Education Week

Can 'Micro-Credentialing' Salvage Teacher PD?

By Stephen Sawchuk

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Last year, Kay Staley and Jessica Scherer, literacy coaches in the **Kettle Moraine district** in Wisconsin, led groups of teachers in a book study on close reading—a complex and important skill emphasized in the Common Core State Standards.

Participants were paired with a coach and peers as they wrestled with how to teach kids to analyze details of an author's narrative technique. At the end of the school year, the teachers documented how they applied close-reading instruction in class and how it impacted student learning. A panel of educators reviewed the submissions, and the best earned those teachers salary increases worth several hundred dollars.

Welcome to the brave new world of teacher "micro-credentialing," an effort to make professional development more **personalized, engaging, and relevant to teachers**. All in all, the two Wisconsin teachers say, it's a lot more focused and practical than the stereotypical continuing-education class.

"You think back to, 'I took basket-weaving, and it moved me up on the salary scale,' and people are like, 'What the heck?' " said Staley, who works at the district's middle school. "But with micro-credentials, you have to show that the learning applies right now. And that matters."

A small but growing handful of advocates think that initiatives like Kettle Moraine's have the potential to move the moribund professional-development field forward.

Among other things, they note, micro-credentials offer an opportunity to shift away from the credit-hour and continuing-education requirements that dominate the PD apparatus in most states, toward a system based on evidence of progress in specific instructional skills.

It is an appealing idea for an industry that has **struggled to rigorously evaluate its effects**—and that is grappling with a series of dispiriting studies concluding, invariably, that **much of the training teachers get is ineffective**.
That said, micro-credentialing is not without challenges.

"You hope that, over time, people who have demonstrated these skills agree to become reviewers for others," said Stephanie Hirsh, the executive director of **Learning Forward**, a teacher-learning membership organization that, with several partners, is exploring micro-credentialing. "And you hope that it never reaches the lowest common denominator, and that it really is a powerful peer-review, peer-learning opportunity."

A District's Story
There is no formal, agreed-upon definition for a micro-credential. Indeed, the term itself irritates some because of its vagueness and because it implies an independent, accredited stamp of approval from some kind of government body. In any case, **the idea refers to bite-sized competencies** that, via samples of student work, videos, and other artifacts, teachers show that they've mastered to students' or colleagues' benefit. Then, in vetting each teacher's submission, the

micro-credential's authorizer either asks the teacher to go back and dig deeper, or approves the submission—sometimes issuing the teacher a digital "badge" to represent attainment of the skill.

To be sure, supporters say, micro-credentials don't replace traditional professional-development channels so much as give them focus and coherence.

"We're agnostic about how you actually develop these skills," said Karen Cator, the chief executive officer of **Digital Promise**, a nonprofit group that last fall unveiled a platform on which educators can earn some 120 micro-credentials, from one on disaggregating data to one on classroom management. "There are just so many ways of learning things, and we want to see many more opportunities, whether it's through online communities of practice, watching videos, talking to your peers, getting a coach. It's an expansive view of professional learning."

The Kettle Moraine district stumbled onto micro-credentialing while struggling to put into practice personalized and competency-based student learning, concepts its school board had directed it to prioritize.

"We came to an understanding that teachers had never experienced it themselves, and were struggling with how to do it in the classroom," said Patricia F. Deklotz, the district's superintendent. Ultimately, the district's solution was to set broad instructional goals, and to allow individual or groups of teachers to propose their own courses of study aligned to them—just as Kay Staley and Jessica Scherer did.

"Jessica and I talked about falling in love with close reading as part of our own training, and we thought, 'Huh. I wonder if anyone else would want to do this?' And then we wondered, 'Could this be a micro-credential?' " Staley said. A 10-member panel of educators pre-approves which projects will count as a micro-credential. It also sets how much successful completion will improve a teacher's salary—by anywhere from $100 to $600 a pop.

"Micro-credentials really allow our teachers to self-organize around learning concepts and dig in, and to do the coaching, the modeling, and the feedback around those concepts," Deklotz said.

The district estimates that about 80 percent of its 280 teachers have at least engaged in the process, and about half of them have completed one micro-credential.

While it's unclear how extensive that kind of experimentation is, other districts also are testing the process. North Carolina's Surry County school system just wrapped up a micro-credentialing pilot for a handful of its teachers. Beginning this month, teachers will be able to access an online platform and participate in a number of "quests"—self-guided modules often with a game component—that conclude with a micro-credential.

The district has developed around a dozen, mostly on the application of technology in classrooms, such as how to make effective use of Twitter or Skype, said Lucas Gillispie, the district's director of academic and digital learning.

States are interested, too. This summer, Tennessee plans to pilot micro-credentials with about 40 teachers, pairing top-notch teachers with novices. It will begin by offering a select few from the Digital Promise platform that are tied to key skills in the state's teacher-evaluation system—such as using questioning and problem-solving techniques in the classroom.

"We think those are areas where teachers probably struggle the most, even beyond our novice teachers," said Kathleen Airhart, the state's deputy education commissioner. "And our principals struggle in how to give feedback in those areas."

Setting Standards
One of the major challenges is that, like a new currency, the idea of micro-credentials hinges on many different people—from educators to school leaders to policymakers—coming to value it. But the landscape is diffuse, and there is no single issuer or authorizer of the competencies.

Digital Promise is taking steps to establish a quality threshold, by corralling partners to help develop micro-credentials, write guidelines for vetting the submissions, and score them rigorously.

Among its partners are the Center for Teaching Quality, a North Carolina based nonprofit that has crafted micro-credentials on teacher leadership; the Relay Graduate School of Education, which has adapted its own curriculum to create micro-credentials relating to teachers' ability to check for student understanding in their classrooms; and the Friday Institute, based at the University of North Carolina, which offers several for boosting student motivation.

A for-profit tech company, BloomBoard, has **developed an infrastructure** that Digital Promise and its partners use for managing teachers' portfolios, but actual submissions are scored and vetted by the creator of the micro-credential. It takes 50 submissions to build up enough data to make basic determinations about a micro-credential's validity.
But all these efforts are still only months old, and not all of the credentials have had enough takers to reach a critical mass. Only a handful of teachers—perhaps five—have submitted portfolios for the Relay-sponsored micro-credentials, said Brent Maddin, Relay's provost.

There are also conceptual challenges, including the slippery question of just how "micro" a micro-credential should be. "One of the potential shortcomings that we need to work through is what happens when you begin to atomize teaching too much," Maddin said. "Do you lose sight of the whole? Is there something powerful about how multiple techniques, or moves, or strategies, or competencies move together that are an even better indication of what a teacher can know and do in the classroom?"

Getting more teachers to recognize potential value in micro-credentials also means confronting the existing incentive structures in most states.

Every state requires teachers to fulfill continuing-education requirements or college classes to maintain or renew a license. Fitting what are in essence personalized accomplishments into those seat-time-based structures has proved a challenge of the square-peg-round-hole variety. A handful of states now permit teachers to translate micro-credentials they've earned into a certain number of continuing-education units or points. In North Carolina and Wisconsin, districts have the ability to make those approvals. And if after examination Tennessee's pilot program shows promise, the state will consider allowing teachers to use the credentials for maintaining a license, Airhart said.

Building Confidence
Still, Kettle Moraine appears to be the only district to have linked micro-credentials to pay—a powerful lever to prod teachers to engage with them.

There is also uncertainty about another supposed benefit of micro-credentials: their portability. Digital Promise's micro-credentials come with digital badges—symbols teachers can display in an electronic backpack or CV, and that they could potentially use to make the case for a promotion within a district or even for another job elsewhere.

The problem is that it's unclear whether the average teacher needs or wants that feature, or how many districts are tech-savvy enough to look for digital badges.

"At this point with our teachers, that is still largely a foreign concept, except for a few folks who have a completionist attitude," Gillispie of Surry County said. Instead, the district plans this year to create physical badges for teachers to hang outside their classrooms—a stepping stone to get teachers comfortable with the idea of displaying what they've learned.

Building teachers' confidence in micro-credentialing matters, especially if the approach is to be paired with online PD options, said Michael Watson, the chief academic officer for Delaware, during a recent Education Week webinar.
"I feel that we've had a series of stop-starts over the years with online PD," he said. "There's a wariness that this is a repackaged version of something we've tried in the past, and it's not."