



## Preparing Personnel

# MICRO-CREDENTIALS

### Description

Micro-credentialing, a rapidly expanding practice in the field of education, is a form of digital certification indicating an educator has demonstrated a specific competency in a very targeted area (Kerr-Vanderslice, LaTurner, & Nelson, 2020). Although micro-credentialing has not been widely adopted, systems of micro-credentialing offer formalized recognition that an educator or educator candidate has developed particular skills or masteries within a larger skill set (Harvey et al., 2020) and may provide an efficient way to increase knowledge of noncertified teachers or enhance additional certification efforts of current teachers.

### Overview

A micro-credential is a self-directed, competency-based **demonstration of expertise** in a single target area, assessed through a portfolio of evidence, submitted through an online system, and evaluated by a qualified assessor (Berry, Airhart, & Byrd, 2016; Grunwald Associates & Digital Promise, 2015). This personalized and targeted learning process is supported by strong **coaching** and **collaboration**, and it enables the continuous identification, support, and recognition of **best practices** (BloomBoard, n.d.; Grunwald Associates & Digital Promise, 2015). Once an individual completes a micro-credential, they receive recognition often through a digital “badge.”

Institutions of higher education (IHEs) continue to explore micro-credentialing to improve teacher preparation (OSEP Summit Prepare Panel, 2020). Many **pilot programs** are being developed to implement micro-credentialing as part of educator preparation and development. Many IHEs have created **partnerships** with local education agencies (LEAs) to identify **specific skills or competencies** that could form the foundation for micro-credential development (OSEP Summit Prepare Panel, 2020).

Currently, micro-credentials are individually recognized by different LEAs and States, with **little to no reciprocity** between localities (Kerr-Vanderslice et al., 2020). Micro-credentials exist in approximately 24 States—that is, States where at least one IHE offers micro-credentials to educators (Kerr-Vanderslice et al., 2020). In 11 of these States, individual LEAs offer micro-credentials for their in-service teachers. While approaches to micro-credentialing are still developing, most programs are hosted **online** (Kerr-Vanderslice et al., 2020).

### Research Findings

As micro-credentialing is a new practice, there is limited research and supporting evidence on the impact of micro-credentials on educator preparation and effectiveness.

However, the existing research and literature on **micro-credentials** has shown the following:

- Like all other forms of educator preparation and professional learning, micro-credentialing is **not a one-size-fits-all approach** (Acree, 2016).
- The **instructional design** and **online platform** of micro-credentials are strong indicators of the success of the micro-credential programs (Acree, 2016).
- There is a need to **provide (limited) choice** in the development and skills built through micro-credentials (DeMonte, 2017; Gamrat, Zimmerman, Dudek, & Peck, 2014).
- Micro-credentials are most effective when **aligned with local and State standards** and requirements (Gamrat et al., 2014).

As this is an expanding field, most available information on micro-credentials in teacher preparation and development is based on feedback from practitioners on their own use of micro-credentials (DeMonte, 2017). Large-scale research needs to be conducted on micro-credentials to determine the long-term impact of micro-credentials on educator preparation and retention.

## Part of a Strategic Approach

Micro-credentials have emerged as a successful practice in large part because they **empower** personnel and candidates to take **autonomy** over their own professional learning. Many States and districts have also used micro-credentials to **incrementally** prepare personnel to **take on leadership roles** (Kuriacose & Warn, 2018). The impact that micro-credentials have on personnel empowerment and leadership suggests that micro-credentials have **implications for teacher retention**, as both empowerment and leadership have been shown to be linked to teacher retention. States, preparation programs, and LEAs can **leverage this connection to build coherent approaches** to the attraction, preparation, and retention of personnel to serve students with disabilities.

## Exemplars

- [Micro-Credentials in Kettle Moraine School District](#). This Wisconsin school district offers educators personalized opportunities to earn micro-credentials in specific skills and competencies that, once demonstrated, can lead to increased salary and compensation.
- [University of Texas' Children's Learning Institute \(CLI\) Early Childhood Specialist Micro-Credentials](#). The University of Texas' CLI Engage initiative is implementing a system for early childhood specialists to earn micro-credentials as part of an early childhood competency framework. The competencies involved in these micro-credentials have been identified as essential for all early childhood specialists, such as coaches, trainers, and assessors. CLI Engage identifies a cohesive set of skills for each role that candidates would need to demonstrate to earn these micro-credentials in the form of digital badges.

(Additional exemplars can be found on the [Attract, Prepare, Retain resource page](#).)

## Resource Spotlight

- [IRIS Center Micro-Credentials](#). Through collaboration with Digital Promise, the IRIS Center offers focused and intense courses to develop discrete instructional skills and practices. Once participants successfully complete a course, they receive a digital badge to document their receipt of an IRIS micro-credential.

# KEY IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

## Critical Components for Success

*(Lists are not sequential)*

### Setting the Stage

- Identify existing relationships between LEAs, educator preparation programs, policy makers, and/or any relevant stakeholders or organizations.
- Examine data related to the current workforce.
- Select specific competencies or populations of candidates for piloting a micro-credential program.
- Determine a digital platform for micro-credentialing to embed in educator and related service provider preparation.
- Find funding sources for the platform cost and fees.
- Establish a system for evaluation and requirements for a qualified assessor.
- Identify a framework for observing practice and analyzing evidence.

### Initial Start-Up

- Train appropriate staff in use of the micro-credentialing platform.
- Design screening and selection processes for assessors.
- Identify an accountability or quality control system for micro-credential allocation.
- Select key stakeholders to crosswalk the micro-credential program with local and State standards to ensure alignment.

### Continuous Improvement

- Convene partners to address changes that need to be made during implementation.
- Identify data sources to evaluate the effectiveness of the program.
- Engage former candidates and their administrators to recognize successes and shortcomings of the micro-credentialing program.
- Collaborate with other LEAs that incorporate micro-credentialing into their preparation to share lessons learned and areas for improvement.

## Related Services

Some micro-credentialing systems have expanded to include related service providers, such as **Kettle Moraine School District's** micro-credentialing program (see exemplar above), which now offers micro-credentials to **speech therapists and audiologists** (Kettle Moraine School District, 2019). Yet, in comparison to its use in teacher preparation and professional learning, micro-credentialing has **not been widely adopted** in related service professions.

Even so, micro-credentialing continues to be a rapidly expanding strategy that related service professions are considering. In an open letter to the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education, the **American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)** **recognized micro-credentials** as an effective best practice for professional learning (ASHA, 2020).

## Early Childhood

Much like their K–12 counterparts, IHEs continue to explore micro-credentials within their early childhood programs of study (OSEP Summit Prepare Panel, 2020). One example of an institution implementing micro-credentials is the **University of Virginia (UVA)**. UVA first began exploring micro-credentials in early childhood education by **partnering with a local district to pilot a micro-credential** (UVA, 2016). Once supporting children's reasoning and problem-solving skills was identified as the **targeted area**, faculty at the university identified systems for **observing and evaluating** that competency so that candidates could receive a digital badge recognizing their proficiency in that area. This **pilot proved successful**, and UVA has since **expanded** micro-credentials to several areas within early childhood education and early childhood special education with a variety of partnering LEAs (OSEP Summit Prepare Panel, 2020).

### Critical Components for Success (Continued)

- Have LEAs and/or State education agencies (SEAs) formally recognize the micro-credential program and increase teacher compensation accordingly.

### Leveraging Lessons Learned

- Identify new partnerships between preparation programs and LEAs.
- Share success stories.
- Develop guidance, resources, and tools.

## Stakeholder Spotlight

- **Local Education Agency (LEA) Leaders.** LEA leaders, such as district superintendents and charter management organization directors, play a key role in integrating systems of micro-credentials into their localities (Kerr-Vanderslice et al., 2020). LEA leaders serve this role in three key ways: (1) by **collaborating with local IHEs** to establish a micro-credential program, (2) by **working with SEAs** to formally **recognize and establish policy** around micro-credentials, and (3) by providing **incentives** for personnel in their localities to earn micro-credentials. Leaders in **Juab School District in Utah** have found success in improving the preparation and retention of personnel by offering salary-based incentives for their micro-credentialing system (Kuriacose & Warn, 2018). More information on the role of micro-credentials in addressing the personnel pipeline can be found on OSEP's [Attract, Prepare, Retain resource page](#).

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