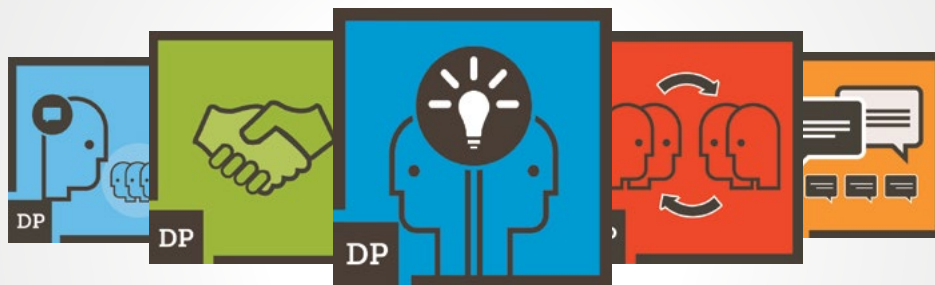


**Micro-credentials:**  
Spurring Educator  
Engagement



# Introduction

The state of educator professional learning in this country is recognizing the need to chart new ground.

Research consistently articulates the dilemma of educator professional learning as one of misalignment: the formal professional development (PD) offered in most districts and schools does not respond to the evolving nature of the profession and educators' immediate needs in facilitating a 21st century classroom, responsive to a complex world. In order for teaching to remain effective in our technologically-connected, increasingly diverse world, educators find themselves needing to adapt their classroom practice daily, with the help of teacher networks through social media and other informal means, to make sure student learning leads to college and career readiness. Yet, the vast majority of professional learning provided to educators currently does not support this experience shared by many educators.

"Teachers Know Best: Teachers' Views on Professional Development," a 2015 Gates Foundation report, details research and trends on building more effective professional development. One of the major findings is that educators view professional development "more as a compliance exercise than a learning activity," and more importantly, as an activity "over which they have limited, if any, choice." This research makes the case for educators to have a role in managing their *own* learning. Educators have intimate knowledge of their classroom and students' needs to ensure their professional learning provides the instructional support they *actually* need.

Many educators are looking for support as districts transition to student-centered, personalized learning models. In these new

models, educators empower students to be autonomous learners and courageous thinkers, and to adapt content for each student—all within an [increasingly diverse K-12 population](#). Additionally, to strengthen this shift to personalized student learning, many schools are experimenting with competency-based education models, which allow students to choose different ways to learn and show their knowledge of concrete skills. The ways the student learning experience is being reimaged are serving as starting points for reimagining the educator professional learning experience, as well.

**We are on the cusp of a shift in educator PD business as usual.**

Bold questions are being raised and new ideas are emerging to expand educator professional learning experiences that are teacher-driven and outcome-focused. The logic behind personalized student learning and competency-based education is beginning to contour the ways districts and schools approach educator professional learning. Districts and schools are now imagining ways that educator voice and choice can serve as significant drivers of the professional learning they offer.

In order for PD offerings to have overlap with an educator's role in personalizing student learning, PD must support teachers as they customize their own professional development aligned to their unique student needs. In "How Teachers are Learning: Professional Development Remix," EdSurge recommends that new PD models invite

teacher choice, and offer differentiation and content based on educators' unique needs. Also, the report recommends PD offerings have aspects that integrate into a teacher's actual work day. Further, EdSurge's report asserts that districts need to become more flexible in how they recognize informal learning experiences as a part of district-approved PD. But we are on the cusp of a shift in educator PD business as usual.

The fact is teachers are already participating in PD experiences outside school walls, such as Twitter chats, EdCamps, online courses, and conferences and unconferences — pulling lessons learned from those informal opportunities into their classroom practice. If formal professional development can begin acknowledging these experiences, then educators can feel empowered to continue learning in a format they find most useful.

Micro-credentials are one way of bridging the gap between informal and formal professional learning. They recognize specific competencies that support a student-centered classroom, such as: checking for understanding, using exit tickets, using student data for better decision making, or facilitating wait time in a group discussion. Micro-credentials meet the need for customized content and format while giving educators the opportunity to manage and direct their own professional learning journey.

To earn a micro-credential, educators submit authentic artifacts of learning, such as student work samples, classroom videos, or reflections, as evidence of the micro-credential's articulated competency. Then, qualified assessors review that evidence, and award the micro-credential if the competency is demonstrated.

Districts and state education agencies are beginning to consider the promise of micro-credentials as a way to recognize educators for the ongoing and informal learning they are already undertaking to best serve their students, whether through YouTube, Pinterest, partnering with other educators, or in traditional, more formal ways. As they begin this journey, a major consideration is how micro-credentials will be officially recognized as a benefit to the professional trajectory of an educator.

This report provides a starting point for that conversation.

# Incentive Strategies for Educator Micro-credentials



Local districts and state boards of education across the country are exploring the promise of micro-credentials within broader systems of professional learning, and as a way to align educator professional growth markers (continuing education units, points, relicensure, etc.) with the shared goal of ensuring college and career ready students.

When transitioning to micro-credentials, incentives are an important consideration. Developing a set of rewards for earning micro-credentials is beneficial for broad adoption. This report has compiled some emerging strategies to expand educator engagement in earning micro-credentials. Following are three strategies to ensure micro-credentials are beneficial to the professional journey of educators.

## 1. Micro-credentials Converting to Continuing Education Units (CEUs)

For many educators, professional learning is measured by a system of continuing education units (CEUs). The nomenclature may vary depending on district and state (e.g., continuing education units, credits, contact hours, points), but universally, these units signal whether educators are in professional “good standing” in a variety of high-stakes ways for educators. One is for the purpose of *master’s equivalency degree* standing for those seeking salary advancement or leadership opportunities, and another is for *teacher re-certification and licensure renewal*.

Several school districts and state-level education agencies have recently implemented systems that allow earned micro-credentials to convert into a specific number of CEUs, which educators can then use for re-licensure or to petition for a master’s equivalency. Baltimore County Public Schools and North Carolina Department of Public Instruction are two systems leveraging micro-credentials for CEUs and for the benefit of their educators.

## Micro-credentials and an Educator’s Master’s Degree Equivalency

Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS) began their micro-credential pilot during the 2015-2016 school year as a way to recognize educators as they personalize learning for students through technology, which is a district priority. The micro-credentials chosen for the pilot aligned with the district’s vision of BCPS as a 21<sup>st</sup> century, learner-centered environment.

Professional development for BCPS educators is measured through continuing professional development credits (CPD), the district’s equivalent of CEUs. These units can count towards an educator’s Master’s degree equivalency. BCPS wanted there to be multiple incentives for earning micro-credentials. Beyond serving the direct purpose of recognizing educators creating customized, digital learning environments for the district’s students, BCPS created a system where micro-credentials convert to continuing professional development credits (CPD).

Here's the math behind the system: every two BCPS approved micro-credentials earned can fulfill one Maryland State Department of Education CPD credit. 36 post-baccalaureate credits must be presented for a master's equivalency to be granted, 15 of which can come from CPD work.

Through this incentive structure, BCPS educators who use earned micro-credentials toward a master's equivalency are able to increase their compensation, and may become eligible for leadership opportunities. Also, because micro-credentials articulate skill and competency in an explicit and transparent way, BCPS is at the beginning stages of implementing a way for earned micro-credentials to serve as "district teacher leadership endorsements," according to the district's Chief of Organizational Effectiveness, Billy Burke. Through this system's ability to identify expert teacher talent, those educators who want to remain in the classroom can do so, while still receiving district-level leadership recognition and access. The incentive structures being explored by BCPS for earning micro-credentials recognizes the increasing demands placed on educators committed to effective 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching, and at the same time, empowers educators to own their role in that journey.

## Micro-credentials and an Educator's Licensure Renewal Efforts

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) manages teacher licensure in the state, and now offers teachers the opportunity to include earned micro-credentials in their license renewal efforts.

NCDPI requires that educator licenses be renewed every five years. A certain number of renewal credits or CEUs must be obtained, depending on the licensure area. Renewal credit is a time-based unit that can come from college or

university coursework, in-service courses or workshops, or classes and workshops approved by a Local Education Agency (LEA), synonymous with school district).

Let's consider what this looks like in practice: if a Durham Public Schools kindergarten teacher completes a week-long (40 hour) in-service workshop on phonemic awareness, the teacher would receive four CEUs, and could submit those CEUs to the Licensure Section at Durham Public Schools. Those CEUs would then count toward the teacher's required eight renewal credits.

The state's licensure renewal process has been recently redesigned to ensure that classroom teachers are continually growing their professional knowledge and sharpening their pedagogical competency. This shift to a process that prioritizes ongoing skill development has led the way for the state to recognize earned micro-credentials as a part of licensure renewal requirements.

One way North Carolina educators can include micro-credentials as part of their CEUs for licensure renewal is through Massive Open Online Courses for Educators (MOOC-Eds), state-approved professional development offered by NC State University. MOOC-Eds were recently redesigned to integrate micro-credentials throughout certain courses.

MOOC-Eds are designed to create engaged communities of educators through free, flexible online course modules on specific topics. These MOOCs include information, multimedia resources, a community of practice, and guidance by experts in the field. NC State awards a certain number of CEUs to each MOOC-Ed, depending on course length and difficulty. Participating educators need to earn all micro-credentials associated with their MOOC-Ed in order to be awarded CEUs. For example, the Institute developed the "Learning Differences" MOOC-Ed, a six-week

course that explores research and instructional strategies to better meet the needs of diverse student learning styles. In partnership with Digital Promise, Friday Institute developed micro-credentials to support each unit of study. NC State equated completion of this MOOC-Ed, including embedded micro-credentials, to 30 hours of professional development, or three renewal credits.

The partnership between the Friday Institute at NC State University and NCDPI shows how traditional state-approved professional learning opportunities can leverage micro-credentials to strengthen the professional advancement of teachers.

## 2. Micro-credentials Leading to Base Salary Increases

Kettle Moraine School District (KMSD), located in Wales, Wisconsin, designed a compensation structure that connects an educator's salary advancement with earned micro-credentials. This salary model aligns with KMSD's value placed on continuous and reflective educator learning and practice.

In spring 2014, KMSD received school board approval to pilot a compensation system where earned micro-credentials would lead to increases in a teacher's base salary. According to Superintendent Patricia Deklotz, board approval was unanimous since they "understood how this model supported KMSD's priority of collaborative, competency-based teacher practice and also, how it could serve as an on-ramp for providing personalized learning experiences for students."

Kettle Moraine worked closely with a focus group of teachers during the summer of 2014 to refine the details surrounding the new salary structure, being sure to develop a flexible model that would not penalize teachers who did not earn micro-credentials. KMSD officially implemented its new salary model during the 2015-2016 school year.

This new compensation model awards a permanent base salary increase, ranging from \$200 to \$600, depending on the difficulty of each earned micro-credential. The process of earning micro-credentials and achieving salary advancement in Kettle Moraine School District is coordinated by the Office of Human Resources and the Office of Teaching and Learning. First, educators seek what KMSD calls "pre-approval." During this step, educators provide written rationale for the micro-credentials they've selected, including the impact they will have on students and their alignment with the district's mission. Once approval is granted, the educator focuses on developing their skills, and collecting the artifacts and evidence required to earn the micro-credential. If successful, they submit proof of the earned micro-credential to the Office of Human Resources at KMSD, and the salary increase takes effect.

Connecting the district's salary scale to earned micro-credentials encourages continuous and ongoing professional learning amongst KMSD teachers. KMSD originally considered a stipend model, which would have awarded a one-time monetary amount to teachers for earned micro-credential. However, Superintendent Deklotz felt it was important that micro-credentials led to permanent salary increases. She observed that "stipends are for completed work; micro-credentials for our district's students and teachers are worthy of more than one-time recognition. Personalizing learning is ongoing work."

## 3. Micro-credentials Featuring in Professional Growth Plans (PGP)

Clark County School District, serving students in the city of Las Vegas, Nevada, has developed a Professional Growth System that is tied to educators' salary advancement. When entering the district, each educator is placed on the pay scale according to his

or her educational attainment and previous maximum teaching salary. Once on the scale, a teacher begins accruing professional development time, also known as contact units, to increase his or her base salary.

All teachers are required to get 675 hours of professional development, or 225 CU (contact units), to move over one salary column. To attain these units, educators work with their school leader to develop a Professional Growth Plan (PGP). This PGP outlines the professional development activities the educator proposes to undertake, such as conferences, inservice workshops, or online courses, that are aligned to the state's rubric for effective teaching, the Nevada Educator Performance Framework. For the 2016-17 school year, Clark County educators can earn up to 30 CUs for approved micro-credentials. Micro-credentials must be related to the educator's licensure area, and approved by Digital Promise.

This ensures educators are developing competencies that will be beneficial to their classroom practice, and that all micro-credentials are vetted and research-backed.

Clark County School District's micro-credential incentive structure strengthens its already robust professional development offerings. By earning micro-credentials, Clark County educators can now utilize informal pathways, as well as more formal routes available, to grow professionally and be recognized for their learning.

The micro-credential engagement strategy Clark County School District is exploring strengthens its already robust professional development offerings. By earning micro-credentials, Clark County educators can utilize informal pathways, as well as more formal routes available, to grow professionally.

## Moving Forward

Each of these three engagement strategies incentivizes educators to earn micro-credentials. Districts and states are discovering how micro-credentials support competency-based, continuous professional learning. Recognizing earned micro-credentials can advance both formal and informal professional learning, while creating vibrant communities of effective educators.

**Micro-credentials help create self-driven and reflective professional learning environments for educators, and in turn serve to advance high quality, personalized, and competency based environments for supporting student learning.**

