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Teacher credentials get little credit

Researchers find national certification has minimal impact on pupils' test scores

By LISA MICHALS

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National board-certified teachers in South Carolina have little impact in boosting the achievement of poor students, a USC report said.

But a broader study is needed to better examine the overall effects national board-certified teachers have in schools, according to the report, which was released by the South Carolina Department of Education Tuesday.

Elite teachers did minimally boost achievement for more affluent students in English-language arts, the USC study showed, but did not appear to make a significant difference in students' math achievement.

National board certification does "make a better teacher," state Superintendent Inez Tenenbaum said. She pointed to studies in other parts of the country that showed teachers with the certification are more effective.

The USC study was requested by the South Carolina General Assembly, which in 2000 authorized a \$7,500 state bonus for teachers who achieve the certification. The goal was improving instruction. In some school systems, including many in the Midlands, teachers receive an additional bonus.

Government officials maintained Tuesday that the certification holds immense value in educating students.

"Any teacher that goes that extra mile to become nationally board certified just normally has that commitment that they would do the same in the classroom," said Sen. John Land, D-Clarendon, the Senate Democratic leader.

"Regardless of that report, it's worth the money that we spend on those who become nationally certified."

Gov. Mark Sanford recently said he would recommend to the Legislature that only teachers who relocate to work in low-performing or underperforming schools should qualify for bonus pay.

"It flies in the face of common sense to suggest that putting better-trained teachers in the schools that need them most wouldn't have a positive effect in those districts," said Joel Sawyer, a Sanford spokesman.

The USC researchers wrote that a more thorough study was needed because they encountered challenges in compiling data.

About 300 national board-certified teachers were examined in the study, said Janice Poda, director of education quality and leadership at the Department of Education. South Carolina has 4,444 teachers with the certification.

USC researcher Tammiee Dickinson, director of the College of Education's Office of Program Evaluation, declined to comment on the study until she could confer with fellow researcher Steve Fisher. Fisher could not immediately be reached for comment.

The study compared the performance of students taught by teachers with and without the certification. The comparison used fourth- through eighth-grade students' scores on the 2003 and 2004 Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test in the subjects of math and English/language arts.

Tenenbaum called the Legislature's request for the study "premature." She recommended continuing the bonus system and said a broader study isn't needed because studies in other states conclude nationally certified teachers are effective.

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