

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today on Senate Bill 219. I come to you as a parent of a current college student, and as a college student myself who is pursuing a career change. I have worked as a database programmer and project manager for most of my adult life, but after volunteering for several years at my daughter's elementary and middle school, I discerned a calling to teach middle school. I am now a student at The Ohio State University. I have just completed my third year and I'm preparing for my last semester of classes before I begin student teaching in the spring, the last step on my way to becoming a licensed Middle Childhood educator in Math and English Language Arts.

The grade band realignment that was established as part of the budget last summer from grades P-5, 4-9, and 7-12 to grades P-8 and 6-12 will have a severe impact on teacher candidates. While the coursework requirements have not yet been developed, they will necessarily either increase the number of required credit hours or reduce the depth of content that is learned. I foresee a possibility of returning to a requirement for a master's degree to teach at the P-8 level simply because of the number of credit hours that would be required to prepare for this new generalist license. If I had been confronted with grade bands of P-8 and 6-12 when I decided to become a teacher, I may have chosen to study 6-12 Math, but it's also possible that I would have decided the courseload was too onerous and opted not to pursue the career path. For those who do move ahead with a P-8 license, in addition to increasing the required time and financial commitments, this change will undermine their professional identity and autonomy. Teachers choose to specialize in certain grade levels and subject areas based on their interests, strengths, and passions, and having the licensure flexibility to fill any open district position from preschool through 8<sup>th</sup> grade may render a teacher's reasons for becoming a teacher irrelevant.

From a parent standpoint, imagine your child's preschool teacher also being responsible for teaching them 8<sup>th</sup>-grade science. Imagine their 8<sup>th</sup>-grade science teacher also being responsible for teaching preschoolers. The difference between the physical, mental, and emotional needs of a 4-year-old and a 14-year-old are too many to enumerate, and to have every future elementary and middle-school teacher preparing to instruct students in all content areas at both of those ages and everything in between defies my imagination. Not only will this licensure change lead to lower teacher satisfaction, motivation, and retention, but it will reduce the quality of instruction and student outcomes. By increasing the flexibility of new teachers for staffing purposes, we are quite possibly decreasing the number of available new teachers while also decreasing their effectiveness via skill diffusion.

A common focus in the public discussion of education is test scores. Teachers who have specialized in the grade band they teach have a positive impact on student outcomes. Ohio first established the 4-9 license in 1998, and the first licensees of this new band graduated in 2002 ([amle.org](http://amle.org)). Data from the Nation's Report Card ([NRC](https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/nrc/)) tells its own story: the number of 8<sup>th</sup>-grade students testing at or above Proficient and Advanced in math began climbing in 2005 and rose almost steadily through 2019, after which the COVID pandemic began to have an impact on scores. Increases were also seen 4<sup>th</sup> grade math and reading over the same timeframe.

As someone who is in the last year of preparation for a 4-9 license, I can tell you that I chose to become a teacher not because I love Math and ELA (although I do love Math and ELA) but because I know the developmental importance of the middle school years. This is a time when students begin to understand they have some level of self-determination, that their values are determined by them and not by their

family or friends. It is also a time when students experience a searing need for belonging, love, and acceptance, and having a teacher who knows them, who cares about them, and who is in tune with the changes they're going through can play a vital part in their healthy mental and emotional development.

I can't adequately describe to you the wide-eyed looks of shock and horror that have regularly met my announcement that I, in my late 40s, am studying to become a middle school teacher. The most common theme I hear is, "You're braver than I am." But I'm not brave; I'm a middle-school teacher in my soul. I believe in the magic of the middle-grade years, and I *want* to work with those students. I want to be a stable and caring adult in their lives as they navigate the joys and the pains, the happiness and the frustrations as they begin to come of age. Don't all of our students deserve that?

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