

May 4, 2023

Representative Edwards and the Finance Committee:

My name is Amy Walker, and I am a professor of middle childhood education at Kent State University. I do not represent Kent State University, but rather I am submitting testimony as a private citizen and constituent in opposition to the dismantling of middle childhood licensure that would occur with grade band changes referenced in Revised Code Section 3319.22.

Educators must understand the nuances associated with brain development and socioemotional learning development during young adolescence. We know that human bodies change and grow more during young adolescence than any other time throughout a person's life except for infancy (Association of Middle Level Educators, 2020). Youth undergo enormous physical changes, experience puberty, and have an enormous transformation in their brains (Cleveland Clinic, 2023). While children are only able to think logically about present and concrete moments and events, young adolescents begin developing logic and understanding about abstraction and the future (Cleveland Clinic, 2023). During cognitive development in young adolescence, neurons grow rapidly and grow in large numbers, allowing for the growing development of complex and critical thinking (Cleveland Clinic, 2023). However, unlike adolescents and late adolescents, young adolescents are still not always able to apply this logic because of emotional influence and impulsivity on decision making, as their prefrontal cortex is still developing (Allen, 2019).

In recent years, Ohio has had the third largest commitment to middle level specialized programs in the nation (Howell, et al., 2016), producing highly skilled and highly trained teachers committed to the belief that young adolescents are more successful when teachers know and are able to respond to their developmental needs (AMLE, 2012; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; NMSA, 2010). One of the reasons I chose to move my family and myself to Ohio to pursue a career as a professor of middle childhood education was for the reputation of the middle level licensure program in the state of Ohio. I want to continue to be part of the success of these programs and the ongoing reputation Ohio has for middle grades education, which is now at risk if Ohio dismantles the middle childhood licensure. The grade band change to pre-kindergarten through 8th grade and 7th grade through 12th grade completely overlooks and overshadows our state's students who are in uniquely vulnerable and formative years; it also moves in the opposite direction of research. The state of Michigan recently changed their grade bands to *include* middle grades. Removing the middle grades band would be in a directly opposite trajectory to research and teaching trends across the field of education.

Before earning my PhD and becoming a professor of middle childhood education, I was a public middle school teacher. In my experience, it was common practice for friends, community members, and even parents to repeatedly say to me, "It takes a special person to teach middle school," followed often by, "I could never do it." Although this deficit mindset on

middle grades is damaging and pervasive across communities—another reason to advocate for middle level licensure to increase understanding and strengthen acknowledgement and advocacy of youth in these grades—this idea that it takes a special person to teach middle school is not necessarily wrong. Teaching middle school requires constant, careful attention and understanding of young adolescent development. Research shows that the principles of effective middle grades learning is when educators can respond to the developmental needs of young adolescents while challenging and empowering them across learning spaces in ways that take into account their specific needs (Previts, et al., 2013). My fear is that, by absorbing middle grades licensure into elementary and secondary, these students will fall through the cracks, and their needs will not be a focus of pedagogy in teacher preparation. My fear is this will result in not only a decrease in mastery, meeting benchmarks, and standardized test score performance, but also in engagement of students who might be forced to learn from teachers who do not understand them. McEwin, Dickinson, and Smith (2004) argue that “the failure to create mandatory middle level teacher licensure...has resulted in the majority of middle level teachers being inadequately prepared to teach young adolescents when they begin their careers” (p. 116).

As a middle childhood education professor, I have the privilege of instructing core curriculum courses for preservice teachers at Kent State University. Each semester across courses, I ask students: “Why middle grades?” By far, the most common answer has been, “I struggled with the changes I experienced in middle school, and I would have benefited from having a teacher who understood me. I want to be that teacher for middle school students.” This is my own anecdotal experience, and from what I have seen and heard, the decision to teach middle school is often unique because it is a specific set of years that requires care and nuance. Our middle childhood preservice teachers understand this need. We must not tear down middle grades licensure across the state of Ohio; rather, we must continue to support preservice teachers’ passions for middle childhood and to curate their expertise in young adolescent development and pedagogy for the success and benefit for all middle grades students.

To keep our young adolescents’ needs and education at the center of middle childhood policy change, I ask you to consider my testimony and remove the grade band change from HB 33.

Respectfully,

Amy Walker  
Assistant Professor  
Kent State University