Attachment 5: Summary of AIMS Survey Results

Background

A survey of “Teacher Certification at the Middle Level” was independently initiated by the Association of Illinois Middle Schools (AIMS), with the goal of providing the State Board additional information for its discussions on a new middle level certificate. The survey was given to approximately 450 participants in the summer 2002. The AIMS organization has submitted approximately 150 completed surveys.

The survey did not ask the respondents’ role so it is difficult to determine the breadth of participation. Contextual evidence in the responses suggest that most participants were middle level teachers and (in limited numbers) administrators. However, some of the respondents were either in the final stages of their teacher preparation program or had recently graduated and would be working in a middle level school this year.

The survey had two parts: four questions which gave the respondent choices and whose answers could be quantified, and three open-ended questions asking for a narrative response.

Overview

The value of these survey data is limited because the questions appeared to be confusing to many respondents, especially among individuals with limited experience and knowledge about middle school concepts. As a result, the answers were sometimes not clearly linked to the questions.

The questions themselves are not as helpful for the Board’s purpose as they might have been. Only one question directly refers to the issue of a new certificate and even that is somewhat oblique.

Although the survey results may be considered biased because the respondents could be presumed to be strong supporters of middle level initiatives, there was a small but expressive subgroup of respondents who were either negative or not yet convinced of the value of a certificate.

The data described below should be considered as approximations.

Summary and Analysis of Part 1

A majority of respondents expressed relative satisfaction with “the current level of expertise of [the] teaching staff or colleagues” in relation to best practices in middle level education. On a scale from 1 to 5 (low to high), 67 respondents ranked their satisfaction level as a “4” and another 14 ranked their satisfaction as
a “5.” However, even though only 21 respondents indicated their dissatisfaction with a “1” or “2,” the narrative responses to other questions suggested the frustration level is high among some.

Respondents could choose one or more of five factors they believed contributed to the perceived level of expertise. “Retraining based on new endorsement and certification requirements” received the fewest “hits” (44) while professional development provided by the district and off-site were among the most frequently selected. “Common planning time” received 99 “hits,” but college coursework received only 69 votes. These choices indicate that the district actions in supporting professional development and planning time for teachers can be critical to the development of expertise. Factors added under the “other” option included networking, adoption of the “Turning Points” model, availability of master degree programs, the support of local leadership, experience in a middle school setting and the impetus provided by being assigned to a middle level school without a strong background.

The survey asked respondents to identify, from among twelve choices (plus “other”), the areas of professional development needed most at their schools. Many respondents checked all or most of the choices, suggesting that despite the relative satisfaction levels described in response to question #1, professional development needs are perceived as broad and deep. The areas receiving the greatest number of “hits” were “interdisciplinary curriculum skills,” “working with at-risk students,” and “tailoring instruction to diverse learning styles/achievement levels.” “Reading/writing/literacy” received 64 “hits,” but professional development in “other content areas” was perceived as a need by only 18 respondents.

All six of the options for “how do you plan to meet these needs” received a substantial number of responses. However, it was evident in the numbers and the pattern of choices that “encouraging teachers to pursue college coursework” was the least satisfactory option. Again, the strong preference was for professional development provided by the district, through formal programs on- and off-site, staff meetings, and team meetings.

Analysis of the Part 2 Narrative Responses

The following themes were identified in the narrative responses:

- Special training is critical to effective teaching of adolescent students, whose special needs at this point in their lives make them dramatically different from younger and older students.
- Although the current elementary and secondary certificates do not adequately prepare candidates for working with this age-group, new graduates are better prepared than in earlier years.
- The current course requirements are a start, but they are minimal.
• The endorsement has done a reasonably good job of focusing attention on the unique professional development needs required to work with this group and the development of a cadre of teachers with appropriate knowledge and skills.

• Because of the hold-harmless provisions, there are still many individuals in middle level classrooms who are not adequately prepared. Some have been placed there against their will; others are there until they can secure a high school or lower elementary position. Some are very senior teachers who do not believe in or want to embrace the middle level approach.

• Administrators at the middle school level need better training to provide leadership and support.

• Middle level students are at a critical juncture and deserve appropriately trained teachers.

• The proposed middle level certification may limit the number of individuals who choose this area but it would “be worth it” to have appropriately trained teachers for all middle level students.

• Adoption of the proposed middle level certificate can be expected to have many benefits, ranging from improved achievements, more effective teams, greater support for student social, emotional and other needs, etc.

Although respondents thought that the requirement of two areas of academic emphasis would significantly strengthen the two-person teams in many of their schools, there was a divergence of opinion on the issue of “content expertise.” Some respondents appear to believe the middle school concept and approach is diluting content and depriving middle level students of strong academic preparation. Others respondents indicated that content expertise is not as critical as a teacher’s ability to address the specific needs of students in this age group.

Final Thoughts

Many of the respondents to the survey are passionate believers in and advocates for middle level education. They are persuasive in their plea for teacher preparation that enables each teacher to work effectively with students in this age group. They are also convincing in their comments that, even though there has been progress over the last decade or so, it has been slow and remains inadequate.

Although the survey probably deserves further discussion and may contain clues about what we need to do, it fails to provide clear direction for the basic policy questions – how to best ensure that middle level teachers are adequately prepared and what constitutes “adequate preparation.”