

NAPOMLE NEWSLETTER

Message from the President: Shirley Theriot



National Association of Professors of
Middle Level Education

"It is to those who master our minds by the force of truth, and not to those who enslave them by violence, that we owe our reverence."
-Voltaire

Like the presidential campaign, middle school education is attracting lots of attention, both positive and negative. In regards to pedagogy, we now are more certain that the adolescents learn best in environments that are safe and free of intimidation. It is not what we teach but how we connect with students' lives. However, some are indicting middle school education and educators for including affective concerns, as they say, at the expense of a rigorous curriculum. We now are forced to wage a defense strategy that will demonstrate examples of the philosophy that has inspired middle school children through integration of subject matter, equipped them to engage in academic excellence, and instilled values through teaming and advisory. The work and response of middle school advocates is complicated by many factors, one of which is economical.

Which conference do I go to this year? Many university professors are asking this same question. The reason behind the choice is not "Which is the best conference?" but rather "How many can I afford this year?" In

Texas and all over our nation, we are feeling the cuts of a slower economy as it shreds our plans of networking with people who can invigorate us professionally. Nothing compares to listening and interacting with the middle school researchers whose works we read continually. Emails are great, but they just aren't the same.

The use of email has paved a highway of immediate and facile communication with anyone in the country and indeed in the world. However, the reduced face-to-face at professional meetings for many of us has dimmed the excitement and limited interactions with people who make us remember why we began in this profession. The ultimate result is extremely devastating.

However, as we consider the alternatives, we have no choice, but to do what we must do. We must make wise and crucial choices. We must continue emailing and networking with those who continue to work for improved middle level programs at the university level. We must continue to support and mentor each other. We must mentor the newer assistant professors, who are so loaded with tasks at their universities and who are constantly reminded about tenure and promotion. Most importantly, we must remember that whatever we do will ultimately affect the person

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sitting in the middle school classroom, who is taught by the persons we send to them. I am reminded of this each time I observe one of my student teachers. This makes all that we do worth the effort.

The profession of teaching, at all levels, is the most honorable profession in the world. In spite of all opposition, we must continue to do what we know is best for adolescents anywhere. As Voltaire suggests, let us master the minds of adolescents by truth.

The officers of NaPOMLE have been in constant email and phone contact as we work to define who we are and what our organization must do to better middle school education. As discussed in our business meeting at the NMSA Conference, we now have one regional director who is appointed and will vote for another regional director at the next national conference in November. (If you are interested, please email me. I have received several names as of this date.) We are also participating in discussions with NMSA about meeting times and conflicts with other higher education groups and speakers, as occurred last conference.

Please send any comments, recommendations, or advice to Theriot@uta.edu. NaPOMLE can be a driving force in middle level education with your help.

The War Against Excellence: The Rising Tide of Mediocrity in America's Middle Schools, Cheri Pierson Yecke, (2003), Westport, CT: Praeger.

Book Critique By Vincent A. Anfara, Jr.
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

With an initial read, one could easily be impressed by what appears on the surface to be a well-reasoned, cogent, and evidence-based argument that there is a rising tide of mediocrity in America's middle schools. In the style of *A Nation at Risk*, the rhetoric of this book is intended to emotionally engage and incite the reader to action against radical middle school activists (i.e., Paul George, John Lounsbury, etc.). According to Yecke, these activists had non-academic and anti-intellectual intentions as they viewed middle schools as laboratories for social experimentation. Their aims were to infuse in young adolescents the values of radical equity, group rights, and coercive egalitarianism. In writing this book, Yecke engages in the very Hegelian plot she accuses radical middle school activists of employing. She does this, though, utilizing poor research skills that result in over-exaggeration, misrepresentation,

and faulty claims and conclusions.

Thoughts A closer examination of Yecke's work reveals some very serious flaws in her logic and scholarship. Ranked first among these shortcomings is the fact that there are no data presented in this book. Her primary claim is that the middle school philosophy and practices (specifically cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and heterogeneous grouping) have had significant negative effects on gifted and talented students. But no data are presented to establish this as a fact. No data are presented on the effects of cooperative learning, peer tutoring, or heterogeneous grouping on the academic achievement of middle grades students. No data (beyond the opinion of one education professor at Virginia Wesleyan) are given to support the claim that preservice middle level teachers are an inferior lot when compared to those entering elementary or secondary education. The list of claims that are unsubstantiated with data seems to be endless.

Instead of trying to make her case with empirical data, she relies on: (1) the 1982 version of *This We Believe*, (b) the 1989 edition of *Turning Points*, (c) the content of NMSA program descriptions from 1974-2001 and *Middle School Journal* articles, (d) a very limited amount of anecdotal data, and (e) inappropriately using quotes, out of context, from middle level

researchers to support her position. Using the 1982 version of *This We Believe*, Yecke constantly reminds her readers of the fact that the theory of brain periodization was once embraced by NMSA. Forget about the fact that subsequent versions of *This We Believe* have been published and that NMSA has changed its position on this matter. Yecke found something back in 1982 that aroused her interest and she relentlessly drives this point home. She attacks *Turning Points* (1989) for its anti-intellectual focus and for manufacturing a crisis that focused on young adolescents and their educational needs. *Turning Points 2000*, for all practical purposes, does not exist according to Yecke's research. There are two lines at the end of the book that reference it. Interestingly, one of these lines notes that while the focus of *Turning Points 2000* is more academic than the original *Turning Points*, this amounts to little more than lip service to academics. She holds NMSA responsible for the content of every session presented at its annual conferences and for the content of every article published in *MSJ*, as if NMA officially endorsed these. Interestingly, there are no references to *Research in Middle Level Education Quarterly, Annual, or Online*. References to September 11, 2001 and United Flight 93 are inexcusable. She implies that if passengers on that flight would have gone to middle schools they would not have had the competitiveness to overpower the hijackers (see p. 157) and the

results would have been far different.

In addition to these flaws, Yecke relies on faulty assumptions. She assumes that all schools that have "middle school" as part of their name have adopted the middle school philosophy and are employing the practices she attacks as harmful to gifted students. She assumes that organizations like NMSA cannot learn and grow, thus changing their official positions on such issues like brain periodization. Yecke assumes that there is a singular purpose of schooling (purely academic) which everyone in America agrees upon, except, of course, those middle school radicals. She obviously has not been introduced to the fact that there are competing perspectives (functionalism, conflict/critical theory, interpretivist) on the purpose of schooling. She assumes that you cannot have developmental appropriateness and academic rigor linked; that parents across this nation do not agree with the middle school philosophy which has been imposed on them against their will; and that the effects of peer tutoring, cooperative learning, and heterogeneous grouping are a zero-sum game when comparing gifted students to all other students.

While we can easily reveal flaws in logic, faulty assumptions, and bad research, it must not be forgotten that this book is part of a larger attack sponsored by ultra-right and ultra-conservative groups on colleges of education,

NCATE, and the like. Yecke periodically takes time off from attacking NMSA and turns her attention to these other organizations. After all, according to Yecke colleges of education (filled with left-wing radicals) are in the business of training our next generation of middle school activists who will perpetuate the social experiment of middle schools that has resulted in an emphasis on radical equity, group rights, and coercive egalitarianism. One will note that the forward to the book has been written by William J. Bennett and that endorsements on the back cover are from Chester Finn, Lisa Graham Keegan, and Michael Poliakoff. We must not forget that these people are working in concert to achieve goals consistent with their ideological stance.

Writing this brief review was a struggle in the sense that responding to the ideas in this book seems to imply that they have some credibility and legitimacy. To respond or not to respond—that was the dilemma. I can only hope that readers will see *The War Against Excellence* for what it really is—bad research filled with exaggerated and unsubstantiated claims and empty attacks.

Message from the President Elect: Barbara Blackburn

Prior to the 2003 NMSA Annual Conference, the officers of NaPOMLE developed and distributed an online survey of members (available at www.napomle.org). Members indicated their priorities for the Association, as we move forward. The top issues for those members responding to the survey were licensure, political action, communication, opportunities for networking, and research; secondary issues included mentoring, collaboration with other groups, teacher education programmatic issues, and sharing of ideas. These dovetail with the purposes of the Association as detailed in the Constitution and Bylaws.

The purposes of the Association are to:

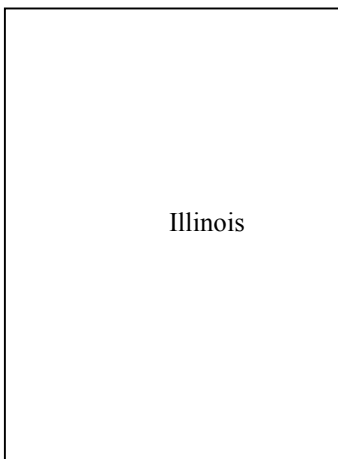
- E. Provide a professional network to enhance the exchange of information and ideas, as well as encourage the discussion of topics related to the preparation of middle level educators.
- F. Contribute to the development of an expanded middle level research base, and provide additional means for sharing and disseminating current research and ideas among those interested in middle level education.
- G. Serve actively as advocates for the middle school movement, especially in terms of promoting middle level concepts among various publics commonly dealt with in the preparation of middle level educators.
- H. Share in advocacy for the middle school movement by the supporting the stated purposes and goals of the National Middle School Association.

As we move forward, we are striving to increase our visibility within NMSA and to enhance communication within our membership and among other groups such as the Professional Preparation and Research Committees and CMLA. However, membership is an action word. We need your involvement to help us grow. Please forward the newsletter to other interested professors (and future professors). Encourage them to join NaPOMLE (membership forms available at www.napomle.org). Submit articles to Current Issues in Middle Level Education (John Myers, Editor, jmyers@westga.edu) or to our newsletter (Susan Breck, Editor at sbreck@siue.edu). Check out the website, and submit course resources or syllabi to be added to the site. Finally, if you want to get involved in other ways, contact us (blackburnb@winthrop.edu; shirleycajin@aol.com; jay.hertzog@sru.edu).

The “State” of Middle Level Education: Illinois & Colorado



ILLINOIS



Update on the Work of the ISBE Middle Grades Panel

In the fall of 1999, the Illinois State Board of Education convened an expert panel to address the need to develop standards that guide the preparation of teachers for the

middle grades. The panel gathered for its first meeting in January of 2000. The panel was comprised of three public school teachers, six school administrators, three superintendents, five representatives from higher education, one parent, and one agent from a Regional Office of Education. The original

charge to the initial committee was to define the appropriate grade levels for the middle level; examine national standards in the content areas, the Illinois Learning Standards, and the Illinois Professional Teaching Standards; identify the essential requirements for middle-grade teachers; make a recommendation about a teaching certificate; suggest what content areas are appropriate; and recommend what clinical experiences are appropriate.

A report, a set of standards, and a list of recommendations were submitted to the Teacher Certification Board. The Teacher Certification Board approved this work and sent it on to the State Board of Education. At that time, the Illinois State Board of Education would not approve the recommendations in the initial report. Instead, the State Board asked the panel to reconvene to address enhancing the current middle grades endorsement that was put in place in 1997.

The Illinois State Board of Education asked the panel to revisit the standards, and work on enhancing the current endorsement. The initial committee members were invited to remain on the panel to continue its work. There were new members added to the panel to broaden the base of this group beyond the three public school teachers, six school administrators, three superintendents, five representatives from higher education, one parent, and one agent from a Regional Office of Education. New members were added from work groups involved in a large teacher quality grant focusing on middle level education, the Illinois Community College Board, the Illinois Board of Higher

Education, and several other higher education institutions.

The committee revisited the set of standards that were developed for the initial submission to the State Board of Education. The committee worked to focus the standards by removing those that were also found in the Illinois Professional Teaching Standards, the Elementary Standards, and reorganized some of the broader standards that resulted in a focused set of Middle Grade Standards. Most of the standards in the focused set are as they were in the initial set of standards. There were a couple of standards that were rewritten to incorporate two or more of the standards from the initial set.

This revised set of standards was submitted for approval to the Illinois State Teacher Certification Board on December 5, 2003. The Certification Board approved the newly reworked standards. Next, the panel submitted these standards to the Illinois State Board of Education for approval on December 18, 2003. The State Board of Education approved the revised standards unanimously.

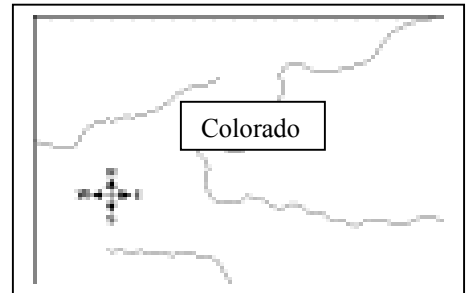
It is important to note that only the standards were approved at each of these meetings. There was no new plan for implementation of the standards submitted for approval during these meetings. Currently, a new report is being developed that will outline the implementation plan for the new middle grades standards. It is anticipated that the approved set of standards will be applied to all course work leading to the current enhanced middle grades endorsement. This is an endorsement that can be added to an already existing certificate.

Additional discussion continues

concerning an anticipated recommendation that an optional certificate be made available that would encompass grades 5 through 9. The standards that were developed in the initial panel work could be used to focus this optional freestanding certificate. At the present time though, the middle grades endorsement remains the only indicator to hiring middle school principals that this teacher candidate has some knowledge specific to characteristics and learning needs of the 10 to 14 year old student.

Dr. Deborah Curtis, Director
Teacher Education Center
Illinois State University

COLORADO



No Middle School Licensure for Colorado Teachers

The state of Colorado has been actively involved with middle school teacher preparation for the past 20 years. In spring, 2003 the Colorado Department of Education decided to no longer issue middle school licenses, due in part to a decision made by the Colorado HR1 Subcommittee on what constitutes a "Highly Qualified" teacher in order to be in compliance with SEC. 1119, of the No Child Left Behind Act. As a result of this decision the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley and Regis University closed their middle school teacher preparation programs.

Background

The early beginnings of middle school education in Colorado started in 1974 with a position paper drafted by the Junior High/Middle School Executive’s Association that called for middle level teacher preparation and certification in the state of Colorado. This group was coordinated by Bob Johnson and included such members as Dr. John Swaim. The position paper was sent to state legislators, the Colorado State Department of Education, and all colleges and universities throughout the state. The paper called for a revision of the existing junior high school certification standards and for universities to develop viable middle level teacher education programs. As part of the process, the University of Northern Colorado took that initiative and sponsored a one-year study and along with the 1974 position paper provided the impetus for developing the undergraduate program at UNC. The middle school certification standards in Colorado were accepted by the Colorado State Board of Education and went into effect in 1977.

About 18 years later, faculty from the University of Northern Colorado, University of Denver and Mesa State College along with some middle school teachers and principals from around the state met with officials from the Colorado Department of Education to revise the endorsement standards for Early Adolescence Education (middle school). The Colorado State Board of Education adopted these endorsement standards in 1996.

Impact of NCLB: Defining the Highly Qualified Teaching

With the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, the Colorado Department of Education’s formed a HR1 Committee to develop a state plan. As part of the state plan the state department needed to decide how to ensure that all teachers of core subjects within the state were “highly qualified” by 2005-2006. As part of this process it was decided that there would be only elementary and secondary endorsements. According to the minutes of the HR1 Working Group Subcommittee on “Highly Qualified”, October 23, 2002, “The group did not think that the best course of action was to create a separate middle school endorsement area or definition, but to expand the definition of elementary to include K-8 and keep secondary at 7-12 in order to provide the greatest flexibility to districts.”

Not only has this decision effected teacher preparation and initial licensure of middle level teachers, it has had an impact on currently licensed teachers teaching in middle schools. Through several conversations by leaders of the Colorado Association of Middle Level Educators and the Colorado State Department of Education discussions were held to clarify the interpretation of what the “Highly Qualified” teacher definition means for teachers who are currently licensed and teaching in middle schools with elementary or secondary licenses. This is an important decision because if these teachers are not found to be “Highly Qualified” then they are restricted to the grade levels in the schools they teach.

The Colorado State Department of Education has now clearly presented guidelines for elementary

professionally licensed teachers who have been teaching in middle schools. Teacher who are teaching only one subject in 6th grade must have 25 hours in the content field they are teaching or pass the state content area test. If elementary teachers are teaching in the 6th grade of a middle school and are teaching all subjects then they only have to pass the Elementary Praxis II test. Middle school teachers who do not currently meet these set of “highly qualified” teacher requirements by 2005 may not be able to continue teaching at the middle school level. There are many concerned and anxious middle school teachers as school districts and the Colorado Department of Education try to sort this out. (These guidelines may be obtained by going to the Colorado Department of Education: www.cde.state.co.us and going to Educator Licensing section.)

Taking Action

With the announcement to eliminate the middle school licensure, the Colorado Association of Middle Level Educators (CAMLE) and other state leaders in middle school education have taken several actions. Several strategies are being used to convince officials to advocate for middle school teacher candidates, currently licensed middle school teachers and to reinstate the middle school license. Certainly, political action was one of our initial strategies. Secondly, looking for possible grants and initiatives that would support middle school education was the next step and lastly we are bringing visibility and recognition to high performing middle schools.

The first step CAMLE took in response to the elimination of the middle school licensure was to talk

to possible funding agencies that were interested in promoting middle school education. Actually, two private foundations, the Donnell-Kay and the Piton Foundations of Denver were very interested in supporting our efforts. In May 2003 they assisted in sponsoring a conference entitled *Moving Forward: Ensuring the Success of All Middle Level Students* to give visibility to middle level education and the rise issues related to the elimination of the middle school teaching license in Colorado. Many educational organizations also sponsored the conference. Sponsors and special invitees, along with a special appearance from Congressional Representative, attended the one-day conference. Special middle school speakers, a panel of middle school teachers and CAMLE leaders all spoke on behalf of the importance of middle school education and the special preparation for middle school teachers. As a result of this activity, a newspaper article appeared in the Rocky Mountain News in Denver, identifying the concerns associated with the discontinuation of the license.

Over the past year, Dr. Copper Stoll, Past-President of CAMLE, and I made presentations to the Colorado Association of State School Boards and the Colorado Association of School Executives on behalf of middle school education. These presentations discussed how to design and implement high performing middle schools. In part the presentation includes a demonstration of how one school is becoming a high performing middle school in an effort to dispel some of the myths about middle school education.

As a follow-up to the May conference, leaders of CAMLE and the foundations met to develop a grant. They submitted a grant proposal to the National Forum for the Acceleration of Middle Grades Reform to participate in the Schools to Watch Program. Colorado was one of five states selected to participate in this program. This year Colorado will select four Schools to Watch. This is another strategy to raise visibility of Colorado middle schools that are high performing and implementing the middle school practices supported by the literature and research in the field of middle school education.

Current Efforts

The CAMLE organization continues to have conversations with the Colorado Department of Education regarding the definition and requirements for a “highly qualified” middle school teacher. In addition, they are advocating that the Colorado Association of Secondary School Principals and Colorado Association of School Executives establish a middle school principal emphasis area in these state organizations.

Leaders in the CAMLE organization and myself have addressed the Colorado State Board of Education. In our presentations we have raised issues about the importance of middle school education and of licensing teachers who are specifically prepared to teach early adolescents. Position papers from the National Middle School Association and the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform were shared with the State Board. Teacher candidates from the University of Northern Colorado spoke to the State Board in an

attempt raise concern about teachers who find themselves in middle school settings and are not prepared to teach this age student. There was a great deal of interest and dialogue around this issue, but the Commissioner of Education still indicated that Colorado would lose funding from NCLB if we continued to have a middle school license.

Those of us directly involved with middle school teacher preparation continue to look for strategies to advocate for middle school teacher preparation and the reinstatement of the middle school licensure in Colorado. The political climate is difficult, since the funding of higher education is in a critical state, especially in Colorado. For Deans, Provosts and Presidents, it appears to be more cost effective to prepare just elementary and secondary teachers rather than to look at any specializations.

With the political, high stakes testing and the budget constraints that we face, we have our work cut out for us in middle school teacher preparation. However, on a positive note, there are very few middle school teachers, administrators, parents and members of the community that I speak with who do not recognize that the middle school student is an unique entity and that there are special educators who are required to teach them. I remain hopeful that things will come full circle and as a result we will have more support and an even better program for providing specially prepared teachers for middle school students.

Barbara L. Whinery, Associate Professor Middle Grades Education, Coordinator University of Northern Colorado

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Call for Manuscripts

Current Issues in Middle Level Education, the official refereed journal of the National Association of Professors of Middle Level Education, is seeking manuscripts that relate to middle level philosophy, curriculum and instruction, and research. Book reviews and letters to the editor are also welcome.

Guidelines for Contributors

Manuscripts of approximately 1500-2500 words are preferred. All manuscripts should follow the 5th edition APA guidelines. Prospective authors are encouraged to submit manuscripts in word-processing software compatible with Microsoft Word on a computer diskette. Three hard copies are also required.

When submitting, please include a cover sheet for each copy giving the author's name, professional affiliation, address, telephone number, and title of article. The first page of each manuscript should begin with the title of the manuscript, with carefully proofread text following.

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