

**Proponent Testimony for S. B. 219
Senate Education Committee
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Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee,
Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Nicole Whitaker. I am a former middle grades math and science teacher, now teaching at the collegiate level in teacher preparation. I earned my Ph.D. in STEM Education from The Ohio State University, a Master's in Instructional Practice from Lipscomb University, and a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Wofford College; I hold a valid Ohio Professional Teaching License in Middle Childhood and live in Delaware County.

I am here today to thank you for considering reversing the grade band changes established in Sub. H. B. 33 indicated on pg. 1356, lines 41655-41672, and for your willingness to discuss and deliberate these changes as an education committee, with the best interests of students as the primary focus.

The change to the licensure grade bands from PK-5, 4-9, and 7-12 to PK-8 and 6-12 undermines the work done by the legislature in 2017 for "Middle Level Teacher Preparation and Licensure in Ohio [the 4-9 band] was enacted to ensure that students in grades 4-9 have the best opportunity to gain the in-depth knowledge, skills and dispositions provided by appropriately and professionally trained middle level educators" (White, 2017) so that adolescent students may be successful in High School and beyond. The change to PK-8 and 6-12 is problematic because it dilutes the content and pedagogical preparation for teachers across the grade level bands, resulting in weakened student learning. PK-5 licensure provides a solid foundation in child development and preparation in instructional strategies for the youngest learners, which are significantly different from appropriate instructional strategies for middle-level learners. 4-9 licensure incorporates

much more substantial content area preparation allowing for deeper content coverage and the use of grade-level appropriate strategies for students in the middle grades.

During adolescence, ages 11 - 14/grades 6-8, children's bodies undergo the most rapid physical and cognitive development than at any other phase of human development outside of birth to age two (Patton et al., 2016). In addition to the onset of puberty, during early adolescence there is significant brain development in the areas of "executive functions such as planning and strategic thinking ... and the amygdala that is associated with emotions" (Bahr, 2017 in Brinegar & Caskey, 2022). Educators with specialized middle childhood preparation are specifically prepared to support the "distinctive characteristics of young adolescents regarding their physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and psychological development (Bishop & Harrison, 2021)" that are vastly different than early childhood (ages 5-10) and mid-late (ages 15-18) adolescent development (Brinegar & Caskey, 2022). Eliminating the 4-9 licensure band undermines the quality of education adolescent learners may receive, both academically and social/emotionally.

Additionally, eliminating the 4-9 licensure band risks staffing middle grades with teachers not committed to working with that population. Before the institution of 4-9 licensure, middle grades were often assigned K-8 teachers who would have preferred to teach younger students or 7-12 teachers who would have preferred to teach in a high school. As a result, middle-grades teachers ranged widely in their commitment to middle-grades students, and student experiences suffered. The case for preparing educators specifically to work with middle-grade adolescents has long been championed by the Association for Middle-Level Education and is articulated in their research-supported publication *This We Believe* (2020), now in its fifth edition.

Implementation of a PK-8 and 6-12 licensure bands will be costly and time-intensive. This change is unlikely to be a quick fix for educator shortage issues; it will take a minimum of four years before any teachers would be licensed under the proposed grade bands. Proposed grade-level band changes will necessitate new pedagogical standards to be developed and adopted. These standards would need to be used by educator preparation programs to modify nearly all programs through internal approval processes,

including newly modified PK-5 programs and dual licensure programs for which intervention specialist grade bands aligning to the current regular education grade bands have just been incorporated into code. The Ohio Department of Higher Education would need to review and approve all modified programs. The Ohio Department of Education would need to develop and validate new licensure tests.

Furthermore, consolidation of the licensure bands may make the shortage situation worse. Along with attracting new teachers to the field, we know that retaining teachers is a key factor in solving the shortage issue. Comprehensive preparation is associated with teacher retention (Sucher, Darling Hammond, & Carver Thomas, 2016). As mentioned, changing the grade bands will dilute the quality of middle-grade teachers specifically. Providing these teachers with a less comprehensive program may lead to even higher rates of attrition. Additionally, teachers assigned to grades 6-8 who have a strong preference for teaching PK-5 may choose to leave the profession rather than teach developing adolescents. Finally, dual preparation programs, those that prepare teachers to be licensed as both PK-5 and special education or 4-9 and special education would be unable to continue such certifications resulting in a substantial increase in the shortage of special educators and intervention specialists.

If the goal of consolidating the grade bands is to provide districts with greater flexibility in placing teachers in high vacancy grades, the Ohio Revised Code already provides school districts with the option of applying for a waiver to allow a fully licensed teacher from one grade band to serve in another grade outside of the grade band listed on their license for up to two grade levels and two years to provide districts time to find appropriately licensed teachers. This solution directly addresses the emergency situations in district contexts. It also allows the state to gather data on where specific shortages exist. The supply and demand of teachers fluctuate over time; waivers are a quick, flexible, and efficient way to address this reality without undermining the quality of education received by Ohio students.

I am testifying today affirming S. B. 219, reversing the grade band changes set forth in Sub. H. B. 33 and originally proposed in H. B. 9. The proposed changes will impact a wide audience - elementary and middle school students, elementary and middle school teachers, future/pre-service

teachers, teacher preparation programs, accrediting bodies such as CAEP and ODHE, and will not resolve the teacher shortage. Requiring a teacher to teach outside their desired developmental level may lead to retention issues in addition to the existing shortage.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for your attention. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

Thank you,
Nicole Whitaker, Ph.D.