

FEATURE





PROFESSIONAL *excellence*

Becoming a National Board Certified School Librarian

Aaron Elkins

elkinsa@pcsb.org

Doreen Chonko

chonkod@pcsb.org

Barbara Dirscherl

dirscherlb@pcsb.org

Donna Hall

hallda@pcsb.org

Kimen Mitchell

mitchellki@pcsb.org

Professional Excellence: Becoming a National Board Certified Teacher

By Donna Hall and Kimen Mitchell

An excellent career advancement option available to school librarians is pursuing National Board Certification. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was established in 1987 “to advance the quality of teaching and learning by developing professional standards for accomplished teaching, creating a voluntary system to certify teachers who meet those standards and integrating certified teachers into educational reform efforts” (NBPTS 2008). To become a candidate, you must have a Bachelor’s degree, a valid teaching license, and three successfully completed years of teaching. The certification process is intense, rigorous, requires at least a year of your time, and may require a substantial monetary investment, but it also provides you with a number of benefits, both material and intangible.

Professional excellence—Becoming a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT) has often been compared to earning an advanced degree. It is a mark of distinction that can be analogous to specializations offered in other professions, like medicine or law, and represents the highest honor one can achieve in the teaching profession. NBCTs are also considered “highly qualified” under the stipulations set forth by the No Child Left Behind Act.

Improved teaching and learning—The certification process instills within you an instinct for reflection and analysis of your teaching. You’ll

not only ask yourself “How can I improve this lesson?” but you’ll have a better idea of how to do so. Many of the research studies on NBCTs have shown that they have a greater impact on student learning, leading their students to higher gains in student achievement than teachers who are not National Board certified.

Service to the profession—NBCTs can contribute to the profession by mentoring other teachers, whether they wish to become National Board candidates themselves or are simply interested in improving their teaching. Being an NBCT positions you to be a leader in our field; your expertise and knowledge will be so sought after, you may want to hide! When lobbying to affect positive change in education law, NBCTs may also have more influence with their legislators.

Career development—National Board Certification can count toward your continuing education or professional development hours for renewal of your teaching certificate. If you are working on another degree, some universities will give you credit hours for completing the process. If you move, most states will accept National Board Certification in lieu of making you meet their particular certification requirements.

Financial—Some states offer registration reimbursement, salary bonuses, and other types of compensation. However, the types and amounts of financial support vary widely from state to state, so it would be best to check with your district to find out exactly what type of support and remuneration are available to you.

Steps on the Way: Advice for Your Journey and After

By Aaron Elkins & Doreen Chonko

Obviously, the benefits of being an NBCT are considerable. Before you decide to become a candidate, you’ll undoubtedly want to know more about what the certification process entails. Essentially, there are two components: the portfolio and the assessment center. The four portfolio entries provide a detailed look at your teaching; the six assessment-center prompts give you an opportunity to show how you would respond to different situations. The first thing you should do is download all of the information from the Library Media certificate area of the National Board website. There you’ll find the standards, the portfolio directions, the scoring guides, and information about the assessment center.

The standards exist to give you a broader picture of what school librarians should know and do, as well as how we grow professionally. Use the standards in the way that best suits your style; some candidates try to memorize them while others will refer back to them as needed. The standards expand upon the core values of the National Board, and suggest how to exemplify accomplished teaching in your writing.

The portfolio directions give you a framework to use in writing the entries you submit. In the entry directions the section titled “Accomplished library media specialists” will give you a general feel of what the National Board thinks represents accomplished teaching. The section of the entry directions titled “What Do I Need to Do?” is just that: it tells you almost exactly what you will be doing and

submitting to the National Board for that entry (NBPTS 2009). Each portfolio entry focuses on a different aspect of teaching, but the Board doesn't specify a particular lesson, standard, or teaching method to be used; it will be up to you to design a lesson that will meet the requirements. Each entry also has a list of questions. These questions are designed to help you focus your writing; they don't have to be answered explicitly and sequentially, but all of the information they are asking for should be present in your writing.

It would be beneficial to keep the scoring guide called "Evaluation of Evidence Guide" next to you as you write. This guide has the "aspects" of teaching laid out for you; to achieve an accomplished score, you'll need to strongly demonstrate in your writing all of those aspects specified for each entry. Using this guide, you'll be able to go back and look at what you've written to see how you have presented the aspects in your writing, and try to clarify and revise those areas that need it.

Here are some other tips and suggestions to help you with your candidacy:

Take your time—You can look at the certification as a multi-year process; once you download all of the directions, you might take a year to look at your teaching and decide what kinds of lessons and activities you would consider submitting for the portfolio. You could also take that time to plan with colleagues and work with NBCT mentors to map out your "certification year." Most candidates do not achieve certification on their first attempt; keeping in mind that you have three years to certify can help lessen the stress and pressure you're likely to place on yourself during your first year.

Don't wait until the last minute—Your portfolio will be due by a specific date. Once you have your due date, jump it back two weeks on your calendar, and then count backwards up to the present day. This will keep you in a "countdown" frame of mind. The two-week buffer will give you some time to get everything together before you have to send it off; you don't want to be scrambling for a last-minute flight to turn it in by hand.

Seriously—Don't wait until the last minute—Entry I will take at least three weeks to complete, so you won't be able to start it at the last minute. You might want to make a plan of when you are going to start working on the instructional component of each of the sections so that you don't get caught in a bind trying to video two lessons in the same week.

Give yourself a daily time limit—This process can be very intensive and easily eat up all of your time if you let it. Think about committing only a certain amount of time each day. For example, buy a CD that's an hour long. Play it when you start writing, and when it's done you'll know you have put in an hour of time for that day. If you want to keep writing, you can, but if you can't take it any more, then you can walk away, guilt-free, knowing that you've done your work for the day.

Organize yourself—You are going to have a lot of different stuff to deal with for the portfolio entries: your drafts, student samples, permission forms, documentation, etc. You know how you work, so if a plain old box to hold the papers for each entry does the trick, use that. If you're the kind who needs color-coded paperclips, then set up a more sophisticated system.

Nobody's perfect—All of the lessons you submit in your portfolio are not going to be pitch-perfect. This is okay; reflection is an important component of accomplished teaching. It is far better to show that you know what could have gone better and how to fix it, and what went well and how to enhance it or adapt it, than to try to claim that the lesson was flawless.

Get some help—Ideally, you'll be able to find a mentor who can give you some input on your lesson design and read your writing; while spelling and grammar mistakes don't count off, you want to make it as easy as possible for the assessor to see your accomplished teaching. It'd also be a good idea to have someone outside of the education field read your entries, to make sure you haven't used any inexplicable jargon. Just remember the old adage "too many cooks spoil the broth." If you have several mentors reading the same work, they might give you contradictory advice. It will ultimately be up to you to choose what to submit.

National Board Certification is more than just adding a set of initials after your name; it is the symbol of the highest professional teaching excellence. Going through the process strengthens your teaching practice and positively impacts student achievement. Teachers who achieve National Board Certification have met rigorous standards through intensive study, expert evaluation, self-assessment, and peer review. Although it is a difficult process requiring a great deal of time and energy, the rewards are many. Becoming an NBCT attests to the fact that your peers have judged you as someone who is accomplished in your field. Teachers who become National Board Certified

improve how the community and policy makers view the teaching profession. The establishment of a certified professional workforce can also encourage state and local authorities to relax instructional edicts that stifle teachers' creativity. National Board Certification can increase teacher retention and job satisfaction, and represents a path to career advancement for all teachers.

For more information, check out the NBPTS website at www.nbpts.org or call 1-800-22TEACH. Most states require each school district to appoint an NBCT coordinator; that coordinator should be able to explain any specific eligibility requirements that your state or district may have.

Why National Board Certification?

By Barbara Dirscherl

Are you asking yourself why you should work toward National Board Certification? I wondered the same thing. I had a Master's degree in library science; more than ten years of experience as a school librarian at elementary, middle, and high school levels; and was a trainer for my school, my district, and even for teacher-librarians across the Americas through the International Baccalaureate Programme. Why should I become certified? While talking with many colleagues who had recently achieved their certification, I heard a recurring comment—the process had made them better teachers. I decided to see for myself.

Guess what? It's true! There are so many benefits to achieving National Board Certification; you can find many of them listed on the NBPTS website. But one benefit that is hard to describe is the change the process can make in you as a teacher. We all get distracted by the details of our jobs—schedules, e-mail, budgets, technology, etc. The certification process forced me to remember why I became a school librarian in the first place. It's all about the students and what they need to learn. All those distractions, although necessary, should take a backseat to student achievement. The certification process reminded me that it's not about me and my achievements; it's all about my students and what I can do for them. The process made me a better teacher, and it can do the same for you.



Donna Hall is the library information specialist at Douglas L. Jamerson, Jr. Elementary School,

in St. Petersburg, Florida. She achieved National Board Certification in 2006. Donna has a podcast available through iTunes, at <http://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/d-l-jamerson-elementary/id309616754> and she is also on Twitter as Donna_Hall_PCSB.



Aaron J. Elkins is the library information specialist at Mildred Helms Elementary in Largo,

Florida. He achieved National Board Certification in 2004 and has worked as an assessor for the National Board. Currently, he is pursuing a doctoral degree in library and information science at Florida State University.

Doreen Chonko has been a teacher-librarian for the past twelve years at Palm Harbor University High School in Palm Harbor, Florida. She has been a workshop leader for many International Baccalaureate librarian workshops in North America and the Asia Pacific regions. In 2006 Doreen achieved her National Board Certification in Library Media

What National Board Certification Means to Me

By Aaron J. Elkins

From the first moment I heard about National Board Certification, I knew I wanted to do it; I'd watched a teacher friend go through the process and achieve her certification, and I became intrigued. First, I read through the core propositions and standards, and knew that they were representative of my own philosophy of teaching and learning. However, when I looked into the eligibility requirements, I saw that I would have to wait a bit; teachers must have completed three years of teaching before they can become candidates, and I wasn't quite there yet. I chose to look at the delay as an opportunity to take some time to think about the certification process and what my candidacy would look like.

As a candidate, I found that the process was the best professional development I'd ever engaged in. It really forced me to take a step

back and actually look at how I was teaching. Now, that impulse for reflection and self-analysis is second-nature to me. I found by making a few small changes, I could greatly enhance my instruction. By the end of my candidacy, I almost didn't even care if I became certified or not—going through the process was that beneficial. Of course, I was still really excited when I found out I had achieved the certification.

Since becoming National Board Certified, I have received many benefits and opportunities. I have enjoyed working as a mentor to other candidates and school librarians. I feel that I have earned greater respect as a teacher and professional, and achieving the certification was a validation of the work I do. Being a National Board Certified Teacher has also given me the confidence to pursue other opportunities; I have served as president of my local professional organization; I have given presentations at state and national conferences; and I'm currently working on my doctoral degree.

How National Board Certification Has Changed What I Do

by Kimen Mitchell

The primary way the National Board process changed my professional life is by causing me to begin my planning with student achievement! The process stimulated me to ask questions, such as: How is my lesson going to increase students' ability to complete the assigned tasks? How will I know if we have succeeded in meeting our objectives? What strategies do I need to use to keep the students engaged in the information-seeking process?

Barbara Dirscherl has been a teacher-librarian at Palm Harbor University High School in Palm Harbor, Florida, for the past eleven years. She has been a trainer and presenter at the district and state level. She has also been a workshop leader for many International Baccalaureate librarian workshops in North America, training librarians from around the world. She achieved National Board Certification in 2006.

Kimen Mitchell is the library information specialist at Tarpon Springs (FL) High School. She achieved National Board Certification in 2003. She is also a certified CRISS trainer and has been involved in training at the district level for many years. She has also been actively involved in community theater since 1997. She has played both men's and women's parts, and has played characters from age 25 to 80! She also enjoys storytelling and singing.

Works Cited:

- National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. 2008. "About Us." <http://nbpts.org/about_us> (accessed July 12, 2009).
- . 2009. "Early Childhood through Young Adulthood Library Media Portfolio Instructions." <http://nbpts.org/userfiles/File/ECYA_LM_Portfolio_Instructions.pdf> (accessed July 12, 2009).