

THE W. CLEMENT & JESSIE V. STONE FOUNDATION

Grantee Spotlight

In this section, we feature interviews with some of our grantee organizations' directors and key staff members, who share their thoughts on their work and the particular fields they're involved in.

An Interview with Amber Lewis-Francis of the San Francisco Office of Teacher Affairs

Since 2002, the Stone Foundation has funded a support program run by the San Francisco Office of Teacher Affairs for teachers seeking National Board Certification. Amber Lewis-Francis is a teacher and the Program Facilitator for this project. We recently talked with her about her background in education and the process of National Board Certification.

Q: Amber, can you describe your teaching background? What do you teach, and how long have you taught?

A: I used to be in publishing, then went back to school for my teaching credential. I've been teaching for 13 years and teach the 4th and 5th grade now. I went through the National Board Certification process in 2001 and was certified as a "Middle Child Generalist," meaning I specialize in teaching children from 7-12 years of age.

Q: What made you decide to go for National Board Certification?

A: I'd had a baby and was teaching half-time when I decided to do NBC. With a small child at home, I wasn't ready to go back to work full-time, but I wanted to do something to supplement my half-time teaching—ideally, something that would improve my teaching skills. I read about National Board Certification and it appealed to me because it was self-directed professional development, as opposed to district-imposed professional development. I told my teaching partner about it and she signed us up. Though I had some initial hesitation about what I'd committed myself to, in retrospect, it was the right thing for me to pursue at that point. I had the extra time to devote to it, whereas most people who go through NBC are teaching full-time while they're doing it, which is extremely demanding. The NBC process is a lot of extra work to undertake on top of full-time teaching.

Q: What did the process involve?

A: First, there was the challenge of committing to do it. After contacting the National Board to register, you need to decide which area of certification best suits your area of teaching. Most of the certification areas have 12 standards, and you must provide evidence of having met each of those standards. You also must create 4 portfolios total: 3 in your individual subject matter, and 1 portfolio that demonstrates your leadership in the education community. My portfolio wound up being 220 pages long, and it included a writing component, samples of my students' work, and of course, videotapes of my

classroom teaching. You submit all these materials by March, then have to take a subject matter competency test by June. The test is rigorous and requires a lot of studying, regardless of the area in which you're seeking certification. For me, I had to be able to pass in all the subject areas I teach, such as math, social studies, language arts, etc. For "Middle Child Generalist" certification, I had to demonstrate competency in an age range through 7th grade for each of these areas. You find out by the following November whether you passed or not. I passed the first time, but over half of the candidates do not. However, if you score a minimum of 2.75, you can bank that score and are given 3 years to redo the areas you didn't pass. The pass rate goes up to 80% for advanced candidates who are in their third year, and many of the advanced candidates who take a longer time to become certified find the experience more rewarding because it gives them the extra time to delve more deeply into their areas of challenge over the long-term.

For me, one of the most fascinating components was the classroom videotaping, because it gave me an external perspective about my teaching that is different from what I see when I'm standing in front of a classroom. It's fascinating to step back and see how your kids are reacting as a group, and I learned a lot about my teaching from this process. For example, there's a lot of emphasis in education on how important "wait time" is for the kids—the time you allow them to think and respond to a question or problem you've posed for them. The videotaping revealed to me that I wasn't giving my students enough wait time, and once I identified this problem, I was able to correct it.

But the videotaping was valuable not only because it exposed where there were problems in my teaching, but because it also uncovered a lot of positives as well. For instance, I'd always thought of myself as a strict, firm teacher, but the videotaping showed that I was actually somewhat lighthearted in my interactions with the kids and smiled a lot. I realized that I'm more personable than I was giving myself credit for.

Q: What kind of support did you have in going through NBC? What kinds of support do you think are most helpful for teachers going through NBC?

A: When I went through NBC, I went to an initial two-day workshop on the process that was very helpful, as well as a Stanford support group (because San Francisco didn't have one in place at the time). I found that the support group was a reliable source of information for me, and it was invaluable because it gave me clarification on the National Board instructions. There are so many confusing layers of instructions in the NBC process because the National Board doesn't want to give the impression that there is one "right way" of meeting the requirements. But the Stanford group was a great place to ask questions about the instructions.

I think the type of support a teacher needs really depends on the individual candidate. There is a wide range of needs among teachers seeking certification in different areas, and that's why it's so hard to support the candidates. Some need one-on-one assistance, but for others, group Q & A sessions are sufficient.

Q: Once you were certified, was there any difference for you at your school or in your teaching?

A: When I went through the NBC process, I spent the year picking apart my lessons and

teaching skills to identify where I needed to improve. The biggest difference that year made for me is that it sharpened my overall ability to scrutinize my curriculum and what it is that I'm doing. I'm more analytical now in asking myself what the goals of my lessons are, why those goals are good, what it is that I'm trying to accomplish, the level of my students' comprehension, etc.

I don't think National Board Certification has made a big difference at my school in particular because there aren't a lot of Certified teachers there; however, this does not mean there aren't excellent teachers at my school, because there are. It would be great to have a cohort of NBC teachers there, but the effect of my having gone through NBC is that my colleagues witnessed what a rigorous process it was for me and how much work was involved. So they see how valuable NBC is, but they're also aware of the level of commitment required and want to make sure they're ready when they decide to attempt it. Currently there are two other candidates going through the process at my school, and one former one who had to drop out of the program because the workload was too much at this time.

Q: How did the NBC movement get started? What prompted it?

A: It originated with the publication of two reports back in the 1980s: "A Nation at Risk," published in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which warned of the increasing mediocrity in our educational system and questioned whether we could meet the teaching needs that existed, and a response report called "A Nation Prepared" which was published in 1986 by the Carnegie Forum on Education. "A Nation Prepared" emphasized the need to create standards in teaching and develop it into a more disciplined profession, such as the medical profession. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards was formed in 1987 to address this need. The goal was to have a board of *teachers* creating a voluntary way for other teachers to increase their professionalism and develop standards from *within*, as opposed to having them externally developed and imposed by politicians, business leaders and other professionals who have no experience in teaching or dealing with problems unique to schools and classrooms. The National Board is still expanding its work and is now addressing things such as counseling, in addition to addressing core subject areas. And most people have come to see that NBC is a good and valid way to assess teacher competence.

Q: Has there been any recent upsurge in people going through NBC? If so, why?

A: Nationally, the level has grown dramatically in the past 4-5 years. The first year of NBC was in 1995, and 86 teachers were certified that year. To give you some idea of the growth level, 8,000 teachers were certified in 2004 alone, and 40,211 teachers total have been certified since NBC began. On the local level, California has had an interesting history with NBC because when Gray Davis was Governor, he saw its importance and worked with the California Legislature to pass the \$10,000 bonus incentives for teachers. There was a huge surge in the number of applicants around the State as a result, but when the incentives were eliminated due to State budget cuts, the pool of applicants dropped off. However, it's now creeping up again, but because the teachers applying are genuinely interested in professional development, as opposed to just the money. Most

school districts still give some smaller salary incentives though, so there's an interest level due to both the financial benefits as well as the professional development opportunity. California has the fifth largest number of NBC teachers in the country right now.

Q: Do NBC teachers tend to come from "better" schools? Is there any attempt to integrate the NBC process with teachers who are working in poor-performing schools?

A: I'm not sure about the research base nationally, but I am familiar with statistics on this in San Francisco and California, where half of Board Certified teachers are teaching in low-performance schools. The State and districts recognize the importance of having them there, plus there are stipends for NBC teachers who teach in low-performing schools, which I think is a good incentive for keeping them at those schools. California has done a good job of preventing them from leaving by continuing to provide those incentive stipends, even when the performance level of those schools improves.

Q: Are school districts making the best use of teachers who are National Board Certified? Is there any plan in San Francisco, for example, to use NBC teachers in leadership roles or as staff developers?

A: Some districts, like San Francisco Unified, are actively trying to make the best use of NBC teachers by linking them to professional development opportunities. We want to make sure that Certified teachers know what leadership opportunities are out there, but as I mentioned earlier, there is a whole portfolio component to certification in which teachers have to demonstrate that they are leaders in the education community, so many teachers are already taking on leadership/staff development roles.

Q: Is there any connection between NBC and student achievement?

A: There was a lot of concern over this issue a few years ago because so much state and federal money had been invested in NBC, but there was no hard evidence linking its impact to student achievement. In the last few years, however, a few studies have been published demonstrating that evidence—most notably, one from Arizona State University* that concludes that the impact for students of having an NBC teacher is equivalent to them having had a whole extra month of schooling. Other studies have linked NBC to higher test scores in math, and more studies are currently rolling out with data that points to the positive effects that National Board Certified teachers are having on student outcomes.

* NOTE: Visit the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards website at www.nbpts.org and click on the "News Center" link for press releases or "Research & Information" for specific studies, including the Arizona State University study Amber Lewis-Francis references here.

