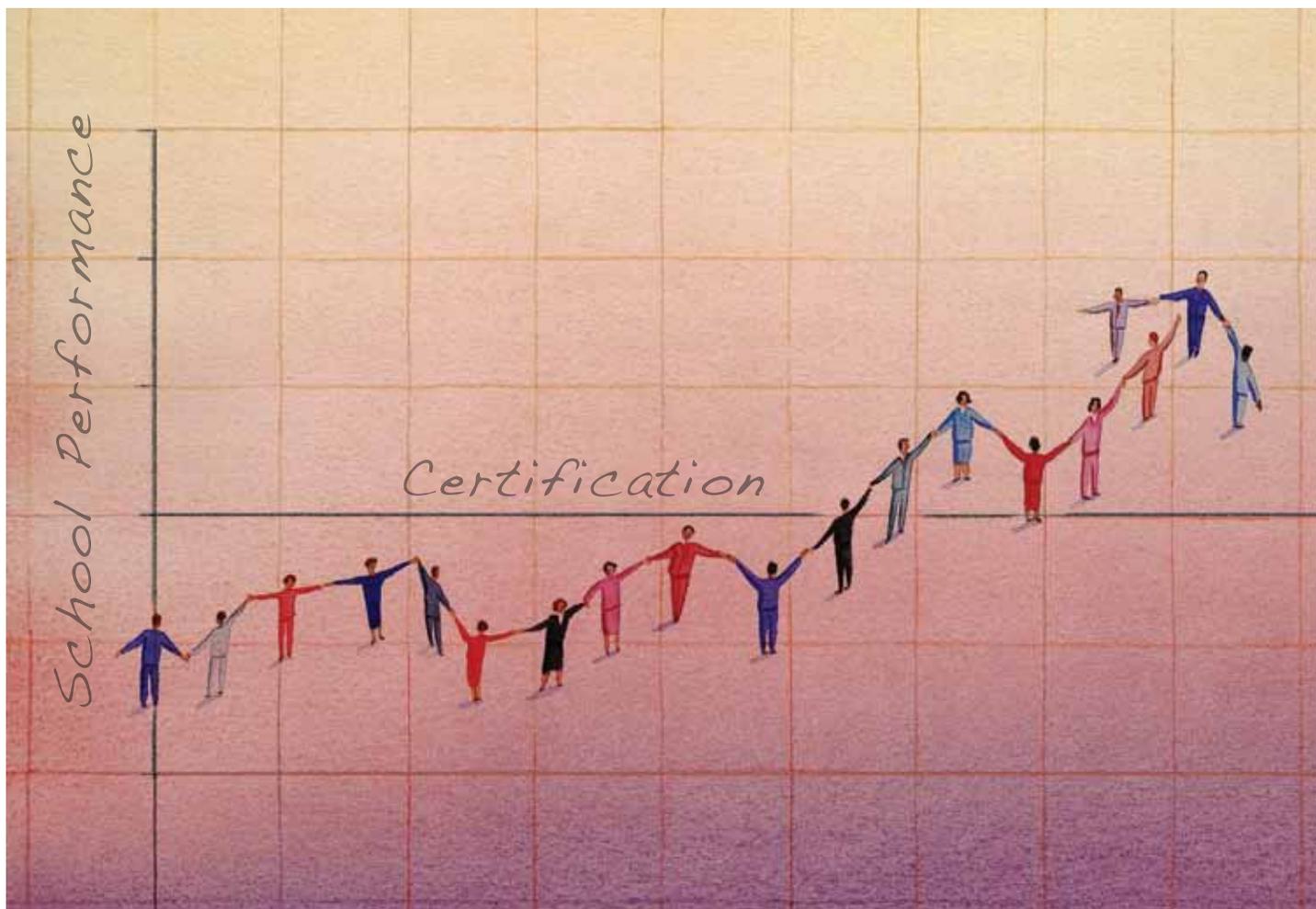


# ANOTHER TOOL FOR SCHOOL REFORM



BY MICHELLE EXSTROM

One of the great challenges facing state lawmakers is balancing cuts to education budgets with the need to close the achievement gap and turn around low-performing schools.

One popular approach—legislators in 30 states and the District of Columbia have signed on—is supporting National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification for teachers. The voluntary program, which is based on advanced teaching standards and a rigorous assessment process, has been around since 1987. Recently, however, more policymakers, teachers and school leaders

are recognizing its promise and potential for addressing challenges in today’s classrooms.

“Reforming education requires a multi-faceted approach that includes school leadership, community involvement, safe campuses, rigorous curricula and common core standards,” says Hawaii Representative Roy



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Takumi. “It also requires highly effective classroom teachers, and national board certification is one way to achieve this goal.”

More than 91,000 teachers are certified by the board, or a little less than 3 percent of all public school teachers. California, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina

and Washington are the states with the most certified teachers.

These board certifications are being used as a turn-around strategy to improve teaching and learning in low-performing schools. Struggling districts and schools from California to Maryland and Arizona to Illinois are supporting their top teachers through the certification process and hiring board-certified teachers when possible to fill vacant positions. These teachers have met high standards through study, expert evaluation, self-assessment, a subject knowledge test and peer review. Education experts believe these teachers will improve student learning and become leaders in their schools.

Schools districts are finding this strategy makes a difference.

*Michelle Exstrom tracks teaching quality issues for NCSL.*

Students taught by certified teachers make higher gains on achievement tests than those taught by non-certified teachers, and the certified teachers also stay longer in the classroom than their non-certified peers, according to a report by the National Research Council of the National Academies.

#### A REFORM TOOL

The board-certification approach also has become central to discussions on how best to define and evaluate effective teaching. Since many states are grappling with implementing educational reform legislation passed in 2010 and federal Race to the Top awards, some top researchers say the key elements used for board certification should become criteria in a new teacher evaluation system. The board's standards have defined the highest level of teacher certification for years and can now be adapted in state policy. In fact, many states included board certification as a key component of their Race to the Top application.

Certification can take from one to three

years, and involves a fee of \$2,500, plus a \$65 processing charge. The certificate is valid for 10 years and can be renewed. The national board certification program is considered more rigorous than existing state programs required to receive a license or certification to teach pre-K-12 classes. It requires the applicant to be familiar with all the standards in the area where they teach, to take assessment tests to show their expertise in the subject matter, and to evaluate their own teaching as part of preparing a portfolio required for certification.

The key role for lawmakers is to provide financial support for certification. Twenty states offer assistance with application fees, and many offer financial incentives for completion. Mississippi, for example, offers a \$6,000 annual salary increase to teachers during during which they are board certified. North Carolina offers a 12 percent premium on base salaries for the life of the certificate. States such as Illinois, New Mexico and Ohio require board certification to achieve the highest level of state licensure, sometimes known as the mastery level, which

provides for a higher salary.

The decision to provide state-funded support for certification, however, doesn't come easily. While most states still offer some type of fee support or financial incentives, others are cutting back, including California, Colorado,



**SENATOR**  
**JOHN GOEDDE**  
**IDAHO**

Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, Oklahoma and South Carolina.

"In the last budget year, the Legislature opted to withhold the stipend for National Board certification," says Idaho Senator John Goedde. "But in the school reform bills before us, we

have included national board certification as one of the criteria for leadership awards as part of an individualized compensation package for educators in Idaho." 

#### SL ONLINE

Check out more on teacher certification at [www.ncsl.org/magazine](http://www.ncsl.org/magazine).