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# Planning for Middle Level Clinical Experiences During a Crisis

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## **Planning for Middle Level Clinical Experiences during a Crisis**

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### **Abstract**

This article describes the trials and tribulations that a middle level education program faced during the global pandemic and recommendations that others can take away from these experiences. The provided suggestions for middle level teacher education programs are specifically for the current pandemic but can be used for other disasters as well. We advocate that educator preparation programs develop a plan to deal with possible school closers or other disruptions to their field placements to prepare for the next disaster. Some of the recommendations include: (a) create an emergency plan, (b) cultivate relationships, (c) prepare your candidates in the best practices of online teaching and educate them about online teaching platforms, (d) focus on the well-being of the candidates and not just ensuring that they complete the requirements, (e) consider relationship building skills when hiring field supervisors, (f) include strategies that help candidates understand how to deal with stress into your curriculum, and (g) adjust to situations on a case-to-case basis.

### **Introduction**

Over the years, Brady Education College's (pseudonym) Middle Level Education Program has made many changes to improve the education of preservice middle school candidates and to better prepare them for: teaching middle level students, middle school level development, and middle school level philosophy. Brady Education College recognized the importance of improving their middle level education program (Dever, 2020) and thus has improved by participating in the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) Specialized Professional Association (SPA) review process. Some of the changes made as a result of this process include designing courses or aspects of courses that are specific to teaching middle level students, focusing more of middle school philosophy, preparing candidates to teach on teams, and helping candidates better understand the developmental level of students from this age range, which are all recommended by the AMLE (2010, 2012). These changes to improve Brady Education College's Middle Level Education Program occurred over years with the involvement of many faculty, current teachers, public school administrators, middle level candidates, and various committees. Although improving and maintaining a middle level education certification program takes constant revisions and can be a challenge due to faculty members' reluctances to make changes (Dever, 2020; McCrickerd, 2012), the problems that the Middle Level Education Program faced when COVID-19 closed schools to in-person learning were difficult to solve. Brady Education College's Middle Level Education Program has candidates placed in over 15 school districts and over 60 different schools. Brady Education College has approximately 80-120 candidates placed in the aforementioned school districts in the fall and spring semesters.

Specifically, they have approximately 15 middle level candidates placed in schools a year, most of which are placed in different districts.

Working with so many districts when you are placing candidates and helping candidates find employment after completing the program is an advantage. However, when in-person learning was suspended, this benefit became a challenge. Brady Education College had to navigate K-12 student learning, keeping everyone safe, college policies, school district's policies, policies by the Texas State Board of Education, the county judges' decisions, and the Texas Governor's mandates. For example, the school districts that Brady Education College works with reside within multiple counties that each have a county judge that created their own COVID-19 restrictions. The uncertainty of the situation with COVID-19 forced Brady Education College to make many changes to their Middle Level Education Program, clinical placements, and policies. This article describes the trials and tribulations that Brady Education College's Middle Level Education Program faced and recommendations that others can take away from their experiences.

### **Overview of Brady Education College's Middle Level Education Program**

Brady Education College is situated in an urban area in Texas. In the State of Texas, middle level certification is from 4<sup>th</sup> grade through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. These certifications can be in the areas of math, science, language arts and reading, social studies, generalist (certifies candidates in all subject areas), and generalist with ESL supplemental. Each of these degree plans require candidates to take at least two courses that are specific to middle level education and as many as five middle level specific education courses. The courses that are specific to teaching middle level students, teaching methodologies, and subject matter are included in the Middle Level Education Program because such courses are recommended (AMLE, 2010, 2012; McEwin & Smith, 2013). These courses include *Creating Positive Learning Environments in 4-8* and the specific methods (subject areas) course(s) in which the candidate is getting certified. For example, candidates who are seeking 4-8 science certification would take *Science Methods for Grades 4-8*. In addition, in these classes and others, candidates have assignment that are specific to middle level education. For example, in their *Creating Positive Learning Environments in 4-8* course, candidates plan a lesson plan that applies AMLE standards (recommended by Wall, 2019) and middle level development, teaching practices, curriculum, and classroom management strategies for middle level students. Such classes and assignments that specifically focus on middle level education are necessary given some of the challenges associated with teaching middle level students (Brown, 2016; Caskey & Anfara, 2007; Divoll & Ribeiro, 2021; Paris, 2016; Powell, 2015; Steinberg, 2014) and because teachers tend to leave the profession early in their career because of the issues associated with teaching such students (Brill & McCartney, 2008; Kraft et al., 2016a, 2016b; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009). Moreover, these courses help prepare middle school teachers to deal with the unique needs of students at this level (Miller & Thompson, 2016).

Brady Education College's candidates complete over 130 hours in the field and practice teaching lessons with middle level students prior to clinical teaching. A candidate's final two semesters include a once-a-week semester long placement (what they call Internship I) and a five-day-a-week semester long placement (what they call Internship II, but most people consider clinical teaching). The second to last semester, candidates are in a middle school classroom on Wednesdays (Internship I) for the entire semester and take at least one methods course. During Internship I, candidates are in school for the times that their cooperating teachers are required.

This includes the time that a teacher is contractually obligated to be there on a daily basis and any afterschool meetings that are required on that day. Internship I candidates are required to teach at least two lessons to middle school students while in their one-day-a-week placement. However, they are encouraged to teach additional lessons and takeover other responsibilities from the cooperating teacher.

During their final semester, candidates are placed in the same school and grade level, but are required to be in the classroom five full school days a week for the entire semester. This Internship II placement, which will be referred to as clinical teaching from here on, requires candidates to take over additional responsibilities from the clinical teacher and a minimum of six weeks of independent teaching wherein the candidate plans and teaches middle school students. Although Brady Education College prepares candidates to teach in schools that adopt a middle school philosophy (AMLE 2010, 2012), few of the middle schools or middle grade classrooms adopt an entire middle level philosophy. During a candidate's final two semesters, they, at minimum, have a cooperating teacher (the teacher of record in the classroom or classrooms in which they are placed) and field supervisor. The field supervisor is a liaison between the college, the campus administration, the cooperating teacher, and the candidate. The field supervisor visits the candidate and the cooperating teacher at the school multiple times a semester, observes the candidate, and reviews the candidate's assignments.

### **Spring COVID-19 Disruptions**

Like many education preparation programs, COVID-19 left Brady Education College with uncertainty around what they would be able to do to ensure their middle level candidates received the proper preparation. Brady Education College had to navigate candidate learning, keeping everyone safe, the county judges' decisions, the Texas Governor's mandates, and the policies of the college, each of the schools, and the Texas State Board of Education. This was complicated by the fact that the school districts in which candidates are placed reside within multiple counties that each have a county judge that created COVID-19 restrictions. Many of the school districts with which Brady Education College works follow the same spring break schedule as the college does, i.e., a one-week break in the middle of March. Most of the school districts that Brady Education College work with, as did Brady Education College, extended their spring break by a week when COVID-19 began to become a threat in Texas to allow for teachers to prepare to go online (Webb & Carpenter, 2020). However, the largest school district in the area, Adams Independent School District (pseudonym), had their spring break the week after and closed schools the Thursday before the start of their break (Webb & Carpenter, 2020). Thus, Brady Education College was also dealing with multiple calendars. The extra week before classes resumed allowed Brady Education College to prepare for the online placements for the time being. During that time, Brady Education College adapted their coursework requirements to ensure that candidates could still meet the requirements and continue to move towards graduation.

Although Brady Education College did not know how long schools were going to be converted to remote learning, they anticipated that they would be using remote learning for the remainder of the school year and planned accordingly. On March 19, the Texas Governor closed schools to in-person learning until at least April 3<sup>rd</sup>, then in late March moved the date until at least May 4<sup>th</sup>, and finally in April closed Texas schools to in-person learning for the remainder of the school year (Goldenstein et al., 2020; Swaby, 2020; Weinberg, 2020). When COVID-19 restrictions were put into place in Texas in March, Brady Education College was fortunate that



candidates had been in the classroom since early January and already met the 35-day minimum requirement that the Texas Governor mandated as a result of the virus. Typically, candidates are in the classroom until the middle of May.

The uncertainty of the situation with COVID-19 and whether or not the schools would reopen to in-person learning forced Brady Education College to make changes on the fly. The Director of the Center for Professional Development of Teachers (CPDT) and the Teach Education Advisory Committee Chair met to discuss options regarding course requirements and adaptation of assignments. These options were shared with the Teach Education Advisory Committee (TEAC). TEAC is comprised of field supervisors (retired teachers/administrators) and full-time faculty from across the college. This advisory group’s role is to make recommendations to the CPDT Director and the TEAC Chair regarding course textbooks, candidates’ field placements, field observation documents, course assignments, and course rubrics. The spring semester resulted in a number of challenges that can be summarized as questions. Some of the questions that COVID-19 posed for by the Middle Level Education Program are included in the Table 1. As a result of these questions, the aforementioned group developed a number of new policies and procedures. These new policies and procedures can be seen in Table 2.

Table 1  
*Questions Posed through COVID-19*

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| Question 1 | How can Brady Education College maintain the integrity of the candidates’ preparation and honor the stress of the schools/teachers?           |
| Question 2 | Will school districts and schools allow candidates to participate?  |
| Question 3 | How can Brady Education College gain access to the school’s online teaching platforms so that candidates can participate?                     |
| Question 4 | Will the teachers be too overwhelmed to have the candidate involved with the online schooling?  |
| Question 5 | What new policies and procedures does Brady Education College need to implement to ensure candidate follow-through?                           |
| Question 6 | What contingencies can Brady Education College create if a candidate is not allowed to participate in the online teaching in their placement. |
| Question 7 | How can Brady Education College hold field supervisor meetings with candidates and cooperating teachers?                                      |
| Question 8 | How can Brady Education College observe candidate’s teaching?   |

Table 2  
*Policies Developed as a Result of COVID-19*

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| New Policy 1 | Candidates were still expected to complete the semester and course requirements, but the candidates would do so on a digital platform. |
|--------------|--|

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| New Policy 2 | Clinical teachers were expected to participate in all areas of planning and implementation through phone conferences with cooperating teachers and video planning with grade levels and/or subject area teams.   |
| New Policy 3 | A clinical teaching log was kept by all clinical teaching candidates to record all activities when the shutdown occurred due to COVID-19.  |
| New Policy 4 | Candidates were required to participate in additional campus meetings remotely and field supervisor Zoom meetings weekly.  |
| New Policy 5 | Daily communication between the candidate and field supervisor occurred via email, text, or phone call depending on the preference of the parties involved.  |
| New Policy 6 | Candidates continued their weekly journal reflections with field supervisors.  |
| New Policy 7 | Practicum assignments were adapted. For example, during the practicum, candidates were required to teach multiple lessons, collect data on student learning, and reflect on the impact of their teaching based on the data for the impact on student learning assignment. This assignment was not feasible under the circumstances and was replaced with a log that included the date, activity, activity explanation, duration of time, and activity reflection.    |
| New Policy 8 | Candidates were still required to be observed the same number of times by their field supervisors. They wanted to evaluate the candidates teaching regardless as to whether or not the candidate could teach in their clinical placement. If candidates could not teach their lesson plans in the online format, they would video themselves teaching the lessons to family members, their own children, or roommates and share with their supervising practitioner. |

After all of these policies were developed, the university supervisors and the Director of CPDT worked with school districts and schools to determine what candidates would be allowed to do in each setting. The changes were then communicated with candidates and the field supervisor worked with the cooperating teacher, the campus administration and candidates to complete requirements and determine alternatives if something could not be completed. In the spring semester, most of Brady Education College's candidate who were in Internship I or their clinical teaching were allowed to participate in the online teaching.

### **Fall COVID-19 Impact Still Present**

Although the fall semester should have been easier to plan for because Brady Education College had the entire summer, in many ways, it was more difficult. Once the decision was made that at least the first eight weeks of the semester would be online, Brady Education College assumed that the year would start similar to how the spring ended. Brady Education College was encouraged because candidates' placements were welcomed by the districts. Also, many of the assignment changes that were adapted during the spring remained for the fall of 2020. However,

the beginning of the semester was complicated because some districts wanted more time to prepare for the eight weeks of online learning and thus many districts had different start dates. When remote learning started in the spring, teachers taught remotely from their homes. In the fall, many school districts required teachers to conduct their remote learning from their classrooms. Each district had different COVID-19 policies and some restricted candidates from being in the building while others allowed them to be in the classroom during the first eight weeks as long as they wore a mask. In addition, Brady Education College had to navigate their candidates and the cooperating teachers' fear of contracting the virus. Parents and guardians of K-12 students were allowed to decide whether they wanted their children to continue online or attend classes in a face-to-face format after the first eight weeks. This meant that candidates had to split time between teaching online and face-to-face or have some students attend classes online while others participated in a face-to-face format at the same time. In some cases, the cooperating teacher would have the candidate teach in one format, while the teacher did the other.

Moreover, Brady Education College policy allowed those who did not feel comfortable meeting face-to-face to participate in an online format. Thus, once some K-12 students were meeting face-to-face, Brady Education College had to reevaluate each field placement to determine what the district would allow and with what the candidate and cooperating teacher were comfortable. Also, since many of the field supervisors are retired teachers and administrators, they were in the age range that were most likely to suffer the worst consequences from the virus. Therefore, in an effort to keep them safe, Brady Education College allowed the field supervisors to meet with the clinical teachers and candidates and observe the candidates remotely. In addition, since candidates started going to the classroom during the first eight weeks or joined the classroom after the first eight weeks, candidates had to follow the district protocols if they were exposed to COVID-19 or tested positive for the virus. Brady Education College also had to develop a college policy for this contingency and a policy for how to deal with the lost hours that a candidate might miss while they were away from the classroom. Students who were exposed or tested positive, but were not sick were expected to participate remotely during their required times until they could safely return to the classroom.

Another issue that developed in the fall was with candidates' state certification exams. One of the policies at Brady Education College was that candidates must have all of their state certification exams passed prior to clinical teaching (a candidate's final semester). This was not an issue for candidates in their clinical teaching in the spring of 2020 because they already passed their exams before COVID-19 closed the testing centers. However, candidates who were going into clinical teaching in the fall of 2020 could not take their state certification exams because testing locations were closed. Many of the candidates attempt to pass all of their state certification exams during their Internship I semester or during the summer (if they take Internship I in the spring). Since state certification exam sites were closed from the middle of March through the summer, candidates could not pass their exams. For context, candidates in the Middle Level Education Program take two or three state certification exams depending on their certification area. Before they are approved to take a certification exam, the candidate must score at least an 80 on a practice test that Brady Education College administers. Between studying for a practice test, taking/passing a practice test, the approval process to take the exam, scheduling an actual exam, and passing that exam, it takes at minimum a month. This timeline is further complicated if a candidate fails a practice exam or a state certification exam because the candidate has to start the process over again. If a candidate fails an actual exam, the State of

Texas mandates a 30-day waiting period before signing up for the exam again. If a student fails a certification exam, it might take them two to three months before they are approved to retake the exam. Thus, Brady Education College had to change their policy for the candidates in their clinical teaching in the fall of 2020. After being developed by the CPDT Director and the TEAC Chair, the policy was reviewed by the Teacher Education Program faculty and approved within a month. The new policy allowed candidates to move forward to their clinical teaching without their state certification exams being passed.

### **Dealing with the Issues: What Worked**

Despite the craziness of trying to prepare candidates to teach during the pandemic, Brady Education College believed that their program created changes that helped candidates develop. One of the things that worked was Brady Education College's partnerships with the districts. The partnerships that they forged with the districts and the close relationship that Brady Education College's field supervisors have with the school districts in which the candidates are placed were critical to their success. Most of the field supervisors were former employees in the district in which they supervise candidates and who had a relationship with the administration and many of the teachers in that district. These relationships, along with the fact that the CPDT Director is a former principal who knows many of the principals and administrators in each district, assisted with negotiating the candidates needs with the K-12 school policies. Brady Education College also understood that they were guests in the classrooms and had to work around the school and cooperating teacher's needs. Thus, Brady Education College approached a candidate's placement from the mentality that they will take what the K-12 schools were willing to give them and that cooperating teachers should use candidates to help make their classrooms successful.

Having these relationships and the partnerships that Brady Education College formed over the years, created a situation wherein the schools wanted to help ensure that candidates were still receiving the preparation that they needed. In addition, over the years schools and districts recognized that placing candidates in their classrooms was beneficial to the school and district. The candidates not only helped their cooperating teacher in the classroom, but also impacted students learning. In many ways, having a candidate in a school was similar to a year-long job interview and helped schools and districts determine who to hire. Most of the field supervisors, being former teachers and/or administrators in that district also took pride in the development of the candidates. Many of the candidates were being hired in the schools or districts in which they were placed. Thus, the schools, districts, field supervisors, and cooperating teachers took ownership over the candidates completing their preparation. As a result, most of the districts included clinical teachers in their virtual platforms, involved candidate in professional development, and in online and/or face-to-face classroom lessons.

Second, many of the teachers in the spring were only given one week to convert their face-to-face sessions into online learning classes. For many cooperating teachers, candidates became an extra set of hands, technical support, and someone to help with ideas on how to move to online learning. Some examples how candidates assisted their cooperating teachers included adapting lessons for online learning, setting up online teaching platforms such as *Google Classroom* and *ItsLearning*, making parent friendly lesson plans for at home learning, creating parent instructional how guides to interact with online platforms, and assisting with grading. The cooperating teachers seemed to appreciate candidates help with: converting lessons, understanding using online platforms, and ideas about using new technologies. Third, developing the log wherein candidate kept track of what they did and how they participated in the online

sessions was a success. This log helped hold candidates and field supervisors accountable and became record keeping to show how the candidates met the requirements.

Fourth, Brady Education College converted to an online format at the same time as public schools. Thus, Brady Education College provided funding for college students who did not have adequate technology to participate in online formats. Although this was not specifically designed for candidates, as Brady Education College students, they benefited from this offer and thus, all candidates were able to participate in the online formats required by the school in which they were placed. Fifth, another success was the communication between the cooperating teacher, the candidate, and the field supervisor. Brady Education College provided field supervisors and candidates access to Zoom for online meetings. This helped because the Middle Level Education Program did not have to search for a platform and Brady Education College paid for the service. The triangulation of the communication between the three parties clarified issues, avoided problems, and helped ensure that the expectations were met.

Sixth, the relationships that developed between the field supervisor and the candidates were another success. Since field supervisors were the direct contact between Brady Education College and candidates, they not only served as mentors, but also communication conduits and in some ways a support system to help candidates deal with all of the changes. Brady Education College's field supervisors were an asset to the Middle Level Education Program and ameliorated the difficulties during this challenging time. Without the field supervisors, the fall and spring semesters would not have gone as well. The final success was the people on TEAC and all of those involved in adapting the policies for the spring. These people made changes in weeks that would normally take years to get approved. It was important for Brady Education College to have such a dedicated group of people, who not only care about the candidates, but also the integrity of the Middle Level Program and all of the education programs.

### **Lessons Learned**

Despite all of the successes that Brady Education College had in making changes to their programs, there are also issues that arose and changes that Brady Education College would make in hindsight. One of most difficult aspects for candidates was the uncertainty that they faced in terms of their practicum experiences and what COVID-19 would mean for them and their families. Although the Middle Level Education Program's focus was on ensuring that the candidates met the requirements, they quickly realized that they were not just dealing with the placement issues, but also the stress and uncertainty that COVID-19 caused in a candidate's life. Some candidates contracted COVID-19, others had friends or family who were laid off from their job, while others had family members or friends get sick and/or pass away. Additionally, candidates with children encountered childcare issues. Even if none of these issues arose for the candidates, the stress of the presence of the virus and all of the daily changes that it caused impacted all of the candidates. Texas did not have the level of outbreak that many northeastern states had early in the pandemic. When schools closed in Texas, there were very few confirmed cases in the state. Thus, Brady Education College did not anticipate the life stress that the pandemic would cause candidates. Brady Education College realized this need and became empathetic towards candidates' stress level and made sure that not only the candidate's academic needs were met, but their affective needs as well. Brady Education College constantly reassured the candidates that they are moving towards graduation regardless of COVID-19 obstacles. However, this was not Brady Education College's initial focus and probably should have been a focus earlier.

Second, Brady Education College learned that they needed to include more technology into the program to help prepare candidate to teach in online settings. Although Brady Education College has a course on educational technology and many of the instructors in the program share educational technology tools, none of the candidates were fully prepared to be an online teacher. Thus, Brady Education College made changes to the program and included more about the best practices of teaching in online formats.

Third, although many of the candidates had experiences with many forms of technology, online formats constantly need support. Brady Education College should have worked out a deal with the districts so that candidates could have contacted technology support to help with the online formats used in the district. This was mainly an issue in the spring semester and in the fall for those candidates who elected not to physically go to the school in which they were placed. Some candidates called Brady Education College's technology support when they had issues, but if the online platform was not supported at Brady Education College, then they could not offer help.

Fourth, although candidates were eligible for financial support if they did not have proper technology for online teaching (mentioned as a positive above), the rollout of this program was understandably slow and was not fully implemented until the CARES Act funds were appropriated. Thus, not every candidate had adequate technology right away. Additionally, so many emails were being sent during the spring semester that knowing that there was such a program, getting the word out to candidates, obtaining the funds, and purchasing the technology during the pandemic was complicated.

Finally, the change in Brady Education College's testing policy for candidates to take and pass their state certification exams resulted in unintended consequences. The policy change, which was previously described, helped candidates move toward completing the program. Normally, since candidates have already passed their state certification exams before their clinical teaching, they are often offered a job for the next semester or school year before they complete the program. However, a number of candidates were offered jobs, but since they did not pass their exams, the offer was later rescinded. Although this policy was developed to assist candidates with graduating on time, it also added additional stress that was not anticipated. Some candidates who were in Internship I during the fall of 2020 declared that they wanted to sit out a semester to study for their state exams rather than deal with the stress of taking the exams during their clinical teaching. Thus, some students were willing to delay their graduation a semester so that they did not feel overwhelmed during their clinical teaching. This was not something that was expected, nor is it something for which Brady Education College had a solution because the certification exams are mandated by the state.

### **Suggestions for Middle Level Experiences During a Disaster**

The following are suggestions that we have for middle level teacher education programs during a pandemic or other disaster.

#### **Create an Emergency Plan**

No matter where you live in the world, there is some form of disaster that can impact your area. Living on the coast in Texas, for example, results in worrying about hurricanes, while people living in California worry about earthquakes and those living in the Midwest fear tornados. On the Gulf Coast, Hurricanes Katrina, Ike, and Harvey displaced families from their

living arrangements and destroyed public schools and colleges. Remember, not long ago, a pandemic of this magnitude was unheard of because it had not occurred since the 1900's. Thus, having a disaster plan with contingencies will help your program deal with such issues in the future. Today it is a pandemic, tomorrow it's an unprecedented winter storm in Texas that causes massive power outages, next week, who knows. Having a plan for short and long-term disasters that interrupt your programs will help you deal with the problems of the future.

### **Embrace the Challenge**

When a disaster occurs, it creates a lot of challenges for college education programs and schools. These challenges can last months (e.g., a pandemic), weeks to months (e.g., the devastation caused by a hurricane or a tornado), or days (e.g., a snow storm or flood). Embrace the challenge that such an event brings rather than look at the situation as an obstacle. Based on positive psychology, if you approach a situation as a challenge it empowers you to face the difficult situation (Achor, 2011; Ribeiro, 2018).

### **Cultivate Relationships**

The relationships that your program has with your field partners are an asset. If these relationships are cultivated in such a way that your partners are empowered to be a part of the developmental process of your candidates and they see the relationships between the district and program as being symbiotic, then regardless of the challenge they will be likely to work with you when something unexpected occurs.

### **Field Supervisors are Critical**

The field supervisors can be one of the greatest assets or biggest weaknesses of your program. Communication between the field supervisor, the cooperating teacher, and the candidate is extremely important and can help deal with potential issues. During times of change or any situation that could result in stress for the candidates or the cooperating teacher, the well-being of these individuals should be addressed (see Jennings et al., 2017; Mahfouz, 2018; Water & Stokes, 2015; Wells & Klocko, 2018; Wicher, 2015). The field supervisor is an important person in this process.

### **Hire People Who Understand that Candidates Need Support**

Hiring people that not only have experience and high standards, but recognize the importance of supporting the candidate as an individual is crucial. Not everyone has the capacity to form positive and professional relationships (Albright et al., 2017; Divoll, 2010; Watson & Battistich, 2006; Watson & Ecken, 2003), but this should be a requirement for hiring field supervisors and anyone working with teacher candidates. Also, since teaching middle level candidates about the importance of teacher-student relationships at the middle school level (Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Ellerbrock, 2016) and teaming (Ingwalson, 2016; Ruppert, 2020) are important, we should be practicing what we preach and modeling for them. In some ways, the meetings with candidates, the field supervisor, and the cooperating teacher is a model for middle school teaming. We want these groups to be similar to the tightly organized groups described by Feldman et al. (2009, 2013). As Ruppert (2020) so eloquently posits, "While we teach teaming as a tool for common practices, assessments, events, and exercises, may we never forget that teaming is about family, caring for one another, and finding ways together to make a difference with students" (p.45). Additionally, such relationships

become the foundation of modeling another “key element of middle school design,” advisory programs (Wall, 2016, p.31).

### **Give Stakeholders a Voice**

The people who work in your programs are critical to its success during trying times. Without the help and support of all those involved in the program dealing with a disaster can fail miserably. Allowing all of your stakeholders a voice in maintenance of the program most likely will result in those same people taking ownership of the program and wanting to work to solve problems during a crisis. The stakeholders at Brady Education College went above and beyond to develop policies and solve problems.

### **Candidate Preparation**

Preparing candidates with skills that allow them to teach when a disaster occurs can be beneficial. Prepare your candidates in the online learning platforms that can be used in your program’s contingency plan and the online platforms that might be used by districts to teach students. Also, prepare your candidates in the best practices of online teaching.

### **Consider Mental Health**

When a disaster occurs, candidate and teachers will be under stress and need to understand how to deal with stress and the situation. Prepare candidates to deal with stress and how the brain reacts to stress (Doyle & Zakrajsek, 2018). Teaching is considered a stressful job (Chaplain, 2008) and candidates working with middle level student can be even more stressful (Brown, 2016; Caskey & Anfara, 2007; Divoll & Ribeiro, 2021; Paris, 2016; Powell, 2015; Steinberg, 2014). Not only are candidates ill prepared to deal with the stress of the classroom, but they are even less prepared to deal with the additional stress that a disaster brings. Thus, middle level candidates need to learn methods to help them deal with stress (Divoll et al., 2018; McCarthy et al., 2015). For ideas about dealing with stress, see (Achor, 2013; Ben-Shahar, 2012; Divoll & Ribeiro, 2021; Ribeiro, 2018; Ribeiro & Divoll, 2020). Remember, you are not just developing teachers, but helping people navigate a challenging time in their life.

### **Deal with Situations on an Individual Basis**

A disaster creates so many variables that impact the program, the K-12 schools, the faculty, and the candidates. Adjust to situations on a case-by-case basis rather than assuming that every situation with a placement, cooperating teacher, field supervisor, or candidate will be the same. This will allow you to handle each situation on a personal level and with compassion.

### **Conclusion**

This article provided the lessons learned from dealing with COVID-19. We hope that your program can benefit from sharing the experiences of Brady Education College and you can learn from their successes and areas of improvement. Regardless of when the pandemic ends, being prepared for another unforeseen event can save you, your program, and your candidates a lot of turmoil in the future. Think of it this way... when you were a kid, the fire department taught you to stop-drop-and-roll if you ever caught on fire, a skill that you never thought you would need. As you read this article, someone out there right now, who never thought it would happen to them, is glad that they learned that skill. It is always better to plan and not need it, then need it and not have planned it.



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Disclaimer: The authors of this paper recognize that many people have passed away from COVID-19 and do not mean to trivialize the virus by discussing it as a problem that education preparation programs faced. We understand that field placements and the education of future teachers are trivial compared to the personal loss and economic hardships that many families have faced and are facing. However, we recognize that other programs can benefit from discussing the changes that were made and the lessons learned as a result of COVID-19.