The promise of micro-credentials

Micro-credentials are an emerging learning design that shows promise for offering educators an on-ramp for identifying and meeting classroom-specific professional learning needs.

Four key features define educator micro-credentials: They are competency-based, personalized, on-demand, and shareable. As a personalized learning design, micro-credentials allow educators to focus on a discrete skill related to their professional practice, student needs, or school goals.

Here's how micro-credentialing works:

Teachers identify the micro-credential they want to earn based on their needs and interests. Each micro-credential provides details about what the teacher should know and be able to do, recommends resources to support the development of the skill, and specifies appropriate evidence an educator must submit to demonstrate his or her competence to earn the micro-credential.

Teachers pursue their learning. Educators pursue development of the stated competency until they are ready to submit evidence for assessment.

Learning can take place at a time and location chosen by the educator.

Teachers gather and submit evidence of their competence. Required evidence might include a portfolio, video, student work, classroom observations, teacher and student reflection, and/or other documentation of their learning in action.

Trained assessors evaluate the evidence educators submit. After the reviewer completes the assessment, the issuing organization reviews that assessment and determines whether the educator should be awarded the micro-credential.

Teachers earn the micro-credential and are awarded a digital badge. Educators can display their earned micro-credentials on websites, résumés, and online profiles, and share them directly with colleagues and administrators.

Because educators can select the micro-credentials they wish to earn, they can create their own professional learning path. Districts and state education agencies are beginning to consider the promise of micro-credentials to recognize educators for the ongoing and informal learning they are already undertaking to best serve their students, whether through YouTube, Pinterest, partnering with other educators, or in traditional, more formal ways. These tools are designed to help stakeholders begin a micro-credential discussion within their school, district, or state eco-systems.

When developing a micro-credential plan, it's important to ensure that consideration is given to the research-based elements of professional learning essential so that educators achieve ambitious outcomes. Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) provide a road map for doing this. Two of the tools that follow are discussion facilitators for micro-credentialing through the lens of two of these standards — Leadership and Resources. The third is a sample micro-credential description and tool on generating ideas and the brainstorming process.

REFERENCE

Learning Forward. (2011). *Standards for Professional Learning.* Oxford, OH: Author.

MICRO-CREDENTIALS AND LEADERSHIP

Standard: LEADERSHIP

Definition: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning.

Role: Teacher

Micro-credentials show great promise for supporting the development of leadership in schools. Teachers can customize their learning to develop the leadership knowledge, skills, and practices they seek. Educators in other roles can pinpoint specific areas for growth and seek out specific learning opportunities to fill gaps. Because of their responsibility to stay informed about new developments in professional learning, learning leaders need to understand what micro-credentials are and the role they can play in advancing a comprehensive professional learning system.

When it comes to the Leadership standard, here are critical questions for teachers to consider include:

1. What micro-credentials are available that align to teacher leadership competencies?

2. How will gaining this competency enhance my leadership knowledge and skills?

3. What support do I need from my principal, instructional coach, or district leaders as I undertake developing my leadership competencies?

4. How can I share stories of my success in this learning experience to advocate for and sustain this kind of learning?

5. How might leaders in my school or district better understand or advocate for the kinds of learning that are valuable to me?

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The text and tools are adapted from two reports: *Micro-credentials for Impact: Holding Professional Learning to High Standards* (2017), by Learning Forward and Digital Promise; and *Micro-credentials: Driving Teacher Learning & Leadership* (2016), by the Center for Teaching Quality and Digital Promise. Download the full reports and other micro-credential resources at **www. digitalpromise.org/initiative/educator-micro-credentials/micro-credential-resources-hub.**

MICRO-CREDENTIALS AND RESOURCES

Standard: RESOURCES

Definition: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires prioritizing, monitoring, and coordinating resources for educator learning.

Role: District, central office, or state official

As more educators select micro-credentials for their learning, schools and districts will need to maintain an awareness of the resources personalized professional learning requires and support it accordingly. One draw of micro-credentials is the convenience of scheduling learning during open windows of time outside of the school day or week. However, this doesn't remove the need for dedicated professional learning time during educators' workdays. Districts should allocate resources to support a system of options that accommodate the professional and unique needs of individual educators.

When it comes to the Resources standard, here are critical questions for district, central office, and state leaders to consider:

1. Can we include micro-credentials as a method to support transparency around how decisions are made about which learning investments are funded and prioritized?

2. How can we ensure micro-credentials create choices for educators that ensure professional learning is aligned with needs of the students, professional interests, and school/district goals?

3. What steps need to be taken to develop capacity of district and school leaders and coaches to support personalized professional learning around micro-credentials?

4. How can we gather data associated with resource usage (time, money, coaching, etc.) for earning micro-credentials that will support resource allocation?

5. What steps can we take to monitor resource use related to micro-credential learning to ensure equity and impact?

SAMPLE MICRO-CREDENTIAL: GENERATING IDEAS, PART 1

Following is a sample micro-credential description and tool from Digital Promise. Use this to better understand and guide construction of your own micro-credential concept. See other samples at **www.digitalpromise.org/initiative/educator-micro-credentials/sample-micro-credentials.**

KEY METHOD

Use this tool to guide a multistep, structured, student idea-generating and brainstorming process with clear rules, group interactions, idea visualization, and focused refining of ideas designed to enhance expansive creative thinking and focused innovation skills.

METHOD COMPONENTS

As students engage in an activity or task, the instructor facilitates a focused idea-generating session through a structured conception and curation process. Students can improve this process over time by carefully documenting and refining their conclusions throughout. This can be done individually, in small groups, or in whole-group instruction. Here are components of an idea-generating/brainstorming session.

- **Establish ground rules for generating ideas. Examples of ground rules include:**
  - o There are no bad ideas; no judging.
  - o Encourage wild ideas.
  - o Build on other's ideas; Yes, and, not Yes, but.
  - o Stay mostly focused on the topic or challenge.
  - o Keep to one conversation at a time.
  - o Be visual and expressive.
- **Group and select ideas.**
  - o Students begin the brainstorming session, following the established ground rules.
  - o When a wide range of ideas have been generated, have students group similar ideas.
  - o Students decide on their favorite idea, then put a dot (vote) on that item.
  - o Students discuss the results.
- **Sketch and describe promising ideas.**
  - o Students sketch out a promising idea.
  - o They then brainstorm further to expand the idea.
  - o Students share their expanded ideas/sketches.
  - o Students name and summarize their promising ideas.
- **Review.**
  - o Students review their idea-generating experiences and discuss how they could be improved.

SUGGESTED PREPARATION

- Students discuss where good ideas come from and how they are generated.
- Students clearly define a topic, challenge, or problem to brainstorm about.
- Choose a comfortable space for brainstorming and provide idea-capturing tools (sticky notes, markers, idea-mapping and collaboration apps, and other tools).
- Do a quick 3- to 5-minute warm-up brainstorm on a fun topic.

TOOLS

SAMPLE MICRO-CREDENTIAL: GENERATING IDEAS, PART 2

Following are the items you must submit to earn this micro-credential and the criteria by which they will be evaluated. To earn the micro-credential, you must receive a passing evaluation for Parts 1, 3, and 4 and a "Yes" for Part 2.

PART 1. OVERVIEW QUESTIONS
(200-word limit for each response)

- **Activity description:** What kind of project activities did you and your students engage in to become more proficient at generating ideas? Please describe the learning activities and strategies you used.

- **Activity evaluation:** How do you know your students increased their proficiency by engaging in the brainstorming activities, and what evidence did you collect that demonstrates these learning gains?

PART 2. EVIDENCE/ARTIFACTS

Please submit work examples from two students (writing, audio, images, video, and other products) that demonstrate progress toward the idea-generating competency, including items such as examples of brainstormed lists, sketched visuals of selected ideas, voting processes for the most promising ideas, evidence of presentations of final results, and other relevant items.

PART 3. STUDENT REFLECTIONS
(200-word limit for each reflection)

For the two students whose work examples were included above, submit their student-created reflections on the idea-generating activities they experienced. Use the following questions as guidance:

- How did going through the idea-generating process help you and your group come up with good creative ideas?

- How did this learning activity change your view of what it takes to generate creative ideas that could be useful to others?

PART 4. TEACHER REFLECTION
(200-word limit)

Provide a reflection on what you learned, using the following questions as guidance:

- What was the impact of engaging your students in the idea-generating activity?

- How will experiencing these project activities shape your daily future teaching practice?