



# Aligning Incentives to Personalized Competency-based Professional Learning



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Ann Ecker  
Director of Instruction  
School District of South Milwaukee

## Introduction

In the state of Wisconsin, many districts have moved away from automatic step increases for educators based on educational credits and advanced degrees, in particular due to the new licensing language. There is a sentiment among leaders that basing compensation on years and degrees does not align with what is known about excellence and expertise in the classroom. Instead, Wisconsin leaders are seeking a compensation system that embraces more relevant professional development opportunities and aligns with the performance expectations of the Wisconsin Educator Effectiveness System. As a result, the School District of South Milwaukee (SDSM) decided to pilot a process to help teachers advance on the salary schedule while honing high quality educational practices.

## Solution

Beginning in March 2017, SDSM partnered with BloomBoard to embark on competency-based learning with micro-credentials. Investigating the opportunity for staff to earn an in-house equivalent of a certification, the educators had the opportunity to complete 14 micro-credentials during the program. If they successfully demonstrated competency and earned the micro-credentials, they could use their awarded certification to advance on the compensation model.

The program began with a select group of interested and eligible educators who volunteered to participate. It was structured as a “limited choice” program, meaning that participants could choose to personalize their learning by selecting which micro-credentials they wanted to earn from a list of approximately 75 micro-credentials that district leaders and teachers agreed would be most valuable.

To begin, all participants engaged in a cohort model of practice by working on the same micro-credential. In order to gain a better understanding of how the process worked, the participants met during an initial orientation to familiarize themselves with the platform and micro-credential process. After the initial micro-credential was earned, each could complete the remaining 13 micro-credentials on their own time, at their own pace.

## Impact

While the program has yet to be completed, there are participants who have already earned all 14 micro-credentials and several are close to completion. Feedback has been positive. In particular, the teachers appreciate the opportunity to select topics that allow them to dig deeper into an area of practice with measurable evidence for students and staff success. All have commented on the immediate and direct connection to what is happening daily in their classrooms and environment. Some even remarked on the benefits of connecting with educators outside the district who are also working on the same micro-credential.

“I am surprisingly impressed with and thankful for the micro-credential pilot. As a busy wife, mother, special education teacher with a Master’s degree, I was worried how I would continue to advance on our district’s compensation model,” said Natalie Eiting, Special Education Teacher.

“I have really valued the opportunity to be a part of my district’s pilot program with micro-credentials. The self-paced, self-selection of classes that were relevant to me and my specific job felt differentiated and doable. I also enjoyed collaborating with a colleague on a couple of the micro-credentials that we both undertook. This was a great chance to work together and hone our skills and knowledge.”

- Jennifer Cosgrove  
Gifted & Talented Coordinator and  
Differentiation Specialist

“Choosing the micro-credentials that interested and applied to me was refreshing; I was in charge of my growth choosing the best evidence that demonstrated my growth as well as the balance of topics that had been on my “list” to do for my professional growth. With excitement, I have obtained 14 micro-credentials and learned a lot about myself. The biggest growth was an affirmation about my skills set as a special education teacher and the internal and external evidence that affirmed my competencies. I want to thank my school district for stepping out ahead of the pack and trying something different. They have afforded me a way that also works within my busy life to meet their expectations and continue to move on their compensation model with the completion of this micro credential pilot. Most importantly, they have once again made me see the value I add to my students and the field of education on a daily basis. With room to now move on my compensation model, I am ready for what the next 30 years of my career will bring.”

## Looking Forward

While the program does not officially end until summer 2018, there is already discussion with district leaders about how micro-credentials can be scaled to more participants in the coming years. According to the district’s Director of Instruction, Ann Ecker, “Micro-credentials have the potential to be the next wave of limitless professional learning communities grounded in high-quality professional demonstration of competence and collaboration. The benefit of learning with and from professionals to apply newly refined ideas is a compliment to the educational profession.”

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