

NCLB and Middle Schools: Confronting the Challenges

Executive Summary

In April 2003, the Alliance for Excellent Education released *Left Out and Left Behind: NCLB and the American High School*, a report documenting the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) on high schools (Joftus and Maddox-Dolan, 2003). Among these findings, the report noted that NCLB's requirements specifically targeted to high schools included the following three areas:

- testing;
- Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP); and
- teacher quality.

Middle schools are subject to the same categories of requirements. These requirements, however, apply differently to middle schools than to high schools. Specifically, NCLB treats middle schools like high schools some of the time, and like elementary schools some of the time. This report attempts to clarify NCLB's requirements for middle schools while also providing insight into the unique challenges middle schools face in implementing them.

NCLB's testing requirements for middle schools are fairly straightforward. NCLB mandates the same testing requirements for grades three through eight, regardless of the school's structure. Similarly, NCLB's Adequate Yearly Progress requirements for middle schools mirror those for elementary schools. However, NCLB's requirements for middle schools with regard to teacher quality are not as clear.

States may define the upper grades within their K–8 schools as elementary schools or as secondary schools. If the state classifies the middle school grades within the K–8 school as an elementary school, then these grades must meet the same NCLB standards for teacher quality. However, if the state defines the upper grades in the K–8 facility as a separate “school within a school,” then NCLB holds the grades to secondary school standards for teacher quality.

NCLB immediately requires new teachers in middle schools that are not within K–8 facilities to have a major or the equivalent of a major in each subject they teach. Many of the education programs offered by universities and colleges today provide potential teachers with the equivalent of an academic major. Veteran teachers must meet the same requirements as new teachers or meet a uniform state standard by the 2005–06 school year.

Given that the majority of middle schools are not part of K–8 facilities, most of the nation's middle school teachers will have to meet the more stringent requirements. These requirements could present a real challenge for school districts as they try to recruit and retain middle school teachers.

Middle school teachers often teach multiple subjects, and the guidance on NCLB teacher-quality standards require them to be certified in each of those subjects. It will be especially challenging for middle schools in high-poverty districts and in very rural districts to recruit and retain qualified teachers for all subject areas.

Training for middle school teachers presents an additional challenge. While academic content is important, middle school teachers must also have knowledge of the unique developmental issues that their students present. However, many schools of education still do not offer programs aimed at specifically providing middle school teachers with this background. Moreover, in some states, middle school certification is treated as an “add-on,” meaning that a teacher can receive this certification only after first earning a degree or license in primary or secondary education. Both of these issues create additional problems in ensuring that a fully prepared middle school teacher is in every classroom.

With these challenges in mind, the Alliance for Excellent Education is recommending that state and federal legislators do the following:

- ensure that states establish criteria for college and university programs offering the equivalent of an academic major, so future teachers will have the necessary knowledge to instruct students at high standards;
- provide veteran middle school teachers with the professional development resources that will enable them to become certified in every subject they teach;
- make certain that middle school teachers receive the necessary professional preparation and support to meet the specific developmental needs of their students;
- end the practice of “add-on” certifications for middle school teachers; and
- provide federal tax credits, college scholarships, and loan-forgiveness programs to highly qualified middle school teachers who commit to teaching in high-poverty areas.

NCLB’s Requirements for Testing and Adequate Yearly Progress for Middle Schools

NCLB’s middle school requirements for testing and Adequate Yearly Progress are similar to those for elementary schools.

Testing

NCLB requires that all students in grades three through eight be tested annually in reading/language arts and math (by 2005–06). The Act adds the requirement that students will be tested in science (by 2007–08) at least once in grades three through five and then at least one more time in grades six through nine.

NCLB requires states to assess all students, including limited-English-proficient (LEP) students and students with disabilities. The state must provide LEP students with “reasonable accommodations,” which may include providing the assessment in the student’s primary language during their first three years of education in the United States. Similarly, NCLB requires states to provide reasonable adaptations and accommodations for students with disabilities, such as allowing these students extra time to finish their tests.

Adequate Yearly Progress

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is the measure by which all schools (including middle schools), districts, and states are held accountable under NCLB. Each state is responsible for developing an AYP definition that all of its schools and districts must meet. This definition is part of each state's accountability plan, which must be submitted to and approved by the U.S. Department of Education. While these plans vary from state to state, certain information must be included in every state's plans.

For example, state tests must be the primary factor in the state's measure of AYP. High schools must also use graduation rates as an AYP indicator. According to Title I regulations, a different process is followed for middle schools. Specifically, as in the case of elementary schools, the state must include at least one additional indicator (other than scores on the state assessments) that applies to all students. Indicators may include, but are not limited to, achievement on additional assessments (e.g., locally administered tests), retention rates, attendance rates, and changes in the percentages of students completing gifted-and-talented or advanced courses. If a school fails to make AYP for two consecutive years, the state must identify the school as "needing improvement."

More detailed information on AYP requirements and sanctions is outlined in *Left Out and Left Behind: NCLB and the American High School*. (Readers can download a copy of this report from the Alliance for Excellent Education's website, at www.all4ed.org, or they can obtain it by calling 202-842-4888.)

NCLB's Teacher-Quality Requirements for Middle Schools

NCLB requires all teachers in core academic subjects to be "highly qualified" by the 2005–06 school year. Elementary, middle, and high school teachers must hold at least a bachelor's degree and obtain full state certification. All teachers must also demonstrate a high level of competency. This competency requirement varies based on whether the state classifies the middle school as an elementary school or as a secondary school. Teachers working in middle school grades in K–8 schools that are classified by the state as elementary are held to the same standards as elementary school teachers, while all other middle school teachers must meet the same standards as high schools—a higher standard. This second group represents the majority of middle school teachers.

The requirements for teachers in middle schools classified as secondary schools are the same as those for high schools and vary based on whether the teacher is new or a veteran. New high school teachers, including alternative-certification teachers, must hold a major in each academic subject they teach or pass a "rigorous" test of subject knowledge. Guidance from the U.S. Department of Education confirms that a minor in a subject is insufficient but that coursework equivalent to an undergraduate academic major, as determined by the state, is considered sufficient. Veteran high school teachers may either meet a high objective uniform standard determined by the state or meet the requirement for new teachers. Each state defines its own uniform standard but is subject to certain NCLB guidelines, as specified in Box 1. (See Box 1 for a complete summary of the teacher-quality requirements.)

Box 1. Mandated Timeline for Secondary School Compliance with NCLB Requirements for Teacher Quality

Effective Date	Requirement for Middle and High School Teachers
<p>New hires (beginning with the 2002–03 school year)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Must have full state certification or have passed the state teacher-licensing examination and hold a license to teach in the state. 2) Neither certification nor licensure requirements can be waived on an emergency, temporary, or provisional basis. 3) Must hold at least a bachelor’s degree and have demonstrated a high level of competency in each of the academic subjects in which the teacher teaches by <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) passing a rigorous state academic subject test in each of the academic subjects in which the teacher teaches;¹ or b) successfully completing, in each of the academic subjects in which the teacher teaches, an academic major, a graduate degree, coursework equivalent to an academic major, or advanced certification or credentialing.
<p>Teachers hired before the 2002–03 school year (must be compliant by the end of the 2005–06 school year)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Must have full state certification or have passed the state teacher-licensing examination and hold a license to teach in the state. 2) Neither certification nor licensure requirements can be waived on an emergency, temporary, or provisional basis. 3) Must hold at least a bachelor’s degree and <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) have either met the applicable standard for a new teacher, which includes an option to test, or b) have demonstrated competence in all academic subjects that he or she teaches, based on a high objective and uniform state standard of evaluation, which includes the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. grade-appropriate academic-subject-matter knowledge and teaching skills; ii. alignment with challenging state academic content and student achievement standards; iii. attainment of core content knowledge in academic subjects in which the teacher teaches; iv. uniform application to all teachers in the same grade level in the same academic subject; v. time the teacher has been teaching an academic subject, available to the public upon request; vi. criteria available to the public upon request; and vii. multiple objective measures for teacher competency.

Source: The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Source: Thompson Publishing Group, *Guide to ESEA Formula Grants*, August 2002.

¹ Rigorous state testing may consist of a passing level of performance on a state-required certification or licensing test or tests in each of the academic subjects in which the teacher teaches.

NCLB’s teacher-quality requirement for middle schools that are not K–8 will be difficult to meet, particularly for schools in high-poverty areas. Whereas 29 percent of classes in high-poverty high schools are taught by teachers lacking a major or the equivalent of a major in the subject they teach, 53 percent of classes in high-poverty middle schools are led by such a teacher (Jerald and Ingersoll, 2002). Despite common perception, the problem is not only severe in the areas of math, science, and special education, but also in the subjects of English and history.

Box 2. Teaching Out of Field

Percentage of public middle school students taught by a teacher <i>without</i> a major or minor in that subject							
By Grade Level	English	Math	Science	Biology	Physics/ Chemistry	Social Studies	History
7	32.2	48.8	31.8	60.4	73.8	23.9	56.3
8	32.9	37.1	23.8	32.9	75.7	19.7	60.5

Source: Ingersoll, 1999.

Middle schools in rural districts also face a serious challenge in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. According to Marilyn Peterson of the Nebraska Department of Education’s Title I office, “Small rural communities often have problems finding teachers, much less expecting every course to be taught by a person with an endorsement in that area” (cited in Education Funding Research Council, 2003). William Mathis, superintendent of the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union school district in Brandon, Vermont, and an educational finance professor at the University of Vermont, agrees, believing recruiting qualified teachers to rural school districts will “be an increasing problem over time” (cited in Education Funding Research Council, 2003).

A significant problem is that many middle school teachers, like elementary school teachers, teach more than one subject, a practice that has been allowed under traditional middle school certification processes. NCLB, however, mandates that middle school teachers must demonstrate a high level of competence “in each of the academic subjects” they teach. As a result, a veteran middle school teacher teaching multiple subjects must have a major (or a major equivalent) or meet the high objective uniform state standard in each of those subjects. Although this is an important step in educating all students to high standards, this requirement will increase the difficulty in staffing classrooms, especially in poor urban and rural areas.

Box 3. How NCLB Teacher-Quality Requirements Will Affect Teachers: An Example

A veteran middle school teacher working in an Illinois school district teaching physics and algebra to seventh and eighth graders would have to meet one of the following five criteria as determined by the state of Illinois in each of the subject areas he or she teaches:

- pass the Elementary/Middle Grades Test or the Content-Area Test for the area of teaching responsibility;
- have a major or a coursework equivalent to a major in the area of teaching responsibility;
- have a master’s degree or other advanced degree/credential in the area of teaching responsibility;
- be certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in the area of teaching responsibility; or
- have an endorsement or its coursework equivalent sufficient to meet the Illinois minimum requirements for the area of teaching responsibility, have teaching experience in the area of teaching responsibility, and have engaged in continuing professional development in the area of teaching responsibility.

Source: Illinois State Board of Education, *Illinois Criteria for Meeting the NCLB Requirements for Highly Qualified Teachers*, June 17, 2003.

Training for Middle School Teachers

Presently, most colleges and universities offer education programs for prospective secondary school teachers with an emphasis in two academic subjects (McEwin, 2003). Depending on the state's definition of "major," the state could consider these programs as a major equivalent. If these concentrations do qualify as majors, potential middle school teachers benefit by being able to teach more than one academic subject.

Still, many schools of education do not offer programs specifically aimed at preparing middle school teachers to better teach young adolescents. In a 1996 national study of teacher-preparation programs, only 51 percent of institutions reported offering courses focused on the middle school level or having specialized middle-level teacher-preparation programs (McEwin, Dickinson, and Swaim, 2003), and most of these programs were offered in states where middle school licensures/endorsements were available (McEwin, 2003).

However, even when licensure is offered, it may have very little meaning for teachers. In 2000, 44 states had provisions for middle school teacher licensure, but only 21 of these states required teachers to hold the license as a condition for teaching young adolescents (Gaskill, 2002). As a result, many prospective teachers opt for more general training that encompasses both young children and adolescents in order to increase their potential job opportunities. Additionally, in some states, middle school certification is treated as an "add-on," meaning that a teacher can receive this certification only after first earning a degree or license in primary or secondary education. This creates additional deterrents for receiving professional preparation specific to middle schools (McEwin, 2003).

This lack of specific professional preparation on the developmental characteristics of young adolescents—and its implications for teaching and learning—may present a problem. Any parent of a 13-year-old understands the particular challenges that middle school teachers face. NCLB emphasizes the importance of content knowledge, but there is little focus on helping teachers understand the psychology of their students and ways to work effectively with them. This has some educators and policymakers concerned that tomorrow's teachers might be knowledgeable about academic content but ignorant of the effects of students' developmental stage on learning (National Middle School Association, 2002) or not qualified to meet the needs of students with widely varying abilities (Arhar, 2003).

Recommendations from Every Child a Graduate

In its September 2002 report *Every Child a Graduate*, the Alliance for Excellent Education made specific recommendations to the federal government that would allow it to become a more effective partner with school districts and states. The enactment of these recommendations would ensure that all students, especially those in high-needs schools, would have access to highly qualified teachers (Joftus, 2002). One of the Alliance's recommendations is that federal legislators should both provide federal tax credits, college scholarships, and loan-forgiveness programs for teachers who commit to working in high-needs schools and also create induction programs for new teachers and ongoing professional development for all teachers. These measures would provide much-needed help to middle schools in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers.

Additional Recommendations Specific to Middle Schools

In response to the middle school–specific issues raised by NCLB, the Alliance offers the following additional recommendations:

- States should make certain that new and veteran teachers receive specialized middle school professional preparation, in either university or college education programs or through high-quality induction and professional development programs. This preparation would provide them with the knowledge and skills to meet the developmental needs of young adolescent students.
- States should provide veteran middle schools teachers who do not have an academic major or the equivalent of an academic major with the professional development resources they need to meet the state’s high objective uniform standard so that high-quality teachers can remain in the classroom.
- States should ensure that the criteria for major equivalents in teacher-preparation programs are rigorous in content and will enable teachers to have the necessary academic knowledge to instruct students at high standards.
- States should end the practice of requiring “add-ons” for teachers seeking middle school certification, which only makes it harder for middle schools to attract highly qualified teachers.

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The opinions expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the views of these contributors. Additionally, any errors are the sole responsibility of the Alliance for Excellent Education.

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