

# More Evidence that System-Friendly Reform Cannot Happen

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April 25, 2015

We keep re-affirming what should be more widely obvious. Alongside our persistent failure to address the [roots of the persistent low performance problem](#) other efforts, such as changing the actors in a deeply flawed system, will yield little or no effect. The latest example is an assessment of the [value of board certification](#) for teaching effectiveness. Like many before it, the article makes a big deal about that finding; that now two studies had found that costly, demanding board certification yields a “statistically significant” effect on student academic progress. But, in a one-sentence paragraph in the middle of the article, the author dutifully confesses a key fact: “The overall effect of holding the certification is fairly small, across the two studies.”

It’s a noteworthy fact because it’s a predictable, common, but not well-known, finding. In 2009, I published an [assessment](#) of studies that explored cause-effect relationships between policy variables and aggregate academic outcomes like average test scores for countries, states, or districts. Like the board certification studies cited above, the studies I surveyed found some statistically significant cause-effect relationships, but the effects were always very small. Mostly, though, the published statistical evidence rejected hypotheses that are still widely seen as intuitively obvious; for example, that increased per pupil funding would yield improved academic outcomes. Not true, as we are periodically reminded [by specific case studies](#)!! That it should be true is one of many should-be-compelling symptoms of school system dysfunction, and powerful evidence that we need transformational school system change.

The bottom line of my study is that it would be prohibitively costly to squeeze acceptable outcomes from the current system; that is, with current funding and governance processes in place, reform attempts would yield very little bang for the buck. As I have [pointed out previously](#), noteworthy school reforms cannot happen without school system reform. ‘System-friendly’ policy changes cannot yield the scope of improvement needed by a [‘Nation at Risk’](#).