

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) provides a Middle Childhood/Generalist Certification, making it the only professional organization that lays out specific expectations for teachers of children 7 to 12 years old.

David Mandel and Suzanne Wilson were involved in the development of the National Board and have remained active in defining teacher professionalism.

**David R. Mandel** is executive director, Carnegie-IAS Commission on Mathematics and Science Education. He was vice president for policy development at the National Board from 1988 to 1996. Previously, he had been associate director of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, an operational arm of Carnegie Corporation of New York, and associate director of the Forum's Task Force on Teaching as a Profession. That work led to his role on the planning group for the National Board in the late 1980s.

**Suzanne M. Wilson** is a professor and chair of the teacher education department at Michigan State University. She worked with the Carnegie Commission of New York's Task Force on Teaching as a Profession and was director of the Teacher Assessment Project, which developed and pilot tested potential teacher performance assessments. The National Board hired her to assist in writing "What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do," the policy document that provided the framework for the National Board's standards.

# Middle Childhood Is Unique Niche in Education



An Interview with David R. Mandel and Suzanne M. Wilson

By Christine Finnan

**Christine Finnan:** I'm trying to get an idea of how the Middle Childhood Generalist Certification emerged. I assume people advocated for Early Childhood and Adolescent Certification and the Middle Childhood just happened as much from default as from intention.

**David Mandel:** Sort of, but not quite. In designing the architecture of the certificates, we were interested in avoiding two extremes: certificates

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that were so broadly gauged that teachers could not be held accountable for in-depth knowledge of any field, and certificates that were so highly specialized that they wouldn't serve students' interests and would be fiscally unsustainable by virtue of the small number of teachers who would apply for each certificate.

Mike Smith, who was dean of the Stanford School of Education at the time, helped us figure out a defensible and practical rationale. Joan Baratz-Snowden (then vice-president for assessment at NBPTS) observed that teachers teach something to someone, and thus the certificates should be defined by both teachers' subject matter responsibilities and the students' needs. Out of this came a decision to distinguish between subject matter specialists and generalists. At first, we considered separating generalists by grade level, but this idea wasn't especially attractive on several grounds. James Comer proposed organizing students by developmental level. With this framework on the table, it was clear that at least one early childhood certificate was required and that the distinguishing features of early adolescence also argued for special standing. As these levels don't directly overlap, middle childhood emerged.

**Suzanne Wilson:** One of our first discussions was how to break the standards developmentally. We were concerned that if we went by grade level, we would be importing a structure that would limit us and would accept the status quo. The National Board was interested in creating new visions of teaching and learning. Accepting the current structures of grade levels would have seriously constrained innovative thinking. The big question was how to define categories without constraining the ideas. In addition to that, there was a renewed interest in keeping the issue of teachers' content knowledge front and center.

**There were concerns that if we focused too much on content, we would lose the child.**

**CF:** How would you describe the most important work of the original planning group in terms of setting the groundwork for NBPTS?

**SW:** I think it was focusing on students. There were concerns that if we focused too much on content, we would lose the child. We emphasized the importance of holding teachers accountable for students' lives,

not just their learning. The idea was to think about content within the context of the child. Lee Shulman's concern with pedagogical content knowledge was a critical component of the discussion, for pedagogical content knowledge argues for a bifocal vision: one eye on the student, the other on the content. One of our main objectives was to strike a balance between students and content and not fall into unhelpful dichotomous thinking.

**DM:** For me, the most important thing was that the Planning Group demonstrated that the core idea was politically feasible. We found that governors, school board members, and business people could work productively with practicing teachers. AFT and NEA leaders and teachers could find common ground on both the substance and policy frameworks that had to be invented. At a time when wise people on the outside praised the idea of National Board certification, many also believed that it was politically infeasible and that the unions would never sign off on a system that was grounded in high standards. The board proved them wrong.

## **DEVELOP STANDARDS**

**CF:** So the task force set the general structure for the certifications. How were the Middle Childhood Generalist standards developed?

**DM:** Like standards in each field, the board established an MC/Generalist standards committee with a teacher majority that was charged with developing the initial standards. Such committees often included administrators, researchers, and teacher educators who had specialized knowledge or experience relevant to each specific domain. The board's working group responsible for standards development reviewed an initial set of draft standards. The second or third drafts were sent out for an extensive external review. Based on these critiques, the committee made a final recommendation to the working group, who passed it on to the full board for approval once they were satisfied with the product.

**CF:** What were the main issues that faced the committees developing generalist certifications?

**DM:** The issue for all of the generalist certifications was whether they should encourage Renaissance teachers with broad knowledge of all of the content for which teachers are responsible or if schools would be better served by teachers with especially strong

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command of one or two content areas (somewhat like double majors in college).

**SW:** Again, there was a concern about thinking in dichotomous ways, and to not presume the status quo. Clearly, everyone believed that teachers at all levels need to understand subject areas and students in meaningful and deep ways. The expectations of what individual teachers know and can do, in part, depend on the structures in which they work. In a world in which we might want to change the role and work of teachers at different grade levels (should someone specialize in a content domain in middle or even elementary school, for instance?) and recognizing that such choices are made differently from district to district, the board did not want to lock NBPTS into a set of assumptions about knowledge and schools that compromised the value of any of the generalists.

### **IMPACT OF THE NATIONAL BOARD**

**CF:** It's been 20 years since the original work on the National Board standards, what effect do you think they've had on teaching, especially teaching in the upper elementary grades?

**SW:** Now that there are about 64,000 NBCTs, there's a growing body of research that informs that question. The effects and consequences of the NBPTS for teachers' individual and collective work remains unclear. There is some evidence that NBCTs take on new roles as teacher leaders and in professional development. But there's also evidence that U.S. schools — egalitarian in their souls — aren't always positioned to accept the idea of levels of professional expertise within the ranks of teachers. And innovative ways of structuring the careers of teachers have still not been explored extensively.

**DM:** My sense is that there is much more ready acceptance today of the distinctions between novice and accomplished teachers and between experienced teachers who are accomplished and those who are not. What remains highly problematic is our readiness to act on this knowledge when it comes to how teachers' work is structured. To the extent that schools fail to find ways to encourage their most accomplished teachers to share their knowledge and expertise with colleagues, a good deal of the promise of National Board Certification will remain unrealized.

We should also not overlook the many candidates for board certification, both successful and not, who assert that working on their portfolios was the most

powerful professional development experience of their professional lives and that it changed the way they approach teaching. It shouldn't be this good, but the fact that it has provoked such claims tells us something of the current state of professional development in our schools (i.e., there is room for great improvement). The initial ambition of the task force was much more modest, to find a means to recognize and reward accomplished practice in a valid, reliable, and fair way, and thus make the profession more attractive on several grounds. The initial board built on this and sought to design assessments that, by virtue of their design, might have a salutary effect on practice.

### **ISSUES FACING UPPER ELEMENTARY TEACHERS**

**CF:** What do you see as the biggest issues facing upper elementary teachers?

**SW:** The vision of an elementary teacher being a master of all content domains — including music, health, and the arts, as well as academic domains — seems unrealistic. We know now that teachers need substantial knowledge of content to support higher levels of learning among their students.

**DM:** My primary concern is how we prepare people who are expected to be good at so much. Policy makers can easily fall into the trap of setting very high standards for elementary teachers' subject-matter knowledge, if we assume that they should reflect the curriculum requirements for students, which, of course, they should. This is especially so in an environment where there is widespread recognition that the initial national math curriculum standards were way too ambitious and the science standards still are. At the same time, such standards can lead policy makers to establish weak requirements if they believe that hardly anyone is going to meet the teacher specifications that naturally fall out of unrealistic curriculum standards. This applies to primary teachers too, but it is very evident in the upper grades.

Teachers certainly need to know a good deal more than their students about the subjects they are teaching them. For example, they need to know how to introduce into the classroom a healthy confusion about how the natural world functions in order to shake some of the preconceived misunderstandings students bring to school. New teachers typically cannot do this on Day One. This raises the question, what models of clinical training hold the greatest promise to build such knowledge and expertise? Other coun-

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tries start teachers with reduced loads in the first one to five years so that they have time to develop their practice. This reduces the damage inexperienced teachers can do and prevents burnout.

### **SUBJECT AREA SPECIALTIES**

**CF:** It sounds like you favor subject area specialization in the upper elementary grades. Is this true?

**DM:** That's a hard one. I do think the idea that teachers can be Renaissance teachers through 6th grade stretches the bounds of credulity. We can be patient while teachers develop knowledge and skill across a broad spectrum of subjects or we can encourage specialization. The bigger issue is determining what knowledge is essential, be it subject-matter knowledge, content-specific pedagogical knowledge, or developmentally specific knowledge. Teachers need to know about where kids are, where they will have difficulty, and how they think. There is also a question about flexibility. The span from 1st to 6th grade is very large developmentally, but we certify teachers to teach this whole span. Primary teachers address wide differences in what students bring with them to school, and these differences continue through the upper grades. There is also an ethical issue in asserting that someone is well qualified to teach at both ends of the age span.

This is why we didn't develop a single professional standard for generalists. We knew that a kindergarten teacher would never accept that a high school teacher is highly qualified in early childhood.

**CF:** What are some other issues you see for upper elementary teachers or for preparation of these teachers?

**SW:** I've already mentioned the issue of content knowledge, which I believe is very important. But I think there has been oversimplification of teacher quality — both in terms of the indicators we use for teacher knowledge — courses taken, grade point averages, academic majors — and in terms of the outcomes we use to define good teaching — student test scores, teachers' ability to use research-based instructional strategies, principal surveys. While I support accountability, the current emphasis on testing (and impatience to move forward fast) leads us to focus on things that are easier to measure, rather than the things that matter. I would not dismiss the importance of so many other things that teachers need to master — working with diverse learners, being learners themselves, understanding and working with other teachers and administrators, as well as the community more generally. As a teacher educator, I worry too about increasing expectations and demands on teachers — we add and add and add. We never seem to subtract. **■**

## **THE NATIONAL BOARD FOR PROFESSIONAL TEACHING STANDARDS**

The Carnegie Corporation of New York funded the creation of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in 1987 following the recommendations of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy's Task Force on Teaching as a Profession.

The release of the task force's report, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (1986), led to the creation of a planning group that later evolved into the NBPTS Board of Directors. The 33-member planning group included practicing teachers and school administrators, as well as governors, state legislators, school board members, and business people.

Most important, the planning group agreed that the NBPTS should have a teacher majority on its 63-person legislature-like board of directors. Thus, the first board was two-thirds teachers or teacher leaders like Albert Shanker of the AFT and Mary Futrell of the NEA.

The remaining one-third represented such public interest constituencies as state chiefs, parents, and business leaders. Out of this group came the board's first chair, Governor Jim Hunt of North Carolina.

Since 1987, nearly 64,000 teachers have achieved National Board Certification. NBPTS offers 25 certificates that cover a variety of subjects areas and student developmental levels.

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