

# Staffing High-Needs Schools: Insights from the Nation's Best Teachers

*What will it take to entice highly accomplished teachers to work in the nation's neediest schools? Researchers from the Center for Teaching Quality decided to ask the teachers themselves.*

By Barnett Berry

**R**ECRUITING and retaining good teachers for high-needs schools may be the most vexing problem facing America's education policy makers. Study after study confirms that poor children and children of color are far less likely than their peers to be taught by good teachers — no matter how “good teacher” is defined. Teachers who are better trained, more experienced, and fully licensed in the subjects they teach are more likely to be teaching in low-poverty schools, serving more academically advantaged students.<sup>1</sup> The same holds true for teachers who generate higher student test scores and for those who earn National Board Certification, a credential granted by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS).<sup>2</sup>

As have many businesses, education has tried a range of incentives to entice people to tackle challenging assignments. As teacher shortages have escalated, states and school districts have launched a slew of such efforts.

A few years ago, the Massachusetts Signing Bonus Program and the New York Teaching Fellows Program sought to recruit teachers for challenging schools. The former effort paid a \$20,000 premium for talented individuals to teach in high-needs schools. Both encourage ■ *BARNETT BERRY is president and CEO of the Center for Teaching Quality, Hillsborough, N.C.*



aged recruits to bypass teacher education and move quickly to fill growing vacancies. More recently, Guilford County, North Carolina, launched “Mission Possible” — an incentive program that pays algebra teachers up to \$14,000 in bonus money if they teach in high-needs schools and their students “show solid progress on state exams.” In nearby Charlotte, teachers can earn \$3,000 for teaching in high-needs schools and another \$2,500 if they are successful and stay.

The U.S. Department of Education recently launched its \$99-million Teacher Incentive Fund designed to recruit and retain teachers for high-needs schools and to pay them more for higher student performance. This federal program funded 34 state and school district programs in fiscal year 2007.

In New York City, the teacher union and the administration have offered a 15% salary increase, coupled with other inducements, as a way to entice teachers with at least five years' experience to teach in the city's lowest-performing schools. Launched in 1999, the effort has not generated much evidence of effectiveness. Just recently, the district announced a \$30-million pay-for-performance program targeting its 200 highest-need schools.

Efforts such as these have, in retail parlance, a great deal of "curb appeal" for high-needs districts. But for incentive programs to be truly successful, policy makers must understand the multiple factors that influence teachers' decisions about where to teach. The issues are far from simple, and often a number of recruitment and retention myths get in the way of the facts. Four of the most pervasive myths include:

- financial incentives alone are sufficient to entice talented teachers to high-needs schools;
- effective teachers can get the job done no matter the school context;
- incentives that entice some teachers will entice all teachers; and
- individual accomplished teachers can fix high-needs schools.

Granted, not many efforts to entice and keep high-quality teachers in high-needs schools have been formally studied or evaluated.<sup>3</sup> Some studies currently under way will be years in the making. In our own efforts at the Center for Teaching Quality to catalog and assess these recruitment and retention reforms, we found few programs that had management information systems and evaluation designs in place that could provide policy makers with the effectiveness data they need.

More sound research is clearly needed. But in this article I take a different tack. By drawing on the wisdom of some of the nation's most accomplished teachers — those who are National Board Certified — I hope to bring more reality-based solutions into the policy debate. While policy makers do not necessarily ignore the opinions of accomplished teachers on purpose, they most often hear from policy gurus, union leaders, school administrators, labor economists, and educational researchers. The cacophony from the usual suspects often drowns out the voices of classroom experts.

To be sure, our best teachers are busy serving stu-

dents and families, and they have few channels through which to translate their knowledge about what works for students into insights and ideas that can help shape effective policy.

## INSIGHTS FROM THE NATION'S HIGHLY ACCOMPLISHED TEACHERS

With support from the National Education Association, the Center for Teaching Quality was able to work with more than 1,700 National Board Certified Teachers® (NBCTs) from five states in a series of state policy summits that gave the teachers opportunities to examine the recruitment and retention research and take part in structured dialogues with policy makers. Summits for NBCTs were held in North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Washington. Accomplished teachers listened to the states' leading policy makers and to fellow educators. Then they took part in highly structured, small-group work sessions. After the summits, the NBCTs remained connected and continued the conversation via our Teacher Leaders Network — a moderated virtual study group in which they continued to refine their thinking and provide more details regarding how and why certain recruitment and retention strategies would or would not work. Across the five states the NBCTs laid out a comprehensive list of 142 specific policy recommendations that, if implemented, they believe would significantly alleviate the nation's problems in staffing high-needs schools. I've summarized and organized their ideas into five major recommendations.

**1. Transform the teaching and learning conditions in high-needs schools.** Because accomplished teachers know a great deal about how to teach, they are cognizant of the conditions needed to help all students meet high academic standards. "Teaching high-needs students is a whole different world," said Jane Jordan Jaeger, an NBCT from Mt. Healthy, Ohio. NBCTs recognize that preschool education, social-service supports, and technological tools are critical "levelers" that help ensure that every student can meet 21st-century civic and labor-market demands. NBCTs are aware of the research on the positive influence of early childhood education for high-needs students.<sup>4</sup> They also know they need to teach all students well, including those whose parents work two jobs or struggle with literacy themselves. NBCTs also reported having to teach more students with behavioral and social challenges in recent years. This change calls for new strategies and new alliances with a range of other local and state agencies. In addition, they reported a dearth

of up-to-date technology and an inadequate infrastructure for introducing students to 21st-century tools.

For most NBCTs, these resource issues come to mind when they consider the possibility of teaching in high-needs schools. But the critical issue of class size is even more important to them: many NBCTs would teach in a high-needs school if they had what they believed to be a reasonable student load. Unfortunately, according to a recent survey of statewide teaching and learning conditions that the Center for Teaching Quality conducted in Ohio, only 39% of teachers reported that the number of students they teach is reasonable if they are to help all of their students succeed.<sup>5</sup> As Jaya Neal, an NBCT from Cleveland, noted, “Resources are not distributed equitably. There are schools with everything and schools with nothing. The quality of education is sometimes determined by zip code.”

At the policy summits, the NBCTs embraced accountability, but they found that their own states’ high-stakes testing programs and the structures created by No Child Left Behind do not adequately recognize growth in student achievement and can be insulting to teachers’ professionalism. In fact, the majority of NBCTs believe that the current proficiency-based system of testing and incentives does little to encourage effective teaching. Consequently, this system can discourage teachers from moving to high-needs schools, where the challenges are greater and the bonuses more difficult to earn.

Business leaders from across the nation call for teachers to help their students compete with peers from Japan, China, and Singapore, as well as many European nations. However, teachers in those nations tend to have 10 to 20 hours each week to collaborate with their colleagues during the workday on such matters as planning, observing lessons, and analyzing student work.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, in a recent statewide survey, over 83% of Washington teachers reported that they have less than two hours per week to devote to learning with their colleagues.<sup>7</sup>

Some other recommendations on improving conditions for teaching in high-needs schools:

- Ohio NBCTs called for universal access to pre-schools staffed by licensed early childhood specialists, along with incentives for specially trained teacher leaders to work with families to bridge the gap between home and school.

- South Carolina NBCTs suggested targeted state funding to ensure that challenging schools could offer supportive working conditions for teachers, including access to state-of-the-art technology and adequate facilities and resources.

- NBCTs from Ohio proposed calculating teacher/student ratio based on *actual* students per classroom and using the pre-K-3 standard of one “highly qualified” teacher for every 18 students in high-needs schools.

- Washington NBCTs called for restructuring the student day to create a continuous three-hour block each week for teacher-led collaboration to improve student learning.

## **2. Prepare and support teachers for the specific challenges posed by working in high-needs schools.**

The variety of student needs, coupled with large class loads, makes teaching difficult in high-needs schools. Shelly Hanahan, an NBCT from Upper Arlington, Ohio, who has 22 years of classroom experience, said it well:

Teachers are faced with learners that are as diverse as ever, including those who do not speak English as their primary language and those with learning or emotional disabilities, hearing impairments, or those who are medically fragile. We must teach them all.

Many teachers enter the classroom unprepared to work with high-needs students. NBCTs may have the “right stuff” for teaching in their current schools, but they may not have the knowledge of the community and of the culturally relevant pedagogy that will enable them to teach effectively and to work well with their new students and colleagues. “We have general knowledge about children and their development,” said an NBCT from the Oklahoma summit, “but we don’t receive specific knowledge about their beliefs, customs, and learning styles. We need to have training that is much broader than we traditionally receive.” Consequently, ongoing professional development becomes a top priority.

In a 2006 statewide survey of North Carolina teachers, the Center for Teaching Quality found that over 60% of the state’s teachers are now teaching second-language learners, while only 9% have had more than 10 hours of professional development in working with these students.<sup>8</sup> The NBCTs emphasized the fact that many teachers do not want to teach in schools where they cannot be successful. They know what it takes to be effective, but most professional development programs do not provide them with what they need. NBCTs want the kind of professional development that research evidence has defined as effective — job-embedded, focused on student work, and done in collaboration with peers.

Many of the states and districts offer mentoring and induction programs for novices, but they are woefully insufficient. “There is no time to go in-depth with men-

toring,” reported one Washington NBCT. “And we certainly cannot go deep enough in pedagogy.” Her colleague added, “There is a lack of quality in mentor pairing, too. In fact, a lot of district administrators just put a body with a body.”

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Among the recommendations of the NBCTs were these:

- NBCTs in all five states called for fully funding statewide mentoring programs so that all new teachers would receive high-quality support and training in such areas as cultural competence and differentiated instruction.

- Oklahoma NBCTs also recommended that every teacher education program require all prospective teachers to complete at least one high-quality, sustained field experience in a high-needs school so they could be better prepared for handling the challenges.

**3. Recruit and develop administrators who can draw on the expertise of specially prepared teacher leaders.** Regrettably, too few administrators know how to support teachers’ efforts to educate all children at high levels or how to nurture teacher leaders. At the Washington policy summit, one NBCT lamented:

I teach in a high-needs school. Since I started there, I’ve had 14 administrators. They don’t know how to support us, don’t understand what National Board Certification is all about. They do not have the right training. The administrators must be educated.

A number of other NBCTs at the summits reported that their principals were threatened by their leadership potential. Some, like Georgia Abeyounis from rural North Carolina, spoke about feeling “yoked” by school administrators who forced them to teach “rigid six-point lesson plans that fail to take into account their expertise and knowledge of their students’ academic and social needs.” Accomplished teachers like Ms. Abeyounis expressed their concerns about this rigidity and stated that they do not want to teach in a school where their expertise is not valued and respected.

Many NBCTs are ready to lead in a number of ways: as teacher educators for preservice teachers, as mentors for novices, and as coaches for their struggling colleagues. Most want more time to spread their expertise in using

data, developing powerful assessments, creating adaptive curricula for diverse learners, and reaching out to parents. However, there are often no pathways that would allow them to do so. Most school districts do not have the resources to release NBCTs for such leadership roles. And when resources are available, district leaders often lack the training and experience to maximize the leadership potential of NBCTs.

Not surprisingly, the NBCTs had some ideas to offer in this regard as well:

- In North Carolina, NBCTs called for university-based administration programs to engage NBCTs or other accomplished teachers in training future principals. They suggested that school districts fund 11-month school leader positions for these teacher leaders so that they could assist in curriculum support, professional development, and other school improvement efforts.

- Washington NBCTs called for creating a new salary schedule that would establish different levels of teacher mastery with accompanying compensation and professional growth opportunities, including roles for accomplished teachers to lead professional learning communities and leverage powerful student learning data from authentic accountability systems.

- Washington NBCTs also recommended providing incentives for administrators to complete a *Take One!*<sup>®</sup> entry so that they could become more familiar with the power and potential of the certification process. *Take One!*, designed by NBPTS, offers a standards-based approach for linking teacher practices to student learning by assessing teachers on a preselected video portfolio entry from any certificate area of National Board Certification.

- Ohio’s NBCTs went a step further and proposed the establishment of a leadership academy within each district to prepare teachers and new administrators for successful collaborative leadership.

**4. Create a menu of recruitment incentives, but focus on growing teaching expertise within high-needs schools.** A number of NBCTs have witnessed firsthand that monetary incentives — even large ones — are insufficient to recruit and retain good teachers in high-needs schools. Supportive principals, freedom to use professional judgment, and a guarantee to work with like-minded and similarly skilled colleagues mean more to good teachers than extra pay.

This does not mean that policy makers shouldn’t offer financial incentives for NBCTs to teach in high-

needs schools. For most NBCTs, they certainly should. But the National Board assessment process is a powerful professional development tool, and it could be used to drive teacher recruitment that would help meet the needs of the nation's most challenging schools. However, the process needs to be promoted among all teachers. While North Carolina offers a 12% annual salary increase and South Carolina offers a flat \$7,500 for the life of the certificate, the NBCTs believe that additional financial incentives should be offered to those NBCTs who also teach in high-needs schools.

The NBCTs at the summits were in general agreement that the last thing policy makers should do is develop a single incentive to attract accomplished teachers to high-needs schools. They focused instead on creating a menu of recruitment incentives to match the specific needs of different teachers. The needs of an accomplished, single, 25-year-old graduate of a teacher education program are likely to differ from those of a 58-year-old career switcher and from those of a 45-year-old veteran who has taught successfully for 22 years but now has three children in college. The NBCTs also recognized that life circumstances and geography can limit recruitment of teachers for their states' more isolated rural schools.

The best strategy then may be to "grow your own" accomplished teachers from within high-needs schools. For those teachers already at high-needs schools, however, the cost of becoming an NBCT may seem out of reach. As Beth Bley, an NBCT from Putnam City Schools in Oklahoma, noted:

I was the second NBCT at my high-needs school. I was really lucky to have the help of a colleague who had already earned a certificate. In most high-needs schools, with all the demands, there just are not enough resources of people and dollars available for teachers to try to obtain National Board Certification.

To support accomplished teachers who pursue certification and to entice other high-quality professionals to work in high-needs schools, the summit NBCTs recommended the following:

- NBCTs from all states recommended that states offer special financial incentives and supports to high-needs schools that grow their own NBCTs. For example, North Carolina's NBCTs proposed offering a 1.3 full-time equivalent (FTE) for every new NBCT hired by or "grown" in high-needs schools.

- Washington NBCTs called for offering an additional stipend of 20% (or a minimum of \$10,000) per year as a way of supporting and retaining accomplished

teachers who teach in high-needs schools.

- South Carolina NBCTs called for providing accomplished teachers with a menu of possible incentives for teaching for three to five years in high-needs schools, including housing subsidies, transportation and gas allowances, signing and retention bonuses, salary supplements, moving expenses, and college loan forgiveness for teachers or their families.

- South Carolina and North Carolina NBCTs also called for offering preparation and incentives for cohorts of NBCTs to move to high-needs schools as a team.

**5. Build awareness among policy makers, practitioners, and members of the public about the importance of National Board Certification for high-needs schools.** The vexing problems of staffing high-needs schools are solvable. Over 1,700 highly accomplished teachers have crafted a number of policy recommendations based on research evidence and their experience. However, too few policy makers and local education leaders understand what NBCTs know and can do — both in determining appropriate instructional strategies and in shaping policies and programs that will successfully recruit and retain good teachers for our most challenging teaching and learning environments. Strong outreach efforts are required.

There is no question that accomplished teachers cannot lead if colleagues, administrators, policy makers, and the public do not know how and why they are effective. Researchers have found that, when NBCTs are present in a critical mass at a school, their teaching talent can "spill over" to other teachers. However, it is one thing for teachers to pass muster as NBCTs; it is another for their knowledge and skills to be recognized, used, and spread.<sup>9</sup>

A number of obstacles keep many NBCTs and other accomplished teachers from influencing their teaching colleagues or administrators and policy makers. In some cases, attitudes create a serious barrier. As Mary McClellan, an NBCT and a K-12 science coordinator from Issaquah, Washington, noted:

The work needed to be done to provide all students the highest level of learning is huge. I think that one of the pieces that would facilitate getting this task done for students would be a culture shift that would actually promote teacher leadership . . . that accomplished teachers would actually be seen by administrators and school board members as teacher leaders and instructional experts — vital parts of the leadership of schools and districts.

Once again, the NBCTs offered their recommen-

dations for spreading the word:

- North Carolina NBCTs suggested that elected lawmakers or public officials in a state spend time with them and with other accomplished teachers in school settings and at the policy table.

- The Oklahoma and Washington NBCTs recommended that accomplished teachers design and provide training to educate administrators, school board members, and university professors about the National Board process, as well as about supporting and making good use of NBCTs in schools.

## CONCLUSIONS

Even if accomplished teachers can be enticed to teach in struggling schools, they cannot be the sole solution to the problems of providing high-quality teaching in those schools. There simply is no silver bullet for staffing and supporting high-needs schools. The recommendations of the NBCTs fly in the face of some of the assumptions that policy makers often hold with regard to staffing high-needs schools. Without building awareness among policy makers, practitioners, and members of the public about what good teaching in high-needs schools looks like and about the importance of National Board Certification for these hard-to-staff schools, little progress will be made.

Insights from some of the nation's most accomplished teachers reveal that salary incentives alone will not suffice to attract and retain good teachers for high-needs schools. Working conditions matter — most notably, access to good principals and skilled colleagues, smaller class sizes and student loads, high-quality professional development, and classroom resources necessary to help students meet high academic standards. NBCTs believe that the bulk of incentives should focus on growing accomplished teachers from within high-needs school.

The voices of the NBCTs have begun to be heard. In North Carolina, S.B. 1479, which passed both the Senate and the House, will now provide additional support to high-needs schools, including stipends for NBCTs who serve as nonadministrative instructional leaders; academic freedom for accomplished teachers to use research-based practices that go beyond the standard course of study; increased numbers of teachers to reduce class size; incentives to attract NBCTs; and extended 11-month contracts to enable teacher leaders to assist with curriculum and professional development. In Washington — and in direct contrast to the Georgia NBCT incentive policy — Gov. Chris Greigore recently signed H.B. 2262, which provided all

NBCTs a bonus of \$5,000 (adjusted annually for inflation) for the 10 years of the certificate and an additional \$5,000 for those who teach in high-needs schools (currently defined as schools with 70% or more students eligible for subsidized lunch).

No doubt the work at the NBCT summits was merely a starting point on the way to recruiting and retaining accomplished teachers for high-needs schools. Much more time and effort need to be committed to turning these accomplished teachers' visions into realities. Perhaps Carolyn Banks, the keynoter at the North Carolina summit, said it best, "A thousand-mile journey has begun toward placing our best teachers in the schools that need them the most." One thing is certain: it is time that our nation's policy makers listened to the experts, those accomplished teachers who serve our nation's schools and students well every day.

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