

Arkansas Teachers for National Board Certification Annual Conference

Saturday, February 6, 2010

**Heritage Conference Center
Harding University, Searcy**

Corey Oliver, Keynote Speaker

**Conference Theme: "Reach for the Stars"
Speech Title: "National Board Certification:
Reaching for the Stars in the Moment"**



Good morning! It is with an immense amount of humility and honor that I stand with you today to share some thoughts about a topic so very dear to my heart: National Board Certification.

I must not delve into my thoughts concerning National Board Certification without first taking this opportunity to express my utmost respect for this university (which is where my road to Certification began) and my appreciation for a few instrumental and influential individuals.

When I arrived at this beautiful campus for the first time in the summer of 2005 to attend a National Board pre-candidacy workshop, I was instantly embraced by a genuine and comforting warmth and hospitality. From students, to faculty members, to administrators, everyone seemed to embody a spirit of community and love. This spirit of community and love isn't different from what we educators should strive to uphold in our various roles. Harding University, I hold you in very high esteem...not just for setting me on this path to and beyond National Board Certification, but also for the ideals for which you stand.

Although I know she isn't expecting or seeking any public praise or acknowledgement, I would be greatly remiss if I didn't bestow some honor where it is due...and that individual is Dr. Clara Carroll. Dr. Carroll, not only I, but we all, value you for possessing so many of the character traits exemplified by positive, successful, influential people, character traits such as honesty, dependability, perseverance, optimism, determination, enthusiasm, unselfishness, friendliness, and being a lifelong learner. The example you have set is exemplary. Your impact on me has been immeasurable, and I'm certain that many others in attendance today would eagerly express to you their gratitude.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to Cyndi Matthews and the other members of the governing board of the Arkansas Teachers for National Board Certification for the tireless effort and relentless determination they have put forth to make this conference a reality.

Having strong advocates for National Board Certification on the state department level is critical. It is indispensable. It is something none of us should take for granted. We have such a powerful advocate for—and believer in—National Board Certification in the person of Michael Rowland. Understanding that every child deserves a National Board Certified Teacher, Michael Rowland has been a steady supporter of this powerful reform movement. I recall attending the National Board national conference in Washington D.C. a few years ago with Dr. Carroll and a delegation of other NBCTs. Prior to that experience I really didn't realize how very fortunate we are in Arkansas to have the legislative support for National Board Certification that we have. At the conference I met countless NBCTs from various other states that did not offer salary incentives for teachers who certify. The annual bonus that Arkansas NBCTs receive each year is not something that just magically happens; no, it is something that is pursued. Michael, we thank you for your support of National Board Certification and all that Certification entails.

I would lastly like to thank everyone (NBCTs, candidates, and other guests) for your presence here today. I hope that I can offer some thoughts that will be beneficial to each of you as you function as an NBCT, a candidate pursuing certification, or someone else who fits neither of those categories but is supportive of this invaluable process.

I understand that the theme for this year's conference is "Reach for the Stars". In accordance with this theme, I would like to share briefly some thoughts on this topic: "National Board Certification: Reaching for the Stars in the moment". While interacting with my students in a recent classroom project, a project in which they examined a variety of texts in search of various sentence patterns, one of my students stumbled across what I considered to be an intriguing, thought-provoking sentence. His sentence read, (I quote) "I'm not just there for the moment; I'm there in the moment." While my student had indeed found a fine sentence for his project, I knew that he had also found a jewel of a sentence for my project, that is, preparing for today's talk on National Board Certification. This experience was yet another reminder of the great sources of inspiration...and assistance...our students can be.

This experience of the excellent sentence befitting National Board Certification offered to me by one of my current students reminds me of one of my most memorable experiences of my certification process. Although it has been a few years since my pursuit of certification, I remember it like it was yesterday. As my fourth period students entered the class, one of my students approached me with a huge smile and equally huge excitement, and said, "Mr. Oliver, I have really gotten more into reading since I've been in your class this year! I am reading so much more than I used to read! I really like a nice classroom library of many different kinds of books. I am loving reading so much this year!" Well, I didn't stop the student; no, I let him go on and on. And after a while, I finally stopped him, and thanked him, and quickly added, "Could you put that in writing?" Why did I ask him this? Because I knew that he had voiced something that I could use for some good documentation for Entry 4! My student gave me a look of slight confusion, which I followed with, "No, I'm serious. I need that in writing." After realizing my seriousness, my student, without any hesitation, provided me that letter I so desired...and needed! So, yes, our students can be a wonderful wealth of inspiration...and documentation!!!

So, again, the sentence that my current student selected and examined for his project in English class is one that I have selected for our examination this morning. Again, that sentence reads, "I'm not just there for the moment; I'm there in the moment." Who are educators that are there not just for the moment, but in the moment? And, lastly and more particularly, who are educators reaching for the stars for the moment, but in the moment? Well, in my estimation, the Five Core Propositions of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards are a fine representation of what it means to reach for the stars and what it means to be in the moment. While I know that many of us probably recite the propositions in our sleep, they deserve repeating here today: Proposition 1: Teachers are Committed to Students and Their Learning. Proposition 2: Teachers Know the Subjects They Teach and How to Teach Those Subjects to Students. Proposition 3: Teachers are Responsible for Managing and Monitoring Student Learning. Proposition 4: Teachers Think Systematically about Their Practice and Learn from Experience. And Proposition 5: Teachers are Members of Learning Communities. not just

The common denominator and central focus of the five core propositions, as well as the common concern of all educators, is the student. The National Board's vision for accomplished teaching involves educators striving to positively impact student learning.

I maintain that the stars we strive to reach as accomplished educators are the students. It behooves all well-meaning educators to forge positive relationships with students through engaging activities. Just as the characteristics of stars in the sky may vary greatly (such as their color, size, brightness, composition, and temperature), so do our students' characteristics (their personalities, backgrounds, strengths, and weaknesses) differ. Accomplished teachers recognize that not only do these differing characteristics exist, but they also respond to the needs presented by such differences. It is a fact that, while stars may seem unchanging to us, they actually pass through a life cycle. Likewise, we educators must remain cognizant of the fact that the stars—the students—we strive to reach daily are not static, unchanging beings, but rather constantly evolving—ever changing—individuals in need—and deserving—of our best efforts to make a positive impact on them. Rather than teach one year 30 times, accomplished educators are constantly evolving and reinventing themselves and their practices so that they are constantly making relevant connections to their students. It is also a fact that a star may look bright or dim to observers on earth depending on the star's size and its distance from earth. Dedicated to making knowledge accessible to all students, accomplished teachers, as reflected in Proposition 1, firmly believe that all students—despite their brightness—can learn.

The words of a simple, yet powerful poem entitled "Reach for the Stars" is one that resonates with me when I ponder its connection to what good teachers know and do, and it, I feel, can be a source of inspiration for educators who have become jaded or lost their enthusiasm. Furthermore, I believe that this poem inspires National Board Certification candidates to endure the strenuous certification process. I also contend that this poem encourages National Board Certified Teachers to continue to advance the mission of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. This simple, yet powerful poem, which challenges all of us to continue to reach for those stars (our students) and positively impact them, goes as follows:

Reach your hand out to the stars

Tell yourself, "I can do this"

I can accomplish everything I have ever dreamed

Sometimes I might run into a roadblock

Other times life will throw me a curveball

But I have the skill and talents to build bridges

And hit homeruns

Everyone has it deep within their heart

We just have to look

We have to put in the effort to find it

It will not be easy to find

But once we do

We will be able to touch that star

Grab a hold of something we thought would always be out of reach

When we do find it in our heart and reach out and touch our dream

Shivers will run down our spine with the most amazing feeling in the world

That of true success and unbelievable happiness

Do it for those stars

Start looking

Start reaching for the stars

Start living YOUR dream

According to the National Board web site, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards "improves teaching and student learning. National Board Certified Teachers are highly accomplished educators who meet high and rigorous standards. Like board-certified doctors and accountants, teachers who achieve National Board Certification have met rigorous standards through rigorous study, expert evaluation, self-assessment and peer review. In a congressionally-mandated study, National Board Certification was recently recognized by the National Research Council as having a positive impact on student achievement, teacher retention, and professional development. Since 1987 more than 82,000 teachers have achieved National Board Certification. These teachers prepare America's diverse student population with the skills it needs to compete in the 21st century workplace."

On May 24, 2006, shortly after completing the assessment center exercises during my pursuit of certification, I penned this definition of what the pursuit of certification meant to me: "The pursuit of National Board Certification propels you into an unprecedented and unparalleled introspective examination of your teaching performance." The pursuit of National Board Certification far exceeded any preconceived notions I had of what the process would entail before I engaged in it. Never before nor since have I been afforded the opportunity to become so intimately acquainted with my teaching practice through descriptive, analytical, and reflective examinations of my teaching. National Board Certification strengthened my conviction in the importance of being conscious of every decision that I make in the classroom. National Board Certification strengthened my conviction in the importance of making a positive impact on every child that I am privileged to have in my classroom. National Board Certification strengthened my conviction in the statement "Students will not care anything about how much you know until they know how much you care." Without hesitation or uncertainty, I can say that National Board Certification has been the most profound, the most rewarding, indeed, the most important professional development opportunity I have ever had.

I have been amazed by the extent to which many of my international travel experiences have had powerful parallels or common threads to my pursuit of National Board Certification and my role as a National Board Certified Teacher. Believing that taking advantage of international travel opportunities literally opens up cultural windows for the traveler, I take advantage of as many such opportunities as I can. Just as international travel opportunities compel the traveler to see situations from a totally different perspective by taking the

traveler out of his comfort zone, so does National Board Certification require the candidate to consider his teaching practice from a different, more analytical perspective, and step outside of his comfort zone in an effort to improve teaching and learning in his classroom and school.

I consider so many of my travel experiences, as I do my pursuit of National Board Certification, as defining moments in my life. Pursuing National Board Certification, like immersing myself in a foreign culture, is an important instance that has shaped or molded everything that was to follow. As it is impossible to leave an international travel experience the same way you entered it, so too is it impossible to leave the National Board Certification process the same way you entered it. You leave both of them a different person. Your views of the world (or teaching) have been permanently molded, everlastingly refined, forever changed. Once you exit both of these experiences, you have a much more keen sense of self-awareness about the world (or teaching) and your role in it.

If you would allow me to share just a few of those defining moments of international travel and draw some parallels to National Board Certification.

Defining moment #1

While visiting the country of Senegal in West Africa with a group of UCA students during the summer of 1994, the group and I had the opportunity to visit some classrooms at a primary school. I was totally unprepared for what I would see as I walked into the first classroom we entered. You see, the most distinguishing feature of this classroom, and in fact of every classroom I visited at this school, wasn't a Smart Board (for there wasn't one); the most distinguishing feature of this classroom wasn't a ceiling mounted LCD projector (for there wasn't one)...the most distinguishing characteristic of this classroom wasn't even a plethora of instructional and motivational posters (for there weren't any). No, the most distinguishing characteristic of this classroom was the 100 students...yes 100 students...who sat two-to-a-desk in this classroom. The amazement that I felt by the large number of students in one particular class was matched only by my amazement of the teacher who stood before those students. With an inspiring mixture of determination, professionalism, enthusiasm, and grace, that teacher in Senegal, West Africa, reached beyond the seemingly limiting factor of a large class size and into a realm of unlimited possibility and ability as she brought the learning to life in a way that excited every single individual in that class! Her teaching was captivating! I stood there in awe as this teacher lit a spark in each and every child in that room. I don't know who was more spellbound...they or I. Not only did she light a spark in those students, she lit one in me! That teacher's burning desire to ignite an inextinguishable flame of learning in each and every child in her room was truly awe-inspiring. It was breathtaking. She was clearly not teaching just for the moment; she was teaching in the moment.

According to Core Proposition 3 of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, accomplished teachers "deliver effective instruction. They move fluently through a range of instructional techniques, keeping students motivated, engaged, and focused." National Board certified teachers are not deterred by large class sizes or other obstacles, but they find inventive ways to educate effectively in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. They don't count the number of students; they make the number of students count. Although this phenomenal cultural experience in a classroom thousands of miles and an ocean away occurred 11 years before I would engage in the pursuit of National Board Certification, I just know that what I witnessed and felt that day in Senegal, West Africa represents so much of what National Board Certification represents. For that teacher and her fine example I am eternally grateful.

Defining moment #2

In the summer of 2006, as a participant in the Japan Fulbright Memorial Fund teacher program, I visited Japan in an effort to increase my understanding of Japanese life and culture, including its educational system. During this incredible three-week journey, I had direct contact with Japanese teachers and students during visits to primary and secondary schools (as well as a teachers college). One of the most unforgettable moments in Japan (one that will remain with me forever) occurred at an elementary school in Kushiro, a city in the northern region of the country. Our visit at this school began by our greeting the school's students as they arrived at the campus. As one small group of students entered the courtyard in front of the school, I greeted the members of that group. While I exchanged salutations with the students of this group, one of the Japanese boys suddenly took my hand, studied it closely, and even began rubbing it intently as if trying to determine if the color of my skin could be wiped away. He rubbed, and rubbed, and rubbed my hand in amazement, and I smiled, and smiled, and smiled in amazement as his friends and my colleagues looked on. I realized later, after visiting about this occurrence with one of our Japanese guides, that I was possibly one of the few African Americans—if not the only African American—that this boy had ever seen in person. Reflecting on that encounter later, I was reminded of the importance of acknowledging and valuing the genuine curiosity each of our students possesses.

Isn't that so akin to the spirit of National Board Certification? Just as that Japanese boy grabbed my hand to examine the pigment of my skin, so do we have students who, in great curiosity, long to feel and understand the fabric of our lives (what makes us who we are). Many students may not physically touch our hand, but countless students will certainly touch our heart. According to Core Proposition 1 of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, accomplished teachers "recognize the individual differences that distinguish their students from one another and they take account for these differences in their practice." While the young Japanese boy was the only person who emerged from his group of friends to carefully and closely examine this unfamiliar spectacle—me—it behooved me to yield to this boy's curiosity. It was necessary for me to yield to something that was important to him in that moment. It behooves all of us to be ever so conscious—but not just conscious—but also accepting of the individual differences, concerns, and backgrounds that our students possess and display.

Defining moment #3

One of the most transcendent, powerfully moving cultural experiences I have experienced occurred in the summer of 2008 while participating in a 5-week curriculum development project in South Africa with other educators from the state of Arkansas. During our stay in—and study of—this incredibly interesting and amazingly diverse country, I had the opportunity to stand atop the majestic Table Mountain and enjoy the picturesque panorama from this lofty location. While so much was to be seen as I peered over the fascinating city of Cape Town and out into Table Bay (which is a natural inlet of the Atlantic Ocean), what made the hugest emotional impact on me was a flat, oval-shaped island approximately four miles off the coast of Cape Town. Why did this island in the distance strike such an emotional chord with me? Well, you see, this island is Robben Island, where, in a 6-foot by 6-foot cell, Nelson Mandela spent 18 of his 27 years of imprisonment. Standing atop Table Mountain and attempting to imagine the misery of such confinement, I was comforted and inspired by this quote from Mandela himself: “To be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”

National Board Certified teachers respect and enhance the livelihood of each of their students by doing not what is merely easy and convenient, but by doing what is necessary and appropriate. They don’t accept a cookie cutter approach to addressing individual student needs, but, but constantly reflecting and constantly expanding “their repertoire of skills”, they make significant contributions to student learning. Yes, they realize that their students’ liberation into well-informed, productive citizens is at least partially contingent upon their efforts to plan and execute relevant, engaging learning activities.

Mandela also said, “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.”

National Board Certified Teachers are committed to speaking to each student in a language that reaches that particular student’s heart. Yes, in essence, National Board Certified Teachers don’t teach for a moment; they teach in a moment. Indeed, NBCTs reach for the stars in the moment.

When I would later in the course of the 5-week project get the opportunity to visit Robben Island and touch and peer into the very prison cell that Mandela occupied for so many years, I was almost overcome by the gravity of the historical significance of the place where I stood. Accomplished teachers are forever cognizant of the significance of each teaching moment and, in the words of American author and storyteller Garrison Keillor, know that nothing they “do for children is ever wasted.”

I will forever treasure these and other defining moments. They have taught me a hugely important lesson: we teachers must greatly value the time we spend with students and enjoy the priceless gift of uniqueness each student gives us daily by just being who he or she is.

Defining moments like the ones I have shared with you here have been incredibly consequential, empowering me to continue to strive to make a significant impact in the classroom and beyond, and raising my awareness of the magnitude of this important work.

Candidates, I applaud you, and I honor you for engaging in this so very valuable professional development activity known as National Board Certification. I applaud you for all that you have done (for your execution of diligence and determination) to get closer and closer to completing this priceless process. Not if, but when you certify, I implore you to continue your commitment with the National Board just as fervently as you pursued certification. Stay involved in this fine reform movement producing better students and better schools. Remember that certification isn’t an end, but a beginning. Know that certification comes with rewards and responsibilities. Once you’ve clearly, concisely, and convincingly demonstrated to the National Board your ability to “reach each of your stars in the moment”, continue your commitment by mentoring National Board candidates, attending state and national conferences, networking with other NBCTs, influencing policy, and having an even greater impact on student learning and achievement.

NBCTs, I am ecstatic about continuing my commitment to the National Board’s mission of advancing “the quality of teaching and learning”. I unite with you in upholding “high and rigorous standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do.”

To candidates and NBCTs alike, I’m honored to join you in this most noble of professions...this absolutely outstanding work of heart called teaching. Lowell Milken, Chairman and Co-Founder of the Milken Family Foundation says, “Each of us can recall outstanding educators who had a profound impact on our lives, infusing us with their passion for the subjects they taught, providing us with the security to learn from both success and failure, and challenging us to perform at the peak of our abilities.” Candidates and NBCTs, that we will continue to be the embodiment of that sentiment is my hope this morning. Let’s have that profound impact, let’s infuse our students with passion for the subjects we teach, let’s give them the security to learn from both their success and failure. In the words of a fellow Milken educator, “When we describe what we do, let’s say with pride, “I’ve got the most important job in the whole world...I teach!”

Thank you!