

# Competency-Based Learning for Teachers

*Can micro-credentials reboot professional development?*

by MICHAEL B. HORN and THOMAS ARNETT

**REMEMBER MERIT BADGES?** The reward for kids who master new skills has been rebooted—for their teachers.

So-called “micro-credentials” work a lot like scouting badges. Teachers complete a specific activity to develop a critical competency for their role, and earn a micro-credential based on showing mastery of the skill. They can collect micro-credentials to document growing expertise and share their accomplishments in the classroom.

This targeted training is in stark contrast to traditional, strikingly ineffective teacher professional development (PD). With its focus on seat time—awarding credit for showing up to workshops, conferences, or classes—formal PD has ignored whether teachers actually learn new skills, apply them, and

may be independently interested in bettering their practices, many participate in training programs because they are either required or rewarded for doing so. For micro-credentials to get a foot in the door, they will need states and districts to start counting them toward licensure renewal, continuing education requirements, and pay-scale bumps.

At this early stage in the game, the path to formal recognition under state and district policies looks promising. Six states now allow teachers to count micro-credentials toward their continuing education requirements, according to Digital Promise, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit authorized by Congress that is focused on educational innovation, and BloomBoard, a teacher PD education technology start-up in Silicon Valley.

*Teacher development organizations have partnered with Digital Promise to issue micro-credentials such as (from left) productive teamwork, active listening, and creative problem solving. Teachers can collect these on BloomBoard’s online platform.*



improve student outcomes. And with its reliance on generalized, off-the-shelf programs, most formal PD does not target the specific skills or expertise an individual teacher may need to improve her practice.

Proponents of teacher micro-credentials hope to move beyond this model. They aim to shift teacher PD to a competency-based system with personalized development opportunities that match teachers’ and schools’ specific needs. Such a system could allow teachers to drive their own development, signal their true areas of expertise to school and district administrators, and advance in their careers according to their skills.

If it gains traction, micro-credentialing could help transform how K–12 teachers are prepared, hired, developed, and assigned teaching responsibilities. But there are some hurdles ahead.

## Making credentials valuable

Micro-credentials have to be worth something to the people who earn them. In the current education ecosystem, policy drives much of the demand for PD. While teachers

The path to regulatory legitimacy varies from state to state, however. Some states regulate PD directly through statewide PD requirements, whereas others regulate it through their teacher licensure and licensure renewal requirements. Still others leave PD policies to local districts.

Most jurisdictions, though, have fairly loose requirements regarding what can count toward PD, which suggests gaining approval may not be hard for micro-credential programs. That also bodes well in terms of innovation—if states or districts had more stringent rules, they would likely kill much of the transformational potential of micro-credentials by forcing them to resemble traditional PD.

## Solving for supply and demand

Although the path to policy approval doesn’t seem too steep, merely allowing room for micro-credentials in state and district requirements doesn’t necessarily guarantee that a micro-credential ecosystem will arise to fill the space.

On the supply side, any ecosystem will need organizations

to step up as gatekeepers, to review teachers' applications for micro-credentials and award those credentials to worthy applicants. Additionally, universities, professional organizations, and other PD providers will need to create resources aligned with micro-credentials.

Digital Promise and BloomBoard have made notable progress in planting seeds that could grow into a new micro-credential ecosystem. A handful of reputable organizations have partnered with Digital Promise to issue micro-credentials that teachers can collect on BloomBoard's online platform, such as the Relay Graduate School of Education, Hope Street Group, Learning Forward, the Friday Institute at North Carolina State University, the Center for Teaching Quality, Teaching Matters, KQED, TNTP (The New Teacher Project), the New Teacher Center, and Arizona State University. Many of these organizations also offer learning resource collections through the BloomBoard platform to help teachers master what they need in order to earn micro-credentials.

On the demand side, distribution channels must arise to inform teachers of micro-credential options. Platforms must also emerge for teachers to share the micro-credentials they've earned.

Just 15 percent of teachers are aware of micro-credentials, but once they see a description, more than 70 percent are at least somewhat interested in them, and 31 percent are "extremely" or "very" likely to try them when they are available, according to a report last year by Digital Promise. Since the beginning of this year, more than 13,800 educators in 400 districts have either earned or are working on completing micro-credentials through BloomBoard's platform, including in Tennessee, Michigan, and Ohio.

### Ensuring quality

Even if a host of organizations start offering micro-credentials and teachers begin pursuing them by the thousand, widespread adoption is not necessarily a win for the K-12 education system. In the current PD landscape, states and districts spend more than \$18 billion annually on teacher development, but very little of that PD actually improves teachers' practices. If micro-credentials end up just modularizing and digitizing current approaches to PD—or, worse yet, focus on practices unlikely to boost student outcomes—then they will miss the ultimate mark of improving teacher effectiveness and student outcomes.

The content and format of micro-credentials will be critical. In the current system, teachers often earn PD credit through coursework, not classroom practice. Sitting through lectures and workshops, watching online videos, writing reflections, preparing sample lesson plans, and passing written exams may all be valuable learning experiences, but teaching skills

are honed through purposeful practice in either real or simulated classroom settings. Focusing on coursework completion emphasizes the inputs into teachers' learning experiences, without actually guaranteeing the desired outcomes of those learning experiences.

It's important to establish and hold programs to a high bar for quality, rooted in competency. Done right, micro-credentials can help make PD more meaningful for teachers by focusing on skill mastery instead of coursework completion. But if such programs catch on, we may see existing PD providers just repackage their traditional, seat-time-based continuing-education training as micro-credentials.

How can we ensure high-quality programs? States and districts could adopt quality standards for micro-credential issuers, or an organization such as Digital Promise could vet micro-credentials before they are available to teachers. Conversely, we could eschew such standards and allow for a variety of credentials of varying quality, and leave teachers and school leaders to rely on the brands of particular micro-credential issuers to determine the quality of a given program—or to create their own personal improvement plans, with the quality ultimately based on school improvement.

That raises another concern: how to ensure a clear connection between micro-credentials and improved student outcomes. Micro-credential issuers may scour the research literature to design programs that are aligned with research-based best practices, just as the developers of professional standards for educators have done for decades. But until micro-credentials are road-tested for student-learning gains, they will remain a hyped-up experimental vehicle for improving education. The micro-credential ecosystem needs to ensure that research and development and quality assurance testing go hand in hand with the creation and proliferation of micro-credentials.

Hurdles aside, micro-credentials appear to be a promising innovation, with the potential to help transform PD for K-12 teachers. Time will tell if proponents can create a robust ecosystem and cross the chasm that lies beyond early adopters to involve a substantial portion of the nation's 3.1 million teachers. It is also yet to be seen whether micro-credentials will serve as just a personalized means of better teacher development, or if they are another catalyst in the movement to personalize learning for students as well.

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## Proponents of micro-credentials aim to shift teacher PD to a competency-based system with personalized development opportunities that match teachers' and schools' specific needs.