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**A Modest Proposal
To Help Disadvantaged Schools**

By: Gary W. Ritter

So far in 2016, Little Rock has been abuzz with discussion of teacher certification. Allow me to briefly recap. In January, the state Department of Education floated proposed rule changes that would gradually phase out stipends to National Board Certified Teachers (NBCT) who have already received the stipends for 10 years. National Board Certification requires teachers to undertake a comprehensive and rigorous process to earn the title and stipends.

Also in late January, Gov. Asa Hutchinson announced a \$6 million public-private partnership to add Teach for America teachers to Little Rock and districts in south and east Arkansas. The program recruits talented and service-oriented people with at least a bachelors' degree to teach in low-income communities.

While these two occurrences are not directly connected, the Arkansas Education Association (AEA) provided the following statement response to the partnership announcement: "The Arkansas Education Association does not oppose the public investment into education announced by Governor Hutchinson earlier this week, but we do have concerns. We welcome the effort to provide additional resources to our public schools, but we believe that it is best to invest in teachers who are already dedicated to the success of Arkansas' students."

The implication here, of course, is that the AEA would be much more supportive of state-level investments in NBCT than in Teach for America. Given that both programs are aimed at improving teacher quality, it is worth considering the similarities and differences between these two programs when deciding what to do with scarce, state-level resources.

First of all, both programs can boast of evidence of their success. The existing random assignment research suggests that Teach for America teachers work in most disadvantaged districts and are as effective (or more effective) than their traditional peers in the same schools. However, critics do voice concerns about the lack of specific degrees in classroom teaching and that those teachers might leave their schools after only a couple of years. According to the best research on the NBCT, board-certified teachers are more effective than their peers, but the

process of certification is likely not the cause of their increased effectiveness. What is more likely is that already-excellent teachers choose to pursue this rigorous path.

There is one fundamental difference between these programs: while Teach for America is specifically aimed at addressing shortages in low-income schools, NBCT has no such requirements. So where do these teachers work?

In 2014-15, of the nearly 40,000 teachers in Arkansas, just under 2,700 were NBCTs as of 2014-15 (6.8 percent of teachers). Unfortunately, NBCTs are far more likely to work in districts serving the fewest high-poverty students. Only 2 percent work in the poorest decile of districts in the state; on the other hand, 22 percent of the state's NBCTs serve students in the most advantaged decile of Arkansas districts.

What does this all mean? Simply put, this means that the NBCT program is not (yet) geared toward helping students in our most disadvantaged schools. Indeed, state dollars geared to teacher excellence are flowing disproportionately to more advantaged schools and districts in Arkansas. This is not a value judgment on the NBCT program; these are simply the facts.

Given this backdrop, what can state policymakers do to address the possible budget shortfalls in the NBCT stipend program in the future? The current intersection of the discussions could lead to a productive compromise in which we merge the best of both programs. I am convinced that NBCTs are likely very effective and that teacher-quality programs supported by the state should focus on supporting schools in our most disadvantaged areas. Thus, in the interest of educational equity, I propose that policymakers might take this opportunity to turn the focus of the Arkansas NBCT program toward students in our disadvantaged schools.

Specifically, I propose that the Department of Education do the following: Continue to encourage teachers to seek NBCT certification with stipends for a lesser number of years (perhaps three to five years); and then, if teachers would like to continue to receive the stipend beyond the initial period, they would have to seek employment in economically disadvantaged schools. Indeed, the state stipend should be doubled to \$10,000 per year for NBCTs who work in disadvantaged schools.

In recent years, Arkansas has typically ranked among the top 10 states with the most new National Board Certified Teachers. We will soon have 3,000 state NBCTs; this is more than 20 times the number of Teach for America teachers in the state.

Imagine how much good could be done for students in low-income communities if state policymakers could use the NBCT-lever to encourage these excellent teachers to seek out



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placements in low-income schools. Indeed, many NBCTs have already done this (several low-income schools in Little Rock are fortunate to have many NBCTs, and these teachers should be rewarded). It would be great for our students if this were the rule, rather than the exception!

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<http://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2016/mar/12/a-modest-proposal-20160312/>