

UCA Middle Level Education Advisory Board

Spring 2026 Meeting

5/8/26

Participating Members: Scott Strickland (Conway- teacher), Tonya Boyd (Conway- teacher), Christopher Jensen (Conway- teacher), Micaela Martinez (Conway- teacher), Marie Aldrich (Conway- teacher), Sondra Wordlaw (North Little Rock - teacher), Todd Stovall (North Little Rock - teacher), Akeyla Barksdale (North Little Rock - teacher), Vincent Bryant (North Little Rock - teacher)

Advisory board members were invited to participate virtually in the annual advisory board meeting.

Agenda:

1. Each advisory board member has been in the role of mentor teacher or other school partner for a UCA middle level candidate, including Internship I or II candidates during the 2025-2026 school year. Each member was invited to share program strengths and areas of improvement based on their observations and experiences.

Strengths:

- Candidates are highly engaged, consistently paying attention, and willing to move around the classroom to interact with students rather than remaining passive observers.
- Mentors noted that students usually arrive prepared, dressed appropriately, and ready to engage with the lessons being taught.
- A recurring strength is the students' ability to ask "the right kinds of questions," indicating they are being coached on what to look for during field experiences.
- Candidates demonstrate a strong grasp of instructional methods and the ability to create effective lesson plans.
- Interns entering Internship II are noted for having a "firm emergent understanding" of how to manage a classroom environment.
- Observers highlighted that candidates understand the specific needs of middle-level learners and are adept at building positive relationships with them.
- The program provides students with specific "look-fors," which helps them navigate and understand different classroom settings. Mentors appreciated the program's emphasis on observing candidates and providing them with actionable feedback to improve their practice.
- The program is credited with exposing students to a diverse range of classroom settings early in their education.
- Communication between candidates and UCA supervisors is described as "in-depth and specific," ensuring the program runs smoothly.
- Reflective practice is a visible strength; candidates are willing to collaborate with mentors and adjust their instruction based on student needs and professional guidance.
- Overall: The program is successfully bridging the gap between university theory and classroom practice, producing candidates who are described as well-equipped, reflective, and professional.

Areas of Improvement:

- A primary concern is that some candidates remain "tethered to the chair" in the back of the room. Mentors suggest they need to ask more questions of the teacher and interact more with the students rather than just taking notes.
- There was a specific note regarding professional "presence." Candidates should be reminded to keep phones away, as students notice; if an emergency arises, they should step into the hall.

- There appears to be a disconnect between the number of students scheduled to observe and those who actually show up in early field classes, suggesting a need for a more rigorous or transparent sign-in/verification process.
- Mentors strongly suggest a dedicated focus on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 Plans. Candidates need to understand that general education teachers are often inclusion teachers and should have more experience working directly with students who have specific accommodations.
- While candidates have a foundational understanding of management, mentors feel they need more preparation for high-stakes classroom behaviors and conflict resolution. They need practical strategies for handling difficult interactions in the moment.
- There is a recurring wish for "more and more" hands-on time. Mentors believe the best way to prepare candidates is to maximize their hours in the physical classroom.
- A specific recommendation was made to allow student teachers to remain with the same classroom teacher for a full academic year to provide better continuity and a deeper understanding of the "start-to-finish" cycle of a school year. [see feedback below re: yearlong residency]

Feedback on specific topics

- The Science of Reading (SoR) as a Universal Requirement
 - Mentors reminded candidates that passing the Science of Reading Praxis is a non-negotiable requirement for many districts. Candidates aiming for 4th or 5th grade need particularly deep SoR training, as these are critical years for transitioning from "learning to read" to "reading to learn."
 - There is a strong push for candidates to understand that SoR is not just for ELA. For example, in Science, teachers are using Latin roots and the "Reading Rope" strands to decode academic vocabulary—candidates should be prepared to support literacy in every content area.
- High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM)
 - It is not enough to just know what HQIM is; candidates need practical training on how to implement these curricula "with fidelity" in a real-world classroom.
 - Mentors suggest that students need better skills in evaluating instructional materials and knowing how (and when) to strategically supplement them without undermining the core curriculum.
 - Conway teacher suggested undergraduate preparation in technology used in local districts, such as Schoology.
- Intervention and Specialized Support
 - Candidates need to know how to use student data to drive reading interventions specifically.
 - There is a significant statewide emphasis on Tier III Reading interventions. Mentors suggested that exposure to specialized paths, such as Masters-level work in Reading or Dyslexia, is increasingly valuable for providing the intensive services schools currently require.
- Yearlong Residency
 - Mentors are excited about residents being present for the "entire process," including classroom setup, professional development, and the foundational first days of school. The yearlong model is expected to significantly strengthen the rapport between the resident, the students, and the families. Moving Residency I to three days a week is viewed as a major improvement, allowing for more "hands-on" experience and better integration into the school culture.
 - A major concern is the loss of exposure to different classroom settings, teaching styles, and student populations. Mentors asked if there will be "bridge" opportunities for residents to observe other environments so they don't leave the program with a limited perspective. Because the resident will be with one teacher for a full year, mentors stressed that the selection process must be more rigorous.