

NEW AMERICA EDUCATION POLICY PROGRAM

Harnessing Micro-credentials for Teacher Growth: A National Review of Early Best Practices

Executive Summary

By Melissa Tooley and Joseph Hood
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Introduction

How can we attract, develop, and retain more high-quality teachers, particularly in our highest-need schools as interest in becoming and remaining an educator is declining?¹ As with many intransigent public issues, there is no single solution. But there is an effort underway to leverage a digital tool that might help: micro-credentials (MCs).

High-quality MCs verify a discrete skill that educators demonstrate by submitting evidence of application in practice. They promote a stark change from the compliance-focused approach to professional development (PD) that has existed for decades, and offer an approach to better defining career pathways and eligibility for teacher leader roles to help retain those who might otherwise leave the profession.

New America's analysis of data from leading MC providers and interviews with a broad swath of other stakeholders within the MC ecosystem—including states and local education agencies (LEAs)—demonstrates that MCs are a still-emerging but growing field. Just among the three major MC platforms for educators, there are, at last count, well over 1,000 MCs currently available, and thousands of educators across all 50 states and Washington, DC have earned at least one.

And states are beginning to incorporate them into policy: New America's analysis found that 26 have formal educator MC policies or programs in place, for career advancement, additional license endorsements, license renewal, and ongoing professional learning more broadly.² A significant number of states provide LEAs wide latitude to define and/or certify PD via relicensure credits. Other states authorize regional education service agencies or other organizations to develop and approve professional learning experiences for meeting state license renewal requirements, which can include MCs.

But research on MCs is lacking, and many questions remain, particularly around defining and measuring MCs' quality and impact. This first-of-its-kind project begins this work by assessing the national landscape and providing lessons for harnessing MCs' potential for improving teacher learning and advancement in four key areas: designing and assessing MC offerings; putting educator MCs into practice; state and local policies; and impact on teacher practice and student learning.

Key Findings and Recommendations

MCs can help attract and retain highly talented teachers by formally assessing and recognizing previously unrecognized skills and providing opportunities for increased responsibilities related to those skills, along with compensation in line with those responsibilities. And while MCs are primarily focused on the assessment of competency, high-quality MCs also have significant potential to improve the quality of PD, and hence, the quality of instruction.

However, it is too soon to say whether MCs will fulfill this potential. This is in part because most systems have not had MCs in place long enough—or at a broad enough scale—to assess impact. And measuring the impact of MCs broadly is difficult due to the wide variation in current offerings and approaches.

As the applications and aspirations of MCs become more ambitious, their quality must keep pace. Conducting additional research on how to ensure MCs are valid and robust measures of teacher competence, and assessing the impact of MCs on teacher practice and student outcomes, should be key areas of focus for education policymakers and philanthropies as more state and local education agencies (LEAs) implement MC initiatives. In the meantime, our research takes the high-level principles for MCs issued in 2020 by the Chief Council of State School Officers' relicensure task force one step further by identifying five core aspects of a quality MC offering and specific related best practices:³

- **Area of focus and level of specificity:** The MC competency is the proper “grain size” (i.e., small, discrete, and demonstrable) and backed by research.
- **Quality of embedded resources and supports:** Resources provided should be evidence-based and clearly connected to the competency.
- **Quality, clarity, and type of evidence requested:** Required articles of evidence are valid, rigorous, representative demonstrations of the specified skill.
- **Quality of assessment process:** Evidence is consistently and accurately evaluated against high-quality criteria and measurement procedures by well-trained assessors, and clearly defined in a rubric that can be understood and applied by both candidate and assessor.
- **Transparency and comparability of earned MCs:** Requirements and the submitted evidence to achieve those requirements must be transparent and easily comparable by potential recognizers.

States should establish quality standards for MCs' assessment components, drawing upon the best practices detailed in this research, so that MCs can be recognized as holding consistent value regardless of location of employment. But quality MC offerings are not sufficient for positive impact. The quality of the implementation and supports for educators occurring outside of the MC offering are just as, if not more, important as the design and assessment of the MCs themselves.

State and local leadership must support the elements of high-quality PD, and the integration of MCs into an effective professional learning and advancement system, by ensuring that:

1. **Any PD opportunities, whether connected to MCs or not, are aligned with professional learning standards and the federal definition of high-quality PD.**

In many cases, the state will have greater capacity and resources than a regional or local entity to guide alignment, and develop high-quality teacher development opportunities, both with and without MCs.

2. Systems are in place to help determine which educator PD opportunities and elements produce the best return on investment (ROI).

ROI should take into account both the success rate in helping teachers earn MCs on related competencies, and a longer-term assessment of impact on instruction and student outcomes.

3. The design and implementation of MC policies and systems is careful and iterative.

Policies should start with a clear goal and plan of action and involve stakeholders early in the policy development process to address concerns and incorporate ideas. Phase in initiatives gradually, analyzing data and stakeholder experience to address issues as they arise.

4. The design of any human capital policies that involve MCs, including any associated incentives, is clearly driven by the intended goal and application of the policy.

It will be important to make policy design and implementation choices that align with the intended objective(s). For example, there is a difference between using MCs for ongoing PD and using them for advancement: the former has the goal of *growing* skill in one's current role, while the latter has the goal of *validating* skill for entry into a new role. To leverage MCs for ongoing learning, either current MC offerings will require adaptation to offer more direct development opportunities, or greater outside resources must be provided to fulfill development goals.

5. A system is developed to rigorously vet and convey the quality of MC offerings.

Quality guidelines should be consistent to ensure that an MC earned for one use (e.g., ongoing professional learning), could also meet requirements for another use (e.g., license renewal or advancement requirements). Ensuring digital badges or other documentation of MCs offered can be thoroughly explored and verified by potential employers is another key aspect for ensuring transparency around quality and allowing MCs to hold currency.

6. Educators are provided with clear and frequent communication on what high-quality MCs are and how engaging in them could help them and their students.

Use language that helps separate the MC itself from the process leading up to the earning of the MC. Clearly communicate that MCs are a tool that can promote the kinds of PD activities that align with evidence on best practices for adult learning, even though they are *not typically* PD in and of themselves and make a clear distinction between MCs and digital badges. Nurturing local champions is an effective strategy for promoting broader engagement.

7. High-quality MC offerings are curated to align with educators' and students' needs.

Educators should have some discretion in choosing what learning and/or advancement opportunities to pursue based on their own interests and goals. However, those decisions should be a "guided choice," scaffolded within a set of options that will move school and LEA objectives forward as well.

8. Educators engaging with MC offerings are provided the quality and level of support necessary to succeed.

While high-quality MC offerings typically embed some resources and/or supports within them, they are generally not sufficient to support teachers' professional learning on their own. Relevant, differentiated high-quality related learning resources must be made accessible for each given MC competency. Educators also need sufficient quality and quantity of timely, individualized coaching and feedback (from instructional leaders familiar with MCs) as well as opportunities to engage in a cycle of inquiry with peers (ideally in person, but virtually as necessary) to pursue the MC *during contracted hours*.

9. MCs are implemented as a tool for furthering equity rather than reinforcing current discrepancies in student access to quality teaching.

An opt-in approach to MCs may lead to only the most well-resourced schools or LEAs being able to provide high-quality MC opportunities, leaving less well-resourced ones, and the students they serve, further behind. State and regional education agencies can help support equitable MC implementation efforts by recruiting a representative sample of LEAs to participate in the first phase of any initiative, and focusing funding and implementation support to the LEAs most in need as early in the rollout as possible.

10. States, LEAs, and schools have full access to all of their MC data and use that data to inform ongoing policy and practice.

The research base on MC impact is thin. Access to data enables a better understanding and harnessing of MCs' potential impact on teaching practice and student achievement. It can also help states and LEAs better target professional learning opportunities and make smarter purchasing decisions, motivating MC issuers to improve the efficacy of their offerings.

Like any specific tool to improve our K–12 education systems, MCs are not a silver bullet. Reaping success from MCs requires more than simply layering MCs on top of, or next to, policies and processes already in place. It requires making bigger shifts to professional learning and advancement systems—particularly a culture and mindset shift from compliance to ongoing growth. Tackling long-standing issues with educator development and advancement systems may be less exotic than adopting a novel digital tool, but, if they are left unaddressed, most educators will struggle to attain MCs, many schools will continue to struggle to retain good teachers and develop them into great ones, and students with the greatest needs will continue to struggle as well.

For more detailed findings and recommendations, see the full report: [Micro-Credentials to Promote Teacher Quality and Retention: A National Review of Early Best Practices](#).⁴ For recommendations on developing strong state-level human capital policies incorporating micro-credentials, see the report's companion brief, [Micro-Credentials to Promote Teacher Quality and Retention: A Model State Policy Guide](#).⁵

Notes

¹ *Frustration in the Schools: Teachers Speak Out on Pay, Funding, and Feeling Valued* (Arlington, VA: Phi Delta Kappan, September 2019), <https://pdkpoll.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/pdkpoll51-2019.pdf>

² For a more detailed explanation of our methodology for reaching this estimate, see “State and Local Educator Micro-credential Policies” in full report, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/harnessing-micro-credentials-for-teacher-growth-a-model-state-policy-guide>

³ National Education Association (NEA) and New America’s Education Policy program co-chaired the 2019 task force with Digital Promise. See the principles at Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO website), “Design, Assessment, and Implementation Principles for Educator Micro-credentials,” https://ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/Micro-credentials%20-%20Design%20Principles_FINAL_1.pdf

⁴ Tooley and Hood, *Harnessing Micro-credentials for Teacher Growth: A National Review of Early Best Practices*, (Washington, DC: New America, 2021), <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/harnessing-micro-credentials-teacher-growth>

⁵ Melissa Tooley and Joseph Hood, *Harnessing Micro-credentials for Teacher Growth: A Model State Policy Guide*, (Washington, DC: New America, 2021), <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/harnessing-micro-credentials-for-teacher-growth-a-model-state-policy-guide>