



## *Policy Brief*

### Middle-Level Principal Preparation and Licensure

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While much attention has been focused on the need for specialized preparation and licensure of middle-level teachers (see National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2002; National Middle School Association, 2002), relatively little consideration has been given to the preparation and licensure of middle-level principals (Valentine & Mogar, 1992). Currently, only seven states (Alaska, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, and Oklahoma) report some form of specialized preparation for middle-level principals. Upon closer investigation many of these states, and the universities providing the programs, require very limited study in the area of middle schools, with most simply requiring an internship in a middle-level school.

Recently, researchers (Brown & Anfara, 2002; Clark, & Clark, 2000; Olson, 2000) have emphasized the importance of strong and effective school leadership and its link to educational excellence. The role of the school principal has been recognized as critical to the implementation of reform and accountability initiatives. With an expected turnover rate in the middle-level principalship of 72 percent between 2000 and 2005 (Valentine et al., 2002), addressing the issue of leader preparation is essential. Findings from a recent study conducted by Valentine et al. (2002) support the need for specialized knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to middle-level leadership. The most pertinent findings include:

- 99% of middle-level principals, when asked recently how to best prepare future principals for the middle level, recommend formal graduate study of middle-level issues. 99% also recommend some form of internship/field experience. Though 82% of today's middle-level principals have graduate coursework beyond the master's degree, 37% have not had any form of coursework in middle-level education and nearly three-fourths have had less than two courses. Only 4% of today's middle-level principals have specific middle-level administrator certification.
- 45% of today's middle-level principals have not had any experience as an assistant principal at the middle level and an additional 8% have had only one year. Only 33% of today's middle-level principals transitioned into their

principalship directly from a middle-level assistant principalship and 12% entered their principalship directly from a middle-level teaching position.

These data confirm that far too many middle-level principals have not had formal graduate study or first-hand experience in middle-level schools. Required programs of study that include specific middle-level coursework such as those listed below and an extensive middle-level internship experience should be a minimal preparatory step for future middle-level leaders.

The Middle Level Education Research SIG strongly supports the specialized preparation of middle-level administrators with a focus on:

- the unique needs and characteristics of young adolescents;
- age-appropriate programs and practices used to promote the learning of young adolescents;
- developmentally appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment;
- middle school history and philosophy as delineated in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2003), *Turning Points* (Carnegie, 1989), and *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000); and
- the qualities and characteristics of effective middle-level teachers.

To that end, we make the following policy recommendations:

- States should establish mandatory requirements for future middle-level administrators as an incentive for both colleges/universities and individuals to pursue specialization in middle-level administration.
- States should require current middle-level principals who have not had specialized middle-level preparation to engage in graduate coursework or professional development in middle-level issues such as those listed above.
- Colleges and universities should establish preparation programs that allow for specialized coursework and internships in middle-level schools for future principals and graduate coursework for current principals who have not had specialized preparation.
- School districts and schools should require expertise in middle-level issues as prerequisite to being hired as a middle-level administrator.

## References

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The Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group (MLER SIG) is an affiliate of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). Its membership includes more than 200 middle-level researchers from across the United States. The SIG's mission is to improve, promote, and disseminate educational research reflecting young adolescence and middle-level education. This policy brief is officially endorsed by all MLER members. For more information about the MLER SIG please visit

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