

Thematic focus: Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them

Projects ML-TEACH and On-TRACK: Preparing elementary and secondary teachers for the middle level classroom in South Carolina

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Overview

South Carolina has been in the process of implementing middle level teacher certification (grades 5 – 8) since 2003. While 14 middle level teacher preparation programs have been approved in the State, the programs are still very small and the demand for certified, highly-qualified middle level teachers in the schools far outstrips the current supply. ML-TEACH and On-TRACK are two projects which are working to increase the number of certified, high quality (HQ) middle level teachers in the state by helping elementary and secondary certified teachers gain the course experiences they need to add a middle level teaching field to their certificates. ML-TEACH (Middle Level Teacher Education, Advancement, Certification, and HQ) works with current middle school teachers who need to meet certain course and test requirements to become fully certified and highly qualified in the middle level subject areas they teach. Teachers receive tuition reimbursement, test preparation support, and ongoing advisement as they pursue add-on certification. On-TRACK (Teaching Reading and Content Knowledge) works with teachers in any subject area at any grade level who want to become middle level certified and HQ. On-TRACK participants take courses in their content areas as well as courses in content area reading and middle level curriculum. In addition, they receive support as they prepare for the Praxis II content exam. This chapter describes these two

projects within the context of the current status of middle level certification policy in South Carolina. Partnerships among the South Carolina Middle School Association, the State Department of Education, and higher education will also be highlighted.

Pathways to Middle Level Certification

New grade spans for teacher certification in South Carolina went into effect July 1, 2005. The new grade spans eliminate the overlaps in the seventh and eighth grades with the former secondary (grades 7 – 12) and elementary (grades 1 – 8) certificates. The new middle level certificate covers grades five through eight, resulting in an overlap only in the fifth and sixth grades with the new elementary certificate (grades 2 – 6). By law, all South Carolina teachers who teach seventh or eighth grades had to qualify for a middle level certificate by July 1, 2009. Individual districts have had the flexibility to determine whether fifth and sixth grade teachers require an elementary or middle level certificate.

Currently there are several pathways to middle level certification in South Carolina which include initial certification, alternative certification through the Program of Alternative Certification for Educators (PACE), and add-on certification.

Approved Programs

Initial certification is granted to applicants who have successfully completed an approved middle level teacher education program, have passed the required Praxis subject area examinations, and the Principles of Learning and Teaching examination. Currently 14 institutions offer specialized preparation leading to initial middle level certification, and that number is growing as new programs are developed and approved (see Table 1). All middle level programs in South Carolina must be reviewed by the South Carolina State Department of Education (SDE) to ensure they meet the National Middle School Association (NMSA) Initial Level Teacher Preparation Standards (NMSA, 2005).

Table 1. South Carolina IHEs Offering Middle Level Programs

Public Institutions	Private Institutions
Clemson (MAT only)	Bob Jones University
Coastal Carolina University	Claflin University
College of Charleston	Columbia College
Francis Marion University	Converse College (MAT only)
South Carolina State University	Presbyterian College
University of South Carolina-Aiken	
University of South Carolina	
University of South Carolina-Upstate	
Winthrop University (BA/BS, MEd)	

Alternate Route

PACE is an alternative route to certification in South Carolina for individuals who possess a bachelor’s degree with a major in a certification area and two years of full-time work experience, who obtain a passing score on the appropriate Praxis examinations, and who find employment in a critical needs subject or school district. Teachers admitted to the PACE program undergo a job-embedded training program which lasts three years and results in professional certification upon completion (SDE, 2007a). Based on data compiled by the South Carolina Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement (CERRA), more than one third of PACE teachers choose to teach at the middle level (CERRA, 2007).

Add-on

Teachers in South Carolina are permitted to “add-on” other areas of certification to an existing certificate. Before middle level certification existed in South Carolina, the grade spans for elementary and secondary certification were 1-8 and 7-12, respectively. Teachers who currently hold an elementary or secondary certificate and who have at least three years of experience teaching in the middle grades before July 1, 2007, are allowed to apply for middle level add-on certification under grandfathering provisions.

After that date, teachers must also obtain passing scores on the required Praxis subject area examinations and the Principles of Learning and Teaching examination. Certified teachers who apply for add-on middle level certification after July 1, 2009, or who have not met the three year requirement, must pass the Praxis exams and complete required coursework. The courses involve content-specific work along with three credit hours of specialized middle level preparation in each of the following areas: Middle Level Curriculum and Organization, Early Adolescent Growth and Development, and Teaching Reading and Writing in the Content Area. Teachers must also complete content coursework in the desired teaching field (see Table 2).

Teachers with secondary certification will typically require only one or two additional courses in their content areas in order to add middle level certification. Often these teachers have a major or the equivalent of a major in the subjects they teach. Social studies teachers will often need to take a course in South Carolina history. Many secondary science teachers will not have sufficient coursework in earth science, and English teachers trained at the secondary level may lack coursework in adolescent literature. The middle level add-on requirements may be especially daunting for teachers prepared at the elementary or early childhood levels. These teachers may have only taken two or three courses in the content areas they teach at the middle level. A middle level science teacher prepared at the elementary level may need 16 credit hours to add middle level certification, while those teaching math may require 12 or 15 credit hours of coursework.

Table 2. Content Requirements for Adding Middle Level Certification

Mathematics	Science	Social Studies	English/Language Arts
Algebra (3)	Biological or life science course and laboratory (8)	World History or World Geography (3)	Adolescent Literature (3)
Plane and Solid Geometry (3)	Earth and space science course and laboratory (8)	South Carolina History (3)	World Lit., American Lit., and British Lit. (two must be represented) (6)
Probability and	Physical science	Government (3)	Teaching of

Statistics (appropriate to middle level and secondary level curriculum) (3)	(equally divided between physics and chemistry) (8)		Reading/Foundations or equivalent (3)
Technology (utilization of appropriate technology) (3)		Three electives in specified subject areas (9)	Reading: Diagnosis and Remediation (3)
Classroom Assessment in Mathematics (3)			Teaching of Writing or Advanced Writing (3)
Three electives from specified subject areas (9)			Grammar (3)
			One elective from specified subject areas (3)

(Note: Credit hours in parentheses)

Teachers who have pursued add-on certification since the July, 2009, deadline may use the Restricted Alternative Certificate (RAC). The RAC provides a route for teachers who are already fully certified to add other areas to their credentials. Districts request the restricted certificate for teachers who have demonstrated content competency in the area requested and have at least 12 semester hours toward certification requirements for the new area. Districts also sign assurances which include their responsibility for these teachers in the following areas:

1. providing high quality professional development which is sustained, intensive, and classroom-focused;
2. providing a program of intensive supervision which consists of structured guidance and regular ongoing support;
3. assuring this alternative route to added areas of certification will not exceed three years;
4. assuring satisfactory progress toward full certification as prescribed by the State (six semester hours annually plus Praxis exam(s) within the three year period). (SDE, 2006, pp. 16, 30-31)
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ML-TEACH and On-TRACK

ML-TEACH and On-TRACK are two projects which work with participating teachers to identify the content courses they need and collaborate with various

partners to arrange for the courses to be delivered in formats which are flexible and job-embedded to the greatest extent possible.

ML-TEACH

ML-TEACH was developed to ensure “Middle Level Teacher Education, Advancement, Certification, and High-qualification” (SDE, 2007b). This initiative is supported by a \$50,700 grant from the SDE to the South Carolina Middle School Association to support ML-TEACH activities. Some of these funds have been used to provide Praxis II preparation for ML-TEACH participants, to hold information sessions pertaining to middle level certification, and to provide grants to teachers to cover add-on course expenses. South Carolina public school teachers may apply for grants of up to \$1200 to cover the cost of tuition and other course-related expenses for approved courses leading to add-on certification in a middle level teaching field. To be eligible, a teacher must:

1. Possess a valid temporary, initial, or professional certificate at the early childhood, elementary, secondary, or pre-K–12 level;
2. Be under contract to teach a subject requiring middle level certification* in a public school district for the 2007 – 2008 school year;
3. Submit a current add-on worksheet prepared by the Office of Educator Certification listing the courses required to become middle level certified; and
4. Submit an application form.

Upon successful completion of the course with a grade of C or better, grant recipients are reimbursed for tuition and related course expenses which may include books, lab or technology fees, and application fees. SCMSA/ML-TEACH Teacher Grants will only cover out-of-pocket expenses; teachers are not reimbursed for any course costs already covered by another funding source.

The SDE unsuccessfully sought additional funds for ML-TEACH in its FY2008 budget as part of the “Critical Teaching Transition Program.” This program would have supported several initiatives which seek to transition teachers into critical needs areas such as middle level, special education, and secondary mathematics. Currently, ML-TEACH operates on carry-forward funds from the original grant.

On-TRACK

Through On-TRACK: Teaching Reading and Content Knowledge, qualified middle level teachers will:

1. Make progress toward becoming “highly qualified” and properly certified as defined by state and federal regulations by completing content coursework and coursework in content area reading, and by passing the Praxis II exam;
2. Increase their content knowledge in the subjects they teach and be considered “content competent” as defined by state regulations by passing the Praxis II exam; and
3. Effectively teach content to their students by implementing research-based content area reading strategies (SDE, 2007c).

During the project period, project participants will enroll in at least one course in the core content area in which he/she teaches (i.e. English language arts, science, social studies, or mathematics) and a graduate course designed to help them effectively teach the new content knowledge to their students by focusing on content area reading strategies. Project partners will work together to design optimal learning experiences for the latter course which will include segments on instructional planning, instructional strategies which focus on reading skill development, and assessment of student learning.

The project will increase the number of HQ teachers in participating LEAs while focusing on two important areas of need for middle school teachers in South Carolina: 1) increasing content knowledge (which is especially an issue for middle level teachers prepared and certified to teach in the elementary grades), and 2) improving student achievement by focusing on content area reading strategies.

On-TRACK is funded by a grant from the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education and the U. S. Department of Education under the auspices of the Improving Teacher Quality Higher Education Grant Program.

Conclusion

As Gaskill (2002) noted, there has been progress in the development and implementation of middle level certification and teacher preparation in a number of states. South Carolina took a significant step forward by developing a middle level certificate (grades 5 – 8) and mandating middle level certification for all teachers in

seventh and eighth grade core subjects. The changes have provided the impetus for the development of middle level teacher preparation programs at institutions throughout the state, and they have helped to bring increased attention to the unique needs of young adolescent learners in South Carolina. However, until these teacher preparation programs are operating at full capacity, the State will be faced with a severe shortage of middle school teachers. South Carolina is addressing this issue through projects like On-TRACK and ML-TEACH, which are possible only through partnerships among the SDE, higher education, the South Carolina Middle School Association, and local school districts.

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