

Practitioner Perspective

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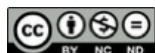
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A Tri-State Comparison of Middle Level Teacher Candidates' Clinical Experiences

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Abstract

We, three teacher educators, each from a different public university in a different Southeast state, describe clinical experiences for middle grades teacher candidates in our respective undergraduate initial certification programs. These clinical experiences are connected to the research agenda of the Middle Level Educational Research SIG and Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards of the Association for Middle Level Education. After providing an overview of each program, we explain challenges, affordances, and opportunities shared by these three programs. From there, we offer questions and points for other programs to consider.

This practitioner perspective article shows how three undergraduate middle grades teacher preparation programs design and implement clinical experiences. Excellent clinical experiences are essential for developing teacher candidates' knowledge, skills, and dispositions for teaching. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) defined *clinical experiences* as "teacher candidates' work in authentic educational settings and engagement in the pedagogical work of the profession of teaching, closely integrated with educator preparation course work and supported by a formal school-university partnership" (2018, p. 11). Darling-Hammond (2014) described this facet of teacher education as the profession's "holy grail." Through sustained time in classrooms, teacher candidates apply and extend their pedagogical, content-area, and pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) and learn to respond to the specific needs of young adolescents in complex school environments (Preston, 2017). These experiences—whether called *internships*, *practica*, *placements*, *fieldwork*, *clinical practice*, or related terms—fall under the broad heading of clinical experiences (AACTE).

As three middle level teacher educators working in different Southeastern states, each with specialized middle level licensure, we share a commitment to preparing candidates through robust, developmentally responsive clinical experiences. Yet when we sought to examine and refine our own clinical structures, we found that practitioner-level descriptions of how programs actually organize,

sequence, and support clinical experiences were difficult to locate. While the literature offers strong conceptual framing for clinical experiences, specific examples are rare—and these examples are precisely what we needed to inform our programmatic decision making.

In response, we offer detailed snapshots of clinical experiences from our three institutions. These snapshots highlight when candidates enter classrooms, how their responsibilities increase over time, how mentor teachers and university supervisors support their growth, and how coursework connects to practice. Our goal is to contribute a practical resource for middle level teacher educators—one that illuminates possibilities, facilitates reflection, and supports ongoing program improvement for those engaged in preparing new middle grades teachers.

We use the term *clinical experiences* as defined by AACTE (2018): authentic teaching engagements integrated with coursework and supported by school–university partnerships. To explore clinical experiences, we each developed a snapshot of clinical experiences in our own program; we focus on teacher candidates' time in schools. In these snapshots, we aim to provide descriptions of various program aspects to show how program goals are put into action through candidates' experiences in schools. Dresden and Thompson (2021), in their overview of clinical practice, named three defining characteristics of clinical experiences: complex, "dependent

on partnerships” (p. 11), and localized. These characteristics, they noted, apply although “surface characteristics” differ; while Dresden and Thompson did not elaborate on these surface characteristics, we understand aspects of clinical experiences like the specific number of lessons taught, the number of hours required, and other details to be examples.

Clinical experiences also depend on mentor teachers and university supervisors to support and guide teacher candidates. A mentor teacher is a classroom teacher who hosts a teacher candidate. A university supervisor is a teacher educator who supports a teacher candidate in a clinical experience. The teacher candidate, mentor teacher, and university supervisor together comprise a clinical triad. Across different programs, educators in the roles of mentor teacher or university supervisor often gain skills for supporting teacher candidates in different ways such as professional development (Albright & Davis, 2025), online training, or other means.

Middle Level Clinical Experiences

At the middle level, clinical experiences are an element of impactful teacher education programs, according to Howell et al. (2016). Howell and colleagues advocated for clinical experiences to be “early, frequent, and rigorous” and connected to teacher candidates’ coursework, consistent with the AACTE definition of *clinical practice*. In 2020, middle level programs, like other teacher education programs, developed varied alternative clinical experiences or modified aspects of experiences for virtual or otherwise changed settings in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In some cases, programs have modified adaptations initially designed in response to the pandemic. As of Fall 2021, 80% of respondents to an AACTE survey reported face-to-face clinical experiences with the rest in hybrid or other formats (AACTE, 2021). Thornton (2022) encouraged teacher educators to reflect on online learning experiences in light of successful middle level practices. Examples from clinical experiences modified for different modalities and environments include lesson study (Falbe & Seglem, 2023), mediated field experiences (Pinter, 2021), and collaborating with colleagues in other campus departments (Ruppert & Pisano, 2021). The 2023 *Clinical Experience Standards* from

the Association of Teacher Educators include a standard for virtual supervision, reflecting sustained virtual supervision practices for teacher candidates, in addition to traditional face-to-face practices.

Aspects of clinical experiences across the three programs featured here connect to each of the five Standards for Association for Middle Level Teacher Preparation (AMLE, 2022):

- Standard 1, Middle level philosophy and organization,
- Standard 2, Young adolescent development,
- Standard 3, Middle level curriculum,
- Standard 4, Middle level instruction and assessment, and
- Standard 5, Middle level professional roles.

Teacher candidates apply knowledge and skills related to each standard in clinical experiences. For example, Standard 3, Component b (Subject Matter Content Knowledge), states that “middle level teacher candidates demonstrate a depth and breadth of content knowledge in the subjects they teach” (AMLE 2022, p. 18). These national standards, along with other standards and requirements such as licensing standards, guide continued reflection and refinement for each program. Teacher education programs differ from state to state, so programs are structured differently.

The topic of clinical experiences is not a distinct strand of the research agenda published in 2024 by the Middle Level Educational Research Special Interest Group (MLER SIG) and led by Brinegar et al. (2024). Clinical experiences can be connected to these example questions from the research agenda, with strands in parentheses:

- What is the impact of middle level teacher preparation programs on middle level curriculum? (Curriculum)
- What are key elements of effective middle level teacher preparation related to instruction? (Teacher Development)

Clinical experiences as a topic also can inform and be informed by questions in strands like Schools, Classroom Cultures, and Learning Environments; Certification and Licensure; and Leadership.

Here, we present snapshots of clinical experiences from three undergraduate middle level teacher preparation programs in three Southeastern states, each of which offers specialized middle level licensure. These snapshots emerged from our shared effort to better understand and refine the clinical components of our own programs. As middle level teacher educators, we work closely with teacher candidates, mentor teachers, and university supervisors across a range of clinical settings—from early observations to student teaching—which gives us firsthand insight into the structures, challenges, and affordances of clinical preparation. Our ongoing collaboration, informed through professional networks such as the AMLE, has revealed a need for clearer practitioner-oriented descriptions of how programs actually enact clinical experiences.

By offering these snapshots, we aim to illustrate the concrete ways our programs put middle level goals into practice through clinical work. The examples highlight how candidates progressively develop knowledge and skills aligned with the AMLE Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards (2022) as they engage in planning, instruction, assessment, and professional roles in diverse school settings. Our goal is to provide specific, practice-based descriptions that can support continued reflection, collaboration, and program development for other middle level teacher educators.

In these snapshots, we focus on clinical experiences in each of our programs, using terminology under this broad heading including *internship*, *placement*, *practicum*, and *student teaching*. We include some ranges rather than precise information for factors like hours that students spend in classrooms, numbers of lessons taught, and other pieces of information. These ranges accommodate continuing changes that program faculty make that are informed by updated requirements and initiatives, ongoing data collection, discussion, reflection, and implementation of new components. These snapshots of clinical experiences are relevant to conversations in middle level programs as teacher educators incorporate updated requirements, shifts in licensure, enrollment changes, and other ongoing realities of teacher education.

One challenge we identified early relates to terminology. For ease of comparison, we agreed on

key mutual terms (e.g., mentor teacher, junior 1) although these differ from actual terms used in our respective programs. We describe parallel pieces of information about clinical experiences from each program to facilitate trends and differences among them. Then we offer common affordances and challenges. These affordances and challenges connect with our programs and may offer points of comparison and reflection for readers.

Snapshot University 1: Western Carolina University

At Western Carolina University, middle grades licensure is grades 6–9, consistent with the state. North Carolina requires the edTPA portfolio, a performance-based clinical assessment adopted in many states as part of initial teacher certification. The edTPA evaluates candidates' planning, instruction, and assessment within authentic clinical experiences, and requires submission of lesson plans, instructional materials, and video evidence of teaching. In North Carolina, candidates also complete the Praxis II content-area exam for licensure.

Undergraduate teacher candidates choose one specialized content area—English Language Arts (ELA), Math, Science, or Social Studies—and begin the major as juniors after completing prerequisite coursework such as Foundations in Education and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Middle Grades Students. The program follows a cohort model.

Across the program, candidates participate in a series of clinical experiences intentionally sequenced to provide breadth and depth. They are placed in a wide range of school settings (rural, urban, charter, traditional), including the university's on-campus laboratory school. This laboratory school functions as a signature clinical site, offering early observations, guided practice, and full internship opportunities. Its proximity enables sustained faculty interaction, co-teaching, and strong integration with coursework. Below, we outline the flow of the program's clinical experiences.

Junior 1

Candidates take an introductory course paired with a seminar focused on early clinical experiences. They visit a variety of middle school settings—including a charter school, a traditional middle school, and an urban school—to conduct structured

observations of classroom environments and school systems. Candidates also complete observations at the on-campus laboratory school. These early clinical observations emphasize classroom climate and instructional strategies. A key clinical assignment is a shadow study in which candidates follow one middle school student for an entire day and reflect on the student experience.

Junior 2

Candidates participate in a more sustained clinical placement, spending one full day per week (approximately 80 hours) in a single classroom with a mentor teacher. Mentor teachers—selected with district partners—typically have a minimum of three years of successful teaching experience and serve as clinical educators. Candidates plan and teach at least four lessons (including one co-taught lesson). Mentor teachers provide ongoing, informal feedback on planning and instruction, while seminar instructors support reflective practice. Although this stage does not include formal university supervision, mentor feedback is required and used to guide candidates' clinical growth. Coursework during this semester includes Differentiated Instruction, Interdisciplinary Methods, Culturally Relevant Classroom Management, and a support seminar.

Senior 1

Candidates complete an expanded clinical experience, spending two full days per week (approximately 240 hours) in a single classroom. Mentor teachers continue to provide ongoing feedback, and university supervisors (generally program faculty) conduct three formal clinical observations. Mentor teachers and supervisors form the clinical triad, collaborating to provide formative and summative feedback. Candidates teach at least eight lessons and complete a mock edTPA portfolio as preparation for the state-required clinical assessment. Coursework includes a content-area methods course, Content Literacy, an Assessment-focused Seminar, and Digital Literacy.

Senior 2

During the final semester, candidates engage in full-time clinical residency (approximately 600 hours) for 15 weeks in a single classroom—typically the same placement as Senior 1 to

ensure continuity and strong relationships among clinical educators and students. Candidates gradually assume full responsibility for planning, instruction, and assessment for a minimum of five consecutive weeks. Clinical educators (mentor teachers) and university supervisors provide regular feedback aligned to program rubrics and state guidelines. Supervisors are program faculty or adjunct instructors with middle grades expertise. During this semester, candidates complete the state-mandated edTPA—a culminating clinical performance assessment—as well as the Praxis II exam in their content area.

Snapshot University 2: University of South Carolina

Middle grades licensure in South Carolina covers grades 5–8. As with Western Carolina, teacher candidates at the University of South Carolina are required to take specific Praxis exams to satisfy state-level requirements. Candidates must complete the following prerequisite courses before admission to the Professional Program: Issues and Trends in Teaching and Learning, Schools in Communities, and Learners and the Diversity of Learning. Once accepted into the program, teacher candidates select two content areas (from ELA, Social Studies, Science, and Math) for their focus. Courses over the four semesters are typically taught on site at various Professional Development Schools (PDS) or Partner Schools throughout the districts. The PDS network are schools in the district connected with the University for research and ongoing professional development. Schools that host interns and student teachers who are not directly PDS, are considered Partner Schools that mainly host interns and student teachers. Candidates are placed in various PDS or Partner Schools throughout districts in the area for internship and student teaching. The PDS and Partner School are considered clinical experiences for candidates, as they become more involved in the day-to-day experiences of middle school. Candidates are in the same middle school for the entire senior year, from internship to student teaching and the cohort is split randomly between multiple middle schools across the district. However, they are only working with one mentor teacher during student teaching (Senior 2) semester in the spring.

Throughout the program, internship and student teaching, teacher candidates are introduced to AMLE's

Essential Attributes and Characteristics (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Coursework requires candidates to apply the essential attributes and characteristics as they interact with middle school students, create seating charts, write notes to parents, and create lesson plans while at practicums. Furthermore, teacher candidates maintain reflective journals and are observed formally and informally numerous times throughout the program as required for internship and student teaching during the entire senior year.

Junior 1

During the fall semester of Junior year, candidates begin progression requirements, which means they make satisfactory progress towards their degree; this includes successful completion of the Praxis Core if the ACT or SAT minimum scores are not met and applying to the Professional Program. Candidates take content courses for both focus areas and Foundations in Reading. Teacher candidates are formally admitted into the Professional Program for Junior 2 spring semester. The application process consists of students completing (and passing) required coursework, taking the Praxis Core (if SAT/ACT minimum scores are not met), a basic skills assessment for candidates and registering with a database for preservice teacher portfolios and assessments.

Junior 2

Candidates take Introduction to Inclusion, Content Area Literacy, and Middle Level Teaching and Management. They complete 10 observation hours in conjunction with the Teaching and Management class and complete a service-learning project for the key assessment while completing content courses. For progression in this semester, candidates apply for Internship and South Carolina Teacher Licensure. The Service Learning Action and Involvement project is designed to help middle level candidates interact with middle level students, the school community or a community partner based on a driving question from the candidate in regard to research, theories, and observations; thus it is considered a clinical experience for this University.

Senior 1

Teacher candidates meet their mentor teachers during district orientation. Coursework includes Integrated Curriculum and content methods courses. Candidates spend Thursdays (content A) and Fridays (content

B) in classrooms, totaling 26 days. Candidates teach mini lessons and whole group lessons, while critically reflecting on practice throughout the semester. During the fall, candidates are observed a total of eight times by the supervisor and mentor teachers (four observations for each content area, informal and formal lessons). Candidates must pass the Praxis Principles of Teaching and Learning (Pedagogy) exam and the appropriate Praxis II (subject-based assessment) to be recommended for initial teacher certification; they typically start studying for those assessments during this semester. At the end of the semester, candidates choose the content area for full time student teaching in the spring semester. There is a final meeting between the candidate, mentor teacher, and supervisor at the end of the semester in which the candidate receives feedback for the lessons taught.

Senior 2

Candidates complete full-time student teaching in one content area for 60 days during the spring semester. In the spring semester, candidates pick the content area (and mentor teacher) that they want to teach. Full time student teaching entails that candidates are in their chosen content area class everyday (Monday-Friday) for the entire semester. They phase into teaching on a daily basis and are required to total teach for two weeks. Overall during the semester, they are observed informally and at least four times formally, each by the Mentor teacher and Supervisor. Candidates are responsible for creating lesson plans for lessons as well as sharing in the mentor teacher roles. The key assessment is a Student Learning Objective (SLO), demonstrating knowledge of adolescent development through planning, sequencing, pacing, and assessment. The SLO measures student growth in a content area over 10 days that includes a pre- and post-assessment. All observations occur in person and include summative and formative lessons scored with the ADEPT South Carolina 4.0 rubric. In addition, candidates complete an e-Portfolio that demonstrates their competency and teaching experiences that align with the Standards for Middle Level Teacher Preparation (AMLE, 2022).

Snapshot University 3: Georgia Southern University

Middle grades licensure in Georgia spans grades 4-8. Prior to program acceptance, students take a three-course sequence to introduce them to topics

in education. Students also take the first teacher licensure exam and apply for a pre-service teaching certificate. Georgia has its own teacher licensure exams that are required like Praxis exams are required in North Carolina and South Carolina. Program acceptance is determined by previous coursework and a minimum GPA. Candidates select two content areas from ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies. Clinical experiences within the program follow this structure:

Junior 1

Candidates take an introductory course with two placements: one in a middle school and one in an elementary school. They complete approximately 50 hours of clinical experiences, spending one morning per week in assigned classrooms. In pairs, candidates observe and assist mentor teachers; they may teach part of a lesson, work one-on-one with individual students, work with a small group of students, prepare materials, accompany students to the media center, or perform other tasks under the supervision of the mentor teacher. Candidates complete structured observations, including a shadow study that requires gathering information about the community and the school.

Junior 2

Candidates enroll in two methods courses alongside Secondary Education candidates. They complete 100-200 hours of clinical experiences in a middle school classroom corresponding to one content area; this range may fluctuate from one semester to another in response to program changes. Candidates' responsibilities begin with observation and assistance, progressing to co-teaching and planning full lessons. In this and the next two semesters, university supervisors may observe candidates through virtual observations (ATE, 2023). Mentor teachers and university supervisors each review lesson plans, observe lessons, and provide feedback based on standardized rubrics.

Senior 1

Each candidate is placed in a classroom corresponding to their other content area, with placement requirements mirroring Junior 2 (100-200 hours). Instructional responsibilities gradually increase. Mentor teachers and university

supervisors continue to support candidates as in the Junior 2 semester.

Senior 2

Candidates complete a full-time, 600-hour student teaching experience; until recent program of study changes, there was a concurrent seminar. They expand their teaching responsibilities to a minimum of 20 consecutive days of full-time teaching (i.e., planning, instruction, and assessment). Their mentor teacher and university supervisor review, provide feedback on, and evaluate their teaching performance.

In addition to the introductory middle grades course and methods courses, candidates take other education coursework like introduction to special education, multicultural education, and content literacy. The state assessment for certification of educators is required. Georgia stopped requiring edTPA in 2020.

University supervisors include faculty members and temporary instructors. Supervision is considered a teaching role, and supervision loads have increased in recent years. Remote supervision (e.g., video-based observations) has become more common since COVID-related disruptions.

Affordances across These Middle Grades Programs

Across all three programs, teacher candidates enjoy robust and practiced-based clinical experiences (cf. Dresden & Thompson, 2021; Howell et al., 2016). These programs fully integrate coursework with extensive clinical experiences. Below, we highlight affordances across programs that ensure that graduates are well-prepared, adaptable, and able to meet the needs of young adolescents in diverse school settings.

Mentor Teachers

Our programs all have a strong network of mentor teachers. Mentor teachers are identified in different ways, such as recommendation from a principal at a partner school. Each of our institutions has a clinical placements office with staff who locate and coordinate mentor teachers for clinical placements. Mentor teachers who are program alumni provide

candidates with experienced professionals who also know program expectations, values, and requirements. There have been some challenges when program or schedule changes mean that a current iteration of a semester differs from what the mentor teacher experienced as a teacher candidate. Communication remains a key factor for strong partnerships. Mentor teachers guide candidates through lesson planning, classroom management, and assessment. Simultaneously, they offer candidates insights into the realities of the teaching profession. These mentor teachers support candidates in areas that connect with all five AMLE Standards, especially Instruction and Assessment (Standard 4) and Professional Roles (Standard 5).

Extensive Time in Schools

Our programs prioritize clinical experiences, recognizing that real-world teaching cannot be fully understood without direct, immersive experiences teaching young adolescents. While some programs may not engage in significant clinical experiences until student teaching semesters, our candidates are placed in schools at least from the start of their junior year. This gradual and scaffolded approach is designed for candidates to develop confidence, expand their own roles as teachers, refine instructional skills, and build meaningful relationships with students and educators. In addition to planning, instruction, and assessment, candidates respond to structured prompts, write regular reflections, take part in conferences with their mentor teacher and university supervisor; these activities scaffold candidates' capacities for reflection to support continuous improvement. These extensive, scaffolded clinical experiences align with the AMLE Standards (2022) for Middle Level Teacher Preparation.

Candidates complete:

- **Junior 1:** Introductory classroom placements with structured observations and related assignments.
- **Junior 2:** 80-150+ hours in classrooms, co-teaching and leading lessons.
- **Senior 1:** 100-240+ hours in classrooms, engaging in assessment, lesson design, and instructional delivery.
- **Senior 2:** 600 hours of full-time student teaching, where candidates assume primary teaching responsibilities.

By the time candidates enter their student teaching semester, they have had multiple experiences in the classroom and are better prepared to take on full instructional responsibilities.

Diverse School Experiences

All three programs emphasize clinical experiences in different schools. Candidates complete experiences in a variety of settings like:

- Traditional public middle schools
- Charter schools
- Urban schools
- Rural schools
- On-campus laboratory school
- K-8 and 6-12 schools.

These purposely varied placements facilitate candidates' understanding and application of instructional models and school cultures. Course assignments such as structured observation protocols and scaffolded lesson planning and implementation experiences allow candidates insights into adolescent development. Over the course of each program, teacher candidates have placements with different mentor teachers in different schools so they experience a variety of settings. In the senior year in each of our programs, candidates may remain with the same mentor teacher for two semesters so they experience one school year with that mentor teacher, their students, and that particular curriculum. Over the course of the program, though, each candidate will have gained experience in a variety of school settings by design. Each institution has partnerships with multiple districts. In each placement, candidates note the context for learning in the school, district, and community through specific assignments or conversations with their mentor teacher and university supervisor.

Challenges and Opportunities for Growth

While our programs have significant strengths, we also recognize challenges that require continual discussion, reflection, and proactive solutions. Rather than viewing these as obstacles, we see them as areas for continuous improvement and innovation in middle grades teacher preparation.

Terminology

As noted earlier, one challenge we encountered early in conversations with one another was terminology. Even with parallel aspects across these undergraduate middle level teacher education programs, we did not speak the same language as we discussed *on-site teacher educators*, *clinical supervisors*, *coaching teachers*, and other phrases for the same role: mentor teachers. While there will be some degree of program autonomy within an institution (e.g., elementary programs compared to middle grades programs; undergraduate compared to graduate programs) and across institutions, different names for program components contributed to confusion and misunderstanding. Agreeing on similar terms for similar roles and responsibilities paved the way for us to discuss other programmatic features and structures. Similarly, we note that teacher educators and mentor teachers need to clarify different expectations for candidates. Candidates, for example, may write *learning objectives* in coursework but be expected to state *learning targets* in the classroom setting. Precision with terminology aligns closely with Middle Level Philosophy and Organization (AMLE Standard 1) and Professional Roles (Standard 5).

Recruitment and Program Numbers

Like many teacher education programs, we all face challenges in recruitment. These struggles tend to vary by institution, year, and content area. From year to year, for example, we may have more students with Math concentrations and fewer with Social Studies. Both the University of South Carolina and Georgia Southern University require candidates to select two content areas, so this structure eases specific content concerns somewhat. By emphasizing unique opportunities in middle level education, we aim to attract and educate passionate candidates who are eager to make a difference in this unique developmental stage. In each program and institution, we collaborate to support recruitment and retention of teacher candidates.

The Roles of University Supervisors

The role of the university supervisor is critical to the clinical triad. Aspects of the role of the university supervisor are so distinctly unique from university to university; it is a worthy point of conversation

within programs and institutions to delineate roles and responsibilities. There are different models and approaches. What counts as a “load” can shift based on a university supervisor’s overall teaching load, the needs in a given semester, or other contextual factors. At some institutions, this work is considered part of teaching; at others, it is service. Sometimes, full-time faculty also take on work as university supervisors; other times, part-time, clinical, or adjunct faculty take on work as university supervisors. When part-time colleagues are needed, it can be a challenge to find qualified supervisors who are able to work extensively with candidates under constraints (e.g., schedules).

Supervisors are essential in that they are the liaisons between the university and the mentor teachers, but most importantly, they serve as mentors to teacher candidates. Through their observations, they provide invaluable feedback for candidates to reflect and grow as new teachers. They make observations on progress and performance that coaching teachers may miss or do not point out to teacher candidates. Supervisors offer mental and emotional support and encouragement while helping candidates make connections from theory to practice.

The Roles of Mentor Teachers

We deeply appreciate the dedication of our mentor teachers, but we also recognize the strain that continual requests to host candidates can place on them. Many mentor teachers are balancing full teaching loads and increasing responsibilities, making it challenging to take on additional mentoring duties. Across programs, we and our colleagues try to address the workload for mentor teachers through clear expectations of what candidates need to do during each type of placement, through coaching and mentoring supports, and through different offerings and supports for practicing teachers. Support, training, and guidance for mentor teachers may come in the form of meetings, handbooks, or online modules, among other approaches. At the institutional level, we can advocate for continuing ways to support mentor teachers.

Enhanced Partnerships and Placements

Each of our institutions has innovative partnerships in place to foster and extend clinical experiences. We share brief examples from

each university. At Western Carolina, the most distinctive partnership is with our on-campus laboratory school, which serves middle grades students from the surrounding district. This laboratory school, which enrolls approximately 70 students, exemplifies the power of enhanced partnerships and placements in education. The lab school's location on the university campus allows for close collaboration among candidates, faculty, and school personnel; coursework often connects directly to what candidates observe and teach. In addition, the lab school hosts ongoing research and professional development initiatives with university faculty, creating a dynamic environment that benefits both middle grades students and teacher preparation programs. This unique, immersive setup allows education candidates to engage directly with middle school students.

The University of South Carolina is an active participant in the Professional Development Schools (PDS) network (Williams et al., 2016). Teaching courses on site provides candidates with context for teaching in middle schools; some candidates get jobs at the schools.

Georgia Southern University offers teacher candidates an opportunity to apply for a paid residency for their senior year. These residents are full-time teachers who are district employees while they are also full-time students; this program is offered only at specific partner elementary and middle schools (Wall & Leckie, 2025).

These innovative partnerships maintain rigor of program requirements while providing teacher candidates with broader opportunities. These placements reflect enhanced partnerships and directly align with the Association for Middle Level Education's Standards for Middle Level Teacher Preparation (2022).

Merging Middle Grades and Secondary Programs

Middle grades education shares some overlaps with secondary programs. This can provide affordances and challenges, especially when there are occasional misinterpretations about content and pedagogy. Many secondary programs also struggle with enrollment (recruitment and retention), and programs may merge middle grades and secondary programs (or components thereof) for

sustainability. Our programs support middle level teacher candidates through specialized advocacy while working to build productive relationships with secondary education programs. While there are program overlaps in terms of grade bands or expectations of deep disciplinary knowledge, there are also differences. As middle level advocates, we need to guard against an erasure of pedagogical content knowledge, integrative curriculum, responsive teaching practices, and other hallmarks of middle level education.

Conclusion

Here, our goal has been to share specific descriptions of how our programs structure clinical experiences. Through these snapshots, we aimed to provide characteristics of each of three programs for undergraduate middle grades programs. We described a scaffolded approach so that candidates gain experience with planning, instruction, and assessment with different mentor teachers at different partner schools. Rather than providing specific numbers of hours in a given semester or lessons planned, we offer ranges that reflect continuous refinement in each of our programs. Our programs all provide candidates with extensive clinical experiences. We also face challenges as explored above. We accept these challenges because we believe they present opportunities to develop our programs. As noted earlier, features of each program as well as affordances and challenges experienced across these three programs connect to the five Standards for Middle Level Teacher Preparation (AMLE, 2022). Other middle level programs can look across all three snapshots and adopt a strategy or feature that may enhance their own programs. Or, a comparison with the snapshots offered here may reassure readers of the strength of their approach to clinical experiences. We provide these snapshots from a perspective that we strive to improve teacher candidates' experiences by meeting, discussion, and reflection.

We offer these questions to guide reflection and discussion for other teacher educators as they strive for continued excellence in their own programs:

- What national, state, and organizational standards and requirements guide program structure and decision making?

- How are roles for teacher candidates, mentor teachers, and university supervisors determined, revised, and communicated to all stakeholders?
- How do middle level clinical experiences at a given institution compare with (a) the three programs described in this paper? (b) other middle grades programs? (c) other programs within the same institution/system?
- How do program structures align with the AMLE (2022) standards for middle level teacher preparation?

We suggest that teacher educators discuss their own programs with internal and external colleagues, including mentor teachers and other school-based partners as well as teacher educators in different institutions, states, and regions. Our own collaboration has been beneficial in this regard. Another suggestion is to chart different requirements for teacher candidates across program semesters to see clearly where candidates introduce, practice, and then achieve various skills related to clinical experiences; this information can be aligned to the AMLE Standards or other frameworks used in the program.

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