Continuing the educator micro-credential movement

An update from CTQ and Digital Promise
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CENTER FOR TEACHING QUALITY
TEACHERS TRANSFORMING TEACHING

Digital Promise
Accelerating Innovation in Education

Background

Personalized, competency-based learning — where young people can demonstrate mastery at their own pace and be supported with varied instructional strategies — is gaining momentum in both K-12 and higher education. (See the growth of competency-based learning across the United States here.) However, if students are going to have more flexibility with how and when their learning takes place, those who teach must also have the power to lead their own learning. Over the last two years, states, districts, and the nation's largest teacher's union have turned to micro-credentials to personalize professional development for and by educators.
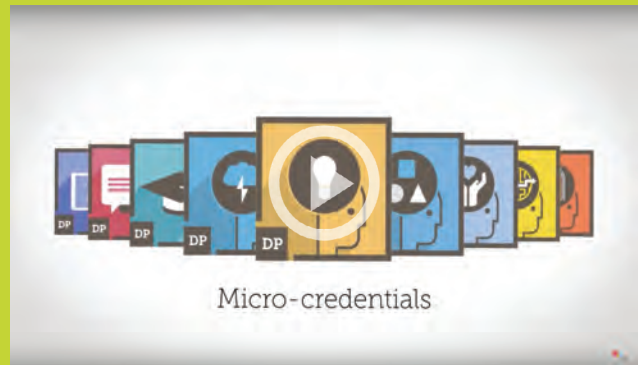
In this report **Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ)** and **Digital Promise (DP)** present a brief update on the micro-credentialing movement in K-12 education, how and where micro-credentials are being piloted, and challenges that need to be addressed if they are going to fulfill their promise.

What are micro-credentials?

Micro-credentials are like mini-certifications in a specific topic area were K-12 educators can present evidence of their ability to demonstrate competency in teaching or leading school improvement and receive quick feedback from trained reviewers.

Micro-credentials

In this video—**Start earning micro-credentials today**—Digital Promise explores the potential of micro-credentialing to support teacher and leader development.

As of June 2017, DP and its 40 content partners (issuers of micro-credentials) have developed over 300 micro-credentials to address a variety of educator skills and competencies. For example, Educators Rising partnered with DP to launch the Beginning to Teach micro-credential stack (or a coherent set of micro-credentials designed to earn together) earlier this year. (Check out this video to learn how high school students prepare to teach through micro-credentials.) And CTQ is drawing on its stack on virtual community organizing in its work with Teaching Partners so teachers can more effectively lead online networks to improve instructional practices and develop leadership skills.

The Digital Promise micro-credentialing ecosystem is currently housed on a platform powered by the ed tech startup BloomBoard. As of late July 2017, there have been more than 5,000 submissions on the platform from educators in approximately 550 school districts across the nation. Over 3,400 unique users have applied for at least one micro-credential, and about 55 percent of those who submitted their required "electronic portfolio" of evidence have been awarded a micro-credential. Monthly unique visitors to the BloomBoard storefront have reached a high of 13,000.

Currently, nine states offer Continuing Education Units (CEUs) for teachers earning micro-credentials from the Digital Promise ecosystem, and several more proposals are pending approval.

Beyond CEU approvals, several states are currently engaging with the use of micro-credentials within their formal professional development structures.

- **Arkansas** is piloting micro-credentials in leadership, as well as in novice teacher mentoring, and expecting 1,500 participants.

- **North Carolina** convened a Micro-credentialing and State Policy Work Group to inform and define a framework for using micro-credentials to transform professional learning for educators. The group consisted of Department of Public Instruction (DPI) staff, district stakeholders, and partner organizations including Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS), The Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University (NCSU-FI), Newton-Conover Schools, Surry County Schools, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNC-G), and Winston-Salem Forsyth County Schools.

- **Rhode Island** piloted the Center for Collaborative Education's teacher leadership for performance assessment reform micro-credentials as part of a larger Assessment for Learning Project (led by the Next Generation Learning Learning Challenge and the Center for Education Innovation). They are now preparing to expand this effort with Phase II support.

- **South Carolina** is piloting an array of micro-credentials (including [CTQ's stacks on Collective Leadership](#)) and drawing on teachers' experiences to fuel the development of collective leadership for school improvement.

- **Tennessee** is beginning the second year of a pilot with 100 teachers in 15 districts, which comes after 60 teachers experimented with 15 micro-credentials aligned with the state's teaching evaluation standards in year one. (This fall CTQ, with its [stack on Going Public with Policy and Pedagogy](#), is working with the Tennessee Department of Education to help teachers in the pilot share their experiences and insights with policymakers and practitioners.)

Read the
the full report
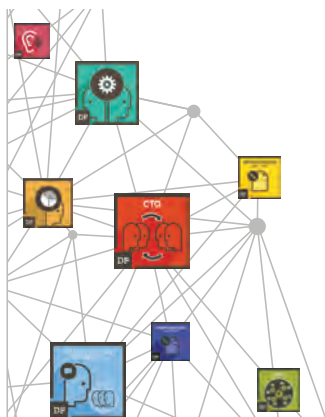
Micro-credentials:
Driving teacher learning and leadership

See the March 2016 policy paper — developed by CTQ and DP — for a detailed overview of micro-credentials and the research basis as well as polling data revealing educators' appetite for them.

At the district level, there are more than 50 formal and informal pilots underway. They range widely in implementation and structure.

- **Baltimore County Public Schools** piloted micro-credentials with about 200 educators in the 2016-17 school year. Educators worked together with school-based instructional coaches to earn micro-credentials aligned with district priorities and received Maryland Continuing Professional Development points as recognition.

- **Charlottesville City Schools** used its Learning Management System (LMS) to structure its micro-credential pilot for novice educators and mentors. Educators could navigate through the LMS to access micro-credentials aligned with their specific needs or goals.

- **Kettle Moraine School District**, a small district in Wisconsin, has made the most progress to date. As noted in a [recent report](#), about 80 percent of the district's teachers have earned at least one pre-approved micro-credential over the last three years, increasing their base salaries anywhere from $100 to $600, depending on the scope and complexity of the micro-credentials earned.

- **Long Beach Unified School District**, an urban district in southern California, is piloting micro-credentials to identify effective teachers and administrators to lead professional development for Common Core and the NextGen Science Standards.

- **Vista Unified School District** in southern California selected several Deeper Learning micro-credentials for educators to earn and embedded them in an online course that supports educators as they develop specific skills.

Aside from district and state initiatives, some high-profile organizations are also getting involved in micro-credentials. For example, the **National Education Association (NEA)** is on the path to be the largest issuer of micro-credentials. With more than 25 micro-credentials already developed in alignment with its Teacher Leadership Initiative, NEA is developing a wide range of micro-credential stacks that support early career teachers as well as mentors who support them, pedagogical skills related to classroom management and English Language Learners, leadership efforts related to civil rights for students, "bully free" schools, and successful implementation of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). With a goal of supporting professional issues of concern to all educators (members and non-members), *NEA will make freely available more than 70 micro-credentials in the fall of 2017.*

In this brief policy report, Digital Promise and CTQ surface a number of early lessons learned as well as the challenges that lie ahead. We organize them along five dimensions: **(1)** creating the currency; **(2)** supporting conditions for professional learning; **(3)** developing the assessment infrastructure; **(4)** establishing financial feasibility; and **(5)** ensuring technical functionality.

Continuing the educator micro-credential movement

Challenges

Creating the currency. Teachers, at least the early adopters, appear to value micro-credentials. As Val Brown, an educator in Seminole County Public Schools, and now with the University of Florida, expressed, "High-flying educators are eager for additional learning experiences and feedback. The micro-credentialing process allows educators to receive both on their own terms." A survey of Rhode Island teachers who piloted the performance assessment design micro-credentials issued by the Center for Collaborative Education, surfaced four major appeals of the innovation: increasing value to their school, creating value for students, making them better teachers, and learning new skills. (See CCE's report here.)

As mentioned above, a growing number of states offer CEUs or other forms of credit for successful micro-credential submissions. Additionally, a few universities have begun offering graduate credit for some. While these developments are important, currently there is no coherent framework or set of options established for valuing micro-credentials.

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> - Val Brown
> Educator, FL

As various stakeholders work together to build such a framework, they are considering a variety of incentives such as financial compensation, continuing education units, re-licensure and licensure, pre-service credentialing, and career pathways. For example, CTQ, in partnership with the South Carolina Department of Education, is leading an effort to determine how micro-credentials could possibly personalize professional development for teachers and also fuel a system of collective leadership for long-term school improvement.

If micro-credentials are to become a coherent part of every educator's professional development journey, it will be vital for those credentials to be accessible to them in a variety of contexts. As we have learned from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, working conditions can make a significant difference in whether teachers engage in the process and achieve. Researchers have shown that teachers in high-need schools, because of the lack of administrative support and adequate time, are less likely to participate in the National Board Certification process and remain in their schools once they certify. Micro-credentials should present minimal barriers to entry for educators, regardless of where they work, the subject they teach, or the conditions in which they teach and lead.

Similarly, the sector must design systems that recognize how micro-credentials have different grain sizes and therefore distinctive potential "values" to educators and systems. For example, a micro-credential verifying an educator's ability to use "wait time" during class discussions may not be as complex to demonstrate and successfully complete as, for example, a micro-credential focused on an educator's ability to implement design thinking in the classroom. However, the distinction between the skills required for each of these respectively does not mean that both don't carry value worth being recognized.

These relative values are currently reflected in the number of continuing education units (CEUs) each micro-credential is worth in the nine states that recognize micro-credentials as part of their professional learning credit program. Each micro-credential is assigned a number of hours or credits based on the estimated amount of time it would take an educator to develop a specific competency and collect evidence for it. It is also important to note that the number of hours or credits does not necessarily represent the amount of time it would take an educator to learn that specific skill, as that is fully dependent on the starting point and resources available to the educator. As more forms of recognition or currency become available, it will be important to continue to accommodate for the grain size of a micro-credential.

As micro-credentials gain value, they may become subject to issues like plagiarism and "gaming." To maintain the integrity of the process, mitigation strategies such as those in place in the National Board system may become necessary. While these tools can increase the cost of assessment, they would ensure that micro-credentials continue to be a meaningful and respected form of currency.

Supporting conditions for professional learning. To truly make micro-credentials part of the professional development landscape, educators need to be able to dedicate time to developing and practicing the competencies as well as collecting and submitting evidence. This has implications for district structures such as professional development and professional learning communities, as well as for shifting priorities in how educators use their time. We know that micro-credentials cannot just be dropped on top of the existing system of traditional, workshop-oriented professional development. Specifically, while educators (such as the early adopters that CTQ worked with in South Carolina and Tennessee) are enthusiastic about micro-credentials, they wonder what is going to be taken off their plates so they can fully engage in this new form of competency-based professional development. As Kristi Meeuwse, a Charleston County (SC) teacher who completed a CTQ micro-credential on collective leadership, shared:

> **It is very important for us to take something off teachers' plates. We cannot just add this without subtracting something else. This is time-consuming. We are not averse to life-long learning as teachers – but this needs to be realistic."**

Similarly, this new system will have to be reflected in formal policies such as teacher contracts and collective bargaining agreements. This presents an opportunity to develop and share standard or template language that can be used and adapted across the country.

Beyond the promise micro-credentials have for empowering educators to drive their own learning, they also have implications for the role principals can play in the learning process. Specifically, micro-credentials can leverage an important opportunity for principals and teachers to learn to lead together — and for principals to assemble evidence on how they are able to broker the expertise of their teaching colleagues. Such a system would enable teachers and administrators to assemble evidence of collective impact on student learning and school improvement. Fortunately, growing evidence shows that high-quality collaboration and its influence on student achievement can be used as a starting point.

The most successful micro-credential implementations to date are marked by a few key characteristics, including careful messaging around the purpose and value of micro-credentials and the buy-in across a school or district, from classroom educators to administrators. Districts, states, and unions need to build a system of educator-led learning — virtual and face-to-face — that guides how micro-credentials are earned. There are new roles for professional development providers, district managers, and university faculty (and courses) to play in developing the micro-credentialing ecosystem.

Transforming professional learning

See the report from CTQ on teacher learning and leadership and the growing evidence on how teachers learn and its relationship to student achievement.

Why teachers' learning must be individualized – and HOW

But here is the most important condition: By communicating clearly about the goals of a micro-credential effort from the get-go and providing the right supports throughout the process, states and districts can set their implementations up for success.

Developing the assessment infrastructure. To ensure that micro-credentials continue to have value, it is vital that the assessment process is rigorous and consistent across the system. This will require issuers to determine and maintain a high-quality bar with regard to assessment. Currently, each issuer approaches assessment training differently. While this may be appropriate during the "calibration" phase of a micro-credential, it may be valuable to establish a common assessment approach that all issuers of micro-credentials adhere to for training or "certifying" assessors beyond the calibration period. Digital Promise has been working to establish this process and has published a paper describing one potential approach.

Similarly, as the demand for micro-credentials increases at the state and district levels, issuers will need to ensure that they have sufficient assessors to meet that demand. As mentioned above, assessor "certification" is one method by which issuers can do so. Essentially, once issuers have a sufficient number

of sample micro-credential submissions and assessments completed by experts, they can train external assessors — perhaps affiliated with specific states or school districts — to assess on their behalf using initial submissions to establish inter-rater reliability. This process has the potential to ensure that issuers can maintain the integrity of their brand and micro-credentials while also meeting demand. And, as mentioned above, engaging local educators in assessment can provide meaningful growth and leadership opportunities.

Establishing financial feasibility. A comprehensive micro-credential ecosystem requires a meaningful business model for both suppliers (issuers of micro-credentials and providers of supporting platforms) as well as consumers (states, school districts, individual educators, and organizations). Such a business model must take into account the costs associated with a valid, reliable approach to assessing various micro-credentials. Similarly, this model must recognize that some micro-credentials are more complex to review than others or require review by more senior or expensive assessors.

On the consumer side, states, districts, and schools must be able to dedicate the necessary funds to support educators as they develop the competency, generate and submit evidence, and earn micro-credentials. While this may include paying for assessment fees, it could also include compensating teachers and administrators as reviewers and facilitators of learning. However, this shift may require reprioritization in how professional development dollars are allocated, tracked, and valued.

Ensuring technical functionality. A highly effective micro-credential platform must enable an efficient and intuitive experience for educators, administrators, issuers, and assessors. For educators, this means an easy-to-navigate flow from micro-credential selection to submission to easy access to information on micro-credential interest and educator use, as appropriate. And for issuers and assessors, this means simple navigation among micro-credentials, assignment of submissions, and ability to share notes/feedback with reviewers.

Additionally, the technology must gather pertinent data on micro-credential submissions to enable meaningful research on the impact of this new method. Finally, to address the financial implications above, a platform must facilitate a meaningful business transaction through a paywall or other means of exchanging funds.

Implications

We believe the micro-credential movement continues to gain momentum because more policymakers and practitioners believe it can expand choice for educators and administrators as they shape their formal professional development. (See this [Education Week article](#) from March 2016, which considers whether micro-credentials can "salvage" teachers' professional development.)

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>
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Although the movement continues to advance rapidly, we have many more questions to address. At the same time, the lack of perfection in the current micro-credential ecosystem should not stand in the way of progress. Based upon on recent developments, early progress, and current challenges, we recommend that the ecosystem focus on policies and practices that address the following:

1. Create incentives for local educators to experiment with different forms of currency for earning micro-credentials;

2. Establish professional development processes and work schedules that provide teachers more time and support to engage in long-term inquiry required by most micro-credentials;

3. Encourage everyone in the system — teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators — to participate in micro-credentials in ways that encourage team learning and leadership development; and

4. Invest in innovative and adaptive platforms that offer educators voice and choice in how they use micro-credentials that fit their particular needs.

A lot of work remains to be done. But if education policy leaders want every student to experience **a personalized, competency-based system of learning**, then teachers and administrators must learn in the same way.

We look forward to learning with you as we collectively advance professional learning for the educators serving students every day.

Start earning micro-credentials today: digitalpromise.org/microcredentials

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