

OPINION

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OUR VIEWS

Certification worthy goal

We're disheartened by the news that Gov. Bobby Jindal's proposed budget calls for the elimination of \$5,000-per-year stipends for public-school teachers who have earned national board certification.

We also are disappointed that state Superintendent of Education Paul Pastorek, who previously championed the value of national board certification, is backing away from his support.

Louisiana desperately needs to improve its public education system. A key part of advancing that goal must be improving teacher quality. Encouraging more of our teachers to become nationally certified is a very good way to increase the quality of instruction that students get.

Becoming a nationally certified teacher is no easy thing. To earn the certification, teachers must undertake numerous exercises designed to measure their command of the subjects they teach. Applicants also must assemble portfolio entries, including video recordings of their classroom teaching, written analysis of student learning using student work samples, and other material that allows a comprehensive assessment of their teaching methods.

Once a teacher applies for national board certification, the process can take up to three years. Achieving certification requires teachers to work many extra hours outside their regular instructional days.

Independent studies have shown students of nationally certified teachers score better on standardized tests than students of teachers who lack such certification; these students also show learning gains equivalent to an extra month of school.

As of December, Louisiana had 1,532 nationally certified teachers, ranking 15th in the nation in the number of nationally certified teachers in its teaching population.

The state's modest \$5,000 a year stipend is a good way to encourage more teachers to become certified. About a dozen local districts around the state offer other incentives for certification.

Speaking before a legislative panel recently, Pastorek said national certification does not mean teachers are getting the job done in the classroom.

Life offers few absolute guarantees, and national certification, taken alone, doesn't automatically ensure quality instruction. But surely, encouraging teachers to reach for national standards of excellence in their subject matter is an important part of promoting good teaching.

A little more than two months ago, Pastorek was touting the benefits of national board certification for teachers.

Here's what Pastorek said in a Dec. 16 Department of Education news release about 132 Louisiana teachers who had just earned national board certification:

"To earn national board certification requires teachers to dedicate themselves to an exacting process, and the achievement of these 132 teachers further demonstrates their commitment to their students and their profession. These educators have met highly rigorous standards, and this undertaking will clearly benefit them and their students."

We believe Pastorek was right in December to acknowledge the importance of national board certification for teachers.

If state funding for the stipends is eliminated, we hope local school districts will come up with the money to keep these stipends in place.

We believe there should be a healthy debate about whether the state or local school districts should be responsible for funding such things as the \$5,000 stipend for nationally certified teachers. But the value of such incentives shouldn't be dismissed.

Tough budget times underscore the urgency of protecting vital priorities. Encouraging more of Louisiana's teachers to become nationally certified should be such a priority.