

## **Middle Childhood Teacher Licensure: An Ohio Issue**

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Ohio middle level educators, both in the K-12 arena and in higher education, are facing several serious challenges that have the potential to have a major impact on education in the middle. The one issue presented here is still in process so no definitive solution can be offered. The issue might be unique to Ohio. However, it is assumed that a similar issue has arisen or may yet arise in other states as well. Being forewarned may well allow others to avoid serious problems. This article is presented here for that purpose.

It will be helpful to begin with a bit of background information for those who are not familiar with the nuances of teacher education in Ohio. In the mid-1990s, Ohio legislators directed the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) to overhaul the teacher certification process completely. This resulted in changing teacher certification to teacher licensure. Ohio moved from a two-tiered certification system (K-8 elementary and 7-12 secondary) to a three-tiered licensure system. Under the certification system, all elementary teachers needed a 20-hr. concentration in one subject. They could then teach any subject, grades K-8. Secondary teachers needed a full college major in their subject area.

The new licensure system includes early childhood (P-3), middle childhood (4-9) and adolescent to young adult, commonly called AYA (7-12). AYA is a typical secondary license that requires a subject major. Early childhood concentrates on literacy as well as specific courses on how to teach the core academic subject areas in the context of the early childhood classroom. There is, however, no academic concentration for the early childhood license.

The biggest change happened with the middle childhood license. ODE was specifically directed to create a license guaranteeing that teachers from grade 4 through grade 9 would have at least a concentration in two of the core subject areas. The legislature wanted to make sure that fourth through six grade students were receiving high-quality instruction in math and science from teachers with extra training in those subject areas. Therefore, ODE requires all middle childhood licensure candidates to take 24 semester hours of credit in two of the four core academic subject areas. In most institutions, those 24 hours do not qualify as an official minor on the student's transcript. However, for all practical purposes, middle childhood education majors in Ohio graduate with a major in education and a minor in two of the core academic content areas. This change went into effect for anyone beginning a teacher education program in fall 1998 so the first wave of graduates with the middle childhood license were graduated in 2002.

Beginning teachers with the middle childhood license have been very well received by principals and superintendents across the state. Since they have specifically chosen to teach in middle grades, and since they have had a teacher education program specifically tailored toward meeting the needs of children in the middle, these beginning teachers can step in and teach in middle grades much more effectively than an elementary or a secondary trained beginning teacher who got "stuck" teaching in the middle school. In traditional junior high schools that are departmentalized or in middle schools that employ teaming, these newly licensed middle childhood teachers fit nicely into the

current system and do an excellent job. However, problems have arisen in elementary buildings where grades 4-5 or 4-6 are still housed in self-contained classrooms. Principals have been reluctant to hire someone for these classrooms who can only teach two of the four academic subjects. In larger schools where there are two or more classes at each grade level, it is not quite as serious. In smaller schools where there is only one room for each grade level, the new middle childhood licensure has created a conflict.

What can be done? ODE has already made one modification and several other proposals are being discussed. Realizing that any kind of teaming or switching classes is difficult in one room per grade schools, ODE created a middle childhood generalist endorsement to add to the middle childhood license. Teacher education departments were asked to develop two specific 3-hr. courses that covered the curriculum in grades 4-6 in each academic subject area. Any middle childhood licensure candidate who completes the extra hours in the non-concentration subject areas is authorized to teach that additional subject in grades 4-6 only. For example, a middle childhood candidate with concentrations in math and social studies can teach those two subjects in grades 4-9. However, if that candidate takes the additional two courses in science, he/she can also teach science in grades 4-6. If that same candidate takes the additional two courses in language arts, he/she can then teach all core subjects in grades 4-6. The words "self-contained classroom" are not mentioned in the endorsement but the endorsement allows self-contained classrooms to continue through grade 6.

Among the middle childhood professors in Ohio, there has been a mixed reaction to the middle childhood generalist endorsement. Middle childhood purists bemoan the fact that it flies in the face of a basic tenet of the middle school philosophy — teaming. It allows schools to keep minimizing some of the specific needs of the young adolescent. Others take a more pragmatic approach to

the issue. Yes, it allows schools to avoid teaming. However, the middle childhood generalist endorsement is available only to candidates who are already trained (or in process of being trained) to teach middle childhood grades. A candidate with the middle childhood generalist is first, and foremost, a middle childhood trained teacher. He/she has completed the full middle childhood licensure program plus additional hours in the two non-concentration areas. The middle childhood generalist is far better qualified to teach grades 4-6, even in a self-contained setting, than any previous K-8 certified elementary teacher.

There is talk about restructuring the licensure bands in Ohio so the generalist endorsement is no longer necessary. Early childhood purists do not like the idea but there is considerable attention being given to expanding the early childhood license to P-4. That would expand the grades the early childhood candidates could teach and would also give overlap between the two licenses that does not now exist. A complimentary move would be to limit the high school (AYA) license to grades 9-12 only. There is some evidence that principals are avoiding the middle childhood trained candidates for grade 7-8 positions because they are seen as "less qualified". That might be true if academics are the only criteria. However, the middle childhood trained candidate is far better qualified to meet the developmental needs of the 7th and 8th grade students than is the AYA trained teacher.

Ohio has not made a final decision on the issue. Like many other issues in the K-12 arena, there is seldom an answer that satisfies all parties. It is anticipated that as teacher education institutions continue to graduate more and more of the specifically trained middle childhood teachers, principals and superintendents will realize the value of such teacher candidates to their school district. It is believed that the middle childhood prepared teacher will continue to provide Ohio students in the middle with quality education that is developmentally appropriate to young adolescents.