

## Short-Cuts To Missouri Middle Level Teacher Certification

### May Border On Malpractice

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Middle school “youth need and deserve developmentally responsible schools staffed with knowledgeable and capable teachers who are experts at their profession, not strangers to middle level classrooms and the young adolescents who spend much of their lives there” (Swaim & Stefanich, 1996). The burden of the previous statement lies directly with the individual institutions of higher learning and the teacher preparation programs within those institutions as well as the individual departments of education located within each state. At the present time forty-six states (46) plus the District of Columbia provide middle level licensure either through certification or endorsement (McEwin, 2007). Achieving the above expectation is not an insurmountable task. The National Middle School Association (NMSA) has over an extended period of time clearly delineated a series of recommendations and guidelines for the preparation of highly qualified middle level teachers.

In part due to the pressures of “No Child Left Behind” and the requirement to have “highly qualified” teachers in each and every classroom by the beginning of the 2006-2007 academic year, many state departments of education have begun taking “short cuts” to achieve this goal. The definition of a “highly qualified” teacher must be extended beyond just content knowledge, and in the case of the middle school, must include knowledge of the developmental needs of middle level students as well as knowledge of the

structure, operation, and organization of a fully functioning middle school.

#### The Missouri Dilemma

In 1997, Missouri began requiring middle school certification for all 5-9 middle school teachers. Before then, junior high/middle schools were staffed with elementary or secondary teachers, some of whom had actually sought other jobs, but when no preferred jobs were available, had taken middle school assignments. Although some of these teachers were successful teaching at the middle level, many others were eager to move on to other assignments as soon as possible (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989).

Dr. Kent King, coordinator of the Supervision Section of The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) announced in 1998, that Missouri would hold firm to its new middle level certification requirements (Breck, 1998). This new certification required middle school teachers to take courses in middle school philosophy, organization and curriculum; middle school methods, teaching reading in content areas, teaching writing, and methods of teaching in specialty areas.

DESE’s position changed in less than two years, however, and since August 1, 2000, anyone holding a valid Missouri teaching certificate has been able to receive middle level certification by simply passing the Praxis II examination in one content

area. This amended procedure is in total conflict with existing NMSA guidelines. No middle school courses or middle level field experiences are required, even though the DESE webpage listing qualifications for middle school certification would imply otherwise.

When discussing these “short cuts” to middle school certification, McEwin and Dickinson (NMSA, 2001) say this type of...“licensure awarded without candidates receiving specific preparation for teaching young adolescents or even completing middle level field experiences serves as an example of the malpractice in which many teacher preparation programs and licensure agencies/professional practice boards are currently engaged” (p. 15).

The trend in Missouri for middle school licensure would imply that the majority of teachers no longer feel it necessary to take middle school coursework. This is evidenced by the alarming numbers of Missouri teachers who have added middle school certification through this alternative route. (See Table 1)

### Study Results from Missouri Middle Level Licensure

Because of the data presented in Table 1 these writers felt it necessary to conduct a state wide study of middle level licensure practices in the state of Missouri to determine if existing middle level teachers who obtained licensure via the Praxis II maintained the belief that they were ready to assume the challenges of teaching adolescents. It could be hypothesized that the alternative means of certifying middle level teachers, which were adopted in 2001 by the state of Missouri, would not lend itself to properly preparing teachers for the middle level who would have the necessary knowledge, skills, or dispositions for dealing with the developmental differences that this age group offers. Because of the growing tendency of teacher candidates in Missouri to achieve middle level licensure via the Praxis II exam, there is growing concern that these teachers would not be adequately prepared to address the uniqueness of a middle level student since they had had no appropriate field

**Table 1.**

#### Comparisons of Missouri Middle School Certificates

YEAR*	INITIAL CERTIFICATES	ADDED BY PRAXIS II
1997	134	0
1998	781	0
1999	1019	0
2000	832	1*
2001	698	161
2002	797	397
2003	763	654
2004	388	674
2005	393	461
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,805</b>	<b>2,347</b>
*date range is from 01 – Jan through 31 – Dec		

DESE, October 22, 2004, and October 3, 2006

experience at the middle level and also had limited understanding of the overall concept of the middle school.

In the fall of 2006 a state-wide study was conducted which included sixty-four (64) middle schools randomly selected throughout the state of Missouri. DESE has divided the state into ten (10) supervisory districts. Six middle schools were randomly selected from each supervisory district and five (5) data collection instruments were sent to each school along with a letter to each principal providing him or her with instructions as to how to administer the instrument as well as a letter to each teacher outlining the goals of the study. It was critical that the instrument (Appendix A) be concise and to the point if teachers were to take the time to complete it. The questionnaire contained only ten (10) questions which included general demographic information, the method in which they had obtained their middle level certification, and whether or not they felt that they were adequately prepared to teach at the middle level. Responses to one critical question for those middle level teachers who had obtained certification via the successful passing of Praxis II.

### **Demographic Information**

Three-hundred twenty questionnaires were mailed and 40.3% (129/320) were returned. Input regarding school size was sought. Forty-six percent of the schools had enrollments of 451 to 750 students. Schools ranging in enrollment from 300 to 450 students comprised 30% of the responding schools and schools with an enrollment of less than 300 comprised 24%. Study results reported that the population of teachers who completed the questionnaire were predominantly female – 72%. The variation of teaching experience was interesting. Unlike the national trend of an aging teaching profession, this study reported that 63% of the responding

teachers had less than ten (10) years of experience.

### **Certification**

The study reported that eighty-one (81) or 63% of the one hundred twenty-nine (129) responding middle level teachers reported that they did not have middle level education as their initial area of certification. Seventy-six (76) or 59% reported that they added middle level education after they had received their initial certification in either elementary education or secondary education.

Very careful consideration was given to one particular teacher question. Teachers were asked, “When you first began teaching middle school did you feel ready to handle the developmental challenges of middle school students?” The question was critical in that it was asking teachers to report that perhaps they were not as well prepared to deal with the uniqueness of a middle level student, and would to some degree, be admitting to a void in their professional preparation and development. Half reported “Yes”. When looking at those sixty-four respondents it was found that only twenty-three (23) or 36% were initially certified to teach Middle School and the other forty-one (41) or 64% were either K-8 or K-12 certified, or they had added the middle school certification by passing the Praxis II. Only twenty-two (22) or 17% reported “No” that they did not feel ready to deal with the developmental challenges. Forty-three (43) or 33% reported “Some What”. This indicates that 50% either felt unprepared or somewhat unprepared to work with middle school students, however the other 50% reported that they did feel ready to handle these challenges. Although these results may seem predictable, additional follow up questions indicated a slightly different situation.

Further data were collected to determine areas in which teachers felt that they were least prepared to teach at the

middle level. Dealing with classroom management issues was overwhelmingly reported (65 respondents) as their main area of concern. These concerns are justifiably understandable and perhaps directly related to understanding the developmental characteristics and needs of an adolescent child. Interestingly, forty-one (41) teachers reported that "Teaching and collaborating with interdisciplinary teams" was a concern. Twenty-five (25) reported that they felt least prepared in "Understanding the developmental characteristics of middle level students" and twenty-three (23) reported they felt unprepared in "Dealing with advisor/advisee issues." All of these responses suggest that teachers do not have a grasp of the basic concepts that under gird a fully functioning middle school.

### **Conclusions & Recommendations**

The licensure of "highly qualified" middle level teachers must be a cooperative effort between the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), each of the 37 teacher preparation institutions in the state of Missouri, and the individual school districts throughout the state.

Additional research is needed in the area of licensure practices in the state of Missouri; specifically, a study looking at middle school MAP scores from 2001 through 2006. The goal would be to see if MAP scores had improved since Missouri began the practice of alternative middle level licensure. One could hypothesis that with the increased number of middle level teachers who possess a high degree of content knowledge that MAP (Missouri Assessment Program) scores should be on the rise.

These writers support, but are not limited to, the following recommendations

which are not listed by priority:

- Children between the ages of 11 & 15 need to be taught by qualified and properly certified teachers. This would mean that meaningful and appropriate field experiences and a fundamental understanding of the intricacies of the middle school must be required.

- Minimum certification should require verifiable proof of a candidate's knowledge of the developmental needs of adolescent children as well as the organization and philosophy of the middle school concept.

- Missouri needs to return to their 1997 guidelines for middle level teacher certification as set forth by DESE.

- Missouri may need to look to other states for qualified middle level teachers. Many states "export" properly certified middle level teachers.

- DESE needs to consider providing financial incentives for teacher candidates selecting middle level certification.

- DESE needs to provide schools with high numbers of teachers holding "short cut" certification with appropriate in-service training regarding the core concepts of the middle school.

- Regarding NCLB, DESE should expand the definition of a "highly qualified" teacher at the middle level to include the knowledge, skills, & dispositions of the developmental needs of middle level children.

### **A Final Note**

Middle level teacher licensure can, but should not, be determined by an individual's score on a standardized test covering only the content knowledge of one individual in a core area. The middle school concept encompasses more than content knowledge; it focuses on the affective, social, emotional, and cognitive

development of the child. These four developmental domains must share the stage at the middle level. If the practice of licensing middle school teachers through the successful passing of the Praxis II exam continues in the state of Missouri, we expect to see the gradual demise of the middle school concept as advocated by the NMSA and MMSA (Missouri Middle School Association). If that happens, children in the state of Missouri may find themselves attending junior high, which would be a giant step backward for the state.

Further exacerbating the Missouri dilemma, Anthony Amato, superintendent of the Kansas City Missouri School District, announced on Wednesday, January 17, 2007, that he... “wants to eliminate most of Kansas City’s middle schools in favor of K-8’s – elementary schools for pre-kindergarten through eighth grade” (Kansas City Star, January 17, 2007). He cited poor attendance and academic performance in his arguments for his decision. This comes in spite of the recent Johns Hopkins University research which found ... “that expanding elementary school to sixth, seventh, and eighth grades does not help adolescents do better academically” (Baltimore Sun, January 16, 2007). This purported transformation opens the door for the continued practice of certifying middle level teacher via the Praxis II and with disregard to the unique developmental needs of an adolescent child.

James Beane and Richard Lipka (2006) reported that school districts in Baltimore, Maryland, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania have abandoned the traditional middle school configuration in favor of K-8 schools in an attempt to bolster their sagging attendance figures and test scores. Yet, a body of research exists that does not fully support the K-8 configuration when it comes to improving student achievement

and attendance. Research does indicate is that it is the overall instructional philosophy found within the middle school concept that makes the greatest amount of difference in student achievement. This can only be achieved through meaningful and appropriate field experience and specific training regarding the overall middle school concept.

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#### **John A. Ellis, Ed.D.**

Dr. Ellis has extensive experience working with middle level aged children covering more than 20 years. He has served as a middle school administrator of a Blue Ribbon school for 12 years and for the past 8 years Dr. Ellis has taught middle school curriculum courses at the university level. Dr. Ellis is a member of NAPOMLE and is a program reviewer for NMSA.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

**Study of Missouri Middle School  
Teacher Preparation & Certification**

*Demographic Information: Please check the appropriate response.*

1. Approximately how many students are enrolled in your school?

Less than 300

- 300-450
- 451-600
- 601-750
- Over 751

2. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

3. To the best of your knowledge, what percentage of minority students do you believe are enrolled in your school?

- 0-25 %
- 26-50%
- 51-75%
- 76-100%

4. How many years of teaching experience do you have at the middle school level?

- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16 or more

*Preparation & Certification Information:  
Please check the appropriate response*

1. Was your initial certification in middle school?

- Yes
- No

2. Was your middle school certification added to another teaching certification?

- Yes
- No

3. If yes, to the above question, was your middle school certification added to:

- An elementary certificate
- A secondary certificate

4. When you first began teaching middle school did you feel ready to handle the developmental challenges of middle school students?

- Yes
- No
- Somewhat

5. When you first began teaching middle school in which of the following areas did you feel least prepared. Please mark as many as apply to you.

- Understanding the developmental characteristics of middle school students
- Teaching and collaborating with interdisciplinary teams
- Dealing with classroom management issues
- Evaluation procedures compatible with the nature of young adolescents
- Dealing with advisor/advisee issues

6. Do you feel you would benefit from additional information about proven effective strategies for working with middle school students?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe