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Middle Level Teacher Certification in South Carolina:
A Case Study in Educational Policy Development

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Abstract

South Carolina made a significant step forward in middle level education reform by enacting middle level teacher certification in 2001. This qualitative case study documents the process through which the state legislation developed, with a particular focus on how middle level teacher certification arrived and remained on the public policy agenda in South Carolina. The study is framed by three key research questions, which are derived from Kingdon's (1995) theoretical model of the policy process.

- How did middle level teacher certification become defined as a public policy problem or issue in South Carolina?
- What policy solutions addressing the problem of middle level teacher certification in South Carolina were or became available to decision makers?
- What political processes and conditions were involved in advancing and sustaining middle level teacher certification as a legislative agenda item?

Data sources for the study include records of semi-structured interviews and conversations with key actors (i.e., policy makers and other public officials, faculty and administrators in higher education, and school district personnel), as well as policy documents and reports.

In a political climate in which any educational change is tenuous, it is critical for middle level reform advocates to understand the many facets of the policy process. This study illuminates the essential role of bottom-up pressure for middle level reform at the state level; it maps the relationships that formed among state officials, higher education, and school personnel; and it highlights the importance of key individuals in moving the policy process forward.

Introduction

For decades efforts have been underway across the United States and elsewhere to improve education for young adolescents. These reform efforts have focused on many aspects of schooling including classroom instruction, school structures and student grouping, teacher training, and curriculum. The issue of special licensure and certification for teachers of young adolescents has received ongoing attention in the middle level literature since the 1970s. This body of work has documented the expansion of specialized licensure and certification requirements throughout the United States, it has highlighted key aspects of regulations in

specific states, and it has called attention to the impacts that licensure and certification requirements can have upon teacher quality and student performance (e.g., Burke & Stoltenberg, 1979; Gaskill, 2002; McEwin, 1983; Swaim & Stefanich, 1996). As a result, middle level educators have a good sense of what licensure requirements for teachers of young adolescents should look like and what the outcomes of these policies might be.

While middle level scholars have expanded our knowledge of the "what" of middle level licensure and certification, much less is known about the "how." For example, research has shown that changing certification and licensure policy requires collaboration among various stakeholder groups including higher education, school districts, and state professional associations (Pendarvis, 1995; Swaim & Stefanich, 1996), but how are these collaborative relationships initiated and sustained? How do these strategic relationships lead to policy change at the state level? How do issues such as middle level licensure and certification get the attention of those in and around state government in the first place?

The purpose of this study is to document the process by which middle level teacher certification regulations developed in South Carolina. The overarching question for the study is: *How did middle level teacher certification get on the public policy agenda in South Carolina?* The study is framed by three key research questions, which are derived from the work of John Kingdon (1995).

1. How did middle level teacher certification become defined as a public policy problem or issue in South Carolina?
2. What policy solutions addressing the problem of middle level teacher certification in South Carolina were or became available to decision makers, and how were these solutions generated?
3. What political processes and conditions were involved in advancing and sustaining middle level teacher certification as a legislative agenda item?

Conceptual Framework

Educational policy analysis has been dominated by rational theories of planned educational change that are based on stage models and assume linear, unidirectional dynamics; system stability; and "a relatively direct relationship between … 'inputs', local responses, and program 'outputs'" (McLaughlin, 1998, p. 71). Educational policy research in the 1970s, including studies of federally funded programs that followed the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (e.g., Berman & McLaughlin, 1973-1978; Kirst & Jung, 1982; Murphy, 1971; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977), challenged dominant assumptions about the policy process by illustrating that rational planning and control of resources is not sufficient to bring about program goals (Hanf & Toonen, 1985). Rational planning models were criticized as inadequate for representing contemporary patterns of educational change implementation that are nonlinear, complex, and influenced by multiple contextual factors (Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Pease, 1983; Fullan, 1996; Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan, & Hopkins, 1998). In addition, this body of research illuminated the dynamics of the policy process and called attention to policy subprocesses such as implementation (Mazamanian & Sabatier, 1989; Nakamura & Smallwood, 1980; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973) and agenda setting and alternative specification (Kingdon, 1995).

The "Revised Garbage Can Model"
Kingdon's (1995) Revised Garbage Can Model helps to explain a key process in pre-policy decision making—agenda setting. Kingdon defines the agenda as "the list of subjects or problems to which governmental officials and people outside of government closely associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention at any given time" (p. 3). Building on Cohen, March, and Olsen's (1972) work on decision making in organizations, Kingdon identifies three major "process streams" in federal agenda setting: (1) problem recognition, (2) the formation or refining of policy proposals, and (3) politics (p. 87).

According to Kingdon (1995), some situations or conditions become recognized as "problems" for policy makers because (a) they challenge certain societal values or ideals, (b) they represent poor performance in comparison to other countries or governmental units, or (c) of the way the situation or condition is categorized

or labeled. In the problem stream, conditions—or potential problem—come to the attention of policy makers through indicators, focusing events that draw attention to certain issues, or through feedback channels.
In the policy stream, networks of actors working within "policy communities" generate a "short list of ideas" from which policy makers can choose to address particular problems (Kingdon, 1995). Kingdon characterizes the inner dynamics of the policies stream as a "policy primeval soup" in which ideas are generated and refined incrementally and iteratively through "recombination" (pp. 116–117). Whether a policy alternative survives depends upon several factors that might hinder implementation: technical feasibility, value acceptance, and the anticipation of future constraints.

Kingdon (1995) asserts that agenda setting may be impacted by activity in the "politics stream," which may include changes in administration as the result of elections or reappointments, politicians' perceptions of public opinion, or shifts in power that might result from reorganization within government.

Central to Kingdon's (1995) model is the notion of coupling, or joining, of the three streams. "The separate streams come together at critical times. A problem is recognized, a solution is available, the political climate makes the time right for change, and the constraints do not prohibit action" (p. 88). Kingdon refers to these critical moments in agenda setting as "policy windows" which might open as a result of "the appearance of compelling problems or by happenings in the political stream" (p. 203).

Kingdon's (1995) "Revised Garbage Can Model" of agenda setting has continued to be both durable and versatile. Since *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* was first published in 1984, Kingdon's theoretical model has been applied to a wide range of policy areas, levels of government, and national contexts. Of particular interest to this study is the power of Kingdon's model to explain agenda setting in the education policy arena at the state level (e.g., Elrod, 1994; Holderness, 1990; Lieberman, 2002; McLendon, 2000).

Methodology

I employed a pre-structured historical case study design to document the rise of middle level teacher certification on the public policy agenda in South Carolina. A pre-structured design was appropriate for this study, since I began with an outline derived from the research questions and analytical framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Following other studies of agenda-setting processes (e.g., Lieberman, 2002), I chose to investigate the phenomenon over time, which is the key characteristic of historical case study research (Merriam, 1998).

An essential aspect of a case study is that it is intrinsically bound in clearly defined ways (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). This study was bounded in time, with a focus on the period from 1990, when funding from the Carnegie Foundation accelerated reform in middle level education in South Carolina, to 2001, when the General Assembly finally approved the regulations governing middle level certification. It was also bounded by a focus on a particular process in the development of policy—agenda setting—and the theoretical model of agenda setting developed by Kingdon (1995), which served as the analytical framework for the study.

I relied upon multiple sources of data to build the case study, as recommended by Yin (2003). Data sources included records of semi-structured interviews and conversations with informants, and originals or copies of policy documents and reports. The pool of informants was limited to those individuals who had key roles in getting middle level teacher certification on the public policy agenda in South Carolina. They included policy makers and other public officials, faculty and administrators in higher education, and school district personnel. Informants were purposefully selected based on their roles in the policy process and their ability to provide information to help answer the research questions. I interviewed informants using an interview protocol derived from the research questions (see Appendix A). Participants were given the interview questions in advance, and follow-up interviews were conducted by phone, email, or in person as needed. Documentary data sources for the study included policy documents, newspapers, interview notes, meeting agendas and minutes, newsletters, and secondary sources.

I employed a procedure for analyzing qualitative data that follows a pre-structured case analysis sequence described by Miles and Huberman (1994). This method was appropriate, as the case study began with a structure defined by Kingdon's (1995) theoretical model of agenda setting and by the research questions and interview protocol (see Appendix A). I analyzed the qualitative data from the interviews and the documents through an iterative process of constant comparison, as evident patterns and themes were identified and described. Gaps, inconsistencies, and unanswered questions guided subsequent rounds of data collection. I repeated or reiterated this process until the conclusions were conceptually dense and additional data yielded no new insights (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

An Overview of Middle Level Certification in South Carolina

Many educators and politicians in South Carolina have long recognized the mismatch between the educational needs of young adolescents and the curricula and school structures that serve them. Middle schools first emerged in South Carolina in the 1960s (Blackburn, Medford, Pendarvis, & Splittgerber, 2004), and by 1969 the State Board of Education adopted a formal definition of a "middle school." A middle school was defined as any school with a grade 5 through 8 organizational pattern, or any combination of these grades when a school had a minimum of three consecutive grade levels. On March 8, 1974, the State Board of Education adopted standards for middle schools, which included specific qualifications for teachers that were to be fully implemented by July 1, 1977 (State Department of Education, 1975).

By the 1980s many school districts in South Carolina had organized according to a sixth through eighth grade middle school structure; however, other key components of middle level reform such as teaming, interdisciplinary curriculum, and advisory programs had not been systematically implemented (Brown, 1978; Jefferson, 1982). "Excellent efforts in the 1970s had been stymied or obliterated by the accountability/regulatory mandates of the 1980s when student-centered developmental approaches were not emphasized" (South Carolina Middle Grades State School Policy Initiative [SCMGSSPI], 1991, p. 5). Moreover, a coordinated system of middle level certification and teacher preparation had not been established (Pendarvis, 1995).

Middle level reform in South Carolina, as elsewhere, gained momentum in the 1990s following the publication *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). In 1990, South Carolina was one of 15 states awarded funds from the Carnegie Corporation as a part of the Middle Grades Schools State Policy Initiative. *Turning Points,* and the funding from the Carnegie Corporation that followed, opened a window of opportunity for middle level advocates in South Carolina to advance middle level reform efforts in all areas, including teacher preparation and certification.

By the mid-1990s, teacher certification was high on the education agenda in South Carolina (Teacher Licensure Steering Committee, 1996). The middle grades were an area of particular concern, and in August 1999 Governor Jim Hodges convened a task force of 19 teachers, school and district-level administrators, legislators, and Department of Education staff. The Governor's South Carolina Middle Grades Task Force recognized the need for specialized training for teachers of young adolescents, and the group forwarded a set of recommendations for middle level teacher certification and teacher preparation programs (South Carolina Middle Grades Task Force, 2001). The middle grades certification standards for teachers in grades five through eight were approved by the South Carolina State Board of Education in December 2000, and ratified by the General Assembly in 2001.

New grade spans for teacher certification in South Carolina went into effect July 1, 2005. The new grade spans eliminate the overlaps in the seventh and eighth grades with the former secondary (grades 7–12) and elementary (grades 1–8) certificates. The new middle level certificate covers grades 5 through 8, resulting in an overlap only in the fifth and sixth grades with the new elementary certificate (grades 2–6). By law, all South Carolina teachers who teach seventh or eighth grades must qualify for a middle level certificate by July 1, 2008. Individual districts have the flexibility to determine whether fifth and sixth grade teachers require an elementary or middle level certificate.

Discussion of Findings

How did middle level teacher certification arrive on the public policy agenda in South Carolina? Kingdon (1995) argues that "the probability of an item rising on a decision agenda is dramatically increased if all three elements—problem, proposal, and political receptivity—are coupled in a single package" (p. 195). In this section, I discuss developments in each of the three process streams (see Appendix B). First, I articulate how middle level teacher preparation became defined as a policy problem in the 1990s. Next, I explain how various proposals for middle level teacher certification were generated incrementally within the policy stream. Finally, I describe how a window of opportunity opened for advocates of middle level certification following the elections for Governor and Superintendent in 1998.

The Problem Stream

The release of *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) was a focusing event that drew great attention to the condition of education for young adolescents in the United States. The Council outlined eight principles for transforming the education of young adolescents, one of which was specific preparation for teachers in the middle grades leading to an endorsement or licensure. In the late 1980s, most states either did not have specialized licensure for teachers in the middle grades or licensure was not required because of overlaps with other grade spans (Children's Defense Fund, 1988). While South Carolina attempted to implement middle level certification in the late 1970s, the policy was never fully implemented and the endorsement that replaced it was, in effect, nullified by the grade span overlaps between the elementary and secondary certificates.

In 1990, South Carolina was one of fifteen states to receive a Carnegie grant to implement reforms based on the *Turning Points* report. The South Carolina Middle Grades Schools State Policy Initiative (SCMGSSPI) (1991) organized its efforts around four areas of emphasis:

1. policy development,
2. assessment of current practices and commitment for future reform,
3. networking or schools for middle grades restructuring, and
4. partnership collaboration (p. 5).

Initially, the project sought to establish partnerships with health and human services providers, reflecting the definition of the middle grades "problem" as one primarily of young adolescent health and risk behaviors, not a teacher preparation problem.

The definition of the problem shifted toward teacher preparation, at least for those in the middle school education community, as schools attempted to implement *Turning Points* reforms. The *Turning Points* report, and the Carnegie funding that followed it, arrived on the heels of Target 2000 legislation, which allowed qualifying schools to be temporarily deregulated. As a result, a number of middle and junior high schools in South Carolina had the flexibility to use the Carnegie funds to implement reforms aligned with *Turning Points*. By 1993, thirty-nine schools associated with the South Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching and School Leadership were engaged in restructuring efforts based on *Turning Points* involving such practices as teaming, interdisciplinary teaching, and flexible block scheduling (South Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching and School Leadership, 1994). Despite the provision of professional development and coursework, it became apparent that many teachers and principals lacked the skills and requisite preparation to carry out these reforms.

A large-scale needs assessment survey conducted by the SCMGSSPI revealed perceptions within the education community about the need for specialized preparation of middle level teachers. Middle school personnel and other stakeholders were surveyed to determine the level of commitment to *Turning Points* recommendations and the extent to which *Turning Points* recommendations were being implemented (SCMGSSPI, 1991). Facilitators from the South Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching and School Leadership conducted regional meetings in Charleston, Spartanburg, Columbia, and Florence to discuss and summarize

the results. The following conclusions emerged from discussions about Section V of the report, which was titled *Preparing Teachers for the Middle Grades.*

- All [stakeholders participating in the meetings] said that the lack of certification policy for the middle grades from the State Department of Education was a driving force which probably determined many of the concerns in Section V.
- Teams were also concerned about the lack of connection between preparation of teachers in institutions of higher education (IHE) and the reality of practice in the middle grades. They felt that teachers were inadequately prepared, but they did not see any present movement toward changing this situation cycle without a change in both SDE [State Department of Education] policy and IHE practice.
- Given their views of lack of SDE certification policy and inadequate preparation by IHE, the teams were greatly concerned about the time, resources, and money necessary to develop and carry out such staff development training for incumbent middle grades teachers in the areas of guidance training for advisors, teaming, and a new core of knowledge about adolescent needs. (SCMGSSPI, 1991, p. 55)

These recommendations suggest that the educators who participated in the survey recognized the need for specialized preparation for teachers of young adolescents and that they saw a link between this preparation and mandatory licensure or certification.

Middle level teacher preparation attracted attention beyond the education community in the 1990s as accountability and standards reforms were implemented in South Carolina. The publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and the passage of the Education Improvement Act of 1983 led to an overhaul of the curriculum and testing programs in South Carolina during the 1980s and 1990s. With the increased emphasis on core academic subjects, some middle schools in the state eliminated exploratory courses, which became viewed as extras, and they instituted remedial programs in their place (Blackburn et al., 2004). In addition, more and more high school courses were being taught in the middle schools, and many teachers in the middle grades were not prepared to teach the higher level content demanded by the new standards. As Phyllis Pendarvis, former Executive Director of the South Carolina Middle School Association (SCMSA) recalls:

> Until middle school curriculum started progressing and we starting bringing ninth grade courses into the middle school, elementary preparation was good for teaming, and teachers were comfortable with dividing groups, et cetera. As the curriculum changed in the 90s, spiraling up, you couldn't go from generalist preparation and be comfortable teaching seventh and eighth grade skills. Schools started hiring high school people who could teach the course but not the kids, and there were in-fights within faculties. Some would say, "I would teach them if they'd behave." Others would nurture them to be good for fifty minutes. Faculties were prepared in totally different ways, and as a result some became departmentalized.
> (P. Pendarvis, interview, December 9, 2005)

The inadequate content-area preparation of middle level teachers was the focus of an influential report published in 1998 by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) titled *Improving Teaching in the Middle Grades: Higher Standards for Students Aren't Enough.* The findings of the report were featured in a January 1999 editorial in *The State* newspaper titled "Middle School Messes." The editorial called for the South Carolina Legislature, the State Board of Education, and the Commission on Higher Education to reform teacher preparation and certification for the middle grades. Another editorial published later that year asserted:

> Recommending certification for middle-school teaching should be non-negotiable. In South Carolina, teachers have been trained for either elementary teaching, becoming generalists, or high-school teaching, becoming content specialists. But middle-school students are beginning high-level content, and need teachers prepared to teach at that level. They also need teachers and principals who understand the special needs of children entering adolescence. ("Middle School Teaching Needs Own Certification," 1999)

By the time the aforementioned editorial was published, middle level teacher preparation and certification were already high on the Governor's policy agenda. At the advice of his education advisor, Governor Jim Hodges decided to focus attention on middle grades reform. Hodges recalls:

> My education adviser, Doug McTeer, began talking with me about how the seventh grade was a critical time in the educational career of a student. Seems as though students begin making a number of important academic choices ... and also begin developing the habits that lead to success or failure in the classroom. We had specialists in early childhood and high school, but nothing for the important middle school years. I remembered my middle school experience when Doug began this discussion, and recognized that he was right. It's a complex time in a kid's life, and dealing with the difficult set of social and educational problems requires great skill. (Gov. J. Hodges, personal communication, August 30, 2006)

In August 1999, Governor Hodges created the Governor's Middle Grades Task Force, a group that included legislators, school teachers, district office personnel, and representatives from higher education. The Task Force examined and made recommendations addressing all areas of middle level education in South Carolina, including teacher preparation and certification. In its initial report, the Task Force stated that "new teachers usually lack training for working in a middle grades organization, for dealing with early adolescence, or for teaching middle grades content aligned with the curriculum standards." The Task Force further recommended:

> The State Board of Education, in consultation with the Middle Grades Task Force, establish middle grades certification requirements by June 30, 2000; including setting standards for programs, eliminating the significant overlap in grades between elementary and middle level certification, and determining ways to phase in initial and add-on certification. (Governor's Middle Grades Task Force, 1999, p. 5)

With the Governor's endorsement of the Task Force's initial report, middle level certification had arrived on the agenda.

The Policy Stream
According to Kingdon (1995), policy develops within "policy communities" that are "composed of specialists in a given policy area" (p. 117). In the case of middle level certification in South Carolina, the policy community consisted of academics in higher education, the SCMGSSPI, staff in the State Department of Education, and educators in schools and districts throughout the state who acted through the South Carolina Middle School Association (SCMSA), the South Carolina Association of School Administrators—Middle Level (SCASA-ML), and various task forces. Kingdon notes that policy communities may be characterized by fragmentation, and this was certainly true of the middle level policy community in South Carolina as proposals for certification were developed in the 1990s. Some key stakeholder groups, notably higher education, were on the periphery in the early stages.

In a sense, the period from 1990 to 1994 was a "softening up" period for middle level education in South Carolina (Kingdon, 1995, pp. 127–128). The Carnegie funds allowed for experimentation in the schools and for research and the exploration of program development in higher education. As a result, the mid-1990s was "a time when substantive change (was) being considered in middle level education within the state" and "the school reform climate in the State Department of Education (was) supportive of ideas that challenge(d) the status quo" (Pendarvis, 1995, p. 9). Gradually the policy community became de-fragmented as institutions of higher education explored middle level teacher preparation in earnest, and as the State Department of Education became a partner with the SCMSA in exploring middle level certification.

Three proposals for middle level certification received serious attention between 1994 and 1999. A proposal developed by members of SCMSA and SCASA-ML was presented to the State Department of Education and recommended to the State Board of Education in 1994. A second proposal was advanced in 1996 through the Teacher Licensure Steering Committee commissioned by former Superintendent Barbara Nielsen. A third proposal for middle level certification was approved by the State Board of Education in December 2000 and sent forward to the General Assembly for final approval in 2001.

Kingdon (1995) likened the dynamics of the policy stream to a "policy primeval soup" (p. 121). He posited that ideas are exchanged and come in contact with one another within policy communities, and policy proposals gradually bubble up to the surface. He noted that proposal development "usually involves recombination of old elements rather than fresh invention of new ones" (p. 124).

Indeed, none of the aforementioned proposals for middle level certification was strikingly original. As Kingdon (1995) suggested, they built incrementally upon previous proposals, including the middle level teacher credential requirements approved by the State Board of Education in 1974, and certification requirements in the neighboring states of Georgia and North Carolina.

The Political Stream
In the political stream, the agenda is influenced by such forces as public opinion, interest group pressures, and government turnover. Often events in the political stream will open a window of opportunity for "policy entrepreneurs" to push their proposals to the forefront, resulting in a coupling of the three policy process streams (Kingdon, 1995, p. 194).

The media can be an important and very visible participant in the political stream. As Kingdon (1995) noted, politicians and non-elected officials follow the media and are keenly attuned to "commentary on and the nature of the times" (p. 149). The attention paid to middle schools and young adolescents by *The State* newspaper in the 1990s closely mirrors the rise of middle level reform on the policy agenda. As schools tried to implement *Turning Points* recommendations in the early 1990s, efforts in some districts met limited, but very vocal, protest. *The State* newspaper demonstrated ambivalence toward middle level reform, sometimes referring to *Turning Points* recommendations as "controversial." In the mid-1990s, *The State* and the *Greenville News* frequently ran articles focusing on middle schools and young adolescents, signaling a heightened awareness of the unique needs of this age group. *The State* took a strong editorial stance in favor of middle level certification in 1999, perhaps in response to the SREB report *Improving Teaching in the Middle Grades,* which highlighted the inadequacies on teacher preparation in the middle grades throughout the region.

In addition to the media, Kingdon's (1995) theoretical model also recognized the influence of interest groups and other organized political forces upon the policy process. The most influential interest group involved in advancing middle level certification was the SCMSA. The SCMSA was established in 1977, not long after the State Board of Education set accreditation standards for middle schools. As the former Executive Director of the Association recalled:

> SCMSA started in 1977, and even at the beginning there was just a mindset; no way to change the system. Our lobbying effort at that point was for identity; we had a model in place and support at the state in practice but not in policy and regulations. When we wrote the strategic plan in 1993, we wanted to get the policy. (P. Pendarvis, interview, December 9, 2005)

Throughout the 1990s, the SCMSA collaborated with the State Department of Education to help shape middle level policy. The SCMSA also took action during the 1998 campaign for State Superintendent. While the Association did not endorse a particular candidate, the membership made certain that both candidates, Democrat Inez Tenenbaum and Republican David Eckstrom, defined a position on middle level education.

In 1995 State Superintendent Barbara Nielsen assembled a Teacher Licensure Steering Committee to review the status of teacher certification in the state and to make recommendations for improving the system. The Steering Committee formed 28 task forces to look more closely at specific areas of certification. The Middle Level Licensure Task Force included members from middle schools, school districts, state government, and the South Carolina Middle School Association. Nielsen worked hard to reform teacher certification in South Carolina until the end of her term in 1998, and *The State* called it her "final big initiative as State Superintendent" (Robinson, 1998).

A political window of opportunity opened for advocates of middle level certification with the elections of State Superintendent Inez Tenenbaum and Governor Jim Hodges. Tenenbaum and Hodges came into office at a time when teacher certification was already high on the agenda as a result of the work of Superintendent Nielsen's Teacher Licensure Steering Committee. In addition, they found middle level issues to be an area around which they could build broad consensus. At the advice of his education adviser, Governor Hodges discussed a possible middle level initiative with Superintendent Tenenbaum, Senator Nikki Setzler, and various education groups. "All determined that the time was right to move forward with an initiative devoted to this important period of a student's life. Once we rolled the initiative out, we found great enthusiasm for it" (Gov. J. Hodges, personal communication, August 30, 2006).

In August 1999, Governor Hodges created the Governor's Middle Grades Task Force to address middle level issues in South Carolina. Within two months, the Executive Director of the SCMSA sent a letter to Superintendent Tenenbaum detailing the Association's past efforts in promoting middle level certification and requesting her support in:

> (1) moving forward to ensure that initial degree program standards are in place for approving middle level teacher preparation, (2) setting a timeline to enforce new certification requirements for teachers in grades 5–9, and (3) helping us determine an effective and equitable method of renewing and upgrading current middle school teachers' certificates. (P. Pendarvis, personal communication, October 20, 1999)

This letter, and the subsequent efforts of the Middle Grades Task Force, represented a coupling of the policy streams that eventually led to mandatory middle level certification in South Carolina.

Conclusion

Middle grades leaders have long recognized the need for specialized preparation and licensure for teachers of young adolescents (Alexander, 1965/1995; Lounsbury, 1960/1998; Toepfer, 1965/1998), yet most middle school teachers in South Carolina today were initially certified at the elementary level (grades 1–8) or at the secondary level (grades 7–12) in a single subject area. "Teachers with these broader range certificates typically lack the expertise they need to work with young adolescents" (Cooney, 2002, p. 10). For such teachers, a gap may exist between "certification" to teach in the middle grades and "preparation" to teach the young adolescents in middle grades classrooms (Gaskill, 2002; McEwin & Dickinson, 1995).

South Carolina took a significant step toward closing this "preparation gap" by developing a middle level certificate (grades 5–8) and mandating middle level certification for all teachers in seventh and eighth grade core subjects. These changes have provided the impetus for the development of middle level teacher preparation programs at institutions throughout the state, and they have helped to bring increased attention to the unique needs of young adolescent learners in South Carolina.

In this study I documented the process through which middle level teacher certification arrived on the public policy agenda in South Carolina using Kingdon's (1995) model of agenda setting as a theoretical framework. I discussed how the lack of specialized preparation of middle level teachers became defined as a policy problem by those within and close to the education community and later by the Governor's Office. I described how proposals for middle level certification emerged incrementally within a policy community that became increasingly de-fragmented as middle level issues rose on the agenda. I identified the windows of opportunity that opened in the politics stream following the 1998 elections for Governor and State Superintendent, and I explained how the three process streams coupled shortly thereafter as consensus was built around an agenda for middle level reform.

My findings illustrate the centrality of key individuals in the policy process. As Kingdon (1995) observed, "one can nearly always pinpoint a particular person, or at most a few persons, who were central in moving a subject up on the agenda" (p. 180). In the case of middle level reform in South Carolina, a cluster of "policy entrepreneurs" advocated for middle level certification to diverse stakeholders. Chief among these were the

Director of the SCMGSSPI and the Executive Director of the SCMSA. Their vision and leadership were decisive in the development of middle level certification policy.

My findings also highlighted the salience of de-fragmentation within the policy community and the building of consensus around an agenda for middle level reform in the political stream. Toni Enloe, a former SCMSA President, credits the rise of middle level certification on the agenda to the presence of "a united front." She adds, "Because we had State Department, higher ed, principal and teacher input, that made the difference" (T. Enloe, interview, December 6, 2005).

It is important to understand pre-decision processes such as agenda setting. An agenda-setting perspective may provide a framework for advocacy and help those who wish to influence the policy-making process (Holderness, 1990). Reflecting upon the development of middle level certification policy, former SCMSA Executive Director Phyllis Pendarvis stated, "To change certification was like changing the currents, it was an immovable force" (P. Pendarvis, interview, December 9, 2005). In contrast, advocating for policy change from Kingdon's (1995) perspective is a process of working *with* the currents and seeking to couple the streams of problems, policy, and politics when a window of opportunity opens.

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Appendix A
Interview Protocol

How did middle level teacher certification get on the public policy agenda in South Carolina?

1. How did middle level teacher certification become defined as a public policy problem or issue in South Carolina?

    •   Who championed the idea of middle level reform, and middle level teacher certification in particular, in South Carolina?
    •   What arguments were raised against middle level teacher certification?
    •   How did teacher certification in general and middle level certification, in particular, draw the attention of those in and around government?

2. What policy solutions addressing the problem of middle level teacher certification in South Carolina were or became available to decision makers, and how were these solutions generated?

    •   Were there precedents for middle level certification in other states that caught the attention of decision makers in South Carolina?
    •   Were there earlier iterations of a proposal for middle level teacher certification that caught the attention of decision makers in South Carolina?

3. What political processes and conditions were involved in advancing and sustaining middle level teacher certification as a legislative agenda item?

    •   What were the roles of higher education, the SDE, and local school districts in moving the agenda for middle level reform forward?
    •   Who held decision-making authority at key junctures in the policy process?

Appendix B
Timeline Depicting Pre-decision Processes and Coupling of the Streams

Date	Problem Stream	Policy Stream	Political Stream
1989	Release of *Turning Points* draws attention to education of young adolescents		
1990	South Carolina receives a grant to implement *Turning Points* reforms through the Middle Grades Schools State Policy Initiative	Carnegie funds initiate reform and innovation in middle grades education	
1991			
1992		Climate in State Department of Education is supportive of middle grades reform	Middle schools begin to receive media attention
1993	Evaluations of SCMGSSPI reforms show lack of preparation for implementing *Turning Points*– based recommendations	South Carolina Middle School Association (SCMSA) and South Carolina Association of School Administrators—Middle Level advance a proposal for middle level certification	
1994			Barbara Nielsen elected Superintendent
1995			Superintendent Nielsen assembles a Teacher Licensure Steering Committee to examine all areas of certification
1996		A revised certification proposal is advanced through the Teacher Licensure Steering Committee formed by Superintendent Nielsen	SCMSA advocacy for middle level certification continues
1997			
1998	SREB report *Improving Teaching in the Middle Grades* calls attention to lack of specialized preparation for middle school teachers		Jim Hodges elected Governor of South Carolina Inez Tenenbaum elected Superintendent

1999–2000: COUPLING OF THE STREAMS
1999   Governor's Middle Grades Task Force notes the inadequate preparation of middle school teachers in South Carolina *The State* newspaper adopts an editorial stance in favor of middle level certification
2000   State Board of Education approves a proposal for middle level certification