



Policy Statement

TEACHER PREPARATION, LICENSURE, AND RECRUITMENT

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The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform is committed to making high-performing middle-grades schools the norm rather than the exception. We believe that specialized preparation of middle-grades educators will produce competent and caring teachers who are well-qualified to teach young adolescents. Therefore, we strongly support the specialized preparation of middle-level teachers at both the pre-service and graduate levels.

To that end, we make the following recommendations:

- States should establish mandatory requirements for middle-level teacher licensure as an incentive for both institutions and individuals to pursue a middle-level specialization.
- Colleges and universities should establish teacher preparation programs that prepare practicing and future teachers to work specifically with young adolescents, and assign faculty and staff with expertise in middle-level education to these programs.
- Districts and schools should hire middle-grades teachers to teach the subjects they are prepared to teach. Furthermore, they should focus on creating the conditions in which both teachers and students can succeed.
- States should make middle-level teacher licensure specific to the middle grades (e.g., grades 5 through 8, or 6 through 9) and not overlap significantly with licensure for the elementary or high school levels.
- Middle-grades licensure for content-area teachers (such as language arts, science, mathematics, and social studies) should be middle-grades subject-specific and middle-grades standards-based, including concentrated study in two or more academic areas. For other middle-grades teachers (e.g., special education, bilingual education), specialized training in middle-level education and early adolescence should be required.
- Colleges and universities should work in partnership with districts and schools to provide ongoing professional development and sustained support for both new and veteran middle-level teachers. This will not only help retain good teachers, but also ensure their continual learning.

In recent years, many organizations and individuals have called for teacher education reform. The Forum is specifically concerned with creating excellent middle-grades teachers who are prepared to teach challenging content to young adolescents. In order to ensure that middle-grades teachers have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to teach their students well, teacher preparation programs must focus on three critical areas:

Academic excellence. Middle-grades teachers must have a deep understanding of both the subjects they teach and how to help young adolescents learn the concepts and skills of demanding curricula.

Developmental responsiveness. Middle-grades teachers must have a solid understanding of early adolescence, as well as the skills and dispositions to work with young adolescents' unique developmental challenges. These teachers should know how to motivate young adolescents by engaging them actively in their own learning.

Equity and cultural diversity. Middle-grades teachers must have a wide repertoire of skills, mixed with a sustained sense of hope, support, and expectations for achievement, to enhance learning and development for the most racially and ethnically diverse school population in our nation's history.

Ultimately, the focus of all teacher preparation programs must be on results. Teacher preparation programs must provide prospective teachers with field-based experiences where they have the opportunity to apply what they learn in the classroom to real-life settings. Graduates should be able to demonstrate that they contribute to middle-grades students' healthy development and their ability to perform at high levels on multiple indicators of academic success. Moreover, they should leave no young adolescent behind.

THE NEED FOR SPECIALIZED PREPARATION OF MIDDLE-GRADES TEACHERS

Teachers are the linchpin in students' learning and healthy development. In his preface to the Education Commission of the States' (ECS) report *In Pursuit of Quality Teaching* (2000), Governor of Wyoming and 1999–2000 ECS Chairman Jim Geringer wrote:

An effective teacher is the single most important factor affecting student learning. It's more important than standards, more important than class size, more important than how much money is spent. Each of these is significant, but the quality of teaching dwarfs them all (p. 2).

Studies conducted by the University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center (Sanders and Rivers, 1996) and by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (Darling-Hammond, 1996) bolster Geringer's assertion that teachers are a critical influence. In the press to respond to public schools' urgent need for more teachers, policymakers must remember that the *essential* need is for more *highly qualified* teachers. We cannot sacrifice the quality of middle-grades education and the next generation of young adolescents to the immediate problem of teacher shortages. Schools must hire teachers who know how to help students meet rigorous content and performance standards and who educate them to live in an increasingly diverse, democratic society. In middle-level schools, with their myriad challenges, high-quality teacher preparation is a must.

Turning Points 2000 (Jackson and Davis, 2000) reports a growing consensus to support specialized teacher preparation at the middle-grades level:

- Numerous studies reveal that middle-grades teachers, principals, and other stakeholders support specialized teacher preparation of middle-grades teachers (Jenkins and Jenkins, 1991; McEwin, Dickinson, and Hamilton, 2000; Scales and McEwin, 1996).
- Many national associations, including both the National Middle School Association and the National Association for Secondary School Principals, support the specialized preparation of middle-grades teachers, as do several regional groups (such as the Southern Regional Education Board).
- Some states—including North Carolina, Georgia, and Ohio—have taken significant steps in creating specialized teacher preparation and licensure programs.

- The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards has adopted specialized standards and performance assessments for teachers at the middle level.
- The National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification includes separate middle-grades teacher education standards in its popular publication *NASDTEC Outcome-Based Standards and Portfolio Assessment* (1994).
- The National Middle School Association has performance-based middle-level teacher preparation standards for undergraduate and graduate degree programs. These standards are approved by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education and are used in the accreditation process (NMSA, 2002).
- A national study of 2,139 middle-grades teachers in six states reveals that the greater the number of middle-grades courses middle-grades teachers have, the more favorably they rate their teacher preparation programs (Scales and McEwin, 1994).

Despite the need for and perceived value of specialized teacher preparation, relatively few middle-grades teachers in this country receive such preparation before they begin their careers (McEwin, Dickinson, and Jenkins, 1996; Scales, 1992; Scales and McEwin, 1994). The National Forum believes that the time is right to establish specialized middle-level teacher preparation programs that prepare the next generation of teachers for the next generation of students. Yet, research shows that specialized teacher preparation will not become the norm until middle-level licensure is universally required. Only then will teacher preparation institutions be compelled to offer comprehensive middle-level programs, and will teachers of young adolescents have the specialized preparation they need in order to become effective teachers.

THE NATIONAL FORUM TO ACCELERATE MIDDLE-GRADES REFORM

is an alliance of educators, researchers, national associations, and officers of professional organizations and foundations, dedicated to improving education in the middle grades. The Forum seeks to improve student learning dramatically by advocating that schools provide strong academics, respond to students' needs and interests, and ensure equal access to high-quality classes.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF MIDDLE-LEVEL TEACHER-PREPARATION PROGRAMS

A high-quality middle-grades teacher preparation program includes many of the components that other top-notch teacher preparation programs offer (e.g., integrating technology, forming collaborative partnerships, promoting teacher leadership). It also has the following key elements that are especially appropriate to this grade span:

A FOCUS ON ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE.

Middle-grades teachers must learn how to provide their students with rigorous curriculum and instruction that are both developmentally appropriate and responsive to the needs of diverse learners. They must have a deep understanding of both their subject and how to teach it so that every student learns and demonstrates significant progress in his or her performance. In addition, middle-grades teachers must learn how to assess what students know and are able to do in order to continually improve both their teaching and their students' learning.

- **Middle-level curriculum.** High-quality preparation programs focus on the study of middle-level curriculum, with an emphasis on discipline-specific, integrative, and interdisciplinary approaches. Teachers must have the knowledge, dispositions, and skills to set high expectations for all students, provide them with a rigorous and challenging curriculum, engage the students in learning, and make sure that students have the support they need to participate and succeed.
- **Concentrated study in two or more broad teaching fields.** Effective middle-grades teacher preparation programs prepare *content area* teacher candidates in two or more academic disciplines (e.g., mathematics and science). This helps prospective teachers build a thorough academic underpinning of content, pedagogy, and the connections and interrelationships among the academic disciplines and other areas of knowledge.

A CONCERN FOR DEVELOPMENTAL RESPONSIVENESS.

An effective teacher preparation program must provide teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to work effectively with young adolescents. Thus, the program must encompass three specific areas:

- **Early adolescence and the needs of young adolescents** (ages 10 to 14). All middle-level teachers should be experts on the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development of young adolescents. This knowledge can be attained through formal study of early adolescence and direct work with young adolescents.
- **The philosophy and organization of middle-level education.** The principles of middle-school philosophy and school organization (e.g., teams, advisories, and exploratory classes) can be mastered through formal study and experience in middle-level schools. Teachers need to learn the importance of personalizing middle-level education so that each child has one committed advocate in the school. Teachers must also learn how to involve parents/families as partners in the educational process.
- **Middle-grades planning, teaching, and assessment.** Middle-level teacher-preparation programs offer numerous opportunities to translate developmental and content knowledge into successful practice. They emphasize a wide range of developmentally appropriate instructional techniques that promote student learning, such as cooperative learning, independent inquiry, use of multi-media, and real-world problem solving. They teach prospective teachers how to employ a wide variety of assessment techniques (e.g., traditional testing, portfolios, and exhibitions) to monitor student learning and improve instruction. They help teachers disaggregate data and look closely at student work so that no young adolescent or group of students is left behind.

AN EMPHASIS ON EQUITY AND DIVERSITY.

Middle-grades teacher-preparation programs help teachers understand individual differences and how to differentiate instruction so that every student—regardless of socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, gender, first language, or ability—has access to a rigorous, developmentally appropriate curriculum.

- **Inclusive practices.** High-quality teacher preparation programs provide teachers with a wide range of instructional strategies designed to meet the needs of students with different learning styles, intelligences, and abilities. These strategies may include, for example, the use of manipulatives and hands-on activities, cooperative learning, the arts, technology, service-learning, and other strategies that help students gather information, make meaning, and apply what they learn in real-world settings.
- **Cultural diversity.** Effective middle-grades teacher preparation programs recognize that early adolescence is a time when students are exploring their own identities while also developing a growing interest in the world around them. Middle-grades teacher preparation programs must help teachers learn how to understand and respect their students' norms and values, as well as those of the students' families and the larger community in which they live.

EARLY AND CONTINUING FIELD EXPERIENCES.

Field experiences provide prospective middle-grades teachers with invaluable learning about young adolescents, middle-level curriculum, and middle-level instruction. A promising approach is an apprentice-based model of teacher preparation, with teachers-in-training placed in high-performing middle-grades schools and participating in seminars built around field experiences. Experiences in the community are another way in which prospective teachers can deepen their understanding of students and their families. Finally, the National Forum encourages teacher preparation programs, in partnership with middle-grades schools, to design induction programs that provide new teachers with initial orientation, mentoring, ongoing professional development, and opportunities to take on leadership roles as they embark on their teaching careers.

THE MANDATE FOR MIDDLE-LEVEL TEACHER LICENSURE

The last decade has demonstrated that specialized middle-level teacher preparation programs are more prevalent in states where middle-level teacher licensure is both available and mandatory. Yet, the majority of states that offer middle-level licensure do not require middle-level teachers to hold that credential to teach young adolescents. As a result, most young adolescents are taught by teachers who have specialized in or taught other age groups, or were unable to obtain training to prepare them adequately for a middle-level position. A student's ability to succeed in the classroom is compromised without teachers who are expert in middle-level education (Cooney, 1999; Jackson and Davis, 2000; McEwin and Dickinson, 1997).

Despite the need for well-prepared teachers, nationally, only 20 percent of teachers are formally prepared to teach at the middle level (and that figure is much lower in some states). The lack of subject expertise is equally glaring. For instance, approximately 30 percent of grades 7 and 8 teachers assigned to teach math or science lack the subject knowledge to do so. Teacher quality especially suffers in poor urban and rural schools, where even larger percentages of teachers teach outside their fields and areas of certification. As Kati Haycock reports, "Poor students, minority students, and lower achieving students of all races are far more likely than other students to be taught by undereducated teachers" (Haycock and Ames, 2000).

Some signs of improvement are beginning to appear. A national study of teacher licensure regulations conducted by Gaskill (2002) found that increasing numbers of states are adopting specialized middle-level licensure regulations for teachers. The study found that 43 states and the District of Columbia now have some form of specialized licensure requirement for middle-level teaching.¹ This number has increased substantially over the last several decades.²

While these results are encouraging, credentials still are not necessarily *required* for middle-level teachers. Gaskill found that only 21 of the 43 states that offered some form of middle-level teaching credential (a license, certification, or endorsement) required middle-level teachers to have this credential. In the majority of states, almost any kind of teaching credential allows a teacher to take a middle-level position. Such leeway is rarely permitted for those teaching elementary or high school

¹ The seven states that reported no specialized licensure regulations were California, Idaho, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Montana, and New Jersey.

² For example, only two states had middle-level teacher-licensure regulations in 1968 (Pumerantz, 1969), 25 in 1982 (McEwin and Allen, 1983), and 33 in 1992 (Valentine and Mogar, 1992).

students, a reflection of middle-grades schools' low priority among state departments of education, policymakers, teacher preparation institutions, and other stakeholders.

In too many states, licenses cover overlapping grade levels (e.g., grades K–8, 5–8, 7–12). This discourages prospective teachers from enrolling in specialized middle-grades preparation programs, because they can acquire a license that covers six (7–12) or nine (K–8) grade levels in the same length of study that is required to qualify for a middle-grades license that covers only four grade levels (5–8). As noted in *Turning Points 2000*:

This dilemma can be avoided by greatly reducing or eliminating the grade-level overlaps between elementary, middle, and high school licensure regulations. Prospective teachers should have the opportunity to decide upon a career which focuses on a single developmental age group and a rigorous preparation in the subjects they will teach. This specialized professional preparation should be rewarded by a distinctive license that accurately informs all concerned that the teacher receiving it has demonstrated his or her abilities to teach young adolescents effectively (Jackson and Davis, p. 103).

In an attempt to respond to these credentialing issues, some states have launched "endorsement" options, rather than authentic teaching licenses. But, however well-intentioned, such add-on endorsements have done little to ensure the special preparation of middle-level teachers. Typically, in endorsement plans, prospective teachers must first earn a degree and a license in elementary education, a secondary subject area, or some other teaching field. Then, by extending their study, prospective teachers can also be licensed to teach at the middle level. Endorsement requirements often amount to little more than two or three courses that may or may not focus directly on middle-level teaching. However, since most states allow elementary- and secondary-level teachers to teach young adolescents, few teachers choose even this limited route to middle-level specialization (McEwin and Dickinson, 1996).

In summary, progress has been made in the number of states adopting specialized middle-level teacher licensure; 86 percent of all states now offer a specific middle-level credential as an option. However, only 42 percent actually require a middle-level license for teaching in middle-level classrooms. The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform joins others in advocating that every state require middle-level teachers to have middle-level credentials. This will encourage more colleges and universities to offer rigorous programs that focus directly on middle-level teaching, and districts and schools to hire teachers with the appropriate preparation.

CONCLUSION

Young adolescents need and deserve caring, knowledgeable, and skilled teachers who want to teach them and have the professional preparation to do so successfully. The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform believes that middle-level teacher preparation programs must be different from programs designed to prepare teachers of young children in elementary schools or older adolescents in high schools. Again, we urge colleges and universities to design teacher preparation programs that specifically prepare future and current teachers to work with this age group and to ensure that students meet academic standards. Further, we strongly recommend that states establish mandatory requirements for middle-level licensure that do not overlap significantly with licensure for elementary or high school teaching. This will serve as an incentive for both institutions and individuals to pursue middle-level specialization and for districts and schools to hire teachers who are well prepared to teach this age level.

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