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## Middle Grades Principal Credentialing: A Vanishing Requirement

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## Middle Grades Principal Credentialing: A Vanishing Requirement

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### Abstract

Limited research explores how school administrators learn the leadership skills, knowledge, and dispositions that will support young adolescents, particularly how administrators are prepared and credentialed to lead middle grades schools. The purpose of this research was to examine which states offered and/or required administrator credentials specific to middle grades and why states do or do not offer or require such credentialing. Analysis of the data indicates that states are moving away from specific credentialing for middle grades school administrators, with only one state still offering such a credential. Although state credentialing officers indicated the value of a specific middle grades principal credential, the need for flexibility for districts and credential candidates was the overarching reason for eliminating or not having a middle grades administrative credential. Moving away from specific middle grades credentialing has a number

of implications for students, schools, preparations programs, and advocates of middle grades education.

*Keywords:* principal, middle grades, credentialing, certification, licensure

Since the early 20th century when scholars in the field of psychology began forwarding the concept of adolescence (Hall, 1916), educators in the United States have examined how best to meet the educational needs of this age group (Alexander, 1968; Gruhn & Douglass, 1947; Jackson & Davis, 2000). Early advocates for the unique educational needs of young adolescents prompted policymakers to introduce and then implement the junior high school as a structure (Gruhn & Douglass, 1947). The junior high school then morphed into middle schools in the 1970s and 80s when advocates argued that junior high schools, as mini-high schools, were not meeting the developmental needs of students ages 10 to 13 (Alexander, 1968; Eichhorn, 1966).

Throughout the development of middle-level schools, advocates have highlighted the importance of educators being prepared to understand the unique psychological, social, emotional, and physical needs of this age group and the need for them to possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively educate young adolescents (Andrews, 2013; Gruhn & Douglass, 1947; McEwin, Smith, & Dickinson, 2003; Mertens, Caskey, & Flowers, 2016; National Middle School Association, 1992, 2003, 2010). To promote adequate preparation and ongoing development of middle grades educators, advocates endorsed specific credentialing for that would provide them with an understanding of young adolescents and the unique instructional programming and school structures that could best meet their unique needs (Gatewood, 1981; McEwin, 1983; National Middle School Association, 1986). Although less prevalent and more recent than teacher credentialing, middle grades advocates and researchers have also promoted and documented specific credentialing for middle grades school administrators (Gaskill, 2002; McEwin & Allen, 1985; Valentine, Clark, Hackman, & Petzko, 2002; Valentine, Clark, Irvine, Keefe, & Melton, 1993; Valentine, Clark, Nickerson, & Keefe, 1981; Valentine & Mogar, 1992).

Research tracking the progress of middle level educator credentialing indicated an increase in states requiring specific middle level credentials over the past forty years (Gaskill, 2002; George, McMillan, Malinka, & Pumerantz, 1975; McEwin & Allen, 1985; McEwin et al., 2003; Pumerantz, 1969; Valentine & Mogar, 1992). However, a recent study by Howell et al. (2018) indicated this trend may be waning, with fewer states requiring specific credentialing for middle grades teachers. Additionally, the last National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) survey of middle grades principals noted that the number of middle grades principals with middle grades certification declined from previous national survey research (Valentine et al., 2002).

The paucity and age of research about middle grades principal credentialing suggests little is known about the current status. The purpose of this current research was to determine state requirements for credentialing middle grades school administrators. Specifically, we examined which states offered and/or required credentials specific to middle grades and why states do or do not offer or require such credentialing.

## Framing the Research

Two conceptual lenses framed this research: the skill model of leadership presented by Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, and Fleishman (2000) and effective school leadership outlined by middle grades advocates and researchers (Brown & Anfara, 2002; D. C. Clark & Clark, 2000, 2004, 2008; Gale & Bishop, 2014; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Little & Little, 2001; Petzko et al., 2002; Weller, 2002). Effective leadership results from skill development that leads to successful organizational problem-solving (Mumford et al., 2000). Effective problem-solving is the result of an interaction among competencies, individual attributes, career experience, and environmental factors. Competencies are the central set in this interaction, with the other mediating factors all contributing to leader competencies. Competencies include skills and knowledge related to solving organizational issues. In the context of middle grades leadership, principals' knowledge of young adolescents, school structures that support developmental needs of young adolescents, and effective instructional and curricular programming are important in effective problem-solving and resulting leadership performance. In addition to knowledge, skill development in problem-solving and social judgments is necessary for effective leadership outcomes. In the environmental context of educating young adolescents, principals may be required to develop specific problem-solving and social judgments skills that meet the unique needs of young adolescents.

Advocates for young adolescents have focused on the importance of the environmental context in outlining effective leadership for principals of middle-grade schools (Bickmore, 2016a, 2016b; Brown & Anfara, 2002; Gale & Bishop, 2014; Weller, 2004). Under the umbrella of middle grades philosophy, advocates have described curricular and instructional programming and school organizational structures that are specific to the needs of young adolescents (Brown & Knowles, 2014; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Middle School Association, 1992, 1995, 2003, 2010). Principal leadership, as a part of this philosophy, is central to the implementation of the ideals and recommendations of middle grades advocates. As Jackson and Davis (2000) stated, "No single individual is more important to initiating and sustaining improvement in middle grades students' performance than the school principal" (p. 157).

Middle grades advocates have long suggested that specific preparation, including credentialing for middle grades principals, is imperative to the application and fruition of the tenets of the middle grades philosophy (Gaskill, 2002; George et al., 1975; McEwin, 1983; McEwin & Allen, 1985; Valentine & Mogar, 1992). Credentialing of middle grades principals provides some assurance that principals are prepared with knowledge of young adolescent development and the practices and structures underpinned by grades philosophy.

### Research of Middle Grades Principal Credentialing

Principals who demonstrate the knowledge and skills described as effective by middle grades advocates tend to have better school outcomes (Anfara, Roney, Smarkola, DuCette, & Gross, 2006; Bickmore, 2011, 2016a; Brown & Anfara, 2002; Gale & Bishop, 2014; Keefe, Clark, Nickerson, & Valentine, 1983; Keefe, Valentine, Clark, & Irvine, 1994; Valentine, Clark, Hackman, & Petzko, 2004). This association provides a foundation to support specific credentialing for middle grades principals. Requiring principals to obtain knowledge and skills, as described through middle grades philosophy, may lead to better school outcomes for young adolescents. Yet, there is also limited research that has tracked if and how states require middle grades certification for school administrators.

This section describes the research highlighting middle grades-focused principal credentialing in the United States. Although states use different terminology, we use the definition of credentialing provided by Howell et al. (2018): “a professional license, certificate, or endorsement issued by a state authority” (p. 4). This credential allows an individual to act as a school administrator in the state in which the credential was issued.

Three national survey studies sponsored by the NASSP tracked the percentages of principals that had obtained specific credentials in middle grades school administration, indicating the trend of states requiring such certification (Valentine et al., 2002, 1993, 1981). In the 1980 study, only eight percent of middle grades principals surveyed indicated they had a middle grades credential (Valentine et al., 2002). This percentage grew to 16 percent in the 1992 survey (Valentine et al., 1993). In the final NASSP survey conducted in 2000, the percentage of principals with a middle grades credential dropped to four percent.

The trend of middle grades principals’ credentialing over the three decades indicated the majority of principals with a secondary certification, 65% in 1980, which dropped to 39% in 2000, while PreK/K-12 certification grew from zero to 46%.

When examining how many and which states provide credentialing specific to middle grades, researchers have examined middle grades principal credentialing as a secondary issue to teacher credentialing. Though McEwin and Allen (1985) focused on middle grades teacher credentialing, they included principals in their survey of certification officers in each state. These researchers reported only four states had the option of specific middle grades credentialing for school administrators.

Valentine and Mogar (1992) surveyed state certification officers and extended the McEwin and Allen (1985) study by chronicling three types of credentialing practices of states that reported middle grades credentialing specific to middle grades schools. The researchers indicated 10 states had some form of credentialing for administrators specific to middle grades. Seven of these states were identified as having Type I certification, or authentic certification. These states’ requirements were “purposely designed to address the needs of certifying elementary and secondary educators to work at the middle level” (p. 38) and included some type of standards specific to middle grades for preparation and practicing principals. They identified two states that had Type II certifications as the state officers did not report specific middle grades standards on which the certification was based. In these states, candidates were automatically awarded certification if the preparing institution recommended certification or at the prerogative of the certification officer, depending on candidates’ middle grades background. Type III certification carried the name “middle school” but the focus was clearly either elementary or secondary. One state was identified as a Type III credential. Additionally, seven of the 10 states required a middle grades credential. Grade configurations for credentials varied widely (e.g., 4–8, 4–9, 5–8, 5–9), with 4–9 as the most common configuration for three states.

Gaskill (2002) was the most recent study examining middle grades credentialing that included principals. Unlike previous studies, Gaskill examined each state and the District of Columbia’s certification office website to initially determine credentialing requirements. After initial analysis, each state’s

certification officer or representative was interviewed by phone to clarify initial analysis. The results indicated seven states had specific middle-grade credentials for principals: Alaska, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, and Oklahoma. The most common grade configuration for middle grades principal credentialing was grades 5–9 with five states using this grade span.

The extant research indicates that few states have provided any type of middle grades credentialing for administrators who lead schools that educate young adolescents. The number of states with some type of middle grades administrative credential has varied from four to 10 over the past 40 years. The limited credentialing or requirements offered by states corresponds to low percentages of principals reporting credentials specific to leading middle grades schools—four to 16% (Valentine et al., 2002, 1993, 1981). Additionally, the most recent research specifically examining middle grades credentialing or administrators is more than 15 years old. The purpose of this research was to examine which states offered and/or required administrator credentials specific to middle grades and why states do or do not offer or require such certification.

## Methodology

This exploratory, qualitative study utilized document analysis to examine principal credentialing in all states in the United States. Based on the results of two document analyses, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with select state department of education directors of credentialing or their designees to provide more in-depth understanding of the specific state credentialing processes.

### *Document Data Collection and Analysis*

A standardized review of public documentation was conducted (Bowen, 2009). The researchers initially visited each state's Department of Education (DOE) website to confirm credentialing requirements. Results were recorded in a spreadsheet, which included the website URL for future reference. Information found on each website was later verified through analysis of the codes, statutes, policies, regulations, and handbooks governing the principal credentialing process in each state.

The researchers used direct content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to quantify data found in these publications. Credentials were categorized based on keywords identified from the type of credentials

offered. *K–12* and *PreK–12* were used to identify states offering a single principal credential.

*Elementary* referred to principal credentialing for any grade combination of pre-kindergarten through grade eight while *secondary* referred to any combination of grades five through twelve. A variety of terms (*middle school*, *middle grades*, *intermediate*, and *middle level*) were used to identify principal credentialing specifically for young adolescents. Based upon predetermined codes, states were grouped into three credentialing types: (a) PreK/K–12, (b) elementary/secondary, or (c) elementary/middle/high. The elementary/middle/high category was central to this research. These data were recorded on a spreadsheet.

After the initial three code categories were identified, the researchers conducted a more in-depth analysis of each state's credentialing. These data were recorded on a second spreadsheet and included specific contact information for potential interviewees, credentialing classification, and updated URLs for credentialing departments. A Google folder was created to house this spreadsheet and to act as a reference repository where state codes, regulations, legislation, handbooks, and policies concerning principal credentialing were collected and recorded.

### *Interview Data Collection and Analysis*

After the initial and secondary content analysis, researchers selected a subset of states from which to conduct interviews of directors of credentialing or their designees (hereto-labeled directors). The selection of interviewees was based on two criteria. First, all directors from states in which a middle grades credential was offered (code category elementary/middle/high school) were selected to be interviewed. Second, directors from the two remaining code categories, PreK/K–12 and elementary/high, were categorized by geographic location (east, mid-west, and west), and state directors were randomly selected to be interviewed from each region. The number of state directors from PreK/K–12 and elementary/high credentialing states interviewed was in relationship to the number of states with elementary/middle/high school credential options.

Three separate semi-structured interview protocols were created, one specific to each type of credentialing (PreK/K–12, elementary/secondary, elementary/middle/high). Each protocol sought to verify specific requirements for licensure based on grade span, changes to the state's credentialing policies, stability of the credentialing requirements,

and opinions about specific credentialing for middle grades principals (i.e., What benefits do you see for having a specific credential for middle grades principals?).

Phone interviews with participant directors were digitally recorded, transcribed, and verified to ensure accuracy. Field notes of all attempts to contact interviewees and signed consent forms were also added to the aforementioned spreadsheet. Interviews ranged from 14 to 20 minutes. The researchers employed a modified constant comparative process to analyze the interview data, using eclectic first level coding including attribute, initial, and *in vivo* codes (Saldaña, 2013). Independently coding and using ATLAS.ti qualitative data software package, this first level coding generated 66 codes. Together researchers cross-checked and discussed the rationale for each code which contribute to inter-rater reliability and the dependability of the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Collaboratively, the research team then developed themes from these first level codes adding to the dependability and trustworthiness of the analysis process (Gibbs, 2007). Finally, the researchers compared the interview and document analyses to provide further trustworthiness and triangulation to the findings.

**Findings**

Findings are reported in two sections. The first section outlines the analysis of the 50 state DOE websites. Findings from the analysis of interviews with state department directors are then reported.

**State Department Websites**

The initial review of states’ DOE websites resulted in the vast majority of states providing PreK/K–12 administrator credentialing (*n*= 45) (see Table 1). Three states (Massachusetts, North Dakota, and South Carolina) granted the elementary/secondary credential, although the grade spans identified for elementary and secondary were different for each state. Additionally, coursework and experience requirements were also different among these three states. In Massachusetts, middle grades coursework and experience were not required for either the elementary (PreK–8) or secondary (5–12) credentials (Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, 603 CMR 7.09, 2017). North Dakota required two education courses specific to either elementary (PreK–6) or secondary

Table 1  
*States Principal Credentialing: First Content Analysis*

State	Grade Span Principal Credential
Alabama	PreK/K–12Elementary/Secondary
Alaska	PreK/K–12
Arizona	PreK/K–12
Arkansas	PreK/K–12
California	PreK/K–12
Colorado	PreK/K–12
Connecticut	PreK/K–12
Delaware	PreK/K–12
Florida	PreK/K–12
Georgia	PreK/K–12
Hawaii	PreK/K–12
Idaho	PreK/K–12
Illinois	PreK/K–12
Indiana	PreK/K–12
Iowa	PreK/K–12
Kansas	PreK/K–12
Kentucky	PreK/K–12
Louisiana	PreK/K–12
Maine	PreK/K–12
Maryland	PreK/K–12
Massachusetts	Elementary/Middle/Secondary
Michigan	PreK/K–12
Minnesota	PreK/K–12
Mississippi	PreK/K–12
Missouri	Elementary/Middle/Secondary
Montana	PreK/K–12Elementary/Secondary
Nebraska	PreK/K–12
Nevada	PreK/K–12

(Continued)

Table 1  
(Continued)

State	Grade Span Principal Credential
New Hampshire	PreK/K–12
New Jersey	PreK/K–12
New Mexico	PreK/K–12
New York	PreK/K–12
North Carolina	PreK/K–12
North Dakota	Elementary/Secondary
Ohio	Elementary/Middle/High
Oklahoma	PreK/K–12
Oregon	PreK/K–12
Pennsylvania	PreK/K–12
Rhode Island	PreK/K–12
South Carolina	Elementary/Secondary
South Dakota	PreK/K–12
Tennessee	PreK/K–12
Texas	PreK/K–12
Utah	PreK/K–12
Vermont	PreK/K–12
Virginia	PreK/K–12
Washington	PreK/K–12
West Virginia	PreK/K–12
Wisconsin	PreK/K - 12
Wyoming	PreK/K - 12

(7–12), as well as three years’ experience as a teacher or administrator in the grade span to receive the designated credential (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction Administrative, 2002a; North Dakota Department of Public Instruction Administrative Rule 67-11-06, 2002b). South Carolina required principals to hold a valid teaching license in elementary (K–8) or secondary (7–12), in addition to three years of total teaching

experience, with one of those years in the grade span for which credentialing is sought (South Carolina State Board of Education Regulation 43-64, Requirements for Initial Certification at the Advanced Level, 2014).

In the initial document analysis, only three states (Massachusetts, Missouri, and Ohio) indicated issuance of separate credentials for middle school principals (elementary/middle/high school category). The second analysis revealed Massachusetts recently changed their credentialing process and no longer issued a middle grades credential for principals (see Table 2). In addition, more in-depth analysis indicated Missouri did not provide an initial middle grades principal credential; instead, the credential was offered as an endorsement to a preexisting elementary (K–8) or secondary (7–12) credential. Addition of this endorsement required five semester hours of reading coursework, a class in elementary mathematics, and a minimum of six semester hours in middle level education courses focused on “middle school philosophy, organization, and curriculum; and the intellectual, physiological, emotional and social development of the transescent child (10–14 year-old)” (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2005, p. 86). Although middle grades coursework was required for credentialing as a middle grades principal in Missouri, experience as a teacher, intern, or administrator in a middle grades school was not.

Ohio was the sole state with a stand-alone middle grades principal credential. Although overlap occurred between its elementary (PreK–6) and secondary (5–12) credential, principals were able to apply for a middle grades credential for grades 4–9. Unlike Missouri, specific coursework in middle-level education was not required. However, those applying for the credential had to provide evidence of two successful years of teaching experience in grades 4–9 (Ohio Administrative Code Chapter 3301-24 Licensing and Education Programs, 2015).

**Director Interviews**

Researchers interviewed the state’s educator credentialing officers or their designees from Massachusetts, Missouri, and Ohio—the only three states for which the initial analysis of state websites indicated a specific middle grades principal credential. The state directors from Iowa, North Dakota, and Oregon were interviewed after being

Table 2  
States without PreK/K-12 Credentialing: Second Content Analysis

State	Type	Grades	MG coursework required	MG experience required
Massachusetts	Elementary/secondary	PreK–8; 5–12	N/A	N/A
Missouri	Middle grades endorsement to elementary or secondary license	K–8; 7–12 (5–9 endorsement)	2 courses in MLE (graduate or undergraduate)	N/A
North Dakota	Elementary/secondary	PreK–6; 7–12	2 courses in elementary/secondary	Yes (3 years teaching or admin exp. In grade span)
Ohio	Elementary/secondary/middle grades	PreK–6; 4–9; 5–12	N/A	2 years teaching in grades 4–9 required
South Carolina	Elementary/secondary	K–8; 7–12		

randomly selected from the other two credentialing categories (PreK/K–12 and elementary/high), for a total of six interviews. Three themes surfaced as a result of the analysis of these interviews: (a) change, (b) flexibility and ease, and (c) value of middle grades credentialing.

**Change.** Interviews of directors revealed that state credentialing for principals was in flux. Four of six directors indicated that they had recently or were in the process of changing the grade span and other requirement for principal credentialing. Of particular note were Massachusetts and Missouri, two of the only three states in which our initial analysis of state websites indicated a specific middle grades principal credential. The Massachusetts director confirmed what our second content analysis indicated: the state had eliminated the middle grades credential in favor of a PreK–8 and 5–12 license. Similarly, Missouri was in process of consolidating their K–8 and 7–12 license to a K–12 license and eliminating the 5–9 endorsement.

The trend to consolidate grade spans also included Iowa and North Dakota. The Iowa director indicated that over the last few years the state had moved to a PreK/K–12 credential, eliminating the previous PreK–8 and 5–12 credential. North Dakota was in the middle of the required process to change the administrator credential by adding a K–12 license to their existing K–6 and 7–12 license.

Beyond grade spans, Oregon and North Dakota were in the process of extensive restructuring of their administrator credentialing process. The Oregon director indicated that new rules for initial licensure were being implemented based on the recently released National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards, which she said, “while not grade-level specific training . . . I think that across the grade levels [they address] the needs of the students.” In addition, Oregon was changing their ongoing licensure to include a professional license focused on more district and system level administration. Beyond adding a K–12 credential, the North Dakota director indicated that the office was collecting feedback on a draft proposal for an alternate route to initial principal credentialing based on micro-credentialing related to standards rather than course work. Experienced teachers would provide evidence of competencies in specific standards and areas of leadership to obtain an administrative credential. The director indicated it would be several months before implementation.

Interviews with directors indicated that Ohio was the only remaining state with a middle grades principal credential (see Table 3). The director of credentialing indicated that there were no recent or planned changes to their principal credentialing process. According to the director, the middle grades credential had been in effect since 1998. In order to obtain this credential, a candidate must complete

Table 3  
Final Principal Credentialing: Post Interviews

Credentialing Grade Span	Initial Public Document Review	Second Public Document Review	Post-Interview
PreK/K – 12	45	45	47 <sup>*a</sup>
Elementary/ Secondary Only	2North Dakota, South Carolina	3Massachusetts, North Dakota, South Carolina	3Massachusetts, North Dakota, South Carolina
Elementary/ Middle/Secondary	3Massachusetts, Missouri, Ohio	2Missouri, Ohio	1Ohio

\*North Dakota considering adding PreK–12 credential in addition to Elementary/Secondary

<sup>a</sup>Includes states with both PreK/K–12 and Elementary/Secondary credential

a program of study from an approved college or university, pass an Ohio and national leadership examination, and have two years of teaching experiences in the middle grades. Without this teaching experience, candidate must obtain an alternate temporary credential in which they must have been hired at a middle grades school as an administrator and be provided a mentor from the school district for one or two years. Upon successful completion, the administrator is provided a credential in the middle grades. When asked if there were any issues with having a specific grade level credential the director stated:

The only thing that we see is really just, can I hire this person who has an early childhood grade band as a principal as my high school principal, and then that’s when we work with them through . . . Well, if you’re willing to go through this pathway [alternate], this is what you can do to get that individual.

The flexibility of Ohio’s alternate pathway for districts may be a reason for the long existence of the middle grades principal credential as outlined below.

**Flexibility.** Overall, states appeared to be moving from specific grade bans, including middle grades specific credentialing for principal, to a more generic credential. The primary reasons given by all directors for changing grade bans or the lack of middle grades credentialing was flexibility for districts in hiring principals and flexibility for principals in seeking employment. As the Massachusetts director stated when asked about eliminating the middle grades credential,

That’s for ease of employment per district . . . Someone who has a pre-K through 8 could easily

be flexed into a 5-8 school or pre-K to 6 school with just one license being held, rather than having to seek two separate licenses. We still have it at the 5-8, it’s just that it’s merged into pre-K to 8 as one license.

Overall, directors either intimated or directly stated that consolidating grades spans for principal credentialing addressed potential principal supply shortages. As the Oregon director stated, “I believe that there could be a supply issue at certain levels; especially, I would think if you do a middle school.”

District flexibility was particularly outlined as a need for rural districts. Both the directors of Oregon and North Dakota explicitly noted the need for rural districts to have flexibility as exemplified by the North Dakota director,

Here in North Dakota, we have some rural schools that are very, very small and very rural . . . [W]hen you have a small school like that, it’s kind of nice to have a pre-K through 12 principal credential . . . having the whole gamut is nicer for rural areas that have a small population.

Even the Ohio director, with the only remaining middle grades credential, acknowledged that a specific middle grades credential could be an issue for rural districts, especially if the state office did not have a flexible alternative certification process.

Flexibility and ease for individuals seeking a credential was also given as a reason to consolidate, eliminate, or provide limited grade bans for credentialing. The Massachusetts director explained one of their main rationales for eliminating the

middle grades credential: “And then we did some merging just for ease of employment purposes, and just for the customer . . . educators to be more able to obtain these licenses in that easier manner.” Together, flexibility for districts and ease of endorsement for individuals were the main reasons directors gave for consolidating grade spans and/or eliminating middle grades credentialing.

**Value of middle grades credentialing.** To further understand why states did or did not have middle grades principal credentialing and why states were moving to more generic grade bans for principal credentialing, the researchers asked directors to assess the value of having a specific grade ban for credentialing. Two questions guided this area of inquiry: (a) What benefits do you see for having a specific licensure for middle grades principals or other more specific grade levels? (b) What issues do you see for having a specific licensure for middle grades principals or other grade levels?

Directors in each state except for Iowa suggested there may be some advantages for having a specific middle grades credential. The two advantages were categorized as meeting student developmental needs and individual principal preference.

The directors from Missouri, North Dakota, Ohio, and Oregon acknowledged the importance of middle grades principals understanding the developmental needs of middle grades students. The North Dakota director stated:

The students have a very specific developmental level obviously. They’re not really at the elementary level, but they’re not at the high school developmental level. So as far as a leader in the middle schools, I can see where having some courses in the middle school to help leaders learn how to work with teachers that work with that population and work with students that are in that population would be helpful.

The Oregon director cited here personal experience to highlight the need for school leaders to understand the developmental needs of the students in their school:

In my opinion, what would be helpful is to assure that people, at whatever area of life, or work that they’re going to get into, whatever level, that they do have a moderate to advanced understanding of developmental principles at that grade level. My own experience, as an example, I taught middle

school, and then I taught high school, and then my first administrative assignment was an elementary assistant principal. So, for me, that was definitely something to look at.

The importance of principals understanding the developmental needs of young adolescents is a foundational tenet of those advocating for specific credentialing for middle grades schools (Anfara et al., 2006; Little & Little, 2001).

The Massachusetts and Oregon directors also acknowledged that there may be an advantage for individual principals in having a specific grade ban credential. These two directors indicated principals would not be assigned to a school with a grade level that they did not want to lead. As the Massachusetts director stated:

The only disadvantage I would probably see [for not having a middle grades credential] is an educator not wishing to be placed in a 5–8 schools, for whatever personal reason they might have. And then just wishing to have one that just addresses pre–K to 6.

Although most directors acknowledged advantages to having a middle grades credential, all directors believed their credentialing process adequately or exceptionally prepared candidates for school leadership. As an example, Oregon’s director acknowledged the importance of understanding the developmental needs of students in the schools principals may lead, however, she also stated,

I don’t necessarily know that the person has to have a very special endorsement, say to do middle school versus high school versus elementary school, because the way the system is set up is that the experiences are supposed to cover the K–12 realm. The curriculum is supposed to cover the K–12 realm.

The Iowa director explicitly stated that he saw no advantage for having a middle grades credential because the department closely examines provider’s programs to assure that principals meet important benchmarks and criteria to adequately prepare them for school leadership. For those states making changes to credentialing, the directors felt they were making changes to improve principal preparation, including adhering to standards such as the NELP standards. Directors privileged general school

leadership standards and requirements over those promoted by middle grades advocates, i.e., the knowledge, skills, and dispositions specifically associated with young adolescents and leadership aligned with their needs.

### Conclusions, Implications, and Limitations

The results indicated that only one state, Ohio, would continue to offer middle grades principal credentialing. The past trend highlighted by researchers (Gaskill, 2002; McEwin & Allen, 1985; Valentine et al., 2002, 1993, 1981; Valentine & Mogar, 1992) suggested states were increasing their efforts to support the knowledge, skills, and disposition specific to middle grades school leadership by offering and requiring specific middle grades credential. This trend has evaporated. Instead, the current trend appears to be that states are consolidating grade spans towards a more generic PreK/K–12 credential.

This movement toward a more generalist credential seems to have been prompted by policymakers seeking to provide more flexibility in hiring for districts and ease of credentialing for aspiring and practicing principals. However, this move away from specific middle grades credentialing has a number of implications for students, schools, preparations programs, and advocates of middle grades education. Leadership theory (Mumford et al., 2000), middle grades advocates (Clark & Clark, 2008; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Middle School Association, 2010), and a limited body of research (Brown & Anfara, 2002; Gale & Bishop, 2014; Keefe et al., 1994; Valentine et al., 2004) indicate that principals with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions specific to the middle grades context are more effective at organizational problem solving in the context of middle grades and in improving student and school outcomes. If credentialing is in place in each state to assure quality control of school administrators, then without specific credentialing there is no assurance that principals have the background that supports teaching and learning, programming, or school structures aligned with the needs of young adolescents. Although state credentialing directors in this study recognized that there was value in principals having the knowledge and skills specific to leading middle grades schools, the importance of assuring such background did not supersede their perceptions that flexibility and ease of credentialing was of greater importance.

Without specific requirements for those leading middle grades schools, questions arise as to if and

how principals learn to effectively engage in situational and contextual leadership that meets young adolescents social, emotional, and cognitive needs. As Mumford et al. (2000) outlined, without the specific knowledge and skills that support competencies directly associated with leading schools that meet young adolescents' needs, principals will be less effective in organizational problem-solving, which is the key to effective leadership.

Specific questions about preparation programs, recertification, and professional development of middle grades principals surface as credentialing fades. Principal preparation programs must be aligned with state credentialing requirements for aspiring principals to receive their credential. Logic would suggest as credentialing becomes more generic related to grade span, preparation programs will limit their focus on the nuances of leading in middle grades schools. Future research should examine the relationship between state principal credentialing and preparation program curriculum related to middle grades school leadership. Without specific credentialing, do preparation programs address any of the skills, knowledge, and dispositions specific to effectively leading middle grades school as outlined in the middle grades literature and research?

Similarly, researchers should examine further the recertification process in each state. Directors in this study did not provide details on the recertification process for practicing middle grades administrators, although the theme of *change* indicated that some states may be looking at creative ways of recertification. North Dakota's director indicated that potential implementation of micro-credentialing may be a process to include middle grades specific leadership practices. However, without such state requirements for recertification that include middle grades specific leadership practices, there may be no pressure on states and districts to provide professional development directed to middle grades principal leadership. On the other hand, districts may feel the full burden of developing middle grades principals to meet the challenges and unique learning needs of young adolescents. Further research is needed to understand if and how districts meet the development needs of middle grades principals who may not have a background in middle grades education.

The results of this study also suggest a gap exists in the advocacy for the preparation and development of middle grades school leaders relative to middle-grade teachers. Howell et al. (2018) research indicated 43 of

50 states offered a middle-grade teacher credential. This represented growth in the number of states with teacher middle grades credentials over the prior 40 years (Gaskill, 2002; George et al., 1975; McEwin, 1983; McEwin & Allen, 1985; Valentine & Mogar, 1992) versus the near elimination of middle grades credentialing for principals. How did this occur? Middle-level advocates and researchers should examine how potential principal advocacy groups, such as the Association for Middle-Level Education, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and NASSP are supporting or could improve efforts to increase the preparation and development of middle-level principals through specific credentialing requirements for those leading middle-grade schools.

Study results fill a 16-year gap in research associated with credentialing of middle grades principals. Clearly much has changed in the credentialing of principals to lead middle grades schools over the last 30 years. There are, however, several limitations to this study. Document analysis was limited to information provided by state DOE websites and, as noted in the interview results, this information may be changing or in the process of changing. Information on websites may not reflect the most recent credentialing changes or that changes were in process. Additionally, directors or their designees may not have had a completed understanding of their state's credentialing history, political nuances, and pressures related to credentialing or of the procedures for credentialing, and this may have resulted in incorrect or incomplete information shared with the research team. Finally, not all 50 state directors were interviewed, so some credentialing patterns based solely on interview data need to be cautiously interpreted. This study, however, provides an important update on how middle grades principals are prepared or, perhaps based on the results of this study, not prepared to lead schools that can effectively meet the unique educational needs of young adolescents.

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