

# Education Week: Teacher Magazine

## Certiably Strange

By James Nehring



My eyes scanned the first paragraph of the letter for a telling phrase, or even a single word. And there it was, a few lines in: “regret.” I was shocked. At first, I denied it. Can’t be. Yet there it was: “regret.” Disappointment began to coalesce somewhere deep down. But then, almost as quickly, my brain kicked into emotional rebound. I can revise. This thought grew bigger in my consciousness until, by the end of the letter, I was philosophizing: Life is about revising. It was my mental defense against that other, unacceptable, conclusion: You failed!

That was last November, when I received my National Board scores for certification in social studies/history. A few hours after digesting the bad news, I sat down and read the full report, which consists of a series of numbers, each one a score for a portion of the portfolio I had submitted. Out of the 275 points needed to obtain certification, I’d earned 269. Yikes, just six points!

Although annoyed, I was encouraged by the thought that I wouldn’t need to revise much to boost my total. I’d simply pick the part with the lowest score, rework some of the commentary, provide alternative documentation, and resubmit. So I examined the scores column, where the numbers ranged from two-point-something to three-point-something (out of a possible four). All except for one score. It read 1.25. I paused. That was just about the lowest score you could get short of failing to submit the section altogether. And that one low score accounted for my overall shortfall. (The National Board multiplies sub-scores before calculating the total score.) Which section is this? I wondered. I scanned across the page and read, “Collaboration in the Professional Community.”

My happy, oh-I’ll-just-revise mood slipped to confusion, then annoyance, and, finally, outright disbelief. But this is the strongest part of my portfolio! I protested to some imagined assessor. It’s the section where I’d described, in a series of reflective essays, the four books I’ve authored, the two public schools I’ve helped launch, the presentations I regularly give in various settings, and the chapters, essays, and commentaries I’ve published, all related to teaching, learning, schools, and education policy. Included in my portfolio were book covers, citations, and program brochures.

He’s authored four books and helped launch two schools, but the National Board says that’s not enough. And it won’t say why.

I went back to the guide books for preparing the portfolio. The rubric for Collaboration in the Professional Community talks about ongoing professional development, sharing expertise with others, and conscious and deliberate practice geared toward improving teaching and learning. It also indicates that the score I received—1.25—means that “little or no evidence has been presented to meet the standard.” How was I not meeting this standard? My books have all been published by well-regarded presses (Random House and Jossey-Bass among them), and the schools I’ve helped launch continue to thrive.

Maybe I’d left something crucial out of the submission.

I checked, then had friends check, including one who’d earned board certification in social studies/history the previous year. They didn’t see anything wrong. Everybody said: “Oh, this is some clerical error. Just give them a call, and I’m sure they’ll clear it up.”

Fat chance. What I have encountered is a brick wall of bureaucratic officialdom.

**Everybody said: "Oh, this is some clerical error. Just give them a call, they'll clear it up." Fat chance.** Within a few days, I sent a polite e-mail asking how to obtain feedback on my scores. The Educational Testing Service, which manages the portfolio system for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, does not provide feedback, I was told. But I just want someone to double-check the paperwork, I pleaded in the next e-mail, to make sure an error wasn’t made in the scoring. The non- answer I received informed me that if I wish to appeal, I may do so. Could I just talk with someone about my scores? I asked. Again, a polite non-answer: Our standards and rubrics are quite clear in our documentation. Simply revise and resubmit.

I was irritated. So I read the appeals procedure and got even more irritated. In order to appeal, I had to write yet another check—on top of the \$2,000 already invested—this time for \$350. If I win, I get the money back. If I lose, I don’t. Also, if I do appeal, I forfeit my opportunity to revise during the coming year. And, in fact, the parameters of the appeal process are so narrowly set that there isn’t really much ground on which to make an appeal. I was feeling less in the embrace of a collegial review board and more in the grip of a faceless corporation.

I appealed anyway, claiming that the scoring for this section was not consistent with the standard. I also stated that the denial of any sort of feedback is fundamentally unfair, particularly for an organization that encourages revision. My deeper appeal, though, was to common sense. I sent ETS copies of my books and a note describing the alumni award I had received from Brown University “for distinguished contributions to teachers and the teaching profession.” I reminded them of the intensive collaboration I undertook with colleagues to design and establish two new public schools.

In late April, I received a response in the mail. It was mostly standard language with a few skimpy (and expensive) sentences addressing my appeal. One informed me that disagreeing with the score is not an acceptable basis for appeal. They missed my point on that one. On the question of feedback, the letter informed me that the NBPTS is “exploring ways” to provide personalized comments but that it does not do so at this time.

The National Board allows for a second, and final, appeal, which I pursued. They said to allow 180 days—that's half a year—for a response. After several weeks, I called just to make sure they'd received the appeal. At first they claimed they had not. Then they admitted they might have lost it. When I offered to resubmit, they told me the deadline had passed. Since I had foolishly not requested a return receipt, I could not prove that I had mailed the original well before the deadline.

The NBPTS is no longer returning my calls. Meanwhile, I continue to teach and write and collaborate with colleagues. Several friends and I recently won state approval to launch an urban public charter school, which is scheduled to open in September 2002. I am also helping to establish a mentoring program for new teachers.

There's a bottom line to all this. Massachusetts grants a \$5,000 annual bonus to board-certified teachers who serve as mentors to new teachers. This was going to be the start of a college fund for our three daughters. One friend tells me I should just suck it up and revise the one section of my portfolio. But I wouldn't know what to say differently. I've presented my work, which I still believe is worthy, in the best way I can. I love what I do and plan to continue doing it, but I feel burned by an organization, the National Board, whose philosophy I once felt quite hopeful about—teachers assuming control of their own profession. Sadly, as it appears to be turning out, the board, caught in the whorl of our culture's bureaucratic-legalistic ethos, is assuming control of teachers.

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