

Middle Level Certification Proposal

By Earle G. Bidwell, Assistant Executive Director

In response to major concerns about a growing teacher shortage at the middle level, a sub-committee of the Connecticut Association of Middle School Principals (CAMPS) was created to address the problem and propose solutions. Working with CAS Assistant Executive Director, Earle Bidwell, a distinguished panel consisting of CAS Middle Level Principals of the Year Carole Iwanicki Michael Rafferty, Preston Shaw and Richard Huelsmann began to address the issue two years ago. They subsequently uncovered some key facts relating to how certification regulations impact the problem, and developed a proposal to ease the shortage through modifications of those regulations. The plan is intended to create a larger pool of certified, qualified middle level teachers without compromising Connecticut's high standards for teachers. Here is a summary of their findings and recommendations, which have been proposed to the Connecticut State Department of Education.

The Problem

The shortage of certified, qualified middle level teachers in Connecticut is likely to grow in the next few years. According to *"Statistics on Teacher Preparation in Connecticut, 2001-2002"* published by the Connecticut Department of Higher Education, only 3% (89 of 3,330) of newly trained teachers in Connecticut teacher training programs were certified for middle grades. With such a low number of Connecticut trained middle level teachers, the bulk of new teachers will be coming from the elementary and high school ranks, from out of state or from an alternative route. In the case of elementary trained teachers, many are certified up to and including grade 6 but most lack subject area endorsements in more than one subject and lack specific middle level training. As for high school teachers, their subject area certification allows them to teach all middle level grades without having any training in adolescent development or middle school pedagogy. While No Child Left Behind Legislation (NCLB) Legislation reinforces the need to have certified and highly qualified teachers in every classroom, it also ignores the need to have teachers who know "how" as well as "what" to teach to middle schoolers.

Another unintended outcome of the current Connecticut and NCLB certification regulations is that teaching teams, an underpinning of exemplary middle level practice, are endangered as the number of teachers with multiple endorsements declines and the number of teachers with little or no training in how to work with young adolescents increases. All this is happening at a time when NCLB is raising the achievement bar, and the need for high quality instruction is crucial.

One might logically conclude that with the shortage reaching critical mass, prospective teachers would be flocking to the middle level. This is not the case. The fact is that students are staying away in droves and once flourishing middle level programs at Connecticut colleges and universities have been reduced to a handful of under-enrolled ones. It is not surprising when one considers that the content requirements for middle school and high school are practically the same yet a high school certificate qualifies one to teach six or seven grade levels where a middle level certificate only covers three or four. Similarly, at the elementary level, a certificate covers more grade levels than a middle level certificate. So where are the teacher candidates? Many are training for elementary grades "Of newly certified educators in 2001-2002, approximately 34% were in elementary education, which is currently not a shortage area."¹ The designated shortage areas include bilingual education Pre-K-12, consumer home economics Pre-K-12, mathematics 7-12, music Pre-K-12, library media Specialists Pre-K-12, Spanish 7-12, and comprehensive special education Pre-K-12.

What results from all of this is that legislation and regulations intended to secure and retain highly qualified teachers in every classroom are running counter to proven, research based, best practices relative to who should teach in the middle. To fill the gap, middle schools are forced to turn to teachers from other levels who do not have middle level training or to people who have been certified through an Alternative Route to Certification (ARC) program. These candidates may have strong subject area credentials but have little training and no

experience in a classroom at any level. Meanwhile, there are highly qualified middle level teachers with years of experience who now must teach only one subject in isolation because of certification expectations that often require content knowledge well beyond the needs of middle level curriculum. Furthermore, single subject endorsements inevitably lead to large teams (research shows that small teams are more effective) or to the abandonment of teams altogether; this to the detriment of student achievement.

The committee is recommending two proposals; the first to strengthen middle level teaming while retaining high standards for content skills.

Proposal I.

- Amend certification Regulation 10-145d-428 (Cross Endorsements) to allow certified teachers or those holding a certificate of eligibility for a middle level subject to obtain additional endorsements for a middle level subject upon successful completion of the appropriate Praxis II Exams.

Rationale

At the heart of middle level best practices are “small communities of learners.”² The literature indicates that this practice promotes:

- School safety
- Positive relationships with knowledgeable, caring adults for each middle school child
- Whole child experiences
- Interdisciplinary and integrative curricula opportunities
- Teachers who are experts in teaching emerging adolescents
- Increased student achievement and well being³
- Small communities of teachers and learners that depend on a preponderance of multi-certified middle school teachers.

Anticipated Outcomes

Allowing certified middle school teachers to obtain an additional endorsement by passing the Praxis II will:

- Maintain high standards of scholarship for cross endorsements as well as for entry into the profession
- Promote dual certification among those who have already been trained in middle school methods and pedagogy
- Relieve the growing shortage of qualified teachers at the middle level
- Provide superintendents and principals the flexibility to assign teachers to grade levels and teams based on their overall strengths as well as their subject area specialty
- Allow teachers who have already demonstrated proficiency in teaching and learning to be assigned to shortage areas
- Help CT schools meet the “highly qualified” standards required of all teachers in NCLB legislation through rigorous testing

The second proposal is intended to address the need for preparing teachers from other levels to teach in the middle. As with the first proposal, a practical solution that will not compromise standards is a primary consideration.

Proposal II

Amend Sec. 10-145d-428 (3) to allow certified teachers to obtain the training specific to middle level education methods and instruction through a combination of education course and continuing education units (CEUs) over time. These teachers will also need to demonstrate proficiency in content areas through course work or Praxis II.

Rationale

The teacher shortage is not universal. There is currently a surplus of otherwise competent and qualified teachers who do not have credentials to teach in areas of shortage. Providing these teachers with reasonable opportunities to retrain can relieve current and future teacher shortages.

Anticipated Outcomes

Allowing certified teachers to obtain middle school training through a combination of continuing education units and course work would:

- Maintain the high standards for subject specific certification while promoting cross endorsements for otherwise qualified teachers
- Provide flexibility for superintendents to effectively staff and manage school enrollment “bubbles” as they move through the grade levels
- Allow certified teachers to continue to work as they pursue additional endorsements (the Bureau of Certification could establish a minimum number of courses and/or CEUs for a provisional endorsement with appropriate timelines for completion of all training)
- Promote teaching in areas of shortage among those in surplus areas who might otherwise leave the profession
- Take advantage of a pool of qualified, recognized middle level practitioners who can provide meaningful, practical, researched based CEU training to candidates for middle level endorsement
- Provide access to the middle level endorsement for teachers who did student teaching at other levels

Summary

Through implementation of the aforementioned adjustments to certification regulations, Connecticut’s high standards for certification can be maintained, shortages in critical areas of middle level education can be significantly reduced, small communities of learners in middle schools can be maintained and greater flexibility can be afforded superintendents and principals in teacher assignments.

The combined CAMSP and Center for Early Adolescent Educators Boards urge you to share this information with central office personnel, school boards and community groups to raise awareness about the growing teacher shortage at the middle level, and to share what we feel are practical remedies for securing and retaining highly qualified teachers in all middle level classrooms.

¹*Source: State Department of Education

²Jackson, Anthony W. and Gayle A. Davis (2000) *Turning Points 2000, Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century*, New York: Teachers College Press and

Erb, Thomas O. (2001) *This We Believe and Now We Must Act*, Westerville Ohio: National Middle School Association

³ Feldner, Robert, et.al [The Impact of School Reform for the Middle Years](#) *Phi Delta Kappan* (March 1997) Bloomington, Indiana