

Case Study

As part of our landscape research on *Micro-credentials for Social Mobility in Rural Postsecondary Communities*, Digital Promise conducted case studies in partnership with four innovative postsecondary institutions that are using micro-credentials. Learn more about how these institutions are leveraging educator-industry partnerships to create real-time pathways for rural learners in their region.



Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative (KVEC)



Introduction

As one of Kentucky's nine educational cooperatives, the Kentucky Valley Education Cooperative (KVEC) serves the predominantly White, southeastern Appalachian region of the state, which includes one of the school districts with the lowest average incomes per capita in the nation.

In the heart of rural Appalachia, teachers may be required to travel 3–6 hours to reach in-person professional development opportunities. Given that most districts are over 25 miles away from an urbanized zone, geographical barriers often create financial impediments. Extensive travel times require school districts to coordinate substitute teachers, necessitating unavoidable costs and logistics. According to administrators of the initiative, there are no state funds directly allocated for the required professional learning of teachers. The scarcity of economic resources and widespread financial burden experienced by school districts in their efforts to navigate professional development opportunities persists as a point of concern.

KVEC has facilitated a niche service, providing free, competency-based flexible professional learning opportunities for rural K-12 educators through micro-credentials. Accordingly, teachers are able to leverage micro-credentials to personalize continuing education credits and increase their rank, thereby, directly increasing their salaries. KVEC's work builds on the specific needs of teachers and students, such as developing micro-credentials in [Understanding Types of Poverty](#). KVEC's micro-credentials are hosted on the [Digital Promise Micro-credential Platform](#) and are free and available to the public.

"It's important to note that geography has an impact on this professional learning. Most of our districts are rural remote, which means they're more than 25 miles away from an urbanized zone. Ours are more than 25 miles away. So, when we have professional learning opportunities that are being offered at the state level in Frankfurt... some school districts have three or four hours of travel to get there. That requires substitutes, plans, travel, meals. I've lost track of the number of budgets that our state has not provided professional learning funds for teachers. There have been no state funds allocated for professional learning for teachers."

*– Jennifer Carroll (Developer, Issuer, Assessor)
Learning Acceleration Specialist, Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative*

Initiative Description

Through a grant, KVEC partnered with Digital Promise to develop micro-credentials for educators. A collaboration of the State Department of Education, special education providers, and practitioner experts resulted in the creation of a stack of over 18 micro-credentials focused primarily on the needs of students experiencing poverty, as well as special education populations, including those who have experienced hearing and visual impairment. In several instances, the experience and expertise of students and staff have been leveraged to guide and generate the creation of these micro-credentials.

“Our district has done a really good job with micro-credentials. Recently, teachers have joined a cohort to work together on completing micro-credentials for a rank change; to get a rank one. In the last couple of years, we’ve really been given opportunities within the school system to advance in our learning.”

– Courtney Kingsmore (Learner), Assistant Principal, Louisa East Elementary School

Some schools have adopted micro-credentials as a whole, whereby all faculty work on a single or similar micro-credentials based on data pointing to the needs of the schools, as outlined in their strategic plans. Other schools relied on team leads to identify micro-credentials that educators could simultaneously complete based on the demographics of the students served. Such unified efforts to complete modules independently helped with educator buy-in, allowing teachers to gather information as a team and discuss their findings together.

As part of this initiative, the state has also allowed rank changes, resulting in an increase of yearly salaries. Micro-credentials have proven to be an economically feasible option for competency-based professional development, allowing educators to complete modules remotely in their classrooms or the comfort of their homes. Teachers and administrators are able to visualize performance-based learning, which translates to practice; thereby encouraging them to provide students the opportunity to demonstrate their learning in multiple ways and depart from the idea of limiting themselves to traditional textbook approaches.

Collaborating Organizations

Given the positioning of the organization, KVEC has put forth considerable efforts to collaborate with multiple institutions to achieve their goals. They have hosted five national summits focused on micro-credentials, bringing together a range of other educational organizations from across the nation.

KVEC’s administrative networks have been developed as a result of regular meetings with regional superintendents, which serve as the cooperative’s board of directors. Monthly meetings between district instructional supervisors and professional learning coordinators facilitate knowledge sharing, serving as the main conduit for disseminating information to the region. In addition, the established new teacher network is used to introduce information to encourage early adoption. Districts use this space to dialogue about how they’re using micro-credentials, growth they’ve seen, what challenges they may have experienced, and how they overcame said challenges.

The partnership with the State Board of Education facilitated the regulation change in Kentucky which saw the acceptance of micro-credentials as a means for educator rank advancement.

Partnerships with state universities have formed in an effort to discuss how they might create independent study courses to be more of a competency-based experience that utilize micro-credentials.

Understanding the Value of Micro-credentials in the Kentucky Valley

"In the past, what they've done – even when I was teaching – is the school district would have somebody come in and do professional development for teachers, and it may not benefit us a bit. But, they would still bring us all together, K-12, and you'd have this one day of PD. So, you're sitting there knowing that you're not going to take anything back to your classroom and be able to use it that day. In order to expedite the process, that's what districts did. So, I think that with the micro-credentials, they saw that as a way of getting something that would benefit them. It's a job-embedded approach to professionalized learning, personalized professional learning, that's going to help them learn skills while they're right in the classroom with kids. So, for teachers, it becomes meaningful rather than just going to those trainings, sitting there, maybe taking some notes; what we always called a 'sit and get'."

– Dr. Dessie Bowling (Developer, Issuer, Assessor)
Associate Director, Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative

For many educators, the universal potential value for micro-credentials is evident across eastern Kentucky. In a region where economic hardships impact the lives of teachers, educators have increased their salaries. This is much needed, as teachers expressed that they and their peers are financially burdened and unable to miss a paycheck, causing them to seek additional ways to supplement their household incomes.

Still more, micro-credentials are compelling for a number of other reasons. Each micro-credential focuses on a discrete skill or competency; therefore, they are manageable to busy teachers. Micro-credentials also reduce school spending for professional development, in part, by limited teacher travel. Consequently, they provide stability for students, allowing teachers to remain in classrooms.

From the perspective of teachers and educators, students benefit from increased perspectives: teaching methods and having educators in a school building that better understand who they are and how to teach them. Both administrators and teachers expressed being able to understand the challenges of students that endure the conditions of rural poverty and the impact it has on learning, behavior, and ability to focus in the classroom. While one administrator commented on the reality of the limit of a dollar in the hands of a student in remote eastern Kentucky, unable to exchange it for any portion of a meal, as can be done in metropolitan areas. Moreover, a teacher expressed the benefit of newfound understanding of the possible impact of opioid use across the region and the dynamics of living with grandparents in the absence of a generation of parents.

What's Next?

"In my new role as director of personnel, we are turning over rocks to find teachers right now. I think I'm processing fifteen. Several of them are going through the University of Cumberland, through alternative certification programs. I still have several jobs posted that we're not able to find people to fill. I'm hopeful that when we do find applicants, and if they are alternative certifications, that we can utilize these micro-credentials to expedite their learning because many of them just hold bachelor's degrees, some in university studies. Some might be a bachelors degree in science or different things. But, not a traditional education program. So, they're going to need something like micro-credentials to expedite their knowledge of what's happening in education."

– Anna Prince (Recognizer), Director of Personnel and Pupil Personnel, Lawrence County Schools

In order to increase the impact of micro-credentials, KVEC continues to utilize its resources to promote messaging about the range of competency-based opportunities that it provides to educators in the region.

Given the number of teachers in the region with alternative credentials, districts hope to use micro-credentials to accelerate teacher learning. According to Theresa Wallace, Associate Dean of the University of the Cumberlands, it is hopeful that the institution begins to accept micro-credentials as course credit, granted they meet the learner outcomes of the courses taught at the university. If there are no existing micro-credentials, the university may explore the possibility of developing micro-credentials that have comparable learner outcomes..

While some districts remain undecided about the value of micro-credentials, KVEC is committed based on the observed benefits to teachers and administrators. Uncertainty persists due to Kentucky requiring four days of "seat time" for professional development. Therefore, it's difficult to determine how to equate micro-credentials, given that they are focused on demonstrating content knowledge and not the amount of time spent sitting. However, presently, what is considered "four days" is a decision made by local administrators.