



# MICRO APPROACH, MAJOR IMPACT

WITH MICROCREDENTIALS,  
EDUCATORS CAN TAILOR LEARNING  
TO THEIR SPECIFIC NEEDS

BY DONNA SPANGLER

**A**s a classroom teacher for 29 years before becoming an instructional coach, I have been on the receiving end of many well-intentioned school initiatives and professional learning experiences that have gone nowhere in terms of creating lasting, meaningful change. One of the reasons is that schools are complex systems, and we often try to do too many things at once. Often, the result is a lack of clarity that leaves people feeling confused, overwhelmed, and unsupported.

The antidote to this confusion is to be thoughtful and specific about your goal, and then go after it with great intensity and focus. This can be done at the school level, but it can also be done at the individual level through microcredentials — personalized, topic-specific opportunities for learning and credentialing in areas of educators' choosing.

When I became an instructional coach in the Derry Township School District in Pennsylvania, I set out to focus and personalize professional learning in my building by creating in-house microcredentials. Building on Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011), this effort has helped balance district needs with the needs of individual teachers while applying the

principles of high-quality professional learning.

### WHAT ARE MICROCREDENTIALS?

Microcredentials create opportunities for continuing growth of all teachers based on specific needs. They provide ways for teachers to lead their own learning while allowing administrators to identify and address teachers' needs as well as the expertise teachers have to share with their colleagues.

Microcredentials are different from traditional professional learning approaches because they are:

- **Competency-based.** Microcredentials focus on evidence of teachers' skills and abilities, not on the amount of seat time they've logged in their learning.
- **Personalized.** Teachers select microcredentials to pursue based on their own needs, their students' challenges and strengths, school goals, district priorities, or instructional shifts. They work through specific activities that will support them in developing each competency.
- **On demand.** Microcredentials are responsive to teachers' schedules. Educators can opt to explore new competencies or receive recognition for existing

ones any time of the day, using an online system to submit evidence for evaluation.

- **Shareable.** Educators can share the learning they gained through their microcredentials with other educators within and outside their school district, thereby serving as resources and mentors for other teachers.

When experienced in a consistent, ongoing way, this kind of microlearning builds up knowledge over time, even when the professional learning occurs in bite-sized pieces. And when it is done well, it produces real behavior change that results in improved teaching, because teachers must document their learning using work samples, videos, student work, peer observation, collegial collaboration, portfolios, teacher and student reflections, or other artifacts.

An assessor reviews the evidence of practice against a rubric to determine the teacher's progress toward the desired practice and decides whether to award the microcredential, often in the form of a digital badge, certification, or credential.

### DEVELOP YOUR OWN MICROCREDENTIALS


When I first pitched the idea of creating a few in-house microcredentials to use with teachers as a choice for a



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2017-18 voluntary pilot in our district's differentiated supervision plan, I was surprised that some administrators thought the only way to do microcredentialing was by purchasing them through a commercial platform or technology companies providing their own certification, badging, or microcredentialing.

In my opinion, buying a system is not the best way to get microcredentialing started. No one knows your school district better than the leaders and teachers in your district. You know your greatest systemic needs and challenges.

When you design your own focused learning for teachers, you personalize that learning and impact for your district, which can be especially helpful for transitioning new teachers or leaders into your school system. Purchasing an existing set of microcredential courses will save you time but won't get you the personalized focus that you desire.

In summer 2017, I designed an in-house microcredential pilot including the coursework, tasks, evidence requirements, and evaluation process. I spent that first summer using our school district's learning management system to design the coursework and tasks.

As a board member for Learning Forward's Pennsylvania affiliate, I understood the power of leveraging professional learning standards to improve teacher practice and student learning, so the Standards for Professional Learning were an ideal place to begin designing our microcredentialing process.

In the 2017-18 school year, we started with the Learning Communities and Data standards because these were areas in which our district needed to improve. We had had professional learning communities (PLCs) in place for many years, but there hadn't been systemic learning and attention given to them and the teams were not developing.

I also worked with an administrator to brainstorm the evidence of practice

we wanted teachers to submit. We designed the evaluation around the Danielson Framework (specifically Danielson's six clusters, which can be found at [danielsongroup.org/framework/framework-clusters](http://danielsongroup.org/framework/framework-clusters)) to be as consistent as possible with the supervision model we use in Pennsylvania.

### GETTING OFF THE GROUND

In fall 2017, I recruited some of our building staff as volunteers. I was looking to find a balance between creating a small, manageable pilot and one large enough to produce significant teacher support and student impact. I ended up with 16 teachers representing diverse content areas: three American cultures teachers, three English language arts teachers, three math teachers, three science teachers, one reading teacher, one music teacher, one technology education teacher, and one art teacher.

The course, broken up into three sections, ran from September through mid-April. Each month, teachers engaged in self-paced instruction (three to five hours per month) using materials aligned to district priorities and other professional learning. Learning occurred via a mix of online and face-to-face instruction.

By the end of the first section, all volunteer participants demonstrated competency through shared discussion board postings and reflection pieces submitted to administration. All participants were able to:

- Explain the evaluation requirements of the course;
- Identify what is and isn't innovative in education and explain why teachers today need to innovate;
- Define what a microcredential is and why it is different from traditional professional learning;
- Recognize there are seven Standards for Professional Learning and identify the two standards to be developed through this course;

- Explain why this course format will use Danielson's six Framework for Teaching Clusters; and
- Reflect on what personalized professional learning is and isn't.

In the second and third sections, coursework focused on macro-level practices (knowledge and skill development) and micro-level learning (practice and classroom application) in the areas outlined in the Learning Communities and Data standards.

In monthly increments, teachers read and viewed instructional content; engaged in asynchronous discussions with their volunteer colleagues, me as the instructional coach, and their administrator supervisor; and performed various tasks and submitted reflective pieces to the administrator for feedback and evaluation.

At the end of each month, an administrator in my building evaluated the teachers' submissions of evidence of learning, using the framework that we had designed to be consistent with the Danielson framework. Putting the administrator, rather than an instructional coach, in charge of this part ensured that the professional learning and evaluation process lines were not blurred.

### SPOTLIGHT ON DATA

One of the things we really wanted to move forward within our building was teachers' use of student data and evidence of learning. This goal tied very tightly to Danielson's Cluster 2: a safe, respectful, supportive, and challenging learning environment.

We needed our PLCs to make the shift from spending most of their time talking about planning and sharing professional practice to spending a significant time creating and implementing SMART goals and examining student evidence of learning to make the critical shift from simply being a PLC focused on *teaching* toward becoming a highly effective PLC focused on *learning*.

In the first month of the data microcredential, teachers focused on examining the importance of data, setting a collaborative team SMART goal to implement as part of a data cycle, discussing what data teachers were using, and discovering how PLCs and teachers might use local data more intentionally than they currently did.

By the end of the month, participants were expected to:

- Discuss their views on the topic of data;
- Explain the importance of data when it comes to school improvement efforts;
- Articulate how data help teachers;
- Write a PLC SMART goal for implementation;
- Explain the differences between formative data, summative data, macrodata, and microdata, and data snapshots;
- Create a common formative assessment as a PLC to administer to students; and
- Track checks for understanding used during Tier 1 instruction.

To help them meet this month's objectives, teachers read and watched instructional content on how data help teachers, what teachers see in data, educational data background, and sources of data; participated in discussions about learning from data and teacher use of data; and reflected on tasks they'd performed, including:

- Identifying an instructional focus for PLC based on student need;
- Writing a PLC SMART goal for students to implement within three to four weeks;
- Creating a common formative assessment to administer to students; and
- Tracking checks for understanding conducted during Tier 1 instruction.

In the second month of the data microcredential, teachers participated in a 45-minute data dive protocol with the instructional coach in which they

devised an action plan for students who demonstrated they had not yet learned the materials and for students demonstrating mastery on the common formative assessment.

### EARLY SUCCESSES AND NEXT STEPS

After the first year of the microcredential pilot, all participating teachers had completed the microcredentials, and the results were resoundingly positive. Teachers demonstrated their learning in multiple ways, including submitting and using SMART goals, carrying out a data dive around student results, and creating and using a collaborative common formative assessment to drive instructional grouping for remediation and enrichment. Furthermore, teachers extended their learning and new practices into their PLCs.

Teacher responses on a feedback survey were very positive. Here are some sample comments from participants:

- “This pilot encouraged teachers to be proactive and to spread out thinking and analysis throughout an entire school year rather than just at midyear and end-of year meetings,” said Darin Hickethier, an 8th-grade math teacher.
- “It made me look at what I’m doing and why in my classroom. I also enjoyed working with the instructional coach to improve my strategies,” said Kaitlyn Roberts, an 8th-grade science teacher.
- “I really enjoyed the discussion with other teachers that I never get to work with. Listening to other viewpoints is critical to self-reflection and growth,” said Sarah Smith, a 6th- and 7th-grade reading specialist.

Perhaps, though, the biggest testament to the entire microcredentialing process was that when we offered a second year of microcredentialing, all 16 members of

the first-year pilot opted to continue.

Those who had completed the first two microcredentials in the first year moved on to microcredentials on video coaching and video collaboration. Video is a powerful tool to help teachers take ownership over their own professional growth, and it allows teachers to see exactly what it looks like when we teach and our students learn. In the first year, we had occasionally dabbled in using video as evidence of student learning, but faced technical challenges, which we were able to iron out in year two.

Another testament to success has been growing interest across the district. New volunteers participated in the year one program, which brought one-third of the building staff on board for the microcredentialing pilot in the 2018-19 school year. That same year, an elementary school in our district created its own pilot. They developed microcredentials around the needs of their building and teachers.

This kind of in-house microcredentialing allows districts and schools to design professional learning that meets the major challenges and opportunities they are facing so that instruction and learning can improve. The goal of professional learning must be changes in classroom practice — otherwise, educators are spinning their wheels. With in-house microcredentials, schools and districts can ask: How are we managing our challenges and making professional learning meaningful?

### REFERENCE

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

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