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Middle Level Teachers Need Both Content Knowledge and Instructional Skills To Be Effective

National Middle School Association (NMSA) believes students in America's middle level schools need and deserve teachers who are knowledgeable about the content of the subjects they teach and who have the skills and dispositions to teach those subjects effectively.



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While NMSA applauds the recognition of the importance of teacher quality in No Child Left Behind, it cautions that the U.S. Department of Education report, *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge*, misses a key point when it calls for more attention to subject knowledge and fewer "methods" courses in preparing teachers. Not only does this report fail to

recognize the influence of teachers' classroom practices on student achievement, it makes some policy recommendations for teacher education that are not supported by research or practice in the field.

An ETS study entitled *How Teaching Matters* found that student achievement increases when students have teachers who are trained in developing

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higher-order thinking skills, who are skilled at implementing hands-on experiences in the classroom, and who are trained to work with special populations. This report and many others support the need for both content knowledge and pedagogy, while dispelling the idea that *only* subject matter knowledge is necessary in order to teach effectively.

NMSA believes these findings are especially pertinent to the education of young adolescents, ages 10 through 14. The middle level years are a time when students are experiencing many developmental changes that influence how they learn. These young people are at a unique and crucial developmental stage that demands teachers who understand them and who know how to teach them in ways that maximize their learning. Middle level schools staffed by teachers with both content knowledge and specialized professional preparation provide the best learning opportunities for all young adolescents.

NMSA's landmark document on middle level education, *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools*, explains, "Effective middle level educators...understand the developmental uniqueness of young adolescents and are as knowledgeable about their students as they are about the subject matter they teach." It goes on to state, "Teaching techniques should enhance and accommodate the diverse skills, abilities, and knowledge of young adolescents, cultivate multiple intelligences, and capitalize on students' individual learning styles."

When these recommendations are put into action, we find middle level teachers using proven techniques such as teaming, collaborative learning groups, and hands-on instructional strategies while connecting the content to real-world situations to motivate and challenge students. They learn these techniques in "methods" classes. Instead of calling for the reduction of such classes, the U.S. Department of Education should urge that all middle level teachers be given the opportunity to learn the instructional techniques that work with this unique age group in addition to gaining content knowledge in the subjects they teach.

NMSA recognizes that many factors beyond teacher preparation contribute to the serious challenges we face in our profession. Those challenges include insufficient access to quality professional development, low salaries, accountability based only on high-stakes tests, and overall lack of respect for educators. However, given the important role that competent teachers play in the learning, growth, and development of our children, we must not side-step our responsibilities and compromise the effective preparation of teachers. If we do, neither our short-term need for "qualified" teachers nor our ongoing goal of a quality teacher for every child will be well-served.

Preparing quality educators should not be an either/or situation. Students, parents, and communities should be able to expect that every teacher in every classroom is knowledgeable about young adolescents, knows his or her subject, and knows how to *teach*, not just deliver content to young adolescent learners. NMSA urges states and policymakers to seek a balanced approach to teacher preparation and licensure and to call for the implementation of specialized middle level teacher preparation programs that focus on subject content *and* instructional methods.

Working together, we can ensure teachers in every classroom are well-prepared to provide every one of our students a quality education that develops his or her skills and talents to the fullest.



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