Quality Assurance Standards for Micro-Credentials: Recommendations from a Multistate Partnership, 2023

Research has long established that the single most important school-based factor in student success is a well-prepared, highly skilled, and caring teacher.[1] Yet states and districts nationwide continue to grapple with how to best develop, support, and retain a highly effective educator workforce, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Central to this effort is the need to modernize professional learning systems to increase personalization, flexibility, recognition across contexts, and most importantly, to improve student outcomes. Practitioners and system leaders alike have pointed to educator micro-credentialing as a promising strategy to shift the paradigm of professional learning and ensure that every student has a high-quality, effective teacher. According to national tracking done by Digital Promise, almost every state in the United States has engaged with micro-credentials for educators at either the local or the state level.

As part of a broader system of professional learning, competency-based micro-credentials have the potential to drive the expansion of educators' skills and knowledge to improve academic and other important outcomes of all students. However, there are no consistent standards to guide the development and implementation of high-quality micro-credentials as usage expands in state and local systems of education. To address this need, digiLEARN convened the Micro-credentials Partnership of States (MPOS) to develop a consistent definition and standards of quality for micro-credentials. This brief outlines how the MPOS approached this work, the resulting quality assurance standards, and related recommendations for implementation.

> ### What is a Micro-Credential?
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> A high-quality **micro-credential** is a verification of proficiency in a job-embedded discrete skill or competency that an educator has demonstrated through the submission of evidence assessed via defined evaluation criteria.

THE CURRENT MODEL OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND THE NEED FOR CHANGE

For decades, the predominant method of teacher professional development has been a workshop model based on seat time. While this model has evolved to include additional research-based supports including coaching, mentoring, and professional learning communities, there remains no consistent measure of learning in this system. Teachers typically receive credit simply for being in attendance. Often there is no requirement to master the session content or incorporate learning into instructional practice. Additionally, participation in these opportunities is often driven by state or district priorities or licensure requirements. Little weight is given to what teachers view as vital to improve practice within their context despite a clear call by teachers for professional development that is related to their own classrooms.[2]

This traditional approach to time-based professional learning comes at no small cost. A 2015 report from TNTP estimated that the 50 largest school districts in the United States spend over $8 billion annually on teacher development, and that teachers dedicate nearly 10 percent of a typical school year to professional development activities. Despite this investment of time and money, research has shown that the impact of these opportunities on teaching and learning is uneven.[3] Further, teachers and administrators consistently report that the current model for professional learning does not meet their professional needs.[4] When professional development represents such a significant expenditure, states and districts must see a return on their investment in terms of impact on teaching and learning.

"As a new teacher… I can see the benefits of using micro-credentials as a tool for certification and development. In contrast to school-based professional development…micro-credentials can be related to what your classroom data is showing, which would provide an immediate reward in student learning."

- South Carolina Teacher

THE CASE FOR EDUCATOR MICRO-CREDENTIALS

Micro-credentials offer an alternative approach to professional learning focused on recognizing demonstrated skills and knowledge rather than seat time. A high-quality micro-credential is a verification of proficiency in a job-embedded discrete skill or competency that an educator has demonstrated through the submission of evidence assessed via defined evaluation criteria. When integrated into existing systems of professional learning, micro-credentials can assess and recognize an educator's acquisition of skills, knowledge, and competencies so they can improve practice, advance in their career, and be acknowledged and rewarded as professionals. Implemented effectively, micro-credentials align with best practices in professional learning and teacher development,[5] and they represent a promising method of providing job-embedded, just-in-time supports for teachers built around their personal professional goals and specific student needs.[6] Other high-leverage professional learning practices, including professional learning communities, mentoring, or coaching cycles, can be strengthened by the incorporation of micro-credentials.

> *"As simple as it sounds, people do not want to change. The only way professional development has been delivered since the dawn of time in public schools is "sit and get." That is how the mind is connected to professional learning in most states. We need to change the paradigm."*
>
> **-Former Arkansas Principal**

While the research base on the effectiveness of micro-credentials remains in its nascent stages, a 2022 study examining the efficacy of micro-credentials for improving teacher knowledge base, with a focus on teachers in rural communities, found that online micro-credentials were an effective method of increasing participating teachers' understanding of third-grade math concepts. Further, a survey of participants revealed that the asynchronous and self-paced structure of the micro-credentials increased accessibility and allowed participants to engage as their schedule allowed, and that participants viewed the micro-credentialing experience as more impactful than professional development they had experienced previously.[7]

A larger body of research has established the value teachers see in micro-credentials as a tool for professional learning. Teachers consistently respond favorably to the opportunities for personalization that exist with micro-credentials, both in terms of the competencies they can select, how they demonstrate their competency, and the feedback that they receive from assessors.[8] Research also shows that teachers who engage with micro-credentials felt their practice improved[9] and believed their learning would lead to improved student outcomes.[10]

In many ways, micro-credentials represent an important opportunity for states and districts to personalize professional learning and facilitate equitable development for educators across contexts. Effective micro-credentialing systems can provide just-in-time supports to teachers in rural or low-wealth districts that may lack the resources or personnel to provide this development in-house. High-quality professional learning opportunities can be particularly scarce for teachers in rural areas, and the asynchronous and personalized nature of micro-credentials offers relevant, ongoing learning opportunities that may otherwise be unavailable. However, state and district systems must also prioritize digital equity to fully realize this potential.[11]

THE NEED FOR CONSISTENT STANDARDS OF QUALITY

The increased prevalence of micro-credentials as a tool for educator learning and licensure has led a wide array of organizations, including local education agencies, state education agencies, institutions of higher education, and third-party organizations, to independently develop and issue their own micro-credentials, each with their own understanding of what constitutes quality. The lack of consistent quality standards undermines the portability of micro-credentials across contexts, leaving earners unsure whether a micro-credential, and the competency they have demonstrated in earning it, will be recognized by their school, district, or other licensing agency. A 2022 feasibility study released by RTI and digiLEARN analyzed micro-credentialing in North Carolina and found that the absence of consistent quality standards was one of the most significant challenges for the state's ability to effectively utilize micro-credentials for teacher retention, development, and career advancement.

Rigorous and consistent nomenclature, quality standards, and review processes are critical for recognizers and earners to determine the quality of micro-credentials and to provide developers a basis on which to measure micro-credentials' effectiveness and impact. By adopting consistent quality assurance standards, states can implement policies that improve portability and advance the integration of micro-credentials from a wide range of developers into systems of professional learning and licensure.

> *"It would be nice for district and building leaders to understand and gain knowledge [about] micro-credentialing. Often teachers are invested, but they don't have the right level of support from leadership due to lack of understanding of how micro-credentials work."*
>
> **-Arkansas District Administrator**

THE MICRO-CREDENTIALS PARTNERSHIP OF STATES

Recognizing the need for consistent quality standards to guide the development and implementation of micro-credentials, digiLEARN convened partners from Wyoming, South Carolina, Arkansas, and North Carolina to form the Micro-credentials Partnership of States.

These four states were selected to lead this work based on their depth of experience implementing educator micro-credentials in unique contexts and their interest in ensuring quality and portability across state systems. MPOS members vary in their approaches to implementation and development of micro-credentials, from their use for licensure add-on and renewal (WY), integration into teacher career pathways (AR), development in partnership with institutions of higher education (SC and WY), and portability across districts (NC). This diversity of perspective is vital in generating the comprehensive and innovative solutions this issue demands.

Through this process, MPOS partner states collectively identified the following core areas of focus as priorities in their work:

- **Increasing Awareness and Buy-in |** Micro-credentials represent an exciting opportunity for systems and individual educators alike, yet many educators and education stakeholders may be unaware of their application and potential.

- **Protecting Time |** Educators already have competing demands for their time. Micro-credentials must replace existing requirements rather than adding to them.

- **Expanding Portability |** High-quality micro-credentials should hold currency across state and district contexts, allowing educators who earn high-quality micro-credentials to be recognized and valued for their demonstrable competencies.

- **Increasing Currency |** Systems can foster the adoption of micro-credentials by developing processes that formally recognize the value of high-quality micro-credentials and tie their completion to formal endorsements, certification, and compensation.

- **Building Capacity |** Efficiently developing and assessing high-quality micro-credentials demands integrated continuous improvement processes and highly trained staff, both of which place a high demand on staffing at the systems level.
- **Consistency Across Platforms |** Establishing currency and portability requires a consistent record of earned micro-credentials and their corresponding metadata.
- **Equity of Access |** Micro-credentials should be available to educators in all contexts. Systems must develop structures and supports that increase availability for all educators to engage in these valuable professional learning opportunities.
- **Creating Culture of Growth Across Roles |** A lack of comprehensive, job-embedded professional learning opportunities excludes nonteaching school and district staff from the growth-oriented culture of schools. Micro-credentials represent an opportunity to build competencies and recognize excellence across a wide range of roles.
- **Measuring Impact |** The evidence in favor of micro-credentials is primarily based on a limited number of studies analyzing educator feedback. Additional research on the efficacy of individual micro-credentials, as well as broader implementation, will be necessary as states investigate the potential for adopting micro-credentials as a tool for licensure.

MICRO-CREDENTIALS IN MPOS MEMBER STATES

MPOS member states are leading the way in establishing the ecosystem necessary to modernize professional learning through micro-credentials. The work in each state models effective collaboration among a variety of bodies including state education agencies, local districts, institutions of higher education, and independent licensing bodies.
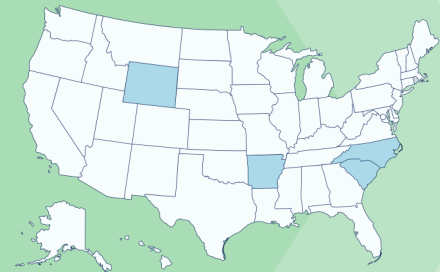
Arkansas

- The Arkansas Office of Educator Effectiveness and Licensure currently provides micro-credentials at no cost to teachers and administrators through its ArkansasIDEAS platform.
- Beginning teachers can use micro-credentials to satisfy provisional licensure requirements.
- Established educators can earn individual or stacks of micro-credentials to become eligible for Master or Lead Professional Educator career continuum designations.

North Carolina

- From 2017 to 2020, North Carolina allocated over $3 million in Digital Learning Initiative grants across 24 districts supporting the creation and support of micro-credentialing programs or individual micro-credentials.
- The North Carolina Micro-Credentials Work Group is designing a universal template for micro-credentials to ensure quality and portability across the state.
- A recent report to the State Board of Education provides recommendations for steps to integrate micro-credentials into professional learning for educators.

South Carolina

- The South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) offers licensure renewal credits for educators who complete eligible micro-credentials. Through a partnership with CarolinaCrED at the University of South Carolina, SCDE offers over 300 individual micro-credentials and 31 stacks addressing competencies focused on the South Carolina context.
- The SCDE is currently in the fourth cohort of its Micro-credential Academy, a program providing support and collaboration opportunities for educators seeking to earn renewal credits.
- South Carolina's Office of Educator Effectiveness and Leadership Development offers micro-credentials as part of four leadership programs.

Wyoming

- In 2019, the Wyoming Department of Education partnered with the University of Wyoming and the state's independent Wyoming Professional Teaching Standards Board to pilot 17 computer science micro-credentials that count toward professional development credits for licensure renewal.
- Educators who participated in the pilot program have reported being more engaged in teaching and an increase in confidence in the material.
- In 2022, the Wyoming Professional Teaching Standards Board directed staff to draft rules to allow for adding endorsements to a teaching license through the completion of micro-credentials.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Through a yearlong process led by digiLEARN and RTI International, MPOS members developed and adopted quality assurance standards that provide criteria by which earners, developers, assessors, issuers, and recognizers can gauge the quality of a given micro-credential, establishing universal quality, portability, and value to educators nationwide. Because the core purpose of this work is to improve instruction and student outcomes, teacher perspective was especially important to the process. Therefore, MPOS members convened key stakeholders, including teachers, school leaders, policymakers, and national experts on micro-credentials, to inform the work.

As MPOS members engaged with state-level practitioners and national experts on micro-credentials and teacher development, it became clear that, while a consistent approach to defining and developing high-quality micro-credentials is critical to improving portability across systems, the standards alone are not sufficient to ensure that micro-credentials achieve the broader goal of transforming and improving professional development for educators. Additional systems improvements are needed. The following recommendations identify important issues that need to be addressed with policies and procedures that establish an ecosystem where high-quality micro-credentials can equitably serve educators in varied contexts, thereby maximizing educator and student outcomes.

1. **Integrate Micro-credentials into Larger System of Professional Learning |** Micro-credentials represent one element of a comprehensive system of professional learning informed by adult learning best practices, where they serve as a conduit to additional opportunities for learning, leadership, and compensation. Micro-credentials should be aligned with and, when possible, offer an alternative to existing seat time-based professional learning requirements.

2. **Balance Individual and System Goals |** Micro-credentials must be embedded within systems so that they align with the strategic priorities of states and districts, while also allowing individual educators to meet their own professional learning goals. Systems should clearly differentiate instances in which professional learning requirements are tied to a prescribed program, pathway, or certification process, like licensure or career advancement pathways, and those wherein educator development can be more self-directed.[†]

3. **Maintain Educator Ownership and Agency |** Micro-credentialing provides an opportunity for educators to take ownership of their own development by selecting micro-credentials that align to their professional needs and the needs of students. To the extent possible, state systems should seek to preserve the element of educator choice when linking micro-credentials to licensure, career advancement, or compensation.

4. **Establish Currency |** Individual and stacks of micro-credentials must provide educators with personal and professional value within state and local systems. This can include recognizing micro-credentials as part of licensure, relicensure, career advancement, graduate coursework, and/or compensation.

[†] New America further clarifies the need to develop policies that address the intended outcomes of incorporating micro-credentials in different contexts including license renewal, ongoing professional development, and career advancement. See Harnessing Micro-credentials for Teacher Growth: A Model State Policy Guide.

5. **Embed Micro-credentials into Career Pathways |** Policies should identify clearly defined pathways where micro-credentials can be combined, linked, and stacked with others in the system to enable the earner to develop and demonstrate a broader set of competencies known to improve professional practice. Pathways should maximize opportunities for choice within the system to leverage the power of relevant, personalized learning for educators.

6. **Prioritize Collaboration and Support |** Support structures and processes should encourage and facilitate collaboration among earners through feedback loops, professional dialogue, and other options to engage synchronously and/or asynchronously while allowing earners to complete at their own pace. Support structures should be aligned with evidence-based approaches that support adult learning, including professional learning communities, professional coaching, mentoring, etc.

7. **Collect Earner Completion Data to Leverage Professional Expertise of Personnel |** Micro-credentials allow states, districts, and schools to identify and capitalize on the expertise of educators and staff. States should employ a data system that tracks completion of quality micro-credentials by earners to provide opportunities to strategically draw on professional expertise to improve student outcomes and reveal systemic gaps and inequities.

8. **Employ Continuous Improvement Methods |** Issuers and recognizers should regularly evaluate the effectiveness of their micro-credentialing systems by collecting and acting upon valid and informative data on the earner experience and micro-credentials' long-term effects on professional practice and student learning. Recognizers should also continually monitor processes and the personnel assessing the quality of micro-credentials to ensure continuity and fidelity to the standards.

9. **Enact a Research Agenda |** Issuers should develop and enact a robust research agenda to investigate and demonstrate the value of micro-credentials as a tool for educator development, retention, and equity. A research agenda that identifies how micro-credentials improve practice and drive equitable student outcomes is especially important to ensure that all students ultimately benefit.

REALIZING THE VISION

As the MPOS partnership continues, members will work to operationalize the Micro-Credential Quality Assurance Standards by developing and piloting a quality assurance rubric for micro-credentials based on the standards. Partner states, along with other national leaders in educator micro-credentialing, will be part of the pilot where learnings will be used to refine the tool and establish a normed baseline of quality. At the same time, partner states will work to implement the systems-level recommendations included in the quality standards to more effectively integrate micro-credentials into their state's professional learning ecosystem. Insights learned from the MPOS partnership will continue to inform the development of a more consistent approach to the development and implementation of high-quality micro-credentials as the partner states pursue meaningful transformation of professional learning that strengthens instruction and improves student outcomes.

Additional states have expressed interest in joining the MPOS, and the partnership is expected to expand as this work moves forward. State education leaders who have interest in joining the partnership should contact digiLEARN Executive Director [Myra Best](#) to learn more.

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