



Moving toward Competency-Based Professional Learning

There are few areas where American teachers are as united as they are in their dissatisfaction with their professional learning and advancement opportunities. The lack of meaningful offerings affects states' ability to attract, develop, and retain strong teachers, which in turn impedes schools' ability to help students fulfill their potential. There are evidence-based fixes, but they require major changes to policies and practices that dictate how schools are staffed and changes in expectations and school culture. If carefully harnessed, micro-credentials are one tool that can help overcome these challenges.

Individual teachers spend an average of 68 hours annually on professional development (PD) activities funded by schools and local education agencies (LEAs), at a total cost of around \$18 billion.¹ While the quantity of these offerings may seem substantial, their quality is generally low. The Frontline Research and Learning Institute found that at least 80 percent of PD failed to meet four of six criteria that Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) established for high-quality

PD.² A nationally representative survey of teachers in 2015 found that only 20 percent were satisfied with PD.³ Given finite resources and a perceived minimal return on investment, at least one state decided that PD was not a top priority, defunding it completely.⁴

We believe the debate should not center on whether educators need more or less support but on how to provide better support. Teachers often engage in formal PD to fulfill state-mandated "credit hours," time-based units they must earn to retain or advance their teaching license.⁵ This compliance orientation flies in the face of research on human motivation and behavior,⁶ as well as the evidence on best PD practices. The PD most likely to improve teacher practice is content focused, incorporates active learning, supports collaboration, is sustained, uses models of effective practice, provides expert support and feedback, and promotes reflection on data and practices.⁷ But most PD is not like this. Instead, all teachers in a school, regardless of their subject area or skill set, attend lecture-based trainings on the same topics, with

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no opportunities to practice skills or work with peers or supervisors in incorporating PD content in the classroom.

The issues with PD are compounded by the dearth of opportunities for professional advancement. The available pathways for teachers to move up in their careers often lead them outside the classroom, into administrative roles or even outside the public education system. And the opportunities that do exist for teachers to gain increased recognition, authority, and compensation while staying in the classroom are often tied to years of experience or degree attainment instead of relevant, demonstrable skills. This lack of support and opportunity contributes to making the American educator workforce a “leaky bucket,” characterized by substantial teacher turnover in many schools, particularly in those serving the highest-need students.⁸

A Role for Microcredentials

Recognizing and rewarding teacher growth can lead to better instruction and increased retention of great teachers, and ultimately lead to improvements in students’ educational experiences.⁹ But putting evidence about effective PD and advancement into practice has been a challenge for policymakers and practitioners, in part because of a lack of aligned tools to promote and assess teacher competencies. In a recent report on designing and implementing effective teacher development and advancement policies, New America examined the potential of high-quality educator microcredentials to move PD systems toward quality practice and better define in-school teacher advancement.¹⁰

High-quality microcredentials are a verification of a discrete skill or competency that a teacher has demonstrated by submitting evidence assessed via a validated rubric. In short, a microcredential is a competency-based assessment of a specific “micro” skill. The emphasis on “micro” is a key differentiator of these credentials: For example, an educator could not get a microcredential in classroom management overall, but they could get one in a specific classroom management skill, such as using wait time in the classroom. Over time, they could earn several complementary microcredentials that more comprehensively address core classroom management practices as part of a classroom management microcredential “stack.”

To begin the process of earning a high-quality microcredential, an educator identifies an area for growth, selects a corresponding microcredential, and develops and collects the required evidence for demonstrating the given competency. Once the educator submits the requisite evidence, an assessor uses a transparent, validated rubric to determine whether the candidate has met the requirements. If they have, the provider awards the candidate the credential. If not, the candidate gets feedback for improvement so they can improve their practice and resubmit evidence to try and earn the credential.¹¹

Microcredentials and Professional Development

While they focus primarily on the assessment of competency rather than delivery of new information, high-quality microcredentials can significantly improve PD quality, and hence, the quality of instruction. First, by offering a rubric for assessing proficiency in a given evidence-based competency, microcredentials can give educators a clear picture of what successful practice entails.

Additionally, microcredentials can make PD more relevant by targeting areas for teacher growth via a customized, on-demand, self-paced experience. By increasing teacher agency, microcredentials promote authentic engagement and greater satisfaction with professional learning. While teachers perceive these offerings to be more difficult than traditional PD offerings, those who finish one typically express interest in doing more.¹²

Through their evidence collection and assessment processes, microcredentials also model best practices. By encouraging teachers to collect, analyze, and act on data, they promote an inquiry-based, active learning model. And they provide opportunities for teachers to receive and learn from feedback on their submissions of evidence.¹³ Each of these attributes helps promote learning but in combination can provide powerful professional growth.

And while teachers can pursue them individually, schools and LEAs can increase microcredentials’ impact by encouraging groups of educators to collaborate to develop targeted skills. In a 2016 report, the Center for Teaching Quality described microcredentials as offering colleagues a “common currency” for articulating and

documenting knowledge and skills as they learn and work together.¹⁴ Educators in Washington found that microcredential candidates were more satisfied with their experience and more likely to be successful in their submissions when they felt supported by collaborative learning systems rather than working in isolation.¹⁵

The Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative also embraces a community approach, facilitating in-person and remote collaboration for educators pursuing microcredentials in pursuit of solutions to common school-level problems of practice.¹⁶ The opportunity for remote collaboration has been a particular benefit during the COVID-19 pandemic but can be a real boon for “singleton” teachers who have few or no other colleagues in their school or LEA who are focused on the same content area or “problems of practice,” even during more normal times.

Researchers have identified several features critical for successful professional collaboration and coaching, one of which is having teacher leaders trained to use explicit protocols to guide teams through “a process of identifying student learning problems, selecting instructional strategies, analyzing student work for evidence of impact, and honing strategies until they achieved results.”¹⁷ The structure of high-quality microcredentials makes them well suited for guiding this work.

Career Advancement

Microcredentials can also provide a competency-based route to advancement. Often, states leave the roles and responsibilities of a teacher leader undefined.¹⁸ Hence these roles vary from LEA to LEA. Many of the state requirements for gaining a teacher-leader license or endorsement are currently related to degree attainment, years of experience, or overall teaching performance.¹⁹ Microcredentials offer one tool for focusing these roles on demonstration of specific, relevant competencies, including ones that may not be easily identifiable in an educator’s current role.

According to officials at Harmony Public Schools, a charter school network in Texas, an additional benefit is helping to better define an advanced role’s responsibilities.²⁰ In conjunction with BloomBoard, a for-profit provider, Harmony developed “role cards” for leadership and coaching positions in their schools with associated salary increases. Each role card specifies the competencies needed to perform

a specific teacher-leader job, along with the associated stack of aligned microcredentials that an educator must earn to be eligible for the position. Teaching Matters, a nonprofit PD provider, has used microcredentials to certify teacher leaders for years in conjunction with the New York City Department of Education.²¹ To earn teacher leadership positions and the additional job responsibilities and union-negotiated salary increase they proffer, candidates must first earn the required microcredentials. Officials then interview successful candidates as the final step to being approved for the role.

At least four states have, or are developing, programs that use microcredentials for teacher career advancement. In Arkansas and Louisiana, state-recognized teacher leadership roles can be earned in this fashion. Oklahoma is developing a similar system, and South Carolina is also experimenting with microcredentials for teacher leadership.²²

Other states let teachers use microcredentials as a pathway to earning advanced licensure, which is meant to recognize superior teaching ability. For example, Kentucky approved a plan by the Kentucky Educational Development Corporation, a consortium of Kentucky LEAs, to use microcredentials in this way.²³ The consortium created a three-year, 24-microcredential pathway that balances a set of core pedagogical practices with room for individual “electives.” It carefully vetted each microcredential for quality and alignment with the evidence-based competencies it had determined were most critical for advanced educators. If a teacher earns all 24, they receive a Rank 2 license and a base salary increase.

Ongoing Challenges

Microcredentials were created first and foremost as an assessment of competency and hence have focused less on how the individual learns a skill and more on whether they can demonstrate it. Thus, while high-quality microcredentials do provide some recommended resources on the specific competency in question, the depth of these resources is typically shallow. While that approach may work for the most effective or motivated teachers, many—particularly those new to a topic—will need more direct or intensive resources than are typically provided.

To help identify more customized resources, teachers will likely turn to colleagues. While

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microcredentials may facilitate peer collaboration and coaching, they do not by themselves guarantee that teachers experience these impactful approaches to developing their practice or have interactions of sufficient quality or quantity. And while providers of high-quality microcredentials offer feedback to teachers who fail to earn them, teachers do not typically seek and receive guidance along the way.²⁴

Two additional issues, particularly for career advancement, are the lack of a clear quality vetting process for microcredential offerings and no commonly agreed-upon value for those earned. Without a consistent process for confirming quality, employers will either be reluctant to bestow rewards and recognition upon earners or will use varying criteria for doing so. Either scenario will lead to confusion and minimal “portability” of microcredentials from one employer to another, ultimately reducing teachers’ interest in pursuing them. And a lack of clear, consistent value or incentives for engaging in microcredentials will lead many teachers to continue pursuing less risky and difficult—but less impactful—professional growth opportunities.

Considerations for State Boards

The thoughtful incorporation of microcredentials can move human capital systems for educators away from bureaucratic compliance to demonstrated competencies and rehabilitate teachers’ view of PD from a waste of time into a meaningful experience. By New America’s count, at least 15 states have developed their own microcredentials to support ongoing professional learning.²⁵

Yet microcredentials are no silver bullet. The issues with traditional PD and professional learning systems are well documented and long-standing.²⁶ While our research finds that high-quality microcredentials can significantly improve PD, they will not shift professional learning without also shifting culture and mindsets from compliance to ongoing growth.

Success requires systemic change, rather than simply layering microcredentials alongside existing policies and processes. The best strategy for such change incorporates three synergistic components: 1) recognizing and rewarding competency through formal advancement, 2) using license renewal as a tool for ensuring teachers hold key evidence-based competencies,

and 3) personalizing ongoing PD.²⁷

To help make these shifts, state boards of education can do the following:

- Promote alignment between state licensure and certification requirements, professional teaching standards, elements of teacher performance evaluation systems (particularly observation rubrics), and professional development policies and systems, including efforts to incorporate microcredentials into these systems.
- Develop career lattices that allow teachers with varying interests and abilities to continue to advance in the profession as educators, identifying the specific skills, responsibilities, and rewards associated with each role and appropriate pathways for attaining them (including via stacks of microcredentials, where applicable).
- Push to disconnect ongoing PD focused on promoting personalized professional learning from PD activities required for license renewal in order to prevent teacher development efforts that would otherwise be intrinsically motivated from becoming acts of compliance.
- Shift the license renewal process away from a compliance orientation driven by “seat time” to one focused on ensuring that every teacher can demonstrate sufficient competency in high-priority, evidence-based skills for effective teaching, particularly those that have emerged in research more recently and that teachers are unlikely to have encountered as part of their initial preparation (e.g., approaches for developing students’ social-emotional learning skills).
- Provide guidance and funding for rethinking educator schedules to ensure there are opportunities to engage in the inquiry cycles required for microcredential success and include structured opportunities to collaborate with peers and receive coaching as part of the professional learning process.
- Create vehicles to virtually connect teachers who are “singletons” in their specialty area to engage in structured, collaborative PD, possibly using microcredentials as a tool.
- Develop a system to rigorously vet the quality of microcredential offerings and associated training, as well as policies that establish appropriate value and incentives for engaging in them, and convey that information to educators and employers.

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want from their education system, then go out and design it, and constantly go back and ask if you've gotten it right," Watson advised. "Every state can do this; it's just hard work." ■

¹Jay Scott, "Redesign Resiliency: Kansas Secondary Redesign Schools Navigating COVID-19," *Educational Considerations* 46, no. 2 (2020).

²Anthony Nguyen, "Kansas Loops Stakeholders in on Conversation about K-12 Policy," *State Innovation* 21, no. 3 (October 2016).

³Anthony Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl, "Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements through 2020" State Report (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, Center on Education and the Workforce, 2013).

⁴Kansas State Department of Education, "Kansas Report Card 2019–2020: Postsecondary Progress," figure, https://ksreportcard.ksde.org/ccr.aspx?org_no=State&rptType=3.

⁵The department calculates a five-year effective rate by multiplying its four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate by the percentage of students meeting one of four postsecondary success markers.

⁶Tamra Mitchell, "School and Community Relations in the Kansans Can School Redesign Project," *Educational Considerations* 46, no. 2 (2020).

⁷The Kansas state board is statutorily charged with managing accreditation of districts and schools, a process that provides official recognition of a school as having met a defined set of standards. The Kansas Education Systems Accreditation requires districts to document outcomes outlined in Kansas's strategic plan: local measures of social-emotional growth, kindergarten readiness, individual plans of study, high school graduation, and postsecondary success. Some schools saw a pause in the process during the past school year due to the pandemic.

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■ Ensure high-need LEAs have the supports necessary to adopt and implement microcredentials effectively, so all students and teachers can benefit equitably.

■ Collect and review data on initial efforts to redesign PD, license renewal, and advancement systems, including via feedback from educators, in order to understand their influence on teaching quality, teacher retention, and student achievement, and continue to iterate and improve upon those efforts. ■

¹Boston Consulting Group, "Teachers Know Best: Teachers' Views on Professional Development" (Seattle, WA: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014).

²Elizabeth Combs and Sarah Silverman, "Bridging the Gap: Paving the Pathway from Current Practice to Exemplary Professional Learning" (Malvern, PA: Frontline Research & Learning Institute, 2016).

³Grunwald Associates LLC and Digital Promise, "Making Professional Learning Count: Recognizing Educators' Skills with Microcredentials" (San Mateo, CA: Digital Promise, 2015), 5.

⁴Jason Bailey, "Governor's Budget Cuts Education, Eliminates Some Programs," report (Berea, KY: Kentucky Center for Economic Policy, January 17, 2018), <https://kypolicy.org/governors-budget-cuts-education-eliminates-programs/>.

⁵Stephanie Hirsh, "Choosing between What Matters and What Counts," opinion, *Education Week*, March 4, 2015.

⁶David Burkus, "Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic Motivation at Work,"

Psychology Today, April 11, 2020.

⁷Linda Darling-Hammond, Maria E. Hyler, and Madelyn Gardner, "Effective Teacher Professional Development" (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, June 5, 2017).

⁸Emma Garcia and Elaine Weiss, "U.S. Schools Struggle to Hire and Retain Teachers," report (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2019).

⁹Melissa Tooley and Kaylan Connally, "No Panacea: Diagnosing What Ails Teacher Professional Development before Reaching for Remedies" (Washington, DC: New America, 2016), 19–20.

¹⁰Melissa Tooley and Joseph Hood, "Harnessing Microcredentials for Teacher Growth: A National Review of Early Best Practices" (Washington, DC: New America, 2021).

¹¹For a visual representation of the microcredential earning process, see "Understanding Educator Microcredentials," in Tooley and Hood, "Harnessing Microcredentials for Teacher Growth: A National Review of Early Best Practices" (Washington, DC: New America, 2021).

¹²Grunwald Associates and Digital Promise, "Making Professional Learning Count."

¹³John Hattie and Helen Timperley, "The Power of Feedback," *Review of Educational Research* 77, no. 1 (2007): 81–112, <https://doi.org/10.3102/003465430298487>.

¹⁴Center for Teaching Quality and Digital Promise, "Microcredentials: Driving Teacher Learning & Leadership" (Carrboro, NC: Center for Teaching Quality, 2016).

¹⁵State of Washington Professional Educator Standards Board, "The Potential of Microcredentials in Washington State" (Olympia, WA: author, 2019), <https://www.pesb.wa.gov/resources-and-reports/reports/the-potential-of-microcredentials-in-washington-state-report/>.

¹⁶Melissa Tooley and Sabia Prescott, "Professional Learning in Appalachia," *State Education Standard* 21, no. 1 (2021), 18–24, 37.

¹⁷National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, "Beyond 'Job-Embedded: Ensuring That Good Professional Development Gets Results'" (Santa Monica, CA: author, 2012).

¹⁸Education Commission of the States, "50-State Comparison: Teacher Leadership and Licensure Advancement, Does the State Define the Role (Prescribe Certain Duties) of the Teacher Leader in Statute or Regulation?" table (Denver: author, October 2018), <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/MBQuest2RTanw?rep=TCL1806>.

¹⁹Education Commission of the States, "50-State Comparison: Teacher Leadership and Licensure Advancement, What Tasks and/or Evidence of Effectiveness Are Required for Teachers to Obtain a Teacher Leader License/Endorsement?" table (Denver: author, October 2018), <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/MBQuest2RTanw?rep=TCL1804>.

²⁰Authors' interview with Burak Yilmaz and Robert Thornton, Harmony Public Schools, July 27, 2020.

²¹Authors' interview with Evan O'Donnell of Teaching Matters, September 9, 2020.

²²Authors' interview with Lilla Toal-Mandsager and Libby Ortmann, Office of Educator Effectiveness and Leadership Development, South Carolina Department of Education, September 29, 2020.

²³Authors' interview with Latishia Sparks and Charles Rutledge of the Kentucky Educational Development Corporation, November 13, 2020.

²⁴Teaching Matters is one exception. Authors' interview with O'Donnell.

²⁵Tooley and Hood, "Harnessing Microcredentials."

²⁶Tooley and Connally, "No Panacea."

²⁷For more detailed recommendations on designing and implementing more effective teacher development and advancement policies, with microcredentials as a component, see Melissa Tooley and Joseph Hood, *Harnessing Microcredentials for Teacher Growth: A Model State Policy Guide* (Washington, DC: New America, 2021).