

Rosalyn O'Donnell
January 11, 2007

Why I decided to pursue National Board Certification.

I have always enjoyed learning and a challenge. Following completion of my undergraduate degree, I immediately enrolled in a masters' degree program at CWU, a logical undertaking since I lived and taught in Ellensburg. Within a few years of completing my masters I had taken enough additional courses and clock hours that I held over ninety hours beyond my degree. As any Washington State teacher knows, that's the end of the line in professional development as far as the state is concerned. I needed a new challenge, and with a husband and two young children I was not interested in pursuing my doctorate, which would almost certainly require a residency. As I read about National Board Certification, my adrenaline began to flow. I wondered if this was the "next step" I'd been looking for, the chance to push myself to be a better teacher. There was no guarantee that I would ever receive a stipend from the state if I certified, so I wasn't aiming to get rich. Then in 2001 I heard about a scholarship opportunity through the state that was based on sheer luck and would pay half the cost of the process. All I had to do was submit a brief application and hope my name was drawn out of the hat. I decided that if my name was drawn I would become a candidate, and if it wasn't, then this must not be the right time. I received my letter of "condolences" in due time. Just as I turned my mind to other pursuits, however, a second letter arrived announcing that I would receive funds after all because several recipients had declined. I began the certification process and never looked back (I never had the time!).

The primary challenges in the process.

I knew from the beginning that finding the time to work on my portfolio materials and study the Standards would be my biggest challenge. I heard stories from National Board Certified Teachers about Murphy's Law taping moments and family crises they had dealt with, but I knew time was my enemy. I commuted to work with two young children (ages three and six) in tow. I served on several committees and considered myself active professionally. My husband, who is also a teacher, was involved in several challenging professional activities that same school year. Of course, I consider myself to be fairly efficient, and I work well under pressure, so I naively figured that I would manage to get by with the minimum number of anticipated hours. Ha. I haven't met anyone yet who honestly managed that. I eventually set aside one evening a week when my husband took the children and I had a three to four hour block to devote to the process. I found other bits of time on weekends and such, but I was lagging behind quite a bit as the month prior to the portfolio deadline approached. I didn't doubt that I would complete my portfolio, but I was beginning to think it might not have the polish I once dreamed of. Then, with five weeks to go my husband called me at school to tell me that our house was fully engulfed in flames.

We lost essentially everything and moved into a relative's unfinished home. Thankfully, most of my National Board materials were in the trunk of my car and saved on my laptop,

and I only lost a few student work samples. Since it was too late to request a refund and I didn't want to have to repay my scholarship money, I decided to do my best and submit all four portfolio entries, knowing that two of the four, at least, would not represent my best work since I had hardly begun them. My husband's big professional deadline was two weeks ahead of mine, so he had priority while I focused on family and home. As soon as possible, we switched roles and I threw myself into a last-minute frenzy of taping and writing. With the support of many, I managed to mail my portfolio at the last possible moment.*

Benefits of Being an NBCT

I didn't begin to imagine the world of opportunity that would open before me as an NBCT. As an NBCT your name appears on magic lists, and suddenly invitations arrive for leadership training opportunities. Better yet, these opportunities are generally at no or limited cost to you. I have attended conferences and trainings that have shaped my teaching and built leadership skills. I have been invited to speak to other teachers and had the privilege of helping CWU develop a support program for candidates. Teachers who are interested in promoting National Board Certification can train to be speakers or support group facilitators. Politically-minded teachers are regularly invited to participate in discussions with state officials or legislators. The possibilities are endless.

The greatest benefit of these trainings is the opportunity to work with other NBCTs. Our state has a strong teacher network, and the caliber of the teachers I have worked and trained with has been nothing less than exceptional. Expectations are high, and I find myself compelled to do my best. Working in a room full of teachers who are without exception dedicated to improving student learning, knowledgeable about teaching practice, and intensely self-motivated is a humbling and inspiring experience.

Without a doubt, the National Board process changed my teaching. I am a more reflective, analytical teacher. I learned a lot about myself and my capabilities during the nine months of my candidacy, as well as my weaknesses. I am continually evolving as a teacher, with increased awareness and enhanced opportunities as a result of my certification. I fully believe that the National Board process changes teachers.

*Yes, I certified with my first attempt. I believe that preparation through WEA-sponsored National Board training and meetings with a support group gave me a strong foundation. The faith of family, friends, and teammates did the rest.