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Guest Editorial: Renewing the Commitment for Specialized Middle Grades Teacher Preparation and Licensure

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There is a nation-wide teacher shortage. While this statement might seem obvious to many, perhaps even an understatement to the many challenging and traumatizing things taking place within education (see Hurd et al., 2021, Hurd et al, 2022), it is a statement worth exploring. According to U.S. Government Accountability Office (U.S. GAO) (2022) the teacher shortage facing schools is real. It is worse in certain areas and for certain groups, such as in western states and for rural, urban, and high-poverty communities with Black and Brown students. However, the U.S. GAO found that “in every [U.S.] region, shortages were between 8-17 percentage points higher than five years earlier” (p. 15). U.S. GAO also found that the teacher shortage was made worse during the Covid-19 pandemic and has been exacerbated by two key issues: recruitment and retention challenges due to a negative perception of the teaching profession and a perceived lack of support for current teachers. Of course, there are many efforts and initiatives to solve the teacher shortage crisis in the United States, just as there are goals to have high quality teachers.

But the goals of high quality teacher recruitment and retention are in fact interrelated. These are a twofold goal that some states may struggle with meeting, keeping in mind the aims within both of these goals.

Despite current research and the struggles facing schools to recruit and retain teachers, there are some organizations that still question whether or not there truly is a teacher shortage. For example, the National Council on Teacher Quality (2018) argued that the “largely anecdotal, not based on data” teacher-shortage-narrative is really a decades-old struggle, misguided by limited policy papers and localized economic conditions of just a few states (p. 1). They further stated that the widespread deficit of teachers nationally is a perception due in part to state agencies that misalign teacher and job vacancy data against district hiring statistics. Their main point is that way too many teachers (in fact, 50%) leave the profession before they actually begin to teach, thus inflating statistics (p. 4). However, the NCTQ report is based on statistical data of national agencies dating back to before 2016 and has yet to be retracted or updated. In fact,

much of the world has changed since then, with a global pandemic, stock market strife, and global inflation. Regardless of one’s orientation on the teacher-shortage-narrative, there is no denying that some schools are struggling to recruit and retain teachers, for various reasons. There is no denying that many schools are also having serious issues with recruiting substitute teachers. Some states, for example, are turning to unconventional ways to fill classrooms with teachers in order to meet the demand and to have an adult in front of children. The following list includes just a few efforts occurring nationally to address the teacher shortage:

- Golden Apple has created an accelerated 15-month teacher-pathway program
- A midwestern medical doctor has worked once a week as a substitute, donating his salary back to the school
- Some universities have incentivized teacher education programs for licensure completion in shortened amounts of time and for additional endorsements, with some offering multiple grade-span licensures
- Some states have offered provisional licensures to teachers, especially in high need areas, or licensure through community college programs
- Some states have offered provisional substitute licensures for those with an associate degree and for teacher education candidates while studying in their programs

While these collective efforts might seem advantageous in addressing the teacher shortage, some hold a hidden consequence: the dismantling of the specialized preparation and licensure of middle grades education. Some states have even made efforts to change or revert middle grade-span configurations (e.g., 4-6; 5-8) back to earlier generalized grade-spans (e.g., K-9) to allow for teacher mobility within and across schools. In fact, a few states and programs have offered a middle grades licensure with only one or two classes (the equivalent of 6-credit hours) in addition to an elementary or secondary degree. One university even went as far as to offer the middle grades licensure in one conference or workshop! Even though it seems that a K-9 licensure might help with teacher recruitment, it is potentially detrimental to retention. Furthermore, these efforts undermine the very ideals and progress of the specialized preparation and licensure of middle grades education as communicated and shared by the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), the National Forum, the National Association of Professors of Middle Level Education (NAPOMLE), and other national and state-level associations and agencies.

We argue this is not the time to solve educational and economic crises by changing grade-span configurations of teacher preparation programs, namely, to absorb middle grades education into elementary and/or secondary education, as it once was long ago. This is not the time to have teachers who do not understand the context of middle

grades education entering into their profession with only one or two classes as their foundation (an endorsement). The answer to the teacher shortage is not to have more teachers who do not understand what youth are going through today in order to fill a vacancy. The point of middle grades education is to have teachers trained to teach multiple grades with two or more disciplines (interdisciplinary curriculum) and who understand and know how to help youth in what they face each day.

Today's youth face considerable challenges, both online and in-person, seen by rising youth suicide (Curtin, Garnett, & Ahmad, 2022), poverty, homelessness, trauma and school violence (Lopez, 2022; Office for Civil Rights [OCR], 2021), and mental health illnesses (Geiger & Davis, 2019; NIMH, 2022; Prentis, 2022). Therefore, youth need educators who can rise to these challenges by being fully trained and who understand social and emotional learning for building community and competence (Vawter & McMurtrie, 2022). They need educators that can develop lasting relationships that go beyond superficial surfaces and academics alone. They need adult advocates that understand the "knowledge of the distinct nature and identities of young adolescents" (Hurd, 2022, p. 44). While we understand the short-term need for flexibility and reciprocity, we argue against one-sided efforts that do not allow middle grades teacher candidates to simultaneously achieve an elementary or secondary licensure in the same ways. We argue against the mistake to generalize grade-band configurations. According to Deborah McMurtrie, professor of middle grades education in South Carolina,

Young adolescents have distinctive developmental characteristics, needs, and abilities that are specific to this age group. It is imperative that we provide our teacher candidates with the specialized knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to address the unique needs of young adolescent learners in middle schools. If our teachers are not adequately prepared, we are dooming them to failure. Teachers who fail are more likely to leave the profession, thus exacerbating teacher retention and perpetuating the teacher shortage. (personal communication, December 19, 2022)

We advocate that schools and teacher preparation institutions renew their commitment to middle grades education and licensure. We advocate that policy makers and parents consult the very associations and experts in the field mentioned above who understand middle grades education and young adolescents. Moreover, we advocate for the specialized preparation and licensure of middle grades teachers. "The specialized professional preparation of teachers of young adolescents must be a high priority of teacher preparation programs, colleges and state certification agencies" (Hurd, 2022, p. 1).

At the core of this belief, and with the shifts within society and education these past years, we must realize how important it is that middle grades teacher preparation centers young adolescents and their learning. As

communicated in the 2022 Revised AMLE Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards, "This required shift in focus has also led to the need for a critical stance and an awakened attention to the reform efforts that did not evolve from past generations. At the core, those efforts and the shift in focus must include culturally and developmentally responsive and sustaining instruction, anti-racist pedagogies, and a commitment to equity, diversity, access, and inclusion" (Hurd, 2022, p. 2). This is where the work must continue.

As schools and higher education teacher preparation programs continue to respond to the teacher shortage, there will be many ideas considered. We advocate for staying the course of middle grades education. We advocate for the specialized preparation and licensure of middle grades education for young adolescents.

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