Agenda Topic: Examination for the Standard Teaching Certificate

Materials: Report of the Standard Examination Advisory Committee

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Purposes of Agenda Item

- To inform the Board about the proceedings of the Standard Examination Advisory Committee;
- To identify policy issues related to the Report of the Standard Examination Advisory Committee; and
- To consider options for Board action.

Expected Outcome

- Board awareness of the issues and options relating to implementation of an examination for the Standard Certificate; and
- Board direction to staff regarding next steps.

Background Information

Public Act 90-548 authorized the establishment of a three-tiered certification system and required the State Board of Education to develop a certification assessment system for implementation by 2003. As a result, during the past two years, the Board has engaged in numerous discussions about desired characteristics of the new assessment system and sought advice from the Assessment Advisory Panel, the Joint Education Committee, the Governor’s Task Force on Teacher Quality and representatives of Education Trust. Significant progress has been made with respect to developing new assessments for Initial Certification (i.e., Enhanced Basic Skills test, core and content tests) and passage of the NBPTS assessment has been adopted as the requirement for the Illinois Master Teaching Certificate.

In October 2000, the State Board endorsed “portfolio review” as the “primary strategy” for teacher assessment in relation to the Standard Certificate. This endorsement was based on the recommendation of the Teacher Assessment
Advisory Panel (which conditioned any implementation of portfolio assessment on the existence of an induction and mentoring program for all new teachers) and information provided to the Board by representatives from the Interstate New Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) and the Connecticut State Department of Education.

During the following months, agency staff had opportunities to talk with counterparts in other states about their experiences with second-stage certification requirements. It quickly became apparent that this is a constantly changing landscape, that states’ plans are seldom moving forward as they were intended, and that the number of states actually implementing a high-stakes test or assessment is still very small. More critically, discussions with Connecticut staff clarified that implementing a statewide system of portfolio review takes a great deal of time and money. The Connecticut system has been under development for about ten years and still does not include all teaching fields. Projecting that experience to Illinois, which has a substantially larger teacher population, it became evident that the planning time, financial requirements and staff needed to develop and implement a similar system would be significant.

During this same period, it became apparent that the environment for developing such a system in Illinois was becoming less rather than more supportive of the Board’s initial direction. The State’s previously strong financial position gave way to serious budget pressures in the spring of 2001 and that, in turn, led to the demise of several proposals for a statewide induction and mentoring program. In addition, the shortage of teachers appeared to be escalating as more beginning and experienced teachers indicated their intent to leave the profession.

Late in the spring of 2001, the State Superintendent convened an Advisory Committee that included representatives of teachers’ unions, higher education, regional offices of education, the Governor’s Task Force on Teacher Quality, school administrators and business organizations. That group was asked to advise staff about issues related to the next steps. This included whether “portfolio review” was still a feasible approach given state budget limitations and the lack of the recommended prerequisite -- a statewide induction and mentoring program for beginning teachers. If the Advisory Committee determined that portfolio review continued to be appropriate for the Standard Certificate, the members were asked to identify the elements that should be included in the system design. If the Committee determined that portfolio assessment is not feasible at this time, the members were asked to recommend options that could be discussed with the State Board of Education.

The Standard Examination Advisory Committee was comprised of partners with whom the State Board of Education regularly consults for advice and recommendations in matters of public policy. In addition, several beginning and experienced teachers were asked to represent those individuals who will be affected by the final decisions.
Mr. Bob Gerry, recently retired Director of Assessment with the Wheeling public schools and co-chair of the earlier Assessment Advisory Panel, and Dr. Renee Clift, Professor in the Department of Education at the University of Illinois/Urbana-Champaign and member of two earlier induction and mentoring committees, served as Co-Chairs for the Advisory Committee. They provided exceptional leadership for the work of a large and diverse group, balancing a variety of opinions and focusing on completing the assigned task within the allotted time. Mr. Gerry and Dr. Clift will be present at the Board meeting to comment on the Committee’s Report.

**Discussion of the Advisory Committee’s Work**

The deliberations of the Standard Examination Advisory Committee provided a forum for partners and stakeholders to debate the issues associated with the requirement for a high-stakes examination. Although the State Board had discussed the topic on at least two occasions, there had been very little external comment on the proposal to pursue portfolio review. The work of the Committee quickly demonstrated that the stakeholders had very strong opinions on the issue and, despite some points of consensus, the members’ opinions were often very far apart.

The work of the Committee also demonstrated that the question for some members was not just “what” examination to use for the Standard Certificate, but whether there should be an examination at all. This should not have been a surprise since there had been little public discussion of the assessment requirement prior to its adoption by the General Assembly. Although the earlier Assessment Advisory Panel discussed how to implement the requirement, this Advisory Committee provided the first opportunity for stakeholder debate on the requirement itself.

As indicated in the Committee Report, the fundamental issue in dispute was the need for and/or desirability of a high-stakes examination as a condition for Standard Certification.

Those who support a high-stakes examination for Standard Certification believe that an “examination” is needed and/or is desirable

1. To assure that all individuals who are given a certificate that is essentially permanent (i.e., subject only to meeting renewal requirements) are able to meet high standards set by the state;
2. To drive continuing professional growth of beginning teachers and document its occurrence;
3. To reflect best practices advocated by NCTAF and selected other states;
4. To provide insight and direction for the kind of support and professional development needed by beginning teachers; and
5. To balance investments in teacher support with investments in accountability.

The Committee report and the attached letter from Carolyn Nordstrom and Steve Tozer provide additional comments on this perspective.

Those who believe a high-stakes examination for Standard Certification is not needed and/or is not desirable indicate that

1. Actions have been taken (i.e., new certification standards, new Basic Skills test, new standards-based core and content area tests, and new standards for teacher preparation programs) that will assure that beginning teachers are better prepared to enter the profession.
2. The most critical teacher-quality issue is supporting the continued professional growth of beginning teachers.
3. Administrators are being trained, through a new required curriculum at the Administrators’ Academy, to better evaluate beginning teachers. The new tenure law gives local administrators four years to make judgments about the competence of new teachers and their “fit” with a given school or district.
4. The implementation of a high stakes examination system to “sort out” bad teachers will yield marginal return on the state’s investment of scarce resources.
5. The state has not established an infrastructure to prepare teachers for a high-stakes, second-stage certification examination. Implementation of such an examination, regardless of its nature, without the provision of equitable and adequate support for the Standard Certificate candidates would be punitive and unfair.
6. A high-stakes, second-stage certification examination will deter many prospective teachers from choosing the profession and/or encourage them to leave before reaching that hurdle. Either scenario will exacerbate the teacher shortage in Illinois.

All Committee members agreed that if there is a high-stakes “examination” for the Standard Certificate, it should be performance-based rather than a paper-and-pencil test.

Ultimately, the work of the Committee focused on two separate proposals that reflected these differing perspectives. Plan A would shift the focus from an “examination” to required continuing professional development for beginning teachers. Plan B would combine professional development with a pilot portfolio assessment system. These proposals are presented in their entirety as attachments to the Committee report.
It is worth noting that despite their differences, the two proposals had some common themes. Both proposals include required professional growth activities based on a plan developed by the individual teacher; both include the use of portfolios as a tool for personal reflection and development; and both acknowledge that the State is not yet in a position to move forward with high-stakes Standard Certificate assessment.

It is also worth noting that the Committee members generally agreed that teacher portfolios have value as a tool for professional growth and reflection. As the Board is aware, portfolios are used for NBPTS, and they are increasingly in use in Illinois teacher preparation programs. Both Proposal A and Proposal B include portfolios, although they would be used in different ways.

In the end, the recommendations of the Committee were limited to those areas in which there was clear consensus. Those recommendations are:

1. The State of Illinois should not implement a paper and pencil assessment leading to the Standard Teacher Certificate.

2. The State Board should move quickly to assure that people in “the pipeline,” meaning those who are currently teaching on an Initial Certificate, are not faced with new requirements they have not had time to meet.

3. The State of Illinois should give priority to providing support to initial certificate holders through opportunities for relevant professional development and for learning from and with experienced teachers (mentors).

Discussion of Board Options

The discussions of the Standard Examination Advisory Committee made clear the magnitude and complexity of issues associated with second-stage certification “examinations.” They also illustrated the lack of stakeholder consensus about what the State Board and the State of Illinois should do, and how and when to do it.

The Board has six major options for action with respect to the current statutory requirement.

- Acknowledge the lack of consensus on a high-stakes certification “examination” and seek repeal of the requirement.

- Seek statutory modifications that would extend the timeline for implementation of the current requirement and make it contingent on the
existence of a statewide induction and mentoring program and the availability of funds for implementation.

- Pursue the Board's original direction for implementation of the requirement (i.e., development of an RFP for a portfolio review system similar to that in Connecticut) with full knowledge that funding for its implementation is not likely to be available in the immediate future. This would probably not require legislative action, unless the Board would wish to extend the timeline for implementation.

- Endorsing Proposal A (see attachment to the Advisory Committee Report), which would substitute continuing professional development requirements for beginning teachers for the current required “examination.”

- Endorsing Proposal B (see attachment to the Advisory Committee Report), which create a multi-year program of professional development to support beginning teachers’ professional growth, capped by peer review of teacher portfolios. The portfolio review process would be launched as a pilot in volunteer districts. This would require some change to the current requirement, although proponents were not clear about the nature of that change.

- Endorsing some combination of the above.

The first three of these options would have the effect of putting the issue of second-stage certification on the shelf. More critically, these options would do little or nothing to move Illinois forward in its efforts to assure high-quality teachers for every school and every student.

Proposal A represents a completely different approach to the issue of continuous professional growth and development for beginning teachers. It would move Illinois forward by filling the void in the state’s current teacher-quality efforts -- i.e., the lack of any systemic attention to Initial Certificate holder’s growth and development -- while recognizing the state’s fiscal realities. It would tailor the proposed professional development requirements to research-documented needs of beginning teachers, such as classroom management and integration of theory and practice and give “credit” for desired professional development activities for new teachers, such as participation in an induction and mentoring program and development of portfolios. This approach emphasizes the importance of these activities and may serve to drive their expansion in Illinois; however, a teacher’s ability to meet the professional development requirements for Standard Certification would not depend on their availability throughout the state.
Since this proposal would establish requirements for new teachers that are similar to those now in place for certificate renewal, the concerns that have been raised about that process must be acknowledged. How can we assure that the professional development activities engaged in by beginning teachers are appropriate and high-quality? How can we avoid undue time and paperwork burdens on new teachers, many of whom are overwhelmed by their assignments? If the Local Professional Development Committees are responsible for beginning teachers’ professional development plans, how can we minimize this addition to their current responsibilities? How can we tell whether such new requirements have a positive impact on beginning teachers?

Proposal B has several aspects that are worthy of note, such as the use of a self-assessment tool to identify areas in which additional professional development is needed, and it acknowledges current fiscal and infrastructure constraints in its recommendation for pilot testing of portfolio review. However, the proposal would require mentors, for which there is no funding, and it would represent a continuing commitment to high-stakes, performance-based assessment as a condition for Standard Certification, on which there is no consensus.

The combination option is hypothetical at this stage and so cannot be evaluated.

Discussion of the Superintendent’s Recommendations

Although the focus of this analysis has been on the lack of agreement about high-stakes assessment as a condition for Standard Certification, there was a very strong consensus among Advisory Committee members in support of a statewide, state-funded induction and mentoring program. That consensus reaffirms the conclusions of virtually every other group that has looked at teacher quality issues during the past several years.

I am therefore recommending that the State Board endorse the recommendation of the Advisory Committee that the “State of Illinois give priority to providing support to initial certificate holders through opportunities for relevant professional development and for learning from and with experienced teachers (mentors).”

I am further recommending that the State Board provide leadership for a collaborative effort among all the partners to secure legislative approval and funding for a statewide induction and mentoring program for beginning teachers.

Success in this regard would do a great deal to meet new teachers’ needs and address issues of statewide concern, such as attrition rates for beginning teachers. It would also eliminate, or at least mitigate some of the arguments against portfolio review and second-stage assessment.
I am also going to ask the Committee members to reconvene during the next month and redouble their efforts to develop a consensus recommendation to the State Board on the requirements for Standard Certification. If they are unable to do so, I will provide a recommendation to the Board in November.

As background for the continued work of the Committee and our staff, I am recommending that the State Board commit to securing the funds for full implementation of the final requirements, whatever they may be.

**Recommendations:**

The State Board should:

- Endorse the recommendation of the Advisory Committee that the “State of Illinois give priority to providing support to initial certificate holders through opportunities for relevant professional development and for learning from and with experienced teachers (mentors).”

- Commit to provide leadership for a collaborative effort among all the partners to secure legislative approval and funding for a statewide induction and mentoring program for beginning teachers.

- Identify questions or issues to be addressed by the Advisory Committee and/or staff before the November Board meeting; and

- Commit to securing the funds for full implementation of the final requirements for Standard Certification, whatever they may be.