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What Motivates Teachers to Earn PD 'Micro-Credentials'? New Report Offers Insights

By [Madeline Will](#) on October 20, 2016 5:18 PM

A new trend in teacher professional learning forgoes general credit hour requirements in favor of "micro-credentials"—or digital badges that focus on the mastery of a singular competency.

But completing these micro-credentials can be a rigorous, time-consuming process, [says a new report](#) by Teaching Matters, a nonprofit dedicated to developing and retaining effective teachers, partly through issuing micro-credentials. To demonstrate mastery in a skill, teachers must complete online coursework, lead classroom activities, and prepare examples from those activities. Coaching, support, and pay or leadership incentives are necessary components of micro-credentialing programs, the report concludes.

The report details the results of two years of investments in micro-credentials, in three different case studies—two partnerships with New York City schools and one with Mineola Union schools in Long Island, N.Y. Since 2015, the report said, Teaching Matters issued 546 micro-credentials to 154 teachers in those two districts.

Each case had a different approach to micro-credentialing. Mineola, for instance, implemented a teacher-leadership initiative that used micro-credentials as a pathway to a permanent \$500 per year pay increase. Ten teachers participated in the program and received induction training and monthly in-person coaching. The goal was for all 10 teachers to earn 18 micro-credentials in a year—but only two completed the full set. (All 10 teachers earned at least a handful of micro-credentials.)

The teachers said the opportunity to serve in a new teacher-leader role was the driving force behind their participation in the program, but earning 18 micro-credentials in one school year was simply too much work.

That was also the takeaway from Teaching Matters' partnership with the NYC Department of Education to strengthen the pipeline of teachers who formally become teacher leaders in high-needs schools. About 190 teachers were given the chance to earn four micro-credentials—on strategizing for assessment, planning professional learning, analyzing student work, and stepping into a formal teacher-leader role—to then interview for roles that would add up to \$12,500 to their salary.

Ultimately, 123 teachers earned at least some micro-credentials. About 60 percent of participants who received coaching completed the program. Of the participants who didn't earn micro-credentials, 70 percent said they were too much work.

But those who did earn micro-credentials said the chance to move into a new role was the incentive behind the extra work. And it paid off: A majority of teachers who earned all four micro-credentials were accepted into teacher leader roles (see chart). Teaching Matters and the NYC Department are now boosting the partnership to reach an additional 300 emerging teacher leaders.

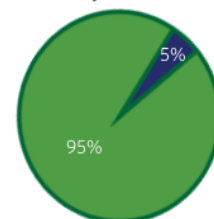
In the third case, Teaching Matters partnered again with the NYC Department of Education to support a network of 14 schools focused on improving formative assessment practices. Earning micro-credentials was voluntary, and there was no formal recognition for completion—the idea was that teachers would want to earn the micro-credentials to differentiate themselves. But of the 50 teacher leaders in program, only two earned micro-credentials.

A majority of the teachers who did not earn micro-credentials said it was because there was not a requirement, while 38 percent said they didn't participate because there was no incentive.

Teaching Matters concludes that for most teachers to earn micro-credentials, they need expert feedback and coaching throughout the process, as well as some kind of incentive. But the group said competency-based micro-credentialing is worth it—in part because it helps teachers take charge of their own professional development.

"Micro-credentialing provides the teacher more agency because it makes the expectations very transparent," said Lynette Guastaferrero, Teaching Matters' executive director, in a statement. "It puts the onus on the teacher to apply what he or she has learned, and demonstrate impact. This results in deeper, context-based learning and the greater likelihood the practice will stick."

Percent of Teachers Approved for Alternative Pathway to Teacher Leader Role



95% of all teachers who completed all four micro-credentials were accepted into teacher leader roles.

Source: *Chart via Teaching Matters report*

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