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](https://www2.ed.gov/OSEP/AttractPrepareRetain).
REFERENCES


This document was produced under U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) contract no. GS007F-347CA. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service, or enterprise mentioned on this website is intended or should be inferred.