

Your Question:

Generally, you were looking for more information about micro-credentialing in teacher professional development. Specifically, you wanted to know 1) what the research says, 2) what states and districts are doing, and 3) key considerations for policymakers.

Our Response:

Research has shown that much of the professional development teachers receive is **ineffective** at improving teacher and student performance. Few districts offer training that is in alignment with **best practices** (incorporates active learning, supports collaboration, provides expert support, etc.) and teachers are **mostly unhappy** with the training they receive. Micro-credentialing or “digital badging” is a new tool used by some districts, and now some states, to improve teacher professional development.

Under this new method, teachers complete online training modules to develop a specific instructional skill, and earn a micro-credential after demonstrating mastery of that skill through outputs such as projects, classroom videos or student work. Micro-credentials allow teachers to target the specific skills they need to improve their practice and support school and district goals. The credentials can be pursued individually on a host of topics or “stacked” to demonstrate growing competency in a single area.

With the right supports in place, demonstrated competency through micro-credentials might be used as a supplement or replacement for the seat-time continuing education requirements currently dominating professional development in most states. Recently, micro-credentialing has also made its way into the teacher preparation space, with organizations such as **Educators Rising** and **Relay Graduate School of Education** using them to assess and demonstrate student mastery of teaching competencies.

Organizations

A handful of organizations are pioneering micro-credentialing in teacher professional development on a national level. Examples include:

- **Digital Promise** is a non-profit group whose mission is to “accelerate innovation in education.” Alongside more than 30 partner organizations, Digital Promise has created over **250 micro-credentials** for teachers. Some of the partner organizations include: the **Center for Teaching Quality**, **Learning Forward** and **Future Ready Schools**. Digital Promise requires each micro-credential 1) focus on a single competency; 2) have a key method backed by research; 3) require submission of evidence; and 4) include a rubric or scoring guide. Examples of micro-credentials available through Digital Promise include: connecting with students, facilitating classroom meetings, using research to inform teaching and writing publicly to influence policymakers.
- **Open Badges** has made micro-credentialing easily accessible to a range of industries and employment sectors, including education. Common users in the education sector include: postsecondary institutions, schools, teachers and education training programs.

Research

Because micro-credentialing is new to teacher professional development, the research is still emerging. Below are some reports you might find useful:

- [Reimagining the Role of Technology in Education: 2017 National Education Technology Update](#) (USDOE, Office of Educational Technology, 2017) Highlights micro-credentialing as an emerging trend in teacher professional learning.
- [Micro-credentials: Teacher Learning Transformed](#) (Kappan, 2016) Projects optimism about the future of micro-credentials in teacher professional learning for five reasons: 1) the approach is grounded in empirical evidence about effective teacher collaboration; 2) it is likely to appeal to practitioners who have long been disillusioned with the professional development offered by their school systems; 3) it enables teachers to get recognition or credit for what they are already learning informally in online networks; 4) it can fit readily into existing systems; and 5) the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) presents district and state leaders with new opportunities to rethink and fund differently systems for teachers' professional learning and growth.
- [Promising State Policies for Personalized Learning](#) (iNACOL, 2016) Recommends states use ESSA's new flexibility to develop policies that support teachers earning micro-credentials and suggests micro-credentials could form the basis of new competency-based preparation, development and instruction.

Digital Promise has a [library of resources](#) on micro-credentialing. Some of their recent reports include:

- [Micro-credentials for Impact: Holding Professional Learning to High Standards](#) (Digital Promise and Learning Forward, 2017) Demonstrates how micro-credentials connect to the Standards for Professional Learning that have been adopted in 35 states. Provides recommendations for ensuring effectiveness of micro-credentials.
- [Making Professional Learning Count: Recognizing Educators' Skills with Micro-credentials](#) (Digital Promise & Grunwald Associates, 2015) Finds that although teacher participation in formal professional development is high (99 percent) satisfaction is lower. Most teachers are unfamiliar with micro-credentialing, but once teachers see a description of micro-credentials, more than 70 percent are at least somewhat interested in them. Teachers reported that they want professional development that is easy to use/access and tailored to their specific needs.
- [Preparing Teachers for Deeper Learning](#) (Digital Promise & Getting Smart, 2014) Recommends that teacher preparation and ongoing professional learning should offer: 1) some element of teacher control over time, place, path and/or pace; 2) balance between teacher-defined goals, goals as defined by administration through teacher evaluation efforts, and school and district educational goals; 3) job-embedded and meaningful integration into classroom practice; 4) and competency-based progression.

Examples

States and districts are beginning to recognize and promote micro-credentials by offering continuing education units, pay increases or bonuses.

District examples include:

- [Kettle Moraine School District](#) in **Wisconsin** has built a compensation system around Digital Promise’s micro-credentialing system. Teachers can elect to choose from and participate in credentials already offered by Digital Promise or the district, or they can create their own. Teachers receive pay bumps up to \$600 for completed micro-credentials. Within two years of introducing the new professional learning system, more than half of the district’s teacher workforce earned at least one micro-credential. Wisconsin has granted districts the ability to approve micro-credentials as continuing-education units.
- [Surry County Schools](#) in **North Carolina** has provided teachers access to an online professional learning system where they can participate in self-paced learning modules, which often include a game component, and receive a micro-credential and physical badge to be displayed in their classroom once the module has been completed. North Carolina has also granted districts the ability to approve micro-credentials as continuing-education units.
- [Baltimore County Public Schools](#) in **Maryland** is encouraging competency-based professional learning for teachers through micro-credentials. The micro-credentials convert to continuing education units, which can count towards a Master’s degree equivalency and salary advancement and certification renewal and may soon count towards teacher leadership endorsements.

State examples include:

- **Tennessee** launched a micro-credentialing pilot for up to 100 teachers in 2016-17 and plans to scale the pilot to reach up to 5,000 teachers in 2017-18. By 2018-19, the state hopes to further expand the pilot as a resource to all educators and develop micro-credentials around the Tennessee Academic Standards and other state needs. If the pilot goes well, Tennessee might consider using micro-credentials as a tool for licensure renewal and advancement. The effort to promote personalized professional development for teachers in the state stems largely from an interest in expanding student access to personalized learning. (See p. 138-140 of the [Tennessee ESSA State Plan](#) for more information.)
- **North Carolina** allows districts to develop their own teacher license renewal plans and to substitute professional development credit hour requirements with outputs-based measurements. The State Board of Education convened a Micro-credentialing and State Policy Work Group to define a framework for using micro-credentialing in professional development. (See [this work group report](#) for more information.)
- **Illinois** passed [a bill](#) in 2013, which, among other things, allows teachers to pursue different types of professional development, which can include micro-credentials.

Micro-credentials have received some attention in ESSA state plans, with some states committing to offering micro-credentials to teachers ([Delaware](#), [Tennessee](#)) and others expressing interest in exploring micro-credentials in a quest to improve teacher professional development ([Maine](#), [Michigan](#)). Efforts to create micro-credentialing systems are also underway in [Alabama](#) and [New Hampshire](#).

Key Considerations

Policymakers looking to support micro-credentials should consider the following challenges:

- **Already existing professional development structures:** Some states have strict requirements on what can count towards professional development and, oftentimes, states and districts place priority on seat-time.

For micro-credentials to gain traction in a state, competency-based learning will need to be accepted/promoted as part of the professional development system.

- **Value:** For large-scale implementation, micro-credentials must translate to some benefit for the teachers receiving them (i.e. licensure renewal and advancement, continuing education units, and/or pay bumps).
- **Diffusion of responsibility and quality control:** There is no single creator of micro-credentials, and it can be difficult to establish a quality threshold, unless the issuing organization has established strict guidelines.
- **Portability:** Because micro-credentialing is new, the badges received may not yet be readily portable, or received with the same value when a teacher transfers from one school to the next.
- **Sustainability:** State leaders likely face funding limitations, and should look towards Federal Title II statewide program dollars or district-level investments to invest in and sustain micro-credentialing systems.