

# Micro-credential Guidance for Education Support Professionals (ESPs)

## Introduction

Micro-credentials are a digital form of certification indicating demonstrated competency/mastery in a specific skill or set of skills. To earn micro-credentials, educators identify competencies they want to master and complete the requirements to earn them. Because micro-credentialing is still a relatively new model of professional learning, there are few examples of strong contract language or policy documentation codifying implementation. The NEA departments of Collective Bargaining and Member Advocacy, ESP Quality, and Teacher Quality collaborated on this document to highlight some issues that local affiliates should consider when implementing a micro-credentialing program. **Before introducing these issues, it should be noted first and foremost that micro-credentials should be one of many options ESPs can choose to pursue for professional growth. They should not be mandatory or used for evaluation purposes.**

As more NEA local affiliates integrate micro-credentials into existing professional learning systems, we will update this document and include additional examples of strong contract language. (See Annotated Bibliography for contract and policy language examples.)

## Definition of micro-credentials

Micro-credentials are a competency-based digital form of certification. They can be issued for formal and informal professional learning experiences that support the development of on-the-job embedded knowledge and skills and professional practice that supports student and school success. The highest quality micro-credentials are grounded in research and best practices. Micro-credentials can be developed by non-profit and for-profit entities or developed by educators.

### Key Elements of Micro-credentials

To have value, the micro-credential requires three fundamental elements:

- the **issuer** is the organization(s) or institution that awards the micro-credential to the users or earners e.g., NEA, Hope Street, Digital Promise, etc.;
- the **user** is the educator who earns micro-credentials; and most importantly,
- the **recognizer** is the school, district, Institution of Higher Education (IHE), or state Department of Education, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, or other state agency that oversees certifications required for PK-12 and IHE ESPs that gives the micro-credential currency through recognition for advancement, professional compensation, or can be used to meet certification and/or recertification requirements.

Other key terms:

- the **developer** is the organization(s) or person(s) that designs the micro-credential, identifying and establishing the criteria (knowledge and skills) to be recognized. In many cases, it is the same entity as the issuer; and
- the **assessor** is the person(s) that reviews the submitted evidence from the user and determines, based on the published rubric, the user's proficiency.

To pursue a micro-credential, educators identify a competency they want to develop and submit evidence for review to the issuer of the micro-credential to illustrate that they have mastered the competency, and if the educator is successful, the issuer awards a digital badge that represents the achieved micro-credential.

## Bargaining Issues

### Joint Committee to Oversee Implementation

Where the association is the exclusive bargaining representative, the terms and conditions for a micro-credential program should be negotiated. Because micro-credentials are still somewhat new and could lead to some unanticipated consequences, we recommend initially implementing a pilot program under the auspices of a joint labor-management committee (JLMC) that oversees all the professional learning in the school district or IHE. Below, is sample language:

#### **Preamble**

*The [School District or Institution of Higher Education] and [Association] believe it is important to maintain a professional growth system which supports educators and provides the development of professional competencies that shape school culture and support student and school success. The term educators is inclusive of every adult that interacts with students in schools and creates the conditions under which student learning is possible; this includes all nine career families of Education Support Professionals (ESPs). As part of this commitment, we believe a **joint labor-management committee** is the best vehicle to support a system-wide vision of professional learning that includes the design, implementation, and monitoring of ongoing, high quality professional learning for all staff based on student needs and system goals. Micro-credentialing is one important element of the School District's or Institution of Higher Education's professional learning offerings.*

The JLMC should be composed of an equal number of association and school district members, or IHE as applicable. The local president and superintendent can serve or designate the appointees. The ESP members should be composed of a variety of the nine career families: Clerical Services, Custodial & Maintenance Services, Food Services, Health & Student Services, Paraeducators, Security Services, Skilled Trades, Technical Services, and Transportation. The school district/IHE may choose to have fewer members than the association, but at no time can the number of school district/IHE appointees exceed the association's appointees. This committee can address micro-credentials as part of the overall jurisdiction of the committee. If the school district/IHE and association want to have a more limited committee arrangement, the two parties may create a joint committee that deals strictly with micro-credentials.

### Regardless, the joint committee should consider the following:

**Issuer:** What will be the source of the micro-credentials? NEA's micro-credentials are peer-reviewed and approved by NEA. However, there are many micro-credential vendors, and NEA cannot validate all vendors' approval processes or quality control. Currently, NEA micro-credentials are certified by NEA's Center for Great Public Schools and Digital Promise<sup>1</sup>. The JLMC, tasked with oversight of professional learning or micro-credentials, should vet all credible vendors.

<sup>1</sup> Digital Promise is an independent, bipartisan nonprofit, authorized by Congress in 2008 as the National Center for Research in Advanced Information and Digital Technologies through Section 802 of the Higher Education Opportunity Act, signed into law by President George W. Bush. Digital Promise works at the intersection of education leaders, researchers, and entrepreneurs and developers to improve learning with the power of technology.

**Currency:** Educators should be compensated for earning micro-credentials. Depending on the pay structure, some options include:

- Movement across lanes on a pay schedule (where a certain number of micro-credentials would equal advancement, e.g., along the NEA's [ESP Professional Growth Continuum \(PGC\)](#), professional development education credits, or as a component of required certifications, i.e., achievement and/or maintenance in the competency areas of a micro-credential stack such as the PGC).
- A step increment equal to a fixed number of micro-credentials.
- A fixed dollar amount per micro-credential(s).

Compensation for earned micro-credentials should always be part of base pay.

Additional issues to consider:

- Will there be a limit to the number of micro-credentials for which an educator can be compensated per year? This issue may arise from the need of the school district/school/IHE to project budgetary expenditures.
- How often during the year will earned micro-credentials be reviewed for salary movement? Will micro-credentials be reviewed continuously throughout the year, periodically (such as beginning, half-way, and end of year), or just once (the beginning or end of year or a pre-determined date)?

When the local and school district/IHE negotiate and reach agreement on some or all of these issues, the parties can sign a separate Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) codifying the terms. However, we recommend that the JLMC continue to oversee the program to monitor its success and identify areas that need to be addressed.

**Professional Advancement:** Micro-credentials that are bundled or stacked to demonstrate mastery of a variety of skills may be recognized as one demonstration of fulfilling specific requirements for earning professional learning credits/units and/or for ESP leadership/mentoring roles. Recognizing a stack of micro-credentials for advancement should not exclude recognition of other accepted demonstrations such as advance degrees, advanced credentialing, and endorsements. Such determination should be resolved through negotiations in bargaining jurisdictions or by the JLMC tasked with oversight of professional learning or micro-credentials, specifically. In addition, micro-credentials, like all other earned credits, do not expire. Therefore, once an educator receives credit for them, either through additional compensation or credit for fulfilling continuing education requirements, school districts/IHEs cannot later invalidate these gains should the requirements of the micro-credential change. At any point in time, ESPs are encouraged to resubmit a micro-credential they completed or achieved in the past as continuing professional development to enhance and refresh their memory of the knowledge and skills to consistently guide functions on the job.

**Portability:** Consider how the school district and Association can ensure portability between school districts and ultimately, between and among states.

**Alignment:** Micro-credentials should align with the existing professional learning system in the district/IHE and/or state and educators' professional learning goals. Achieving micro-credentials should be job-embedded and rooted in the professional practice of ESPs as they support student and school success, as they transport students and resources, oversee food service operations, or support students and teachers in the classroom.

**Recertification and Re-licensure:** Does your state affiliate have a strategy to advocate with legislatures or state education agencies to include recognition of micro-credentials as another form of earning professional development points towards recertification? For teachers, Massachusetts currently recognizes up to 2 micro-credentials for a total of 10 professional development points (PDPs) for recertification. Tennessee also recognizes micro-credentials for the purpose of professional learning that supports recertification for teachers. (See Annotated Bibliography) For career families that require certification a similar micro-credential recognition process could be developed for ESPs.

**Acceptance Process:** The JLMC should select/determine which micro-credentials will be included in a menu of options for district/IHE credit. If there is a panel, members should include ESPs, as well as representatives from the school district/IHE. Decisions that are made about specific career families should have ESPs serving on the panel from those career families. ESP members should earn additional compensation for this role. Consider language that includes guidelines on ESP leader panel selection and how long ESPs serve on this panel. The joint committee/panel created by the JLMC should oversee and approve micro-credential topics or content and/or issuers of micro-credentials. Those who serve in the role of oversight should include ESP leaders, as well as representatives of the school district/IHE.

**Orientation:** The Association membership must be educated about micro-credentials – what they are and how they work. The JLMC will collaboratively develop training and materials for association members. This orientation will occur multiple times during work hours and will also be available electronically.

**Additional issues** that should be considered:

- If the district/IHE serves as the assessor for educators achieving the micro-credential, is there an appeal process if the competency is deemed not to have been met and the member does not achieve the micro-credential?
- If a member does not achieve the micro-credential during the initial submission process, do they have a specific timeframe to re-submit additional evidence for the same micro-credential, using the feedback provided by the assessor, to achieve the micro-credential? (Currently, in NEA's system, seekers of micro-credentials who do not achieve mastery may use the feedback provided to submit additional evidence of mastery and resubmit.)

**Words matter:** Micro-credentials should never be confused with digital badges, which have been around for over a decade. Encourage UniSerts and members not to use the term digital badge interchangeably with micro-credential. Doing so will diminish the seriousness of the micro-credentialing concept in professional learning. The digital badge that accompanies the achievement of the micro-credential is simply the electronic representation of the micro-credential. What is significant about the badge is the context, including who earned it, how it was earned, who issued it and, when possible, the evidence that was required to illustrate the rigor of the process.

Also, policymakers should avoid prescribing that ESPs earn a certain number of micro-credentials. To do so could increase pressure to dilute or water down the standards to earn the credentials. In addition, we do not want an educator to be penalized for not earning a prescribed amount, and perhaps, be subject to discipline. However, a local affiliate can advocate for stacking or bundling topic-related micro-credentials to earn additional compensation or to qualify for job advancement by demonstrating requisite skills to fulfill a specific job. We recommend including no micro-cre-

dentials that consist of fewer than 10 hours of actual work (In districts/IHEs, a metric often used is 10 hours of work equals 1 Continuing Education Unit (CEU) or 1 in-service credit). How to calculate the 10 hours (as a minimum) of work required to earn a micro-credential is up to the issuer.

Micro-credentials represent a new and innovative form of personalized professional learning, developed to support the professional practice of educators. Because micro-credentials are relatively new, the research is still quite limited. Although they have the potential to become an effective form of professional learning, they are probably best adopted as part of a system of professional learning that provides multiple options for educators. The guidance included in this document was developed to assist locals considering implementing a micro-credential program.

**For guidance and information on micro-credentials for teachers, please go to: [nea.org/mcteachers](https://nea.org/mcteachers)**

## Annotated Bibliography

### **Micro-credentialing Local Contract Language Example:**

The Lebanon Education Support Professionals Association (LESPA), Oregon, partnered with the Lebanon Community School District (LCSD) to provide compensation for NEA micro-credentials earned by ESPs through the following memorandum of agreement.

**Memorandum of Agreement  
Between the Lebanon Community School District  
And  
The Lebanon Educational Support Professionals**

Whereas the Lebanon Community School District (hereafter referred to as “The District”) and the Lebanon Education Support Professionals Association (hereafter referred to as “The Association”) agrees to the following:

**NEA Micro-credentials:** A micro-credential is a competency-based recognition that allows an educator to demonstrate mastery in a particular area of inquiry. Micro-credentials can either be used for compensation (under this MOA) or credit hours toward leader positions but not both. Any ESP employee who chooses to be compensated for a micro-credential shall receive \$175.00 per micro-credential.

The Association agrees to create a form and process to document successful completions. The District shall approve such process prior to implementing. Micro-credentials can either be used for compensation or hours toward leader positions but not both. All completed micro-credential(s) documentation shall be turned in to Human Resources by May 15th of each year, to be processed in the June payroll.

This Memorandum of Agreement shall begin the 2020-2021 school year and shall not discontinue until such time an agreement is reached between the Association and the District.

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Additionally, earned NEA micro-credentials can be applied toward LESPA's and the LCSD's Instructional Assistant and Media Assistant Leader role hour requirements which results in additional compensation applied to ESP's base pay. Below, model Instructional Assistant Leader requirements and application.

### Instructional Assistant Leader

The Instructional Assistant Leader (IA Leader) role was developed jointly by the Lebanon Community School District and The Lebanon Education Support Professionals Association. An IA Leader is highly skilled and consistently goes "above and beyond". He/She is someone who others look to for support and leadership.

#### Requirements to Qualify as an IA Leader:

- Employed five years with Lebanon Community School District, as an Instructional Assistant.
- Five credits of professional development/training directly related to the instructional assistant role
  - o 8 hours of training is equal to 1/2 credit.
  - o Required job training will not be considered for credit towards IA Leader
  - o Development hours cannot be from any degree/certification that an employee is/has used for their educational attainment. These hours would be in addition to any degree/certification.
  - o Workshops attended for credit after September 1, 2016, must be pre-approved by the district.
  - o Credit must have been attained within ten years of application date and must be approved by the district. You can request approval for workshops taken prior to September 1, 2016, by contacting the Kim Grousbeck in the Human Resources Department.
- Supervisor support/recommendation

#### The following will also be considered:

- Leadership experience in the school and/or district
- Performance evaluations
- Attendance

Instructional Assistants who meet the requirements must submit an application to the Human Resources Department. The Human Resources Department will form a team to review applications as they are received. Applicants selected as IA Leaders will be moved to the Personal Care Assistant pay scale at their current step beginning the next pay period.

Instructional Assistant (IA) Leader  
Application

An IA Leader is highly skilled and consistently goes  
"above and beyond".  
He/She is someone who others look to for support.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Current School: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Administrator: \_\_\_\_\_

Have you been employed by Lebanon Community Schools as an Instructional Assistant for at least five years?

Circle one: Yes No

Hire Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have five credits of professional development directly related to your profession? (8 hours of professional development = 1/2 credit) Please attach proof of your professional development credits.

Circle one: Yes No

Describe how you have gone "above and beyond" and been a leader in your role as an instructional assistant.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

References (list individuals that can attest to your leadership and going "above and beyond"):

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Email address: \_\_\_\_\_



**Micro-credentialing State Policy Examples (can be adapted for ESP career families that have re-certification or renewal requirements)**

The Tennessee Department of Education re-licensure policy includes micro-credentialing from state-approved issuers as part of its policy. For more information about the Tennessee re-licensure regulations, go to: <https://www.tn.gov/education/licensing/licensing-faq/pdp-faq-for-educators.html>

*From the TN DOE on re-licensure:*

<i>Professional Learning</i>	<i>1 micro-credential earned through a state-approved provider = 6 PDPs.</i>	<i>Digital certificate provided by state-approved micro-credentials provider.</i>
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**Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education re-licensure policy includes** micro-credentialing from approved providers as part of its policy. License Renewal Guidelines for Massachusetts Educators. (November,2017). For more information about the Massachusetts re-licensure regulations, go to: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/licensure/academic-prek12/guidelines-recert-ma-educators.pdf>

**From the MA DOE Guidelines for License Renewal (p. 19):**

<i>Micro-credentials</i>	<i>2 badges = 10 Professional Development Points (PDPs) as long as the badges are in a related topic area 1 badge bundled with other related PD activities may amount to a minimum of 10 PDPs. (Refer to "Bundling" on p. 17.)</i>	<i>2 badges = 10 PDPs as long as the badges are in a related topic area 1 badge bundled with other related PD activities may amount to a minimum of 10 PDPs. (Refer to "Bundling" on p. 17.)</i>
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**Additional Resources**

Design, Assessment, and Implementation Principles for Educator Micro-credentials. (January, 2020). Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). Available at: <https://ccsso.org/resource-library/design-assessment-and-implementation-principles-educator-micro-credentials>

CCSSO convened a wide range of stakeholders through the Certification and Licensure Collective (CLC) to support states to improve certification and licensure systems, including initial licensure, renewal, and reciprocity or teacher mobility. The principles in this document should also be considered for the improvement of professional learning and continuing education requirements for states that require certifications for ESPs in specific competency areas. Micro-credentials are a critical part of this effort so that educators can have the ability to expand, validate, and receive recognition for their professional learning experiences. Additionally, educator micro-credentials are gaining recognition as an approach for educators to demonstrate proficiency on a discrete skill or competency to indicate their expertise.

Research and Educator Micro-credentials (February 2019). Dan Brown and Digital Promise. Available at: <https://digitalpromise.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/researchandeducatormicrocredentials-v1r2.pdf>



“This paper examines how Digital Promise has ensured the content of micro-credentials and the process for earning them are anchored in quality research.” See pp 9 - 10 for an example of how the University of North Dakota College of Education and Human Development examined and verified micro-credentials developed by NEA and Digital Promise’s protocols, approving them as “professional development equivalency credits.”

**NEA’s Collective Bargaining & Member Advocacy and ESP Quality departments are collecting sample bargaining language or policy documents related to micro-credentials. Please send any samples, as well as comments about this document, to: [collectivebargaining@nea.org](mailto:collectivebargaining@nea.org) and [ESPMicro-credentials@nea.org](mailto:ESPMicro-credentials@nea.org).**