

# 13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

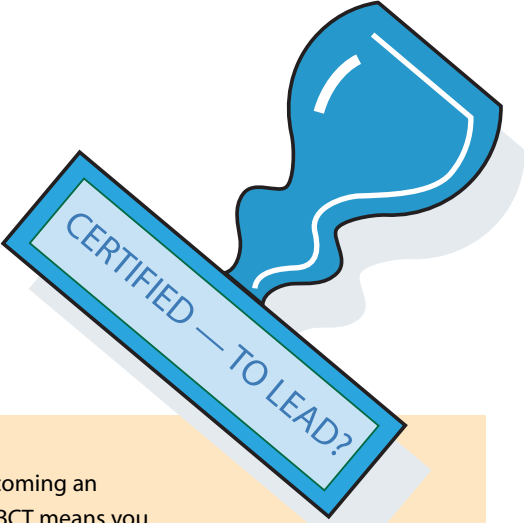
FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

## The challenge of learning to lead as an NBCT

By Bill Ferriter

National Teacher of the Year for 2003 Betsy Rogers had only one goal in mind when she sat for certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards: To improve her work with the 1st- and 2nd-grade students in her classroom. “I never saw beyond those four walls,” said Rogers. “I went through the process strictly to become a better teacher. That was my goal all along.”

Like most of the nation’s 55,000 National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs), Rogers reached her goal, stak-



“Becoming an NBCT means you have demonstrated accomplishment in teaching children and working with other adults to further the learning of your students. While this certainly qualifies one as a role model for other teachers, it does not assess one’s readiness to be a mentor, staff developer, or assume other leadership roles. Some of us were ready for these roles prior to certification and others were not. Certification has little to do with that readiness. The question becomes, “After certification, then what?”

— Carolyn Guthrie, NBCT

ing out a place on the cutting edge of education after demonstrating an ability to translate new ideas into classroom practices informed by rich understandings of students. Rogers began to constantly ana-

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lyze the impact of her instruction, praising lessons learned from the National Board. “The process of certification helps you to understand your content and your kids better,” said Rogers, who now works as a curriculum specialist at Brighton Elementary School in Jefferson County, Ala. “It taught me to focus at a much deeper level.”

But classroom successes often aren’t enough, especially if districts are using National Board certification as a strategy for improving teaching quality throughout a system. With a growing body of evidence that NBCTs have a positive impact on student achievement, decision makers are increasingly interested in engaging these highly accomplished teachers as leaders. “Each NBCT has publicly demonstrated professional expertise in both content knowledge and pedagogy. As a district, we would be remiss in our failure to acknowledge this accomplishment,” said Sue Dole, deputy superintendent of Springfield (Ill.) School District No. 186 (The National Board Resource Center, 2005). Dole’s district is exploring ways to involve NBCTs in its new teacher induction program, as professional development leaders, and as hosts of observation classrooms.

Several states are beginning to document a wide range of new work being done by NBCTs. In Washington, for example, a 2003 survey showed that NBCTs were more engaged in advocating for quality teaching, leading professional development, and implementing new instructional approaches after certifying than they were before becoming NBCTs (Stokes, Helms, & Maxon, 2003). A follow-up study in October 2006 found that over 50% of NBCTs in the state of Washington were more involved in school and district leadership after certifying (Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession, 2007).

Of particular interest to NBCTs are coaching opportunities. “I could see myself mentoring new teachers,” shared Mike Hutchinson, one of North Carolina’s 11,000 NBCTs. “The process of thinking through objectives ... is learned through National Boards. Those processes would be good to pass on to new teachers.” NBCTs also express confidence in their ability to support colleagues learning to design effective instructional practices and to use multiple measures for student assess-

ment (National Board Resource Center, 2005).

But are NBCTs uniquely qualified for — and prepared for — leadership?

### **Leading “beyond the box”**

Many of the accomplished educators in the Teacher Leaders Network, a professional community of nearly 300 teachers working in rural, urban, and suburban schools across America, have learned that leading adults takes a unique set of skills. During a focused three-day conversation in February 2007, these educators — 80% of whom are NBCTs — examined the challenges of stepping into leadership roles.

Teachers working outside the classroom quickly learn that leading adults requires a measure of unexpected staying power. “My biggest challenge was adjusting to the needs of adults. To work effectively with adult learners, I’ve had to remember to be flexible, patient, and responsive to individual situations. All these are qualities I needed for my work with kindergartners and 1st graders. I just needed them in larger quantities for adult learners,” said Virginia NBCT Gail Ritchie.

Susan Graham, an NBCT from Stafford County, Va., added, “Adults process and are motivated differently than children. To some extent, we lead children to, as well as through, learning because their base of knowledge and ability to make meaning ... are still developing and must be guided. With adult learners, the teacher’s job is to facilitate self-instruction.”

Teachers who succeed as leaders also recognize the importance of trust in the adult learning process. An atmosphere of safety is essential for encouraging educators to take professional risks so building community becomes a critical first step for driving change. “I quickly learned that building relationships is essential,” said Betsy Rogers. “Anything that I can do to assist teachers with teaching is what helps me to build positive relationships, and those relationships are important for having influence as a leader.”

“Adults bring a wide range of prior experiences with them,” added Carolann Wade, coordinator for National Board Certification for Wake County (N.C.) Public School System. “You have to respect and value that experience in order to



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be successful.”

Finally, teacher leaders learn to balance an adult’s need for safety with the mental challenge required for meaningful change. Laurie Stenehjem, supervisor for a novice teacher induction program in Grand Forks, N.D., wrestles with this balance regularly. “I’m finding that many teachers are impatient with their own learning ... As adults, maybe we don’t want to feel the cognitive dissonance that happens before really deep new learning takes place. Learning can be uncomfortable and we avoid discomfort.” Stenehjem said.

### Lessons learned the old-fashioned way

The assumption that board certification automatically prepares teachers to tackle these distinct challenges is flawed. “Too many NBCTs are pushed into the role of teaching teachers when they are not comfortable with adult learners. They may have already taken on the role of committee leaders and curriculum developers ... but they still may not be comfortable providing true staff development for their colleagues,” said Deanna Harris, an NBCT in Wake County, N.C.

Rogers echoed this thinking. “When you become board certified, people tend to think that you can do it all, but that’s really not true. To lead, you have to have background knowledge and personality traits that aren’t related to board certification. Moving beyond my classroom scared the death out of me. I never had any training in working with adults.”

Many learn leadership lessons the old-fashioned way — through repeated experiences and a personal dedication to growth. Pursuing individual professional development helped Harris cope with new opportunities. “The year after I certified, I was invited to join an action research group. That was a nice ‘after NBC’ professional development. My principal also encouraged me to take facilitative leadership training, which was another ‘next step’ for me.”

Others establish relationships with informal mentors that provide continuing support after certification. “One major lesson I learned was to find a trusting mentor,” said Shelly Ward, NBCT and 4th-grade teacher from Bellevue (Wash.) School District. “Having someone be honest and

forthright with me (about leadership) helped. It was only then that I began to understand how I could make a difference.”

Wake County’s Wade sees these informal mentors as the key to developing teacher leaders. “NBCTs need to have people guide them into new leadership roles because they often have a sense of initial fear about teaching other adults,” she writes. “Mentors support teachers through each new stage of professional growth until they have confidence in their own abilities to lead.”

Sometimes, success in newly created positions relies on little more than a tenacious refusal to quit. Serving as district trailblazers, teacher leaders adopt a ‘make it happen’ attitude when faced with unforeseen barriers. “I work in a position that is new for our district. There are three of us — all of whom are NBCTs — so we’re trying to shape what this role is going to be. Sometimes, we feel like we are spinning our wheels, but we jump in and do what has to be done,” Rogers said.

### Redefining the teacher as leader

Six years ago, the Institute for Educational Leadership released *Leadership for Student Learning: Redefining the Teacher as Leader*. In this report, the Task Force on Teacher Leadership argued that teachers should play a central role in school change. “Teacher leadership can be a big part of the answer [to critical questions like] how can we create the ‘professional community’ that research shows is essential to peak school and student performance? What can be done to increase the quality of teachers and enhance the professionalism of teaching and teachers? How can the necessary bridge be made between challenging academic standards ... and what goes on in the classroom?” (Usdan, McCloud, and Podmostko, 2001).

Driven by a sense of responsibility for advancing education, NBCTs are helping to rethink teaching and learning. Few back down from professional challenges and most are recognized and respected by their peers. For many NBCTs, certification serves as an invitation to become leaders.

The impact of this professional energy is left to chance, however, in districts that fail to pro-

See the May 2007 issue of *The Learning System* to learn more about how states and districts support National Board certification.

vide the kinds of supports necessary for success. Pairing some of our most influential and accomplished teachers with systematic training on the nature of adult learners can only help to blend who NBCTs are with who the profession wants them to be.

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See the May 2007 issue of *The Learning Principal* to learn what it's like to lead a school filled with NBCTs.

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