

## CASE STUDY

# HARMONY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

*How the second largest charter network in the United States is using micro-credentials to attract, develop, and retain great educators.*

**“Micro-credentials are not just an add-on menu item for us. Micro-credentials are at the center of our Human Capital Management System and enable us to promote educators based on demonstrated competency versus seat-time.”**

**- Dr. Burak Yilmaz  
Director of Instruction  
Harmony Public Schools**

## INTRODUCTION

Harmony Public Schools (HPS) is the second largest charter network in the United States, serving 36,614 students from traditionally underserved communities in 58 schools across seven independent school districts. Harmony educates its students using a mix of STEM, project-based learning, and personalized and blended learning initiatives in a small, supportive environment. Harmony students have a 100 percent acceptance rate into college.

HPS embarked on a 5-year strategic process to re-align its human capital management processes to improve teacher development, satisfaction, and retention. As part of this effort, they deeply embedded BloomBoard micro-credentials into their educator development process. The result has been better understanding of career pathways within HPS, visibility of a strong connection between

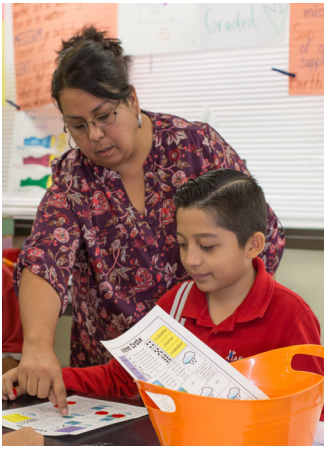
evaluation, professional development, and these career pathways, and increased participation in the professional development process. Additionally, HPS now uses micro-credentials as the vehicle for deploying all new initiatives to educators to create change across the organization.



## IMPLEMENTATION

In 2016, HPS received a 5-year, multi-million-dollar U.S. Department of Education Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant, which funded the creation of the Harmony Supporting Top Educators Program (H-STEP) aimed at comprehensively restructuring HPS's Human Capital Management System. HPS had been exploring ways to provide educators with performance-based compensation and career advancement opportunities while improving teacher effectiveness, retention, and satisfaction. A specific goal was to create paths for high performing educators to advance their careers and compensation without leaving the classroom.

Through the H-STEP initiative, organization leaders dug into evaluating existing systems and structures. In this process they realized that all their human capital structures, including professional development, licensure, incentive-based pay, and educator evaluation, operated independently of each other. It was clear that the best way to break down these silos and better support teacher growth was to unify these structures by completely redefining career pathways across the district.



As a part of re-thinking teacher effectiveness and satisfaction, Harmony also sought a more impactful way to deliver professional development than traditional “seat-time” based delivery systems. Harmony recognized the value of job-embedded professional development, where teachers learn-by-doing and advance by demonstrating their capabilities in their actual classroom practice. To this end, Harmony forged a relationship with BloomBoard to implement micro-credential-based learning.

With the support of BloomBoard, Harmony began by defining a roadmap of all the potential instructional roles an educator could hold across the organization. Taking a phased approach to their micro-credential implementation, they selected five roles to focus on in their first year of implementation: System Course Leader, PLC Leader, Mentor Teacher, Curriculum Writer, Induction (New Teacher and Core Teaching Competencies).

Starting with these five roles, organization leaders came together to define the competencies that mattered most for each of the roles. They then developed formal “role cards,” defined as job descriptions of the future, to help create coherence across the organization. They created micro-credentials with BloomBoard to help educators develop these essential competencies, which they implemented in 2018-2019.

For the 2019-20 school year, HPS created role cards for 12 additional positions: Non-Tested Teachers, ESL Specialists, Special Education Teachers, Gifted & Talented Teachers, Instructional Coaches, Department Chairs, Interventionists, Gifted & Talented Coordinators, College Counselors, Assistant Principals, Pre-Service Principals, and Principals. The role cards specify the knowledge, skills and competencies expected for each position.

There are now more than 22 programs that align to most educator roles at the campus and district level. These career pathways are all aligned to the HPS strategic plan. HPS has been deliberate in making the micro-credential initiative an integrated part of educators’ existing professional development structures and not making it feel like one additional layer in the process. Dr. Burak Yilmaz, Director of Instruction for HPS, explains, “Micro-credentials are not just an add-on menu item for us. Many districts view professional learning this way.”

Staff voluntarily chooses to participate in this development process with HPS. Educators can discuss their paths with leadership and receive incentives for earning micro-credentials toward their career advancement. They can tie their micro-credential work to challenges and opportunities in their own classrooms, making their development especially relevant, and be recognized as in-service educators.

**“ WE RELY ON MICRO-CREDENTIALS TO IMPLEMENT CHANGE. EVERY NEW SYSTEM OR PROCESS WE CREATE ACROSS ALL OUR PARTNERSHIPS IS SUPPORTED WITH MICRO-CREDENTIALS. ”**

**- Dr. Burak Yilmaz  
Director of Instruction for HPS**

## IMPACT

---

HPS has started proactively communicating that teachers who have completed one or more micro-credential will be preferred candidates for open positions within HPS. The intent is to promote candidates with the practical skills and experiences to perform effectively in their roles and who are most invested in their own development. In 2019-20, 270 Harmony educators earned 612 micro-credentials (three times the number earned in the prior school year).

According to the *Harmony Supporting Top Educator (H-STEP) Four Year Evaluation Report (Feb 2021)*, since implementing more consistent advancement pathways and using micro-credentials as a resource for progression,

principals and teachers both have an increased understanding of what pathways are available to them to advance their careers (85% of principals understood in 2017 and 92% in 2020; 66% of teachers understood in 2017 and 76% in 2020). Both groups also now see greater connection between evaluation, professional development, and career pathways (76% of principals saw the connection in 2017 and 82% in 2020; 58% of teachers saw the connection in 2017 and 71% in 2020).

Dr. Yilmaz explains how micro-credentials are now used to tie the systems together, “Micro-credentials are at the center of our Human Capital Management System and enable us to promote educators based on demonstrated competency versus seat-time.” According to the *Harmony Supporting Top Educator (H-STEP) Four Year Evaluation Report*, central administrators see value in using micro-credentials as a skill development tool in addition to a means for career progression.

*I think there’s a better understanding of the importance of micro-credentials. [Teachers] can develop their skills in a micro-credential environment and with that, they can see the future career opportunities within the system.*

*- Central Office Administrator*

*The micro-credentials are a great tool—how are you making use in the classroom of what you’re learning? How are you learning and applying new techniques? It’s a phenomenal idea. Micro-credentials set an expectation for teachers to make use of new learning.*

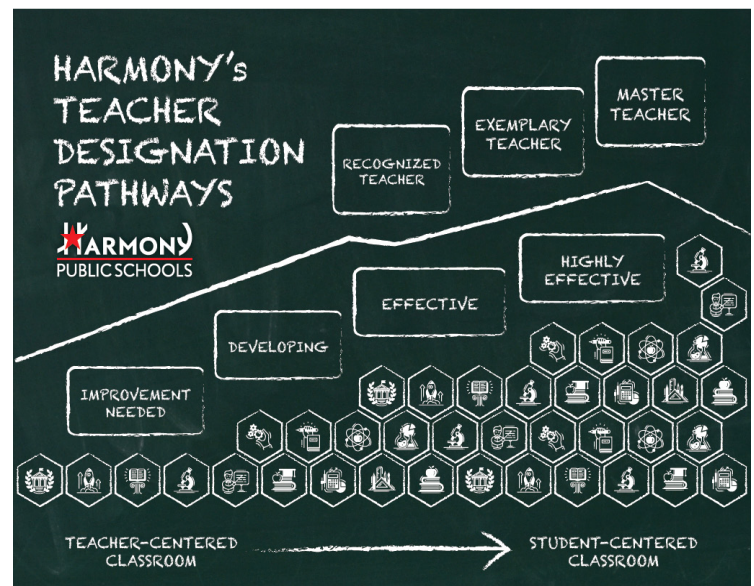
*- Central Office Administrator*

## LOOKING FORWARD

The TIF grant term will end in September 2021, but Dr. Yilmaz explains that HPS has used the past five years to build a sustainable human capital management system that will last long into the future with micro-credentials as a central feature. According to Dr. Yilmaz,

*“The scale and momentum behind micro-credentials has grown considerably and become a core process in how our teachers are supported. Every new system or process we create across our multiple partnerships is supported with micro-credentials, which we rely on to implement change.”*

Additionally, HPS has been awarded a new federal TSL grant that leadership plans to use for improving professional learning for administrators so they can then better support teachers. Dr. Yilmaz adds that implementing a micro-credential-based system of career advancement also has positioned HPS well as the state of Texas



rolls out new Teacher Incentive Allotments. Through this program, teachers are awarded substantial bonuses based on their performance and designation. The HPS micro-credential-based model has been an effective means for helping teachers demonstrate their value and ultimately earn additional compensation. This is a big win for HPS teachers.