

Editorial Remarks

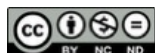
Reigniting the Middle Grades Movement

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Editorial Remarks: Reigniting the Middle Grades Movement

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Advocating for young adolescents and middle grades education often feels like a full-time job that requires moving a large boulder to the top of a mountain. The mountain somehow keeps getting higher no matter how hard or how long you push. It requires perseverance and resiliency as you are pelted with legislative, financial, and other systemic obstacles that keep trying to blow you and the boulder off the mountain. At the center of this mountainous storm is society's deep-seated misunderstanding of young adolescents, which makes them the butt of countless jokes and parodies and causes many people to cringe when you tell them you work in middle schools.

Because of this, advocating for young adolescents is not just about finding the right combination of licensure bands, or school configurations, or instructional strategies. At its heart, it is about altering society's perceptions about this age group; it is about convincing the powers that be that middle schoolers deserve an education tailored to their needs; it is about increasing the odds that present and future generations of talented, passionate, empathetic, and civic-minded individuals thrive during these critical years so they can thrive as adults.

Accomplishing the type of systematic advocacy work that transcends generations requires ongoing research and continuous evaluation of priorities and outcomes. It also requires the development of flexible, responsive policies and structures that can be adapted as the needs and desires of the humans they are meant to support grow and change. To do this, we must recognize that what once served a generation may no longer serve young adolescents in the present or the future.

This special issue of *Middle Grades Review* highlights work by researchers who have conducted research meant to not only reignite the middle grades movement, but to reimagine it for the future. Much of the work published in this issue stems from a research project, led by the Middle Level Education Research Special Interest

Group (MLER SIG) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), in which more than 40 researchers collaborated to develop a forward-thinking research agenda in support of young adolescents. Questions explored in the agenda, which are explored further in this issue, include:

- What does middle grades curriculum look like?
- How are schools responding to the changing demographics and needs of young adolescents?
- How are teacher educators preparing middle level educators and administrators to advocate for schooling that is developmentally and culturally responsive for young adolescents?

The first two pieces in this special issue focus on teaching and learning in middle schools. In their essay, "[Centering Young Adolescents: A Call for Purposeful Virtual Pedagogy in the Middle Grades](#)," Eisenbach and Coleman use data from their scoping review on middle grades virtual pedagogy (see Eisenbach & Coleman, 2024) to identify how the Association for Middle Level Education's (AMLE) essential attributes for successful middle schools are taken up in middle grades research related to virtual learning. They discuss the importance of virtual learning pedagogies that are developmentally responsive to young adolescents. In their research article, "[Multilingual Learners' Writing Experiences in an English-Dominant Class: Instructional Implications for Students' Equitable Learning Experiences](#)," Yoon and Murtaugh explore multilingual learners' (MLLs) perspectives on their writing experiences in classes where English is the dominant language. While much research supports the need for culturally responsive writing experiences for MLLs, few studies incorporate the voices of students themselves. Their findings highlight the importance of understanding the convergence of identity development and learning during early adolescence.

In “[The Status of Middle Level Curriculum in U.S. Public Schools](#),” Mertens and colleagues describe the results of their qualitative content analysis of state department of education websites. Their goal was to better understand the status of middle grades curriculum across all 50 states. They discuss how many states center state and national content standards over developmentally responsive middle grades philosophical and practical recommendations in the development and implementation of curriculum. They question whether waning support for middle grades specific teacher preparation is at least partially connected to this disconnect between research and practice. This relates to another research article in this issue, Hurd and colleagues’ “[Revisiting the National Review of Middle Level Teacher Preparation Programs: Certification and Licensure Across the Country](#).” The purpose of their study was to uncover the status of middle grades specific teacher preparation in the current context of waning support for the middle school model and a lack of resources focused on preparing middle

grades teachers. Their findings highlight ways that middle grades specific teacher education is on the decline across individual states and within geographical regions of the United States. Finally, Wall and colleagues offer hope through their practitioner perspective, “[A Tri-State Comparison of Middle Level Teacher Candidates’ Clinical Experiences](#).” They describe the ways that three middle level teacher education programs in the Southeast are constructing meaningful clinical experience for their middle grades teacher candidates despite the challenging landscape. They offer detailed snapshots that can serve as reflective tools for middle grades teacher educators.

What ties these five articles together is a recognition that young adolescents deserve educational experiences that meet their cultural, linguistic, and developmental needs. While this idea is nothing new, collectively these articles offer current data and practical suggestions for how to accomplish this in today’s educational context.