Ballou of Vanderbilt University, raise doubts about the adequacy and validity of this process.

While it seems obvious that quality teaching requires strength in both knowledge of content and pedagogical techniques, getting the balance right between these components remains controversial. Except where individuals are self-taught, learning is a jointly produced outcome, involving effort by both a teacher and a learner. The pedagogical techniques help engage and communicate to the learner. Fenstermacher and Richardson stress: “We all know that learners are not passive receptors of information directed at them. Learning does not arise solely on the basis of teacher activity … [I]t follows that success at learning requires a combination of circumstances well beyond the actions of a teacher.” Consequently, they conclude, it makes sense to appraise the dimensions of both the task and the achievement of teaching. If there is no recognition of this difference, then it is hard to recognize some of the NBPTS’s important virtues and easy to be impatient with it.

As we have reflected about the impact of the NBPTS and its board-certified teachers, who still constitute only 1 percent of all teachers, it seems that the National Board and education reformers need to give far more attention to trying to increase the cost-effectiveness and the multiplier effects of board-certified teachers as leaders and exemplars. Greater emphasis and attention—by the board, by schools and school districts, and by reformers—to structuring, encouraging, and supporting the leadership roles that NBCTs can and should play could maximize the influence of these teachers as coaches, mentors, and leaders for other teachers. Research is only now emerging that explores the social and productive consequences for schools of introducing the status differences associated with NBCTs into the egalitarian ethos of public school teaching. For NBCTs to affect the greater populace of teachers and students, their expertise must be shared, which is not easily accomplished in the typical milieu of schools, where teachers usually work as isolated solo practitioners. Given the increasing emphasis being placed on shared or distributed leadership within schools, the potential of sharing the expertise of NBCTs is especially significant and important for efforts to reform education, for the teaching profession, and for education leadership.

**Help Where It’s Needed? (Figure 2)**

Except in California, board-certified teachers are less likely than other teachers to be working in schools where the poverty rate is high.

**Board-Certified Teachers Who Work in High-Poverty Schools, 2004**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Board-certified</th>
<th>All Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>36</td>
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