



NC PARTNERSHIP FOR MICRO-CREDENTIALS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:
STATUS REPORT TO THE NORTH CAROLINA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION
April 2021



ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT:

This is a summary document. It does not take the place of the extensive research and recommendations in New America's model state policy guide [Harnessing Micro-credentials for Teacher Growth: A National Review of Early Best Practices](#) or RTI International's [NC Feasibility Study](#).

You are encouraged to completely review all documents for specific information and more clarification to understand the recommendations more fully.

THE NC PARTNERSHIP FOR MICRO-CREDENTIALS IS LED BY:



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A Letter from the Chair

Esteemed Colleagues:

I am excited to share the research overview and preliminary recommendations from the North Carolina Partnership for Micro-Credentials. Thank you for recognizing the importance of this work.

Effective teachers are the most important factor to improve student learning. And effective teachers need an innovative system of professional learning—one that includes micro-credentials. Micro-credentials (MCs) have the power to fundamentally change professional learning for teachers and educators. They are a vehicle to deliver best-practice learning. Done well, MCs provide teachers with the opportunity to learn and demonstrate new knowledge and skills that are timely and relevant to their career and their classroom.

To determine the true possibility of micro-credentials in North Carolina and beyond, we have researched the national landscape, spoken with and surveyed teachers, administrators, local board of education members, policy makers, innovative thinkers, and education experts from across the state and nation. We've also gleaned information and best-practice thinking from our expert roster of Partners, Advisors, and Task Force members, who themselves are policymakers, state and national education leaders, business leaders, school administrators and, of course, teachers.

This document and our preliminary recommendations reflect months of discovery and conversation; innovative, creative thinking; and the wishes of teachers and administrators across our state.

COVID-19 continues to cause unprecedented demand for reinventing what teachers do and how they help students learn. As a long-time leader in education, North Carolina has the opportunity to take this moment and transform how teachers learn, and therefore how they help their students learn. While other states are exploring this work, NC can be the first state to develop a system of professional learning integrated with model micro-credential standards, criteria for credentialing agencies, and model policy.

I am grateful to our Partners, Advisors, Task Force members, and funders for their time, resources, and dedication to this work. I look forward to continuing our work together to create new possibilities for teachers and students in NC.

Sincerely,



Bev Perdue

North Carolina Governor 2009-2012

The North Carolina Partnership for Micro-Credentials

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Executive Summary

Research shows that high-quality, effective teachers are the most important factor in determining students' success in school. Getting these teachers into classrooms and keeping them there, however, is no easy feat. From recruiting and retaining talent to capacity-building at the school, district, and state levels, the search for highly skilled teachers presents many challenges.

Micro-credentials (MCs) continue to emerge as a vehicle for delivering effective professional learning. They serve to develop, recognize, and retain strong teachers. Done well, MCs provide teachers with the opportunity to learn and demonstrate competencies while receiving feedback from an outside evaluator and earning public recognition for their skills. In most cases, teachers can complete a micro-credential in their own time and in their own way through public and private digital platforms.

The standards and policies for using MCs as part of a teacher learning system are not yet consistent. This lack of consistency is driven in part by states' incoherent professional development and licensure policies, which are focused on "seat time" and the accrual of continuing education units (CEUs) rather than the demonstration of new skills or knowledge. While teachers are taking advantage of current MCs offered, the credential is not always recognized by their school, district, or state as a part of their professional growth. As a result, MCs have limited impact on teacher practice, career advancement, or reward. MC providers are operating without oversight and with different quality standards. Incentives, if offered, are not always aligned with practices that best support schools. By developing a state-recognized system of competency-based MCs, integrated with a system of professional learning, MCs could be a useful tool for developing effective teachers.

About the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials

In 2020, digiLEARN and the North Carolina State Board of Education developed the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials with other state and national partners, including RTI International, New America, Digital Promise, Bloomboard, the Learning Policy Institute, and the National Education Association. The work was based on the premise that MCs for teachers could be a potential strategy for ensuring that every student has a high-quality and effective teacher. The Partnership received generous support from Carnegie of New York, the Belk Foundation, and the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation.

The North Carolina Partnership for Micro-Credentials has identified several elements in state and local policies and practices that appear to be preventing effective implementation of MCs, along with recommendations for how to move forward toward integrating MCs into teacher professional learning. We've done this by conducting and analyzing:

- a national research report produced by New America's Education Policy Program,
- a state level feasibility and stakeholder focus groups by RTI, and
- a statewide survey by RTI to validate the recommendations once they are finalized by the Partnership.

Over the past year, the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials has taken the first steps to explore how to proceed with MC implementation in NC. These first steps are well-aligned with principles of implementation science, and we offer the following considerations and preliminary recommendations as the next steps toward further implementing MCs in North Carolina.

Considerations Moving Forward

- **From compliance to growth.** According to the national research by New America, integrating micro-credentials into educator professional development can be instrumental in moving the system from one that is compliance driven to one that fosters professional growth.
- **Agreement on standards.** For MCs to reach their full potential, education leaders must agree on the standards for high-quality MCs for consistency of implementation. States, not Local Education Agencies (LEAs), should determine quality and standards so MCs have a recognized value and are portable across the state and, ultimately, the nation.
- **Expanding opportunities.** As noted in both the New America research and the *NC Feasibility Study* by RTI, MCs are not a replacement for other high quality professional development and learning options but instead an expansion of opportunities for professional growth and career advancement.
- **A deliberate process.** However, states need to be deliberate and provide a process for MC quality to ensure portability; time for teachers to collaborate, develop, and demonstrate skills; human capital support with mentors and coaches; sufficient financial support; and equity so all districts can participate.

North Carolina is positioned to lead an MC effort based on the assets identified in the RTI feasibility study:

1. **Teacher interest, which is heightened by COVID-19.** Through the RTI-led focus groups and interviews, teachers expressed interest in MCs, especially with the continuing changes brought on by COVID. Teachers across the state and nation have faced significant challenges adapting their in-person classroom skills to an online teaching and learning environment. Earning MCs in digital teaching

and learning competencies could help develop a significant number of teachers into effective online educators. These teachers could be easily identified and extend their impact on students as teaching and learning continue in hybrid models, including in person and virtual teaching needs beyond COVID. This example could serve as a model for other state priority areas such as reading and computer science.

2. **Desire for focus on competency instead of seat time.** All stakeholder interviewees agreed that teacher professional learning focused on acquired competencies instead of “seat time” aligns with how adults learn and provides better evidence for decision-making about teacher advancement.
3. **MCs’ ability to offer personalized, flexible learning.** Other interviewees cited benefits included personalized, flexible learning that better aligns with teachers’ needs and schedules. MCs could also highlight pathways for ongoing learning via MC stacks, which sequence skills from more novice to advanced and builds on NC’s Advanced Teaching Roles work and additional initiatives across the state.
4. **Opportunity to start “small” and focus on experienced teachers.** In the focus groups and research, it was suggested that MCs should first target experienced teachers, as new teachers are already overwhelmed with induction requirements and learning how to teach. Additionally, both New America and RTI agree that a statewide MC initiative should start “small” with a few priority areas that are aligned with state goals to give the highest chance of success. Starting small allows for continuous monitoring and evaluation as well as shorter term outcomes leading to critical practice, policy, and funding shifts.

Recommendations

The Partnership—after review and discussion of the research and information provided by digiLEARN, New America, and RTI—makes the following preliminary recommendations to begin implementation of MCs in NC.

1. The North Carolina State Board of Education (SBE) should authorize the development of a state led Micro-Credentials Initiative as recommended by digiLEARN and the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials in this status report to the SBE. The purpose of the Micro-Credentials Initiative will be to develop a state-recognized system of competency-based micro-credentials that promotes and is integrated with a high-quality system of teacher professional learning. As part of this professional learning system, competency-based micro-credentials should encourage and support the expansion of teachers’ skills and knowledge to improve the achievement and outcomes of all students.

Rationale: This is a major system change in how NC provides professional development or learning to teachers and will require a well-planned initiative implemented over time. As noted in the Leandro report, the “frequency, approach, and overall quality” of professional development opportunities for all teachers vary across schools, and state-level efforts are “inadequate and inequitable.” Many teachers reported professional learning or development offerings at the local and state level do not reflect the research-defined qualities of [effective professional development](#) (Darling-Hammond, et.al.,2017).

Further, interest in becoming and remaining a teacher continues to decline, and Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) increasingly face difficulties in finding qualified teachers. MCs continue to emerge as a high-potential solution to developing, recognizing, and retaining strong teachers by incorporating effective MCs into educator policies and practices for ongoing professional development, license renewal, and advancement. An NC Micro-Credential Initiative will support the strategy for a system of teacher development approved in June 2020 by the SBE’s action plan to address the consent order for Leandro compliance. It will also be a strategy to support the [SBE’s NC Pathways to Excellence for Teaching Professionals](#), which recommends reimagining teacher licensure to recruit and retain high-quality teachers due to an impending shortage.

Budget: TBD by Strategic Roadmap

Timeline: March 2021

2. The State Board of Education should endorse this NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials status report, New America’s *National Review of Early Best Practices*, the companion *Harnessing Micro-credentials for Teacher Growth: A Model State Policy Guide* and RTI’s *NC Feasibility Study* as core resources to develop a strategic roadmap for the Micro-Credentials Initiative. Further, digiLEARN and the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials should continue to advise and assist in the development the Micro-Credentials Initiative as outlined in the Partners’ work plan.

Rationale: The vision, mission, and objectives were developed in collaboration with the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials to guide and develop a work plan. The national research and *NC Feasibility Study* were commissioned expressly to inform the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials about research and data for MCs as another key tool for a system of professional learning, license renewal, and advancement. The national report provides an overview of MCs in other states and offers specific proposals about the use of MCs in alignment with the *NC Feasibility Study*. The feasibility report identifies the assets readily available in NC to support implementing MCs and includes input from teachers, principals,

superintendents, other educators, and policy leaders. Utilizing these documents and the expertise of digiLEARN and the NC Partnership will expedite the development of the strategic roadmap.

Budget: Complete and funded with foundation support

Timeline: March 2021

3. The North Carolina State Board of Education should authorize the development of a strategic roadmap to implement the state led Micro-Credentials Initiative no later than October 2021. The roadmap should establish priorities for which MCs are developed, how they are approved, how teacher submissions are assessed, how teachers are supported and how the value (including role or stipend/compensation) of the MC is determined. In addition to clear and specific actions, timelines, and budget, the map should include a strong research and evaluation plan.

Rationale: A new state initiative, especially one as complex as teacher professional learning, requires a strategic roadmap. It is a time-based plan that defines where the state is with the MCs, where the state wants to go and how the state will get to full implementation. A strategic roadmap is a common approach to planning that organizes and presents important information related to the initiative at full implementation. A roadmap is especially effective for management of the development and execution of a statewide initiative. The work done thus far by digiLEARN, New America, RTI, and the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials provides the foundation to begin development of the strategic roadmap. New initiatives need to be developed and often require dedicated staff and specific resources that are not currently part of an organization's budget. As a new initiative, the SBE should seek a new appropriation in the biennial budget for 2021-23 to begin implementation of the Micro-Credentials Initiative.

Budget: Y1 350K Y2 800K Y3 TBD by Strategic Roadmap

4. The Strategic Roadmap should be designed to implement state led MCs incrementally and include the following priorities as identified by the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials to expedite the implementation of state level MCs.
 - a. Development of state-led supported MCs that target NC State Board of Education priorities including:
 - i. a set of early literacy MCs that supports the SBE Framework for Action on Early Reading and integrates with a systemic plan for training teachers in the science of reading.

- ii. a set of reading MCs for middle and high school teachers that integrates reading into content areas and is aligned with the goals of the early literacy Framework.
- iii. a set of MCs for the demonstration of skills necessary for in person and virtual teaching needs now and beyond COVID-19 as aligned with the NC Digital Learning Plan.
- iv. a set of state-designed and approved descriptions of advanced teaching roles using the data from the current Advanced Teaching Role Grantees as a starting point. The goal would be for creating a teacher leadership pathway for career advancement with increased compensation for teachers to remain in the classroom.
- v. MCs for the demonstration of skills necessary for teachers to:
 - a. implement the K12 Computer Science Standards approved by the SBE and to
 - b. seek an advanced degree in Computer Science through stackable MCs.
- b. An initial plan to target teachers with continuing professional license and a plan to expand to all teachers once the MCs Initiative is fully executed.
- c. Sufficient and equitable funding to:
 - build the system of MCs including governing MCs and assessment of MCs and
 - support teachers in earning MCs as well as recognition and compensation for achieving MCs.
- d. A governance model that provides equitable and sufficient support to all LEAs to implement MCs.
- e. Standards for developing MCs as well as quality control for existing MCs developed by other agencies or organizations.

Rationale: digiLEARN and the Partnership offer these priorities to ensure the state’s strategic roadmap for MCs can be developed coherently and implemented successfully. By focusing on specific key state-level priorities for implementation of MCs, LEAs will continue to have the flexibility to utilize MCs and other professional development for specific district and school priorities. With impending budget restrictions due to COVID-19, targeting specific state areas or priorities increase the opportunity for success. Another key factor is making sure there is sufficient financial and human support for teachers as they pursue MCs on their own. It is not the intent to use MCs to replace effective, quality professional development already taking place, but as another tool to increase effective professional learning options for teachers that are personalized to their individual needs and time.

Budget: TBD by Strategic Roadmap

Timeline: October 2021

5. The State Board of Education should review policies as they relate to license renewal and professional learning to incorporate recognition of competency-based MCs.

Rationale: Implementation of competency-based MCs where teachers demonstrate skill acquisition as a part of NC's professional learning system is counter to continuing education unit (CEUs). Presently, license renewal is based on local professional development and the acquisition of CEUs (10 hours of participation in an accredited program or approved activities), which stakeholders say is perfunctory or compliance driven. As noted in the *NC Feasibility Study*, the focus groups unanimously agreed that a move is needed to provide more personalized professional development that has impact on teachers' practice and is aligned with district and state priorities.

Currently, multiple NC districts are granting CEUs for MCs by using an inconsistent exchange rate that does not address the issue of seat time versus skill acquisition or competency. One primary objective of incorporating MCs into human capital systems such as those recommended in the [SBE's NC Pathways to Excellence for Teaching Professionals](#), is to move away from a compliance-oriented, time-based approach and move toward a focus on what teachers know and can do. Any attempt to convert MCs to CEUs is arbitrary, because the length of time it takes educators to complete an MC varies by teacher and the rigor of the MC depends on a variety of factors, including their initial level of teacher expertise. This is a critical point the SBE should consider as the SBE has the authority to add approval of specific MCs for license renewal. For instance, if the SBE has identified reading as a priority, then it can identify completion of specific reading MCs towards licensure renewal.

Budget: TBD by Strategic Roadmap

Timeline: October 2021

6. The State Board of Education should further develop the Advanced Teaching Roles Program as a strategy to provide career advancement for teacher leaders so they may have increased compensation while remaining in the classroom.

Rationale: Advanced Teaching Roles in NC has shown promise as a strategy to develop teacher leaders who remain in the classroom and provide support to other teachers or extend their reach to more students. The most recent evaluation results from the Friday Institute at North Carolina State University

show improved teacher performance and a trend toward improving student growth. This makes it a good starting place for implementing MCs to develop teacher leaders across the state and begin compensating teachers who attain advanced teaching roles and remain in the classroom.

At the present time, its potential is limited to a few districts a year. Increasing the number of participating LEAs will provide the needed research to identify characteristics of advanced teaching roles that lead to improved student learning outcomes. Another advantage to expanding the program is to address equity issues in that large and wealthier districts have more potential for such a program while the smaller and higher needs schools and districts do not have the resources necessary to develop such a program.

Lessons can also be learned from National Board of Professional Teaching Standards. While larger in scope of the skills it covers, the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards is a competency-based approach for which NC has 23,090 teachers who have met the certification standards and receive additional compensation. Because ATRs is an existing program, planning can begin to expand the program immediately and development teacher leader MCs can be incorporated into the strategic roadmap.

Budget: TBD

Timeline: May 2021