

Micro-credentials and Education Policy in the United States

Recognizing Learning and Leadership for Our Nation's Teachers

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Primary Authors: Barnett Berry and P. Ann Byrd, Center for Teaching Quality, with support from Digital Promise

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The Context

Over the last several years, micro-credentials—as a way for teachers and administrators to demonstrate their teaching and leadership skills—have generated growing interest among policymakers and practitioners alike for at least three reasons:



1



The internet provides increasing accessibility and rapid development of multitudes of online resources (experts, videos, apps, communities, etc.), allowing an entirely different context for teaching and learning for both educators and their students.

2



Researchers of late are pointing out the positive effects of the right kind of professional learning on student achievement—most notably learning defined by authentic and structured collaboration among teachers that also places them at the center of school improvement efforts.[1] These effects serve as a powerful response among teachers regarding ineffective professional development that can be disjointed and cookie-cutter, not addressing the diverse needs of educators or those of their students.[2]

3



Education reformers and policy leaders are beginning to recognize that if schools are to create competency-based and personalized learning experiences for every student and ensure students know how to collaborate and communicate, then those who are teaching them need to lead their own learning as well.[3]

In the United States, micro-credentials could serve as a powerful tool to improve the professional development industry serving teachers and administrators.

Micro-credentials are content-focused and job-embedded, and they incorporate active learning—prominent features of effective professional development.[4] Micro-credentials offer a way for schools, districts, and states to

create systems of professional learning that leverage new ways for teachers to lead their own learning, assemble evidence of impact (on students as well as colleagues), and potentially demonstrate what they have accomplished more publicly.

Furthermore, close to three in four U.S. teachers already are engaged in some form of informal professional development or learning.[5]

While engagement with micro-credentials can be either formal or informal, because of the technological infrastructure, they offer a way for teachers to be recognized for the skills they have, regardless of when or how they developed them. The online platform and data that are emerging can provide new ways for school systems to recognize which teachers and administrators are accomplished in teaching certain skills and/or leading improvement efforts as well as provide highly personalized professional learning to help those with specific needs.

Micro-credentials—as an innovation—are still in an early stage. However, growing numbers of states and districts as well as the nation’s largest teachers’ union are experimenting with them. Reports from early adopters are promising.

Jennifer Vandiver, a National Board Certified math teacher who joined the initial micro-credentialing pilot organized by the Tennessee State Department of Education pointed out:

“I was frustrated with the limitations of professional learning offered by my district. Most teachers have been successfully implementing personalized learning for students for years, yet our own learning remains regimented. Micro-credentials have been an extraordinary part of my journey as an educator.”

[See more about Jennifer’s micro-credential journey.](#)

Can micro-credentials be a game changer? Can they serve as a catalyst for transforming professional learning for teachers and administrators? Or will micro-credentials become yet another good idea in education that fails to live up to its transformative potential?

This paper explores these questions by assessing how micro-credentials can fit into current teaching policies and perhaps be used to transform them. A range of documents, including teacher policy reports and scans and a brief survey administered to directors of teacher education and certification in state education agencies (NASDTEC), have informed this work.

Several states and districts were also engaged to learn more about micro-credentialing pilots and to include some early policy lessons. The following brief overview of the micro-credentialing ecosystem recognizes that the innovation is still in an early, “wild west” stage of development.[6]

The Emerging Micro-credentialing Ecosystem

For some time, various industries and companies have used forms of micro-credentials for employees to demonstrate skills verified by an assessment created by professionals in a designated field. Higher education systems, such as the State University of New York, have launched micro-credentialing initiatives so students can easily showcase to employers the skills and competencies they have mastered. An analysis of 450 Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC)-based micro-credentials used in growing numbers of industries “reveals many options but little consistency.”[7]

In 2014, Digital Promise launched the nation’s first micro-credentials for PK-12 educators. Currently, more than 50 universities, non-profits, and school districts have developed more than 400 micro-credentials covering a wide array of professional skills. The National Education Association (NEA) has also joined the flurry of activity. The NEA launched its micro-credential work in the fall of 2017 and has worked in partnership with Digital Promise to develop more than 150 micro-credentials and create a platform for its members in state and local affiliates to be recognized for formal and informal learning.[8]

Indeed, the universe of micro-credentials is expanding rapidly, and the micro-credentials are as diverse as the organizations who issue and score them. Teachers and administrators can delve into such pedagogical topics as using critical thinking strategies in a classroom, providing accommodations for students with special needs, improving parent and family engagement, facilitating virtual communities of practice, creating maker learning spaces,

and supporting English language learners. As this movement grows, organizations now offer similar micro-credentials, yet the evidence required may very well be different.

At least 10 state education agencies—Arkansas, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Louisiana, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington—have launched official micro-credential pilots.¹ And another five states—Illinois, Maryland, Montana, New York, and Wyoming—are experimenting with micro-credentials in some way. The Professional Education Standards Board in Washington has offered up to twenty \$18,000 grants for experimentation with micro-credentials. Tennessee’s micro-credentialing pilot, in its third year, has grown to almost 800 educators from more than 25 school districts. And, of the 100 micro-credentials earned in this past year’s pilot in Tennessee, 60 were from a STEM group, which also speaks to the power of a community of practice around one particular topic. South Carolina’s micro-credentialing pilot, which is organically

¹ The movement is evolving rapidly, and we suspect there are more states that are recognizing micro-credentials for teachers and administrators.

developing, has involved both teachers and administrators submitting evidence together as part of the SC Department of Education's Collective Leadership Initiative.

In addition, micro-credentials are emerging in both pre- and in-service teacher education. For example, the Alaska Department of Education is using the "Aspiring to Teach" micro-credentials program whereby high school students (future teachers) can showcase their developing pedagogical skills in classroom culture, collaboration, and anti-bias instruction. And in North Dakota, educators can be awarded graduate-level degree credits for micro-credentials, which can be developed and implemented far more quickly than most university-based degree programs. resources written by experts in curriculum and instruction as well as financial literacy experts.

A growing number of districts are piloting micro-credentials, albeit in most cases the numbers of teachers participating remain relatively small. Teachers who earn micro-credentials may receive a salary bump, a one-time stipend, continuing education credit (CEU) credit hours, or, in some cases, graduate credit (for a fee).

For example, in Dysart Unified School District (Maricopa County, AZ), teachers can earn substantially more money as part of a professional development program—a 4 percent raise after successful completion of 15 micro-credentials and another 4 percent raise after the second 15 micro-credentials are awarded. (However, the district has limited the program to 120 educators, about 10 percent of the total number employed.) In Community Unit School District 200 (Wheaton, IL), more than 120 teachers—out of 800 total certified staff—are engaging in micro-credentials on both the [Digital Promise](#) and [NEA](#) platforms. The incentives are already baked into their local collective bargaining agreement where teachers can earn up to \$1,000 a year for successfully completing two stacks of micro-

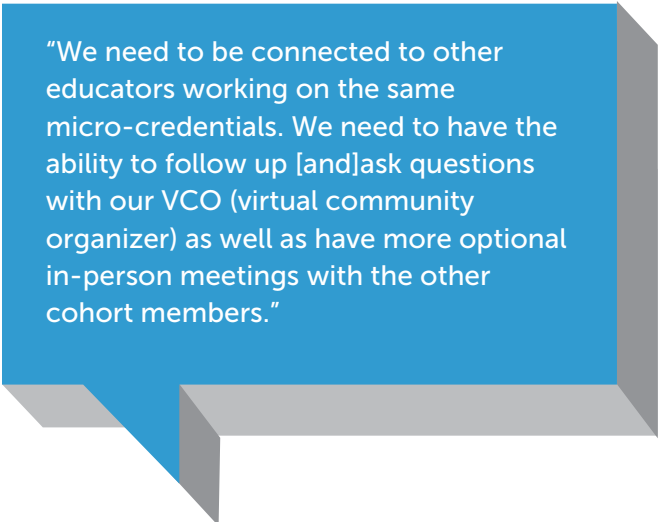
credentials, chosen from a larger set agreed upon by both the administration and the union. With the leadership from the Clark County Education Association (Las Vegas, NV), educators and school support staff can earn micro-credentials as part of an evolving system of community-based professional development in one of the nation's largest school systems.

In Jefferson County, Kentucky, more than 50 teachers have signed up to participate in a micro-credentialing pilot which draws on the [performance assessment literacy stacks](#) issued by the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE). These stacks are demanding, prompting teachers to develop and use more sophisticated methods in designing and using performance tasks to measure deeper learning student outcomes. These micro-credentials require educators to show how they can [create an "original" performance assessment](#) which allows for student voice and choice in their learning and provides multiple ways for diverse learners to demonstrate their mastery of academic discipline-specific content at high levels of cognitive rigor. Others in the CCE stacks expect teachers to analyze a performance [rubric for its qualities and validity](#). These are complex micro-credentials. Additionally, in the eastern part of the state, the Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative (KVEC) is working with partnering districts and schools to design and implement micro-credentials within its Activating Catalytic Transformation network—a systemic continuous improvement approach to address problems faced by rural, remote, and high-poverty schools. Shared leadership teams from schools in the KVEC network develop a Theory of Action, using micro-credentialing for professional learning as a way to assemble evidence of impact on students and the teachers who teach them.

In a recent survey conducted by CTQ and CCE, every one of the teachers pointed out that they needed more, and different types of, time to learn about and develop the

assessment competencies being measured. The CCE performance assessment micro-credentials require much substantive inquiry on the part of teachers—that is rarely afforded by most PD structures and processes. As one teacher noted, “The biggest barrier is finding time as well as the colleagues to work with in doing this kind of work.” Another noted, “I would like to pursue the micro-credential, but attempting to gather the information to actually complete the work is too much. Still another pointed out how “micro-credentials are a great option for PD over the summer” because the work required frequently gets “pushed down in priority by all (her) grading and lesson planning.”

Even in a district where teachers have some experience with deeper learning performance assessments, as well as training from the CCE, the process is taking a full year, given all the other demands on teachers. When asked what would help, one teacher noted:



“We need to be connected to other educators working on the same micro-credentials. We need to have the ability to follow up [and]ask questions with our VCO (virtual community organizer) as well as have more optional in-person meetings with the other cohort members.”

In Pomona, California, a couple dozen teachers and administrators experimented with micro-credentials as part of the district’s efforts to create more time, voice, and choice in professional learning tied to both the academic and social-emotional needs of their students. The educators found great value in a number of micro-credentials, especially related

to leadership, Universal Design for Learning, and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support; however, they also pointed out how most structured PD days and professional learning communities were not aligned for the type of inquiry-oriented, team-based research demanded by the micro-credentials. They saw a lot of value in working collectively and in virtual communities of practice to both identify and address problems of practice. Incentives are important to teachers, but they do not always have to be in the form of additional salary; a menu of incentives, according to teachers in the pilot, are in order.

In each of these pilots, frontline educators, teachers, and administrators offered an array of ideas on how to take advantage of micro-credentials in spurring innovations in professional learning—including more strategic uses of their PLC time, well-facilitated virtual communities of practice, and more varied incentives to encourage different types of teachers (and paraprofessionals) to participate.

In considering how policy can either fuel or tamp down micro-credentials, several thoughtful papers have been published recently. For example, researchers with the Education Testing Service are raising important, scholarly questions, including the issue of quality control in developing and scoring micro-credentials, as well as how feedback is provided in the context of a teacher’s classroom or school.[9] Policy analysts at New America[10] and the Education Commission of the States[11] have detailed an array of current state policies related to teacher licensure and leadership. CCE has investigated the issues faced by early adopters of micro-credentials.[12]

State directors of teacher education and certification appear to be cautious yet hopeful about the prospects for micro-credentials. Our survey revealed two concerns. The first pertains to the “consistent rigor and high quality” of both the micro-credentials

themselves and the many different types of organizations that are now offering them. (See recent [Digital Promise report](#) on how the content of micro-credentials and the process for earning them are anchored in quality research.)

The second revealed that state-level education leaders were concerned about how micro-credentials can fit into existing compensation systems—and how to make sure incentives do not become so complicated they are difficult to manage in a fair and equitable way. One-third of the responding states reported they were already offering some incentives (mostly CEUs), and those that were not were either actively investigating the possibility or currently in dialogue around micro-credentials.

An underlying theme revealed in their responses was how to determine what counts and what are the best ways to encourage educators to take advantage of the opportunities of customized, personalized learning. One respondent noted, “There is a lot of capacity building that needs to

be done to ensure micro-credentials meet quality expectations.” In many ways it is much easier to “get agreement” that sitting in a PD workshop for three hours gets an educator three hours’ worth of continuing education credits; getting agreement regarding the value of different micro-credentials of varying grain size, rigor, and relative importance to individuals and systems alike is another matter.

The pluses, for them, were palpable: Micro-credentials “provide an opportunity for teachers to differentiate themselves and for districts to identify specific knowledge and skills they value.” This can be a cost-effective way for a teacher to be endorsed to serve in a specific teaching and/or leadership role.

Their responses suggested that more attention should be paid to how micro-credentials fit (or do not fit) inside current teaching policies in the United States, including initial licensure, recertification, teacher evaluation, and advanced roles and career pathways. This policy brief presents a number of questions that a range of stakeholders from state capitals to classrooms should consider.

These questions, we hope, can help delineate more specific decision points and recommendations for practitioners and policymakers to consider how to best use micro-credentials to advance the teaching profession. They are designed to provoke out-of-the-box thinking and action toward more innovative approaches to teacher-led learning.

Micro-credentialing and Four Teaching Policy Levers

Micro-credentials are assessments of learning and demonstrations of skill and competency. They are not a substitute for the kind of professional learning that every teacher needs. However, micro-credentials can serve as a way to better understand what teachers know and can do, as well as a way to develop personalized systems of professional learning for any teacher or administrator, no matter where they are in their careers—from seeking a license to teach to serving in an advanced, hybrid teaching/leadership role.

Initial licensure

All states require teachers to earn an initial license in order to teach. However, the criteria for what counts can vary widely, not just across states, but even within them. Georgia, for example, has 21 initial teaching licenses a teacher can earn. In 2012, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that 15 percent of teachers leading classrooms in public schools entered teaching through an alternative pathway. Alternative recruits often bring far more diverse teachers to their classrooms with varying and often valuable experiences. However, most “alt cert” pathways, compared to traditional university-based programs, require far less pedagogical coursework, and many require little or sometimes no clinical training whatsoever before entering the classroom. In high-need school systems, the majority of new hires can enter classrooms with limited training and a provisional license.

More states (now 24) are requiring new recruits to pass some kind of performance assessment in order to be fully licensed. Seventeen states have performance assessment legislation on the books, and 11 states mandate the edTPA—developed by the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity—a \$300 performance assessment that evaluates teaching candidates based on portfolios of lesson plans, student work, and videos of their student teaching in action. (More than 40 states have at least one campus in their state using edTPA.) Louisiana is considering micro-credentials as an alternative to the traditional PRAXIS exams required for new recruits prior to initial licensure, as well as to identify teachers who can lead state-directed instructional reforms. Five states—Arizona, Kentucky, Minnesota, Rhode Island, and Virginia—are considering how micro-credentials can be used to develop and certify high school computer science teachers.

Initial licensing policy questions

- How can an ecosystem of micro-credentials be used to document what new recruits, with varying pre-service training and experiences, know and can do?
- How can micro-credentials be aligned to or augment both state teacher standards and assessments?
- How can a stack of micro-credentials surface hard evidence on the kinds of additional training and supports new teachers need—especially in light of the vast differences of expertise and experience they have?
- How can a stack of micro-credentials provide alternative evidence on the quality of professional learning experiences, and what kinds of training and supports have been most effective for prospective teachers?
- How can micro-credentials offer a way for new recruits to assemble an electronic portfolio of evidence that contributes to more extensive assessments like the edTPA? And how can micro-credentials support teachers’ demonstration of skills and competencies not measured by current performance assessments?
- How can micro-credentials offer ways for districts and their partners to more effectively select, place, and support new hires for a career in teaching?²

Recertification / Professional Development Requirements

As a report from New America has documented, nearly every state mandates that teachers renew their teaching licenses, typically every five years. The report notes that, as of early 2018, only 11 states explicitly stated the purpose of relicensure, and renewal requirements also vary widely by state. The vast majority of states (44) require continuing education units (CEUs), measured in seat time or clock hours, as the basis for recertification. As the New America report points out, the types of activities that can count vary greatly—from sitting in workshops to taking college courses or earning National Board Certification. Only six states require performance indicators, such as teachers’ summative evaluation

ratings, when considering their eligibility for licensure renewal.[13]

Only 12 states require teachers to have an individual growth plan in order to be relicensed. In Arkansas and Washington, teachers can now get relicensure credit by conducting action research as well as participating in study groups. Arkansas recently enacted a new four-tier licensure continuum. In doing so the Department of Education has created nine micro-credentials for its new teacher induction program supported by educators in their regional service centers who have been prepared to lead virtual communities of practice in support of the new recruits.

² Our interviews surfaced concerns among several state-level education leaders that some effective new recruits, already teaching in classrooms, have difficulty passing current standardized, multiple-choice initial licensure tests, and that micro-credentials might offer a more authentic way to screen some candidates to teaching.

Georgia now requires teachers to develop professional learning goals and then engage in a professional learning community to help them complete the goals. Oregon has established a Council on Educator Advancement to form a system of educator networks to offer every teacher in the state access to professional learning opportunities. Virginia recently [passed a bill](#) so its Department of Education could establish a micro-credential program permitting any public PK-12 teacher who holds a renewable or provisional license “to complete additional in-person or blended coursework and earn micro-credentials in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) endorsement areas, including computer

science, for which there is a high need for additional qualified teachers.” In Kentucky, the Educator Professional Standards Board just waived the master’s degree requirement in order for teachers to earn a Rank II license (from Rank III), opening the opportunity for micro-credentials to be used as marker of accomplishment. Several regional services centers are developing lower-cost, competency-based pathways rather than just academic degrees. Not all university-based master’s degrees are uniformly rigorous; however, replacing them with just any set of micro-credentials may not improve the quality of teachers’ professional learning and its impact in developing teaching expertise.

Recertification policy questions

- How might micro-credentials promote demonstration of learning in the relicensure process?
- Should different micro-credentials be established for different purposes such as licensure renewal or professional growth?
- If micro-credentials are used as a means to assess professional learning outcomes, then who should review the evidence? Current issuers?³ Peer reviewers? Independent reviewers?
- How might states and districts use their professional development dollars to prepare and compensate local educators serving as trained assessors?
- What are the cost implications for incorporating micro-credentials into professional development systems, and for whom?
- What additional supports and safeguards must be put in place to ensure that any microcredentials offered and issued for credit toward licensure or professional development requirements represent a more meaningful professional learning experience than the majority of continuing education units currently offered?

3 Current micro-credentialing pilots are relatively small and have yet not pushed deeply on capacity of issuers or state education agencies or districts.

Teacher evaluation and support systems

The last decade has brought significant shifts to teacher evaluation policies across the nation, and in most states the evaluation of teaching is no longer perfunctory. Recent federal policies, particularly [Race to the Top](#), promoted more classroom observations by trained reviewers as well as the use of student test score data in judging individual teachers. However, as Education Commission of States has recently pointed out, states, districts, and schools “struggle to create and implement the type of trusted evaluation system that meaningfully differentiates teacher performance and provides teachers with opportunities for tailored support and development.” The use of standardized test data to determine individual teacher effectiveness was proven to be too statistically unreliable, and political and practical support for its use has begun to wane.[14]

Now, under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states have considerable flexibility in how to support and improve their teacher evaluation systems while still using sound

evidence. In 2017, ECS reported that at least 10 states enacted legislation or adopted resolutions regarding the use of student growth measures in teacher evaluations. And three states convened task forces or working groups to develop a more comprehensive system of assessing and supporting teachers. [15]

School districts like Hillsborough County, Florida, an epicenter of Race to the Top teaching evaluation reforms, invested considerably, with support from the Gates Foundation, in both test-based metrics as well as an increased number of classroom teacher observations annually (anywhere from 4-11), using both administrators and peer evaluators. [16] However, the district has abandoned much of the original approach, now using teachers in “supportive, non-evaluative roles instead of judging their peers.”[17] At the same time, researchers have revealed how the recent labor-intensive approach to teacher evaluation has led to the “burnout” of principals.[18]

Teacher evaluation policy questions

- How can micro-credentials be used as evidence in the assessment of teaching effectiveness that places teacher-led learning and its impact at the forefront of the process?
- How can issuers, as well as districts and states, be assured the evidence submitted has been assessed accurately?
- How can principals and teachers together examine micro-credentialing artifacts that are aligned to areas for individual growth of teachers to drive reflection, coaching, and continued professional learning in the context of the school?
- How can teachers use micro-credentials to help them improve in a particular area identified through their formal teaching evaluation and/or goal-setting processes?
- How could district and school leaders use micro-credentials as a means to identify which educators have what strengths and how best to spread their expertise?
- How can new leadership development programs help teachers and administrators develop the know-how to do so?

Use of micro-credentials has helped move Franklin West Supervisory Union in Vermont to a more competency-based, personalized, flexible, and engaged professional learning environment. Their teacher evaluation system assesses desired outcomes and the knowledge and skills required in order to implement next-generation learning models that were already embodied in many existing micro-credentials on the Digital Promise platform, making this form of professional learning a natural fit. Teachers have self-selected to work on similar micro-credentials simultaneously, leading to what the superintendent cites as a major

positive impact on the system and a better way to help focus their efforts as a team, not just as individuals.

Many of the current evaluation systems, post-Race to the Top, are moving more toward helping teachers grow rather than mostly focusing on who is ineffective and should not be teaching. We believe that micro-credentials could provide a powerful tool for administrators and teachers to use together in a school improvement process.

Advanced roles and career pathways

Over the last several years, many states and school districts have created policies that encourage teachers to lead from the classroom. For example, 17 states have adopted teacher leader standards, and 22 offer a leadership license or endorsement for those who teach. Most states have not established well-developed criteria for leading. However, some states, like Alabama, call for letters of recommendation as well as evidence of ability to lead collaboratively and to positively affect student achievement.

Several states are well-positioned to use micro-credentials to leverage teacher leadership policies. For example, Arkansas is creating a tiered system of licensure that includes a teacher leader advanced license or endorsement with the expectation to build a compensation system that will eventually encourage more classroom practitioners to be recognized and positioned as leaders.

Iowa has created the nation's most substantive formal state-level teacher leader program, with an investment of roughly \$150 million to launch the effort. Approximately 10,000 classroom practitioners are serving in some formal and compensated leadership role. Iowa does not have an official statewide

micro-credentialing pilot; however, [Members Impacting Students by Improving Curriculum](#) (MISIC), a 15-school district collaborative in central Iowa, is now experimenting with micro-credentials.

Tennessee, which has been at the forefront of the micro-credentialing movement, is beginning to put some aspects of a teacher leadership system in place to support professional learning. The state has begun to create leadership opportunities for teachers as part of a larger set of teaching evaluation reforms that have shifted from just assessing teachers to growing their practice. At the same time the state has established a Teacher Leader Network, and those involved have access to participate in a stack of micro-credentials related to instructional coaching as well as using data to plan and drive team meetings. The state has also supported a small group of teacher leaders who have developed skills [in facilitating and activating virtual communities of practice](#) who could help scale professional learning and the use of micro-credentials.

Juab School District in Utah has allocated extra time, pay, and leadership incentives for educators who earn micro-credentials.

Using the “Good, Better, Best Fit” model, learners ask themselves: 1) How well the micro-credential fits within their job context; 2) If it aligns with the district’s mission; and 3) Whether the competencies of the micro-credential fulfill the educator’s standards of interest and need. This offers educators flexibility and a clear framework for selecting professional learning opportunities regarding which micro-credentials they earn; the approach has notably eased implementation. Two stacks have been particularly noteworthy, namely due to the right-sized skill development required and relevance to educators’ contexts: The Foundational Skills stack (student voice and choice, classroom technology use, growth mindset, and data driven instruction) and the Teacher Leader stack have popularized micro-credentials in the district. Teachers demonstrate their learning to peers and a review board with the potential for extra earning and recognition.

Finally, in South Carolina, the superintendent, the principal, and teachers in one of the state’s collective leadership pilot schools all worked on [assessing how time is used](#) in their roles so that effective teaching practices could be more visible to one another, and so that more

teachers can lead in both formal and informal ways. In engaging in the pilot, teachers and administrators recognized the power of working together on these micro-credentials. While the state does not have an explicit policy to recognize micro-credentials it does permit districts the discretion to recognize them as part of their licensure renewal requirements.

In addition, in each of these states, micro-credentials can be utilized to identify teachers to serve in a variety of leadership roles and tasks—not just those related to instructional improvement (e.g., creating school-community partnerships, serving as visiting professors for colleges of education, or leading the development of new policy). Many current career ladder programs, both past and present, are designed for a small number of teachers to move into leadership roles. Micro-credentials can be used to drive more equitable professional learning and leadership opportunities, where many different educators (e.g., teachers as well as administrators and paraprofessionals) could demonstrate skills and be utilized in any number of formal and informal roles.

Advanced roles and career pathways policy questions

- How can states and districts define more clearly what leadership roles are most beneficial?
- How can micro-credentials be used to illuminate leadership potential and capacity?
- How can the evidence from micro-credentials make more well-known how teachers spread their expertise as leaders—for instructional as well as organizational and policy reforms?
- How can micro-credentials be used to help administrators cultivate teachers as leaders who can then spread their expertise?
- In what ways might micro-credentials help policymakers and practitioners rethink teacher compensation, merit pay, and traditional career ladders that often create room for just a few teachers to lead?

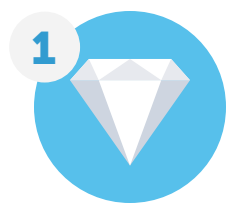
The Future of Micro-credentialing Policy

Micro-credentials, if carefully implemented, can improve practice and outcomes for teachers and administrators, as well as students. Some policy is already in place to support teachers—and to some extent, administrators—earning micro-credentials. The micro-credentials movement is growing and diversifying, with considerable experimentation. And micro-credentials could be a powerful means to support teachers and administrators in not just demonstrating what they can do, but in how to spread it to others that can drive school improvement in a networked community of practice.

Now is the time for policies to be refined to ensure the quality of the micro-credentials and capacity of school systems to leverage them to improve teaching and learning and also advance the profession itself. Doing so, we believe, will require making specific policy decisions and effective implementation.

Let's consider five major domains:

Controlling for quality



1 As the ecosystem evolves, teams of educators, administrators, and researchers should provide guidance for which micro-credentials should be used for what purposes and how. These teams could be established at the state, district, and/or network levels to review which micro-credentials meet standards for what purpose—as part of earning an initial licensure, as part of an innovative pathway into teaching, or to serve in a leadership role, formal or informal.

Counting what matters



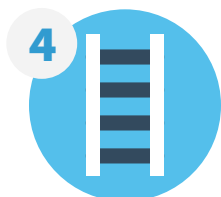
2 The micro-credentials currently available measure a wide variety of expertise, and this diversity in scope and intensity should be valued and embraced, making sure teachers' professional development is not a cookie-cutter enterprise. To gain traction and legitimacy, decisions need to be made about which micro-credentials earn educators what kind of recognition—CEUs, stipends, awards, pathways to advanced degrees, and the like—and how much.

Finding time



Teaching policies should account for the necessary conditions for teachers to master competencies required for licensure and relicensure, as well as documenting their effectiveness and/or spreading it. The number one condition is *time*, the four-letter word of school reform. Professional learning in general, and micro-credentials specifically, take time that many teachers do not have built into their work life—including participation in professional learning communities.

Leveraging and recognizing expertise



Over decades of school reform, many a good idea in advancing teaching as a profession have come and gone. This is particularly the case when it comes to master teachers and developing career ladders as ways to recognize the learning and leadership of those who teach. Policies can be more explicit around support for educators who earn micro-credentials as demonstrations of learning and leading. Policymakers need to fund this approach, and not just because accomplished educators deserve the support. School reform of today and tomorrow needs teacher leaders to be well-known and better utilized.

Designing for effectiveness



Researchers have found that successful school reforms are ones that have “met the felt needs for the (educators) who would implement them” and helped teachers “to capitalize on existing tools, materials, and guidance.”^[17] Micro-credentialing policy must do the same, offering ways for educators to solve problems, and not just implementing another program. State and local policies need to encourage not only teacher buy-in, but engagement and ownership from them in the design of a more effective system of professional learning they need and want.

Micro-credentials, as a way for educators to show what they know, are emerging at the same time legitimate questions have been raised about placing too much emphasis on high-stakes assessments for students and teachers alike. Researchers and journalists have documented the compliance-oriented and gaming behavior of educators, as too many carrots and sticks are attached to student test scores and teaching evaluations. We still need to know which incentives are better for what kind of micro-credentials. We also need to know how schools and districts can balance the

need for more choice for professional learning and more coherence, such as connection to individual student needs, as well as to school and district goals. Much more policy work needs to be done here.

We also need to know more about the impact of different incentives for micro-credentials. And we need to know more about how the work life of teachers and administrators can be redesigned so they can engage in the joint inquiry required to master the competencies associated with the most rigorous micro-credentials.

Micro-credentials are attractive to teachers because they create a way for them to free themselves from long-standing, one-size-fits-all professional development. In addition, micro-credentials can bring greater public recognition to a teaching profession that deserves more respect.

Yet continued experimentation and systematic study are needed, including from those in state education agencies, school district offices, practicing educators, and researchers. Many technical changes in the delivery of professional development are in order. However, the most important matter may be

related to the culture of professional learning in our nation's schools—and the role that teachers play in their own development, individually and collectively. Teaching policies cannot mandate that, but they can serve to encourage and incentivize the professional learning required to maximize the potential of the children and adults inside our nation's schools. Micro-credentials may very well be one of several approaches that schools, districts, and states take to do so. However, the more difficult challenge is how to make sure they are valued and of value—for teachers and administrators, and for the students they serve.

Therefore, the system of professional learning must be *redesigned* so those who work most closely with young people can readily spread their expertise to one another and find meaning and see the impact in doing so.

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