ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT:

This is a summary document. It does not take the place of the extensive research and recommendations in New America’s model state policy guide *Harnessing Micro-credentials for Teacher Growth: A National Review of Early Best Practices* or RTI International’s *NC Feasibility Study*.

You are encouraged to completely review all documents for specific information and more clarification to understand the recommendations more fully.

THE NC PARTNERSHIP FOR MICRO-CREDENTIALS IS LED BY:

WITH GENEROUS SUPPORT FROM:

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RTI INTERNATIONAL

Carnegie Corporation of New York

BELK FOUNDATION

Z. Smith Reynolds FOUNDATION
A Letter from the Chair
Esteemed Colleagues:

I am excited to share the research overview and preliminary recommendations from the North Carolina Partnership for Micro-Credentials. Thank you for recognizing the importance of this work.

Effective teachers are the most important factor to improve student learning. And effective teachers need an innovative system of professional learning—one that includes micro-credentials. Micro-credentials (MCs) have the power to fundamentally change professional learning for teachers and educators. They are a vehicle to deliver best-practice learning. Done well, MCs provide teachers with the opportunity to learn and demonstrate new knowledge and skills that are timely and relevant to their career and their classroom.

To determine the true possibility of micro-credentials in North Carolina and beyond, we have researched the national landscape, spoken with and surveyed teachers, administrators, local board of education members, policy makers, innovative thinkers, and education experts from across the state and nation. We’ve also gleaned information and best-practice thinking from our expert roster of Partners, Advisors, and Task Force members, who themselves are policymakers, state and national education leaders, business leaders, school administrators and, of course, teachers.

This document and our preliminary recommendations reflect months of discovery and conversation; innovative, creative thinking; and the wishes of teachers and administrators across our state.

COVID-19 continues to cause unprecedented demand for reinventing what teachers do and how they help students learn. As a long-time leader in education, North Carolina has the opportunity to take this moment and transform how teachers learn, and therefore how they help their students learn. While other states are exploring this work, NC can be the first state to develop a system of professional learning integrated with model micro-credential standards, criteria for credentialing agencies, and model policy.

I am grateful to our Partners, Advisors, Task Force members, and funders for their time, resources, and dedication to this work. I look forward to continuing our work together to create new possibilities for teachers and students in NC.

Sincerely,

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North Carolina Governor 2009-2012
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Executive Summary
Research shows that high-quality, effective teachers are the most important factor in determining students’ success in school. Getting these teachers into classrooms and keeping them there, however, is no easy feat. From recruiting and retaining talent to capacity-building at the school, district, and state levels, the search for highly skilled teachers presents many challenges.

Micro-credentials (MCs) continue to emerge as a vehicle for delivering effective professional learning. They serve to develop, recognize, and retain strong teachers. Done well, MCs provide teachers with the opportunity to learn and demonstrate competencies while receiving feedback from an outside evaluator and earning public recognition for their skills. In most cases, teachers can complete a micro-credential in their own time and in their own way through public and private digital platforms.

The standards and policies for using MCs as part of a teacher learning system are not yet consistent. This lack of consistency is driven in part by states’ incoherent professional development and licensure policies, which are focused on “seat time” and the accrual of continuing education units (CEUs) rather than the demonstration of new skills or knowledge. While teachers are taking advantage of current MCs offered, the credential is not always recognized by their school, district, or state as a part of their professional growth. As a result, MCs have limited impact on teacher practice, career advancement, or reward. MC providers are operating without oversight and with different quality standards. Incentives, if offered, are not always aligned with practices that best support schools. By developing a state-recognized system of competency-based MCs, integrated with a system of professional learning, MCs could be a useful tool for developing effective teachers.

About the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials
In 2020, digiLEARN and the North Carolina State Board of Education developed the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials with other state and national partners, including RTI International, New America, Digital Promise, Bloomboard, the Learning Policy Institute, and the National Education Association. The work was based on the premise that MCs for teachers could be a potential strategy for ensuring that every student has a high-quality and effective teacher. The Partnership received generous support from Carnegie of New York, the Belk Foundation, and the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation.

The North Carolina Partnership for Micro-Credentials has identified several elements in state and local policies and practices that appear to be preventing effective implementation of MCs, along with recommendations for how to move forward toward integrating MCs into teacher professional learning. We’ve done this by conducting and analyzing:
• a national research report produced by New America’s Education Policy Program,
• a state level feasibility and stakeholder focus groups by RTI, and
• a statewide survey by RTI to validate the recommendations once they are finalized by the Partnership.

Over the past year, the NC Partnership for Micro-credentials has taken the first steps to explore how to proceed with MC implementation in NC. These first steps are well-aligned with principles of implementation science, and we offer the following considerations and preliminary recommendations as the next steps toward further implementing MCs in North Carolina.

Considerations Moving Forward

• **From compliance to growth.** According to the national research by New America, integrating micro-credentials into educator professional development can be instrumental in moving the system from one that is compliance driven to one that fosters professional growth.

• **Agreement on standards.** For MCs to reach their full potential, education leaders must agree on the standards for high-quality MCs for consistency of implementation. States, not Local Education Agencies (LEAs), should determine quality and standards so MCs have a recognized value and are portable across the state and, ultimately, the nation.

• **Expanding opportunities.** As noted in both the New America research and the NC Feasibility Study by RTI, MCs are not a replacement for other high quality professional development and learning options but instead an expansion of opportunities for professional growth and career advancement.

• **A deliberate process.** However, states need to be deliberate and provide a process for MC quality to ensure portability; time for teachers to collaborate, develop, and demonstrate skills; human capital support with mentors and coaches; sufficient financial support; and equity so all districts can participate.

North Carolina is positioned to lead an MC effort based on the assets identified in the RTI feasibility study:

1. **Teacher interest, which is heightened by COVID-19.** Through the RTI-led focus groups and interviews, teachers expressed interest in MCs, especially with the continuing changes brought on by COVID. Teachers across the state and nation have faced significant challenges adapting their in-person classroom skills to an online teaching and learning environment. Earning MCs in digital teaching and learning competencies could help develop a significant number of teachers.
into effective online educators. These teachers could be easily identified and extend their impact on students as teaching and learning continue in hybrid models, including in person and virtual teaching needs beyond COVID. This example could serve as a model for other state priority areas such as reading and computer science.

2. **Desire for focus on competency instead of seat time.** All stakeholder interviewees agreed that teacher professional learning focused on acquired competencies instead of “seat time” aligns with how adults learn and provides better evidence for decision-making about teacher advancement.

3. **MCs’ ability to offer personalized, flexible learning.** Other interviewees cited benefits included personalized, flexible learning that better aligns with teachers’ needs and schedules. MCs could also highlight pathways for ongoing learning via MC stacks, which sequence skills from more novice to advanced and builds on NC’s Advanced Teaching Roles work and additional initiatives across the state.

4. **Opportunity to start “small” and focus on experienced teachers.** In the focus groups and research, it was suggested that MCs should first target experienced teachers, as new teachers are already overwhelmed with induction requirements and learning how to teach. Additionally, both New America and RTI agree that a statewide MC initiative should start “small” with a few priority areas that are aligned with state goals to give the highest chance of success. Starting small allows for continuous monitoring and evaluation as well as shorter term outcomes leading to critical practice, policy, and funding shifts.

**Recommendations**
The Partnership—after review and discussion of the research and information provided by digiLEARN, New America, and RTI—makes the following preliminary recommendations to begin implementation of MCs in NC.

1. **The North Carolina State Board of Education (SBE) should authorize the development of a state led Micro-Credentials Initiative as recommended by digiLEARN and the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials in this status report to the SBE.** The purpose of the Micro-Credentials Initiative will be to develop a state-recognized system of competency-based micro-credentials that promotes and is integrated with a high-quality system of teacher professional learning. As part of this professional learning system, competency-based micro-credentials should encourage and support the expansion of teachers’ skills and knowledge to improve the achievement and outcomes of all students.

   **Rationale:** This is a major system change in how NC provides professional
development or learning to teachers and will require a well-planned initiative implemented over time. As noted in the Leandro report, the “frequency, approach, and overall quality” of professional development opportunities for all teachers vary across schools, and state-level efforts are “inadequate and inequitable.” Many teachers reported professional learning or development offerings at the local and state level do not reflect the research-defined qualities of effective professional development (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2017).

Further, interest in becoming and remaining a teacher continues to decline, and Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) increasingly face difficulties in finding qualified teachers. MCs continue to emerge as a high-potential solution to developing, recognizing, and retaining strong teachers by incorporating effective MCs into educator policies and practices for ongoing professional development, license renewal, and advancement. An NC Micro-Credential Initiative will support the strategy for a system of teacher development approved in June 2020 by the SBE’s action plan to address the consent order for Leandro compliance. It will also be a strategy to support the SBE’s NC Pathways to Excellence for Teaching Professionals, which recommends reimagining teacher licensure to recruit and retain high-quality teachers due to an impending shortage.

Budget: TBD by Strategic Roadmap
Timeline: March 2021

2. The State Board of Education should endorse this NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials status report, New America’s National Review of Early Best Practices, the companion Harnessing Micro-credentials for Teacher Growth: A Model State Policy Guide and RTI’s NC Feasibility Study as core resources to develop a strategic roadmap for the Micro-Credentials Initiative. Further, digiLEARN and the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials should continue to advise and assist in the development the Micro-Credentials Initiative as outlined in the Partners’ work plan.

Rationale: The vision, mission, and objectives were developed in collaboration with the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials to guide and develop a work plan. The national research and NC Feasibility Study were commissioned expressly to inform the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials about research and data for MCs as another key tool for a system of professional learning, license renewal, and advancement. The national report provides an overview of MCs in other states and offers specific proposals about the use of MCs in alignment with the NC Feasibility Study. The feasibility report identifies the assets readily available in NC to support implementing MCs and includes input from teachers, principals, superintendents, other educators, and policy leaders. Utilizing these documents...
and the expertise of digiLEARN and the NC Partnership will expedite the development of the strategic roadmap.

**Budget:** Complete and funded with foundation support  
**Timeline:** March 2021

3. The North Carolina State Board of Education should authorize the development of a strategic roadmap to implement the state led Micro-Credentials Initiative no later than October 2021. The roadmap should establish priorities for which MCs are developed, how they are approved, how teacher submissions are assessed, how teachers are supported and how the value (including role or stipend/compensation) of the MC is determined. In addition to clear and specific actions, timelines, and budget, the map should include a strong research and evaluation plan.

**Rationale:** A new state initiative, especially one as complex as teacher professional learning, requires a strategic roadmap. It is a time-based plan that defines where the state is with the MCs, where the state wants to go and how the state will get to full implementation. A strategic roadmap is a common approach to planning that organizes and presents important information related to the initiative at full implementation. A roadmap is especially effective for management of the development and execution of a statewide initiative. The work done thus far by digiLEARN, New America, RTI, and the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials provides the foundation to begin development of the strategic roadmap. New initiatives need to be developed and often require dedicated staff and specific resources that are not currently part of an organization’s budget. As a new initiative, the SBE should seek a new appropriation in the biennial budget for 2021-23 to begin implementation of the Micro-Credentials Initiative.

**Budget:** Y1 350K  Y2 800K  Y3 TBD by Strategic Roadmap

4. The Strategic Roadmap should be designed to implement state led MCs incrementally and include the following priorities as identified by the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials to expedite the implementation of state level MCs.
   a. Development of state-led supported MCs that target NC State Board of Education priorities including:
      i. a set of early literacy MCs that supports the SBE Framework for Action on Early Reading and integrates with a systemic plan for training teachers in the science of reading.
      ii. a set of reading MCs for middle and high school teachers that integrates reading into content areas and is aligned with the goals of the early literacy Framework.
iii. a set of MCs for the demonstration of skills necessary for in person and virtual teaching needs now and beyond COVID-19 as aligned with the NC Digital Learning Plan.

iv. a set of state-designed and approved descriptions of advanced teaching roles using the data from the current Advanced Teaching Role Grantees as a starting point. The goal would be for creating a teacher leadership pathway for career advancement with increased compensation for teachers to remain in the classroom.

v. MCs for the demonstration of skills necessary for teachers to:
   a. implement the K12 Computer Science Standards approved by the SBE and to
   b. seek an advanced degree in Computer Science through stackable MCs.

b. An initial plan to target teachers with continuing professional license and a plan to expand to all teachers once the MCs Initiative is fully executed.

c. Sufficient and equitable funding to:
   - build the system of MCs including governing MCs and assessment of MCs and
   - support teachers in earning MCs as well as recognition and compensation for achieving MCs.

d. A governance model that provides equitable and sufficient support to all LEAs to implement MCs.

e. Standards for developing MCs as well as quality control for existing MCs developed by other agencies or organizations.

Rationale: digiLEARN and the Partnership offer these priorities to ensure the state’s strategic roadmap for MCs can be developed coherently and implemented successfully. By focusing on specific key state-level priorities for implementation of MCs, LEAs will continue to have the flexibility to utilize MCs and other professional development for specific district and school priorities. With impending budget restrictions due to COVID-19, targeting specific state areas or priorities increase the opportunity for success. Another key factor is making sure there is sufficient financial and human support for teachers as they pursue MCs on their own. It should be noted it is not the intent to use MCs to replace effective, quality professional development already taking place, but as another tool to increase effective professional learning options for teachers that are personalized to their individual needs and time.

Budget: TBD by Strategic Roadmap
Timeline: October 2021
5. The State Board of Education should review policies as they relate to license renewal and professional learning to incorporate recognition of competency-based MCs.

*Rationale:* Implementation of competency-based MCs where teachers demonstrate skill acquisition as a part of NC’s professional learning system is counter to continuing education unit (CEUs). Presently, license renewal is based on local professional development and the acquisition of CEUs (10 hours of participation in an accredited program or approved activities), which stakeholders say is perfunctory or compliance driven. As noted in the *NC Feasibility Study*, the focus groups unanimously agreed that a move is needed to provide more personalized professional development that has impact on teachers’ practice and is aligned with district and state priorities.

Currently, multiple NC districts are granting CEUs for MCs by using an inconsistent exchange rate that does not address the issue of seat time versus skill acquisition or competency. One primary objective of incorporating MCs into human capital systems such as those recommended in the *SBE’s NC Pathways to Excellence for Teaching Professionals*, is to move away from a compliance-oriented, time-based approach and move toward a focus on what teachers know and can do. Any attempt to convert MCs to CEUs is arbitrary, because the length of time it takes educators to complete an MC varies by teacher and the rigor of the MC depends on a variety of factors, including their initial level of teacher expertise. This is a critical point the SBE should consider as the SBE has the authority to add approval of specific MCs for license renewal. For instance, if the SBE has identified reading as a priority, then it can identify completion of specific reading MCs towards licensure renewal.

*Budget: TBD by Strategic Roadmap*
*Timeline: October 2021*

6. The State Board of Education should further develop the Advanced Teaching Roles Program as a strategy to provide career advancement for teacher leaders so they may have increased compensation while remaining in the classroom.

*Rationale:* Advanced Teaching Roles in NC has shown promise as a strategy to develop teacher leaders who remain in the classroom and provide support to other teachers or extend their reach to more students. The most recent evaluation results from the Friday Institute at North Carolina State University show improved teacher performance and a trend toward improving student growth. This makes it a good starting place for implementing MCs to develop
teacher leaders across the state and begin compensating teachers who attain advanced teaching roles and remain in the classroom.

At the present time, its potential is limited to a few districts a year. Increasing the number of participating LEAs will provide the needed research to identify characteristics of advanced teaching roles that lead to improved student learning outcomes. Another advantage to expanding the program is to address equity issues in that large and wealthier districts have more potential for such a program while the smaller and higher needs schools and districts do not have the resources necessary to develop such a program.

Lessons can also be learned from National Board of Professional Teaching Standards. While larger in scope of the skills it covers, the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards is a competency-based approach for which NC has 23,090 teachers who have met the certification standards and receive additional compensation. Because ATRs is an existing program, planning can begin to expand the program immediately and development teacher leader MCs can be incorporated into the strategic roadmap.

Budget: TBD
Timeline: May 2021
Background
Research shows that high-quality, effective teachers are the most important factor in determining a student success (Louis, et. al., 2010). When school buildings closed due to COVID-19 and teachers quickly transitioned to remote learning, it further emphasized that teachers are the key to student success. However, ensuring that students have access to high-quality and effective teachers has proven challenging at many levels, from recruiting and retention to capacity-building. This was validated in the Leandro report, which finds NC schools have issues with equitable distribution and retention of high-quality and effective teachers, which negatively impact outcomes for students—especially in high-need schools. Further proof is in the recent NC Pathways to Excellence for Teaching Professionals report, presented to the NC State Board of Education in February 2021, which recommends reimagining teacher licensure to recruit and retain high quality teachers due to an impending shortage.

According to the Leandro report, another area affecting professional growth and recognition of high-quality teachers is professional development. The report cited that many teachers reported professional learning or development offerings at the local and state level do not reflect the research-defined qualities of effective professional development (Darling-Hammond, et.al.,2017), or professional development that is:

- content focused,
- incorporates active learning,
- supports collaboration,
- uses models of effective practice,
- provides coaching,
- offers feedback and reflection and adequate time to learn, practice, and implement,
- and changes teacher practice.

The lack of research-defined qualities in professional development in NC and other states is driven in part by incoherent professional development and licensure policies, which are focused on “seat time” and the accrual of continuing education units (CEUs) rather than the demonstration of new skills or knowledge and models of effective professional development.

One teacher learning model, micro-credentials (MCs), continues to emerge as a high-potential solution to developing, recognizing, and retaining strong teachers. Educator MCs are defined by New America as:

“A verification of the possession of a discrete skill or competency that a teacher has demonstrated through the submission of evidence assessed via a validated rubric.”
MCs are mostly delivered online, making them more accessible to all educators, especially rural educators and those who need professional learning in the evening, on weekends and other times convenient to teachers’ schedules. The goal of MCs is to improve an educator’s professional practice and ultimately improve student learning outcomes. They are like other credentials, such as degrees or diplomas, because they provide public recognition of acquired knowledge in a specific skill or competency that can be demonstrated. However, MCs should not be viewed as a replacement of formal education and the foundational skills teachers learn as part of their undergraduate degree. Instead, they should be viewed as building on the foundational knowledge and advancing teacher professional development.

Done well, MCs provide teachers with the opportunity to learn and demonstrate competencies, receive feedback from an outside evaluator, and earn public recognition for their skills. In most cases MCs can be done in a teacher’s own time and in their own way through public and private digital platforms developed by Digital Promise, Bloomboard, and the NEA, among others.

While teachers are taking advantage of MCs offered, the credential is not always recognized by their school, district, or state as a part of their professional growth and thus has limited impact on career advancement or reward. Micro-credential providers are currently operating without oversight and with differing standards of quality. The incentives, if offered, are not always aligned with practices that best support schools.
Overview
digiLEARN was founded by former NC Governor Bev Perdue to work toward a future-defining educational system focused on digital teaching and learning that increases personal learning options for students and expands instructional opportunities for teachers.

digiLEARN partnered with the NC State Board of Education, New America, RTI International and other state and national partners to explore the potential for micro-credentials as one solution for ensuring a high-quality and effective teacher is in every classroom across North Carolina. The NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials, led by digiLEARN, is focused on developing a state-recognized system of competency-based micro-credentials (MCs) that promotes and is integrated with a high-quality system of teacher professional learning. Within this professional learning system, MCs will be used to encourage and support the expansion of teachers’ skills and knowledge to improve achievement and outcomes for all students.

Guiding Vision, Mission, and Objectives for the Work
The NC Partnership for Micro-credentials' first step in addressing its work was to develop a vision, mission, and objectives to guide the work. To set a common framework moving forward, Governor Bev Perdue, Chair, set forth the concept of micro-credentials (MCs) for teachers as a potential strategy for ensuring that every student has a high-quality and effective teacher.

MCs can provide teachers at any stage of their career, including mid-career—the time when most teachers leave the profession—an opportunity to learn in small increments while remaining employed and in the classroom. They offer a way to stack credentials that may lead to a degree or license and allow for career advancement and better pay. However, for micro-credentials to be meaningful tools for teachers, they need to be portable, allow teachers to receive credit for them across districts and states. In addition, teachers must be provided some level of compensation and recognition for receiving the extra skills and knowledge they need to make them more effective teachers for student success.

With this knowledge, the Partners developed the following Vision, Mission and Objectives to determined how micro-credentials (MCs) can be an effective as a strategy to retain teachers once they are in the workforce.

Vision
Imagine a system of professional learning for all teachers that:

- is aligned with high-quality standards.
- provides personalized professional learning opportunities in multiple formats, times, and ways, including opportunities based on the skills, knowledge, and
competencies each teacher needs to improve their practice so every student can achieve at their maximum potential.

- has the capacity to assess and recognize the acquisition and demonstration of each teacher’s skills, knowledge and competencies so they can advance in their career, be acknowledged and rewarded as professionals across schools, districts and the country.

**Mission**

Develop a state-recognized system of competency-based micro-credentials that promotes and is integrated with a high-quality system of teacher professional learning. As part of this professional learning system, competency-based micro-credentials should encourage and support the expansion of teachers’ skills and knowledge to improve the achievement and outcomes of all students.

**Objectives**

Develop a system of teacher micro-credentialing that:

- is aligned with NC Teaching Standards, Learning Forward Standards for Professional Learning, NC Digital Learning Competencies for Teachers and Administrators and NC Digital Learning Competencies for Students.
- incorporates teachers’ perspective.
- recognizes teachers’ professional growth and advancement through clearly defined rewards.
- is focused on fairly and equitably promoting and assessing teacher growth and advancement to improve student outcomes in both tested and non-tested subjects.
- is formally connected to professional learning and other human capital systems policies that allow for additional recognition and rewards to be bestowed upon teachers earning relevant high-quality micro-credentials.
- is recognized by state, national, and/or credentialing agencies to ensure portability of micro-credentials across NC districts, as well as value by hiring entities outside of the state.
- can become a model policy for other states.

**Work Plan**

digiLEARN developed the following strategies for its work plan based on the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials vision, mission, and objectives. The overall work plan was designed to include:

- a national scan of MCs across the nation, so Partners would understand the status and effectiveness of MCs in other states.
• a feasibility study of the assets in NC to support micro-credentials so the Partners could develop recommendations for MCs would:
  o build on the assets already in place, and
  o align with the direction for teacher effectiveness supported by the NC State Board of Education.
• A series of stakeholder focus groups to understand perspectives from teachers, principals, superintendents, and local board members across the state.
• A statewide stakeholder survey to validate the recommendations of the Partners and begin to inform stakeholders of the work for MCs.

digiLEARN, New America’s Education Policy Program and RTI International’s Education and Workforce Development Program formed a Task Force to carry out the work plan guided by the Partners’ vision, mission and objectives. As each phase of work was completed, the Task Force met with the Partners to review, debrief the reports, and determine next steps or identify additional data needed. Once all reports were complete, the Task Force met with the Partners for a series of discussions to understand the work and ultimately reach the set of preliminary recommendations included in this report. This report provides a status of the work to date with preliminary recommendations for the NC State Board of Education to consider in the advancement of MC policy and standards that promote and are integrated with a high-quality system of teacher professional learning in North Carolina.
Lessons from the National Level—New America

In *Harnessing Micro-credentials for Teacher Growth: A National Review of Early Best Practices*,¹ New America finds that incorporating micro-credentials into educator development systems can help refocus these systems’ purpose on recognizing growth in—and in the case of advancement, overall quality of—professional practice and related student outcomes.

High-quality MCs have significant potential to raise the quality of instruction and student outcomes by addressing many of the current issues around professional development, including:

- connecting professional learning more directly to practice,
- providing resources that draw upon the best available research and evidence of impact for a given competency,
- promoting greater engagement and satisfaction with professional learning by increasing teacher agency,
- identifying and targeting personalized areas for professional growth,
- promoting learning by doing,
- providing feedback on practice and opportunities to learn from mistakes, and
- modeling best practices in teaching by following an inquiry-based learning and feedback process.

MCs also offer significant potential to allow teachers to showcase their skills and advance professionally regardless of their experience level or the degrees they’ve attained. MCs can help attract and retain highly talented teachers by formally assessing and recognizing previously unrecognized skills and providing opportunities for increased responsibilities and compensation.

However, it is too soon to say with certainty whether MCs will fulfill their potential. This is in part because most systems have not had MCs in place long enough—or at a broad enough scale—to assess impact. The lack of clear data around MC impact is also due to the wide variation present in current offerings and approaches. When MCs were initially introduced, most were not attached to “high stakes,” and the level of rigor and validity of MCs typically corresponded with the consequences of their use. As the uses and aspirations associated with MCs have become more ambitious, the quality of MCs has not always kept pace. While most recognize that assessment is an important aspect of MCs to get right, it is often not understood that the depth and specificity of the resources embedded in, or offered in conjunction with, MCs are just as critical if attempting to use MCs to develop teacher competencies, not just recognize them.

For MCs to reach their full potential, education leaders must come to consensus about what high-quality MCs are and are not. States, rather than LEAs, should determine quality so that MCs have clearly recognized value regardless of location of employment. Ideally, there would be a nationally-accepted definition of quality for MCs—and potentially an external, unbiased reviewer (like a Consumer Reports for MCs)—so MCs can be portable among states as well. In the meantime, the lessons and best practices provided in this report offer a clear starting point for determining quality. Conducting additional research on how to ensure MCs are valid and robust measures of teacher competence should be a key focus for education policymakers and philanthropies as more state and local education agencies implement MC initiatives.

Additionally, like any tool to improve our K–12 education systems, MCs are not a silver bullet. The issues with both traditional professional development “offerings” (or available development tools, vehicles, and resources) and with professional learning “systems” (or structures, policies, and practices supporting and giving meaning to the professional development offerings) are well-documented and long-standing. While our research finds that high-quality MCs have significant potential to positively impact the former, they will not be successful without significant shifts to the latter (which need to happen outside the scope—and even irrespective of the existence of the MC offerings themselves). These broader elements of educator development and advancement systems may be less exotic and alluring than a novel digital tool but, left unaddressed, most educators will struggle to attain MCs, many schools will continue to struggle to retain good teachers and develop them into great ones, and our students with the greatest needs will continue to struggle the most.
State Policy Guide for Educator Micro-credentials—New America

Building on New America’s National Review of Early Best Practices, the companion Harnessing Micro-credentials for Teacher Growth: A Model State Policy Guide outlines multiple phases to consider when implementing MCs. The following pulls out New America’s high-level model policy descriptions and considerations for states to effectively incorporate short-term and long-term MC policies and practices into educator human capital systems for ongoing professional development, license renewal, and advancement.2

A model state policy to improve educator professional development and advancement systems, in part through the incorporation of MCs, must take a comprehensive approach to addressing current issues within these systems. The highest-potential strategy includes three separate but synergistic components related to recognizing and rewarding competency through formal advancement, utilizing license renewal as a tool to ensure teachers hold key evidence-based competencies, and personalizing ongoing professional development:

1. **Career pathways and advanced educator designations accompanied by a significant financial incentive** (base salary increase) and clearly defined role and responsibilities. Prescribed stacks of high-quality MCs could fulfill prerequisites for obtaining some of these roles.

2. **A short list of MCs recognized for fulfilling license renewal requirements for each licensure endorsement area.** These MCs should focus on standards and/or areas of teaching that are newer (i.e., most, if not all, educators did not learn these concepts in pre-service training) and have a positive expected impact on student outcomes based on research. Each topic area should include a stack of MCs with the ability to go deeper in a specific area. State resources should be made available for LEAs who opt in to this approach. The MCs that LEAs propose to focus on should be based on evidence of likely impact of the given competencies in their specific context, determined in consultation with educators and administrators at the school level to ensure relevance. Given that engaging in MCs is likely to result in higher value to teachers’ practice than the standard activities used for license renewal, states can also incentivize LEAs and teachers to opt in by only requiring a few MCs to meet re-licensure requirements.

3. **The use of professional learning goals and/or plans to promote ongoing professional learning.** MCs are included as one option for fulfilling aspects of the plan (and are rewarded with a very small stipend). The state recognizes any MCs in

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its curated database for professional learning purposes, and teachers have the option to submit other MCs to be vetted for addition to the database.

The following criteria must also be in place to ensure success:

- **Process for ensuring MC quality:** Quality guidelines should be consistent to ensure that an MC earned for one use (i.e., ongoing professional learning), could also meet requirements for another use (i.e., license renewal or advancement requirements).
  - The market is not a sufficient quality control mechanism, as popularity does not necessarily translate to effectiveness—an ongoing issue with most current approaches to educator professional development and advancement. Educators and employers require that the value that MCs hold be investigated and assured through more formal processes.
  - Ensuring digital badges or other documentation of MCs offered can be thoroughly explored and verified by potential employers is another key aspect that must be in place to ensure transparency around quality and allow for MCs to hold currency.

- **Time:** The state and LEAs need to ensure adequate time is given to teachers to engage in MCs and to collaborate with peers and instructional leaders.
  - Consult national resources outlining best practices for reallocating teacher time and develop guidance and support for LEAs to put these models in place in a financially sustainable way.

- **Human Capital:** Identifying and training coaches, PGP assessors, and implementing the various MC system and incentive measures requires significant resources. Additional staff may be needed to cover classes while teachers get dedicated time to focus on skill development.
  - Start by using MCs to develop and identify coaches and other teacher leaders that can help lead MC and other professional learning work for

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4 For best practices on reimagining the use of teacher time in schools, see Claire Kaplan, Roy Chan, David A. Farbman and Ami Novoryta, *Time for Teachers, Leveraging Expanded Time to Strengthen Instruction and Empower Teachers, Executive Summary* (Boston, MA: National Center on Time & Learning, May 14, 2014). [https://www.timeandlearning.org/sites/default/files/resources/time4teacherses.pdf](https://www.timeandlearning.org/sites/default/files/resources/time4teacherses.pdf)
colleagues. States can also work with regional networks to develop virtual learning communities where expert teachers can help support each other.

- **Financial Investment:** States, LEAs, and schools need to make significant investments to ensure adequate staff time, human capital, and infrastructure.
  - Policymakers must take the long view on budgeting. Costs could be offset over time through reduced teacher attrition and reduced outlays on other professional development efforts (hiring outside professional development consultants, etc.). The state may also require maintenance of effort from non-high-need LEAs after seed funds are exhausted (i.e., LEAs are expected to find ways to sustainably finance the work after a specified period of time).

- **Support for Equity:** Opt-in policies surrounding MCs could further exacerbate gaps in equitable access to quality teaching, if only more affluent and/or larger LEAs have access to the resources to engage in MCs and put the necessary structures and systems around them. States need to consider how to combat these potential inequities by providing additional technical assistance and financial support to lesser-resourced LEAs.
  - A potential solution is for the state to offer additional resources and support to "high-need" LEAs that it believes would most benefit.\(^5\) Selection criteria could be student academic outcomes, or perhaps schools and LEAs with exceptionally low years of teacher experience.

In addition, longer-term state policy and practice approaches should:

- Consider automatically incorporating stacks of MCs on teacher certificates.
- Consider MCs as a vehicle for demonstrating competency for other educator roles, such as novice school leaders as part of an induction program.
- Require and fund the collection of robust data and use it to study the initial pilot(s) and associated impact and outcomes. The proposed design of the license renewal pilot lends itself particularly well to study, with some LEAs continuing with the traditional approach and others moving to a MC-driven approach. States that adopt MCs in support of multiple human capital processes and priorities should evaluate the effectiveness of MCs for these various policy purposes.

State approaches should not:

- Assign CEUs or other professional development points for all MCs. One primary objective of incorporating MCs into human capital systems is to move away from

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a compliance-oriented, time-based approach and move toward a focus on what teachers know and are able to do. Any attempt to convert MCs to CEUs would be arbitrary because the length of time it takes educators to complete an MC depends on a variety of factors, including their initial level of expertise.

- Allow educators in LEAs that are awarded grants through the innovative license renewal initiative to choose between completing MCs and completing a seat-time option to meet license renewal requirements. Doing so would reduce the likelihood that educators would choose the difficult, riskier MC approach to fulfilling licensure requirements. Some teachers may still choose to engage in graduate coursework, attend conferences, and so forth, to gain the knowledge and skills needed to successfully earn the MC, but attending those events themselves would not count toward renewal requirements. Additionally, some institutions of higher education may decide to offer graduate credits for completing specific stacks of MCs if they have coursework with which the MCs are aligned. However, teachers in non-grantee districts should be allowed to pursue MCs in place of traditional time-based credits (perhaps at a lower “conversion rate” than is implied for the LEAs solely using MCs to fulfill license renewal requirements).

- Offer MCs for demonstrating skills in the use of basic software or hardware, or other administrative skills. While figuring out how to use learning management systems (LMS) such as Google Classroom or Canvas or how to fill out required discipline documentation may be a necessary part of the job, putting these skills on par with MCs for competencies that have a clearer impact on student learning undermines the value of MCs overall. That said, a digital badge may still be awarded for successful completion of performance assessments on the use of such technical tools by the various training providers.

**Final Considerations**

Because the *State Policy Guide* provides model policies, some elements may not make sense within a given state, particularly one that already has strong evidence-based, high-quality systems of educator professional development and advancement. But typically, these high-quality systems exist in rare pockets of excellence, and often do not benefit the students most in need of high-quality instruction. Hence, the objective of offering these policies is not to advocate for “throwing the baby out with the bathwater,” but rather to indicate what a comprehensive approach to high-quality human capital systems might look like if built from the ground up, with micro-credentials incorporated as part of the solution.

The proposals offered here attempt to be realistic about what feels feasible within state and LEA budgets under normal circumstances. However, while finding ways to fund
new initiatives is always a challenge, this is particularly true right now. A more detailed analysis of current state and LEA spending on teacher development and advancement initiatives would be useful to determine the level of funding that states and LEAs may be able to redirect from existing funding streams.

That said, “especially in tough budget times, the challenge for education leaders and policymakers is not just to invest in “what works,” but also to take steps to ensure that what can work does work. [For example,] when potentially effective professional development achieves only limited success or uneven results, scarce dollars are wasted and students who could have benefited do not.”6 We will not realize the potential of educator MCs without taking steps toward a comprehensive review—and in many cases, a complete overhaul—of existing policies and systems, with an eye toward ensuring additional support for those schools serving the students with the most need.

Political challenges also exist. Currently, many entities are making money by offering professional development for educators, including education consultants, institutions of higher education, software companies, some educator associations, etc. Any attempt to disrupt or shift the way the current market works will likely be met by pushback. But having a clearly considered theory of action and inclusive process for taking policy steps, such as the one outlined here, will minimize friction.

Another possible source of difficulty is gaining support from educators themselves. Educators may have negative preconceived notions about the value of micro-credentials or be cynical about the staying power of any new initiative, having watched previous “reforms” come and go. The state should involve principals and teachers from the outset of the MC discussion. States can maximize teacher buy-in by inviting them into the design and implementation process and by offering the incentives listed above. Of particular concern will be teachers who already hold advanced roles or designations or are currently working toward them. States must take measures to ensure that those who currently hold a particular advanced designation, role, or position in a school not be negatively impacted by any changes to advanced designation policies. They must also outline a fair process for those teachers who are already a significant portion of the way on a current path that the state is planning to discontinue in the future.

Moving from the status quo is always difficult. But failing to meet the needs of our educators and, most importantly, the needs of the students they serve is not an option to achieve the society we need, desire, and deserve.

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6 National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, Beyond "Job-Embedded": Ensuring That Good Professional Development Gets Results, (Santa Monica, CA: 2012).
https://www.niet.org/assets/ResearchAndPolicyResources/688a72b19e/beyond_job_embedded_professional_development.pdf
North Carolina Assets to Implement Micro-Credentials—RTI International

A key question driving the interviews and work for the NC Feasibility Study by RTI International was how NC should go about instituting a statewide system of MCs to meet the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials vision. It is important to recognize the first steps, which the Partnership has taken in doing this work. The Partnership is made up of key stakeholders in teacher professional learning policy across a wide range of relevant sectors. Together, Partners drew up a mission, vision, goals, and objectives for this work, shared in the introduction of this summary report and the NC Feasibility Study by RTI International.

digiLEARN commissioned a national scan to understand how MCs are being implemented elsewhere and lessons learned from those implementations. They also commissioned the NC Feasibility Study to understand the appetite for MCs in NC and how implementation will need to look given the NC context. And stakeholder focus groups were commissioned to obtain feedback from key constituents—NC educators—as well as define and clarify what is meant by an effective system of MCs and how they might integrate into a system of teacher professional learning. These first steps are well-aligned with principles of implementation science. The following recommendations for ways to move forward, are also drawn from implementation science as well as change management research, and through interviews and focus groups with NC stakeholders.

1. Start with WHY

Implementation science and the change management literature emphasize that the first step in implementing systemwide change is to have a clear understanding as to why those changes are needed and why specific interventions have been chosen. Best practices in change leadership indicate that for change to “stick,” stakeholders need to be clear and committed to why the change is being made, and what it will look like for them and their daily lives. Interviewees indicated that there must be intentionality around the implementation of MCs in NC. A good example in NC is the work of Wake County and the Center for Teaching Quality to determine whether a system of MCs would meet their teacher Professional Learning needs. It took a year of planning and preparation, guided by a clear understanding of why they were undertaking the work.7 When organizations take on major projects or initiatives, substantial change is often required, i.e., change in processes, job roles, organizational structures, and how staff identify within the organization.

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7 The Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) website highlights their work with Wake County, accessed at: https://www.teachingquality.org/microcredentials-case-study-wcps/
Some tasks involved in preparing organizations for change that could be applied to this work include:

a. **Create a clear understanding of what an effective system of teacher professional learning that incorporates MCs means to NC.** What would this ideal “future” state look like? How and to what extent would this shift in culture impact various groups?

b. **Unpack the “current” state of teacher professional learning and determine the structures needed** to best support stakeholders as they move through the “transition” state. What knowledge, skills, and abilities do they need to feel confident in the new “future” state (i.e., use of specific technologies, a clear understanding of competency-based teacher professional learning)? How does leadership communicate a valuing of and commitment to this approach to teacher professional learning?

c. **Understand the “why” behind the shift to a more competency-based culture of teacher professional learning.** What is the reason for this shift? Why should the organization commit to it? How is this approach aligned with the organization’s goals and objectives? What will it help the organization to accomplish? The *NC Feasibility Study* and New America’s national research both provide information to justify a shift to a teacher professional learning system that incorporates MCs to improve teacher learning and student outcomes. At minimum, the “why” will need to focus on how this approach to professional learning will positively impact student learning and success.

2. **Ensure a clear implementation plan so the implementers know their roles and what effective implementation looks like.**

   A good portion of the interviewees for the *NC Feasibility Study* have experience and expertise in implementing large-scale education initiatives, i.e., across districts and/or the state. There was strong agreement that the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials vision will need a clearly stated and documented strategic plan and set of expectations, so when leadership and priorities change, the work can continue. To avoid a “fire…ready…aim” approach, a clear implementation plan is needed. As one interviewee noted, *priorities at the state level are incredibly diffuse, which prevents things from getting done*. The implementation plan will have to clarify priorities, so they are not diffuse. This work for MCs will need clearly stated outputs and outcomes, and a clear definition of what is meant by competency-based professional learning. Interviews and the national research indicate the lack of a common understanding of MCs, how they support effective teacher learning, and what effective implementation looks like. This step is critical to help avoid widespread confusion as to what the initiative should look like,
which results in disparate actions and/or inaction, and dilutes the impact of promising interventions.

The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) at UNC Chapel Hill has developed the *Hexagon Tool* to assist organizations in understanding how a new or existing program or practice fits into an implementing site’s existing work and context.\(^8\) The Hexagon Tool is based in implementation science and can be used at any stage of implementation to assess fit and feasibility of interventions. For the NC Partnership for Micro-Credential purposes, the tool could support districts in integrating MCs into their teacher professional learning in an intentional, strategic way that improves the likelihood of success. A partnership with NINR to ensure effective use of the tool could also enhance the implementation of MCs across the state.\(^9\)

3. **Tie the MC initiative to existing priorities to help ensure commitment.**

The state has identified and funded several priorities for teacher professional learning: The New Teacher Support Program, Advanced Teaching Roles Program, and the Digital Learning Initiative. As several interviewees suggested, aligning and piloting the implementation of MCs with one or more of these initiatives will likely give the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials’ vision and goals a better chance of success. Implementation science also indicates that aligning new initiatives with existing priorities is a critical strategy for success.

A potentially useful place to start in NC may be aligning MCs to advanced teaching roles. There are several immediate advantages: (1) MCs are typically offered digitally and could help extend the Advanced Teaching Roles Pilot Program across the state, creating a greater return on investment; (2) MCs could target competencies for mentoring and coaching peers, which would help to develop and grow more teachers in NC, again, giving a greater return on investment; (3) experienced teachers are likely to have a better chance at successfully earning the needed MCs; (4) during the COVID pandemic, it is especially important for these advanced teachers to extend their skills and support to their colleagues and students; and (5) MCs would signal who to select for advanced roles based on skills rather than arbitrary criteria like time or “who knows whom.” Other interviewees believed the state should start with Digital

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\(^9\) The Hexagon Tool includes a helpful stakeholder engagement guide, which can be accessed at: [https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/sites/nirn.fpg.unc.edu/files/imce/documents/Stakeholder%20Engagement%20Guide_10.12.18_0.pdf](https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/sites/nirn.fpg.unc.edu/files/imce/documents/Stakeholder%20Engagement%20Guide_10.12.18_0.pdf)
Teaching and Learning MCs. The MCs could be aligned to competencies specified in those standards. Moreover, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, educators desperately need competencies associated with effective virtual teaching and learning. MCs could provide an efficient way for teachers to acquire those competencies through online professional learning targeting the exact sets of skills they need. Multiple interviewees indicated that when the pandemic subsides, there will likely be a permanent change to public education that involves some form of distance teaching and learning. Those sets of competencies will remain useful to NC teachers.

There is some evidence that piloting MCs with new teachers may not be a wise strategy. According to the national research by New America, states that have piloted MCs with new teachers struggled to have a positive impact, largely because effective supports were not in place to effectively support professional learning using MCs. Another lesson learned was that new teachers perceived MCs to be overwhelming. It may be that, in time, NC could focus on the use of MCs with beginning teachers, as more advanced teachers earn MCs to support them. Existing developmental pathways created by the state for beginning teachers could be leveraged to define a strong suite of required competencies aligned to MCs.

Another NC area of work to consider for aligning a statewide system of MCs is the focus on high quality credentials for students. MyFutureNC, a privately funded statewide nonprofit focused on educational attainment in the state, is helping lead the charge in NC on the attainment of credentials for employment. MyFutureNC has set the goal for 2 million North Carolinians to earn a high-quality credential or postsecondary degree by 2030. The goal is to eliminate the skills gap between what employers need and the education and training available in the state. The organization reports doing systematic and strategic work on credentialing, and there may be synergies between the work on MCs for teachers and credentials for students. For example, MyFutureNC is developing a strategic system for identifying the types of competencies and aligned credentials needed for students to obtain a wide range of jobs. It has also developed a credentials eco-system, identifying key players across the state. Both efforts may inform and benefit the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials’ work.

4. **Align the MC work with the State Board of Education’s 8-Year Action Plan**

In Section III of the *NC Feasibility Study*, the State Board of Education’s action plan is summarized for FY21 and the next eight years. Because this is a mandated action plan and the SBE has dedicated funds to this work (though the
amount depends on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the state budget), demonstrating how MCs can enhance and support the SBE strategic plan can help to ensure the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials’ vision is implemented. Suggestions for ways to align MCs to the action plan are shared in Section III of the full NC Feasibility Study.

5. ** Highlight ways in which a system of effective MCs could help to support teachers and students during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has created upheaval in public schools across the United States, and NC is no exception. Schools were forced to offer distance learning to students as young as pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten. Virtual teaching and learning put a tremendous strain on educators and learners. For teachers, a significant challenge has been to adapt their in-person classroom skills to an online teaching and learning environment. Across the nation, it has been made abundantly clear that most teachers do not have the preparation and skills for delivering effective online teaching. Earning MCs in digital teaching and learning competencies could help to develop a significant number of teachers into effective online educators. Those effective educators could extend their impact on students across the state, as teaching and learning are mandated to be virtual. Earning MCs that demonstrate competencies of effective digital teaching can help administrators to identify expertise among staff to support colleagues and students. It may be worthwhile to combine this work on MCs with the educator professional learning offered by NC Virtual Public Schools to address immediate virtual teaching and learning needs.

6. **Pilot test and externally evaluate MCs**

The experiences of many of the interviewees in this feasibility study indicate that rolling out a new system of teacher professional is best accomplished through a pilot study. To give initiatives and/or programs the highest chance of success, starting small allows for continuous monitoring and evaluation of implementation as well as shorter term outcomes. This recommendation is commensurate with the national research conducted by New America. Conducting a small pilot within a district or set of districts that are intentionally chosen for the work allows for the oversight needed to help ensure implementation is carried out as intended, and to identify needed implementation supports as well as challenges and barriers.

Intensive monitoring will help implementers to make and document adjustments as needed and contribute to a better understanding of how to implement this system of teacher Professional Learning effectively. Building in a continuous improvement cycle through planning, implementing, assessing, reviewing, and
problem-solving will help to develop a professional learning system that has the highest chance of success and portability to other districts and contexts. Thomas Guskey proposes a useful evaluation framework for professional development that involves documenting five levels of outcomes that address the following questions:\textsuperscript{10}

1. Did teachers like the professional development?
2. Did teachers learn what they were intended to learn?
3. Do the contexts in which they work (i.e., the classroom, school, district) allow and support them in using what they’ve learned?
4. Are teachers still using what they learned (longer-term, after the professional development is completed)?
5. Does the professional development have an impact on student outcomes?

Most evaluations of teacher professional development and learning stop at the first two levels. However, it is the last three levels that dictate the value of teacher professional learning. If it fails to make a permanent change in teaching practice and impact student outcomes, something has failed—either through poor implementation or an ineffective intervention or both. The strength of MCs as an approach to teacher professional learning is that they require the assessment of competencies. Done well, they go beyond self-reported improvements and provide actual evidence of changes in specific skills and practice. For pilot tests and program evaluation, the MCs themselves will serve as evidence of the value of the teacher professional learning. Perhaps most importantly, they are directly measured and with the appropriate evaluation design can then be linked to relevant student outcomes. It is important to acknowledge that measuring impact on student outcomes is difficult because it can take time for the acquired skills to have the expected impact. However, evaluation designs can incorporate shorter-term outcomes that are known to influence the longer-term, hoped for impacts on student learning. For example, the goal may be ultimately to improve students’ End of Grade (EOG) math exam scores but in the short-term, evidence of attaining specific math skills can be an indicator of improved student learning that is a necessary, although not sufficient, condition for improving the EOG score. If students do not show improvements in those intermediate skills, it is unlikely they will improve in the longer-term outcomes.

Another recommendation coming from several interviewees was to have an external evaluator for the pilot implementation and scaling up of the work, should it be successful. An external evaluator creates accountability in ways that internal evaluators generally do not. Hiring an outside evaluator with expertise in teacher PL and teaching and learning will give the evaluation credibility among stakeholders and should provide insights into program strengths and challenges.
Other Key NC Findings

Additional findings from interviews with individuals representing various sectors of NC’s public education system; reviewed documents and websites; and integrated findings from NC focus groups and the national scan conducted by New America are summarized below:

- **The NC public school system serves a diverse set of communities, a high proportion of which are low-wealth and/or rural.** As of 2019, NC had the ninth highest proportion of low-wealth students in the U.S. Schools serving low-wealth communities have fewer fully licensed teachers, fewer teachers with advanced degrees, fewer National Board-Certified teachers, more lateral-entry teachers and more early career teachers, all of which have been shown on average to be less effective in improving student achievement. Educational inequities are the focus of the ongoing Leandro legal case, which is central to the state’s education policymaking. With a court mandate to implement wide-scale infrastructure for teacher professional learning, the State Board of Education has outlined an eight-year action plan, which includes improvements for NC’s teacher professional learning system.

- **Interviews and focus groups indicate an appetite for MCs for teacher professional learning.** All agreed that teacher professional learning focused on acquired competencies instead of “seat time” aligns with how humans learn and provides better evidence for decision-making about teacher advancement and pay. Other cited benefits of MCs include that they offer personalized, flexible learning and learning that is better aligned with teachers’ needs and schedules. MCs could also highlight pathways for ongoing learning via stacks, which sequence skills from more novice to advanced.

- **Data also revealed reservations about integrating MCs into teacher professional learning.** Some of those concerns reflected a misunderstanding of MCs, equating them with digital badges that were seen as gimmicky and having little connection to student learning. Others were concerned about the lack of professional learning structures needed for effective MC implementation, including sufficient and protected time for teachers to complete them and incentive to do so. A consistent concern was about how the needed competencies would be determined and by whom. To move the needle on teacher effectiveness, MCs would need to focus on competencies that impact student learning.
• **NC has multiple efforts focused on the use of MCs for teacher professional learning from which the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials could learn.** These include work with public and private universities and nonprofits as well as the Department of Public Instruction. The state has offered Digital Learning Initiative grants since 2017-18 to develop personalized teacher professional learning with an emphasis on MCs. As of Round 2 (2018-19), the state had awarded 23 projects focused on MCs across all right regions to 20 districts. MCs are conceived of and used in different ways, underscoring the need for standardization and possibly a typology of MCs to define structures and implementation. Lack of quality standards for MCs reduces their portability and credibility. Several districts are partnering with DPI to streamline work on MCs to offer to districts statewide, which could serve as a useful resource for enabling the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials’ vision.

• **Findings from this study highlight several critical practice, policy, and funding shifts for NC to help ensure effective implementation of MCs.** The state needs a comprehensive, strategic, and equitable system of professional learning that guides and supports personalized district implementation. There are existing helpful frameworks that could be used to guide the development of such a system (i.e., Crow & Pipkin, 2017). A network of educators to support teacher professional learning and MC implementation across the state is a critical need. Another critical need is a shift from a time-based to a competency-based system of learning for teachers. As long as CEUs are the currency for teachers, it will be difficult to make this shift. Creating mechanisms and structures for recognizing MCs beyond CEUs, such as through stipends and career advancement, could help. MC pilots in NC districts could help to inform how to structure incentives for earning MCs. Additionally, the state will need structures for overseeing the quality of MCs and an approving agency with credibility among educators and deep knowledge of their work. This will support the portability and value of MCs. In NC, the largest source of funding for public education is the state. It is important to explore other sources to sustain this form of teacher professional learning beyond shifts in priorities and leadership that result from a state funded model.
Considerations for Moving Forward

- **From compliance to growth.** According to the national research by New America, integrating micro-credentials into educator professional development can be instrumental in moving the system from one that is compliance driven to one that fosters professional growth.

- **Agreement on standards.** For MCs to reach their full potential, education leaders must agree on the standards for high-quality MCs for consistency of implementation. States, not Local Education Agencies (LEAs), should determine quality and standards so MCs have a recognized value and are portable across the state and, ultimately, the nation.

- **Expanding opportunities.** As noted in both the New America research and the *NC Feasibility Study* by RTI, MCs are not a replacement for other high quality professional development and learning options but instead an expansion of opportunities for professional growth and career advancement.

- **A deliberate process.** However, states need to be deliberate and provide a process for MC quality to ensure portability; time for teachers to collaborate, develop, and demonstrate skills; human capital support with mentors and coaches; sufficient financial support; and equity so all districts can participate.

North Carolina is positioned to lead an MC effort based on the assets identified in the RTI feasibility study:

1. **Teacher interest, which is heightened by COVID-19.** Through the RTI-led focus groups and interviews, teachers expressed interest in MCs, especially with the continuing changes brought on by COVID. Teachers across the state and nation have faced significant challenges adapting their in-person classroom skills to an online teaching and learning environment. Earning MCs in digital teaching and learning competencies could help develop a significant number of teachers into effective online educators who could be easily identified and extend their impact on students as teaching and learning continue in hybrid models, including in person and virtual teaching needs beyond COVID. And this example could serve as a model for other state priority areas such as reading and computer science.

2. **Desire for focus on competency instead of seat time.** All stakeholder interviewees agreed that teacher professional learning focused on acquired competencies instead of “seat time” aligns with how adults learn and provides better evidence for decision-making about teacher advancement.

3. **MCs’ potential to offer personalized, flexible learning.** Other interviewees cited benefits included personalized, flexible learning that better aligns with
teachers’ needs and schedules. MCs could also highlight pathways for ongoing learning via MC stacks, which sequence skills from more novice to advanced and builds on NC’s Advanced Teaching Roles work and additional initiatives across the state.

4. **Opportunity to start “small” and focus on experienced teachers.** In the focus groups and research, it was suggested that MCs should first target experienced teachers, as new teachers are already overwhelmed with induction requirements and learning how to teach. Additionally, both New America and RTI agree that a statewide MC initiative should start “small” with a few priority areas that are aligned with state goals to give the highest chance of success. Starting small allows for continuous monitoring and evaluation as well as shorter term outcomes leading to critical practice, policy, and funding shifts.
**Recommendations**

The Partnership—after review and discussion of the research and information provided by digiLEARN, New America, and RTI—makes the following preliminary recommendations to begin implementation of MCs in NC.

1. The North Carolina State Board of Education (SBE) should authorize the development of a state led Micro-Credentials Initiative as recommended by digiLEARN and the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials in this status report to the SBE. The purpose of the Micro-Credentials Initiative will be to develop a state-recognized system of competency-based micro-credentials that promotes and is integrated with a high-quality system of teacher professional learning. As part of this professional learning system, competency-based micro-credentials should encourage and support the expansion of teachers’ skills and knowledge to improve the achievement and outcomes of all students.

   **Rationale:** This is a major system change in how NC provides professional development or learning to teachers and will require a well-planned initiative implemented over time. As noted in the Leandro report, the “frequency, approach, and overall quality” of professional development opportunities for all teachers vary across schools, and state-level efforts are “inadequate and inequitable.” Many teachers reported professional learning or development offerings at the local and state level do not reflect the research-defined qualities of effective professional development (Darling-Hammond, et.al.,2017).

   Further, interest in becoming and remaining a teacher continues to decline, and Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) increasingly face difficulties in finding qualified teachers. MCs continue to emerge as a high-potential solution to developing, recognizing, and retaining strong teachers by incorporating effective MCs into educator policies and practices for ongoing professional development, license renewal, and advancement. An NC Micro-Credential Initiative will support the strategy for a system of teacher development approved in June 2020 by the SBE’s action plan to address the consent order for Leandro compliance. It will also be a strategy to support the SBE’s NC Pathways to Excellence for Teaching Professionals, which recommends reimagining teacher licensure to recruit and retain high-quality teachers due to an impending shortage.

   **Budget:** TBD by Strategic Roadmap
   **Timeline:** March 2021

2. The State Board of Education should endorse this NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials status report, New America’s *National Review of Early Best Practices*, the companion *Harnessing Micro-credentials for Teacher Growth: A Model State Policy Guide* and RTI’s *NC Feasibility Study* as core resources to
develop a strategic roadmap for the Micro-Credentials Initiative. Further, digiLEARN and the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials should continue to advise and assist in the development the Micro-Credentials Initiative as outlined in the Partners' work plan.

_Rationale:_ The vision, mission, and objectives were developed in collaboration with the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials to guide and develop a work plan. The national research and _NC Feasibility Study_ were commissioned expressly to inform the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials about research and data for MCs as another key tool for a system of professional learning, license renewal, and advancement. The national report provides an overview of MCs in other states and offers specific proposals about the use of MCs in alignment with the _NC Feasibility Study_. The feasibility report identifies the assets readily available in NC to support implementing MCs and includes input from teachers, principals, superintendents, other educators, and policy leaders. Utilizing these documents and the expertise of digiLEARN and the NC Partnership will expedite the development of the strategic roadmap.

_Budget:_ Complete and funded with foundation support

_Timeline:_ March 2021

3. The North Carolina State Board of Education should authorize the development of a strategic roadmap to implement the state led Micro-Credentials Initiative no later than October 2021. The roadmap should establish priorities for which MCs are developed, how they are approved, how teacher submissions are assessed, how teachers are supported and how the value (including role or stipend/compensation) of the MC is determined. In addition to clear and specific actions, timelines, and budget, the map should include a strong research and evaluation plan.

_Rationale:_ A new state initiative, especially one as complex as teacher professional learning, requires a strategic roadmap. It is a time-based plan that defines where the state is with the MCs, where the state wants to go and how the state will get to full implementation. A strategic roadmap is a common approach to planning that organizes and presents important information related to the initiative at full implementation. A roadmap is especially effective for management of the development and execution of a statewide initiative. The work done thus far by digiLEARN, New America, RTI, and the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials provides the foundation to begin development of the strategic roadmap. New initiatives need to be developed and often require dedicated staff and specific resources that are not currently part of an organization’s budget. As
a new initiative, the SBE should seek a new appropriation in the biennial budget for 2021-23 to begin implementation of the Micro-Credentials Initiative.

**Budget:**  
Y1 350K  
Y2 800K  
Y3 TBD by Strategic Roadmap

4. The Strategic Roadmap should be designed to implement state led MCs incrementally and include the following priorities as identified by the NC Partnership for Micro-Credentials to expedite the implementation of state level MCs.

   a. Development of state-led supported MCs that target NC State Board of Education priorities including:
      
      i. a set of early literacy MCs that supports the SBE Framework for Action on Early Reading and integrates with a systemic plan for training teachers in the science of reading.
      
      ii. a set of reading MCs for middle and high school teachers that integrates reading into content areas and is aligned with the goals of the early literacy Framework.
      
      iii. a set of MCs for the demonstration of skills necessary for in person and virtual teaching needs now and beyond COVID-19 as aligned with the NC Digital Learning Plan.
      
      iv. a set of state-designed and approved descriptions of advanced teaching roles using the data from the current Advanced Teaching Role Grantees as a starting point. The goal would be for creating a teacher leadership pathway for career advancement with increased compensation for teachers to remain in the classroom.
      
      v. MCs for the demonstration of skills necessary for teachers to:
         
         c. implement the K12 Computer Science Standards approved by the SBE and to
         
         d. seek an advanced degree in Computer Science through stackable MCs.
      
   b. An initial plan to target teachers with continuing professional license and a plan to expand to all teachers once the MCs Initiative is fully executed.
   
   c. Sufficient and equitable funding to:
      
      • build the system of MCs including governing MCs and assessment of MCs and
      
      • support teachers in earning MCs as well as recognition and compensation for achieving MCs.
   
   d. A governance model that provides equitable and sufficient support to all LEAs to implement MCs.
   
   e. Standards for developing MCs as well as quality control for existing MCs developed by other agencies or organizations.
**Rationale:** diLEARN and the Partnership offer these priorities to ensure the state’s strategic roadmap for MCs can be developed coherently and implemented successfully. By focusing on specific key state-level priorities for implementation of MCs, LEAs will continue to have the flexibility to utilize MCs and other professional development for specific district and school priorities. With impending budget restrictions due to COVID-19, targeting specific state areas or priorities increase the opportunity for success. Another key factor is making sure there is sufficient financial and human support for teachers as they pursue MCs on their own. It is not the intent to use MCs to replace effective, quality professional development already taking place, but as another tool to increase effective professional learning options for teachers that are personalized to their individual needs and time.

**Budget:** TBD by Strategic Roadmap

**Timeline:** October 2021

5. The State Board of Education should review policies as they relate to license renewal and professional learning to incorporate recognition of competency-based MCs.

**Rationale:** Implementation of competency-based MCs where teachers demonstrate skill acquisition as a part of NC’s professional learning system is counter to continuing education unit (CEUs). Presently, license renewal is based on local professional development and the acquisition of CEUs (10 hours of participation in an accredited program or approved activities), which stakeholders say is perfunctory or compliance driven. As noted in the *NC Feasibility Study*, the focus groups unanimously agreed that a move is needed to provide more personalized professional development that has impact on teachers’ practice and is aligned with district and state priorities.

Currently, multiple NC districts are granting CEUs for MCs by using an inconsistent exchange rate that does not address the issue of seat time versus skill acquisition or competency. One primary objective of incorporating MCs into human capital systems such as recommended in the SBE’s *NC Pathways to Excellence for Teaching Professionals*, is to move away from a compliance-oriented, time-based approach and move toward a focus on what teachers know and can do. Any attempt to convert MCs to CEUs is arbitrary, because the length of time it takes educators to complete an MC varies by teacher and the rigor of the MC depends on a variety of factors, including their initial level of teacher expertise. This is a critical point the SBE should consider as the SBE has the authority to add approval of specific MCs for license renewal. For instance, if the
SBE has identified reading as a priority, then it can identify completion of specific reading MCs towards licensure renewal.

*Budget:* TBD by Strategic Roadmap  
*Timeline:* October 2021

6. The State Board of Education should further develop the Advanced Teaching Roles Program as a strategy to provide career advancement for teacher leaders so they may have increased compensation while remaining in the classroom.

*Rationale:* Advanced Teaching Roles in NC has shown promise as a strategy to develop teacher leaders who remain in the classroom and provide support to other teachers or extend their reach to more students. The most recent evaluation results from the Friday Institute at North Carolina State University show improved teacher performance and a trend toward improving student growth. This makes it a good starting place for implementing MCs to develop teacher leaders across the state and begin compensating teachers who attain advanced teaching roles and remain in the classroom.

At the present time, its potential is limited to a few districts a year. Increasing the number of participating LEAs will provide the needed research to identify characteristics of advanced teaching roles that lead to improved student learning outcomes. Another advantage to expanding the program is to address equity issues in that large and wealthier districts have more potential for such a program while the smaller and higher needs schools and districts do not have the resources necessary to develop such a program.

Lessons can also be learned from National Board of Professional Teaching Standards. While larger in scope of the skills it covers, the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards is a competency-based approach for which NC has 23,090 teachers who have met the certification standards and receive additional compensation. Because ATRs is an existing program, planning can begin to expand the program immediately and development teacher leader MCs can be incorporated into the strategic roadmap.

*Budget:* TBD  
*Timeline:* May 2021
Appendix A: Glossary

Certification*. Certification is usually issued by a non-governmental agency, entity, or organization. It is usually a voluntary process, issued by a private or non-governmental organization (by the government in specific cases), and issued to give the public information about the persons it is issued to after they have completed the certification process successfully.

Competency Based Professional Learning. Learning activities that result in the participants demonstrating evidence of achievement of specified skills.

Continuing Education Unit (CEU). Credit for hours spent participating in professional learning at a ratio of 1 CEU per 10 hours of learning often referred to as seat time.

Credentials*. Credentials is a broad term that can refer to a practitioner’s license, certification, or education. In the United States, government agencies grant and monitor licenses; professional organizations certify practitioners. Certification can be either a prerequisite for licensure or, in some cases, an alternative. To get certified or licensed, practitioners must meet specific education, training, or practice standards.

Earner. The educator or professional submitting evidence for the micro-credential.

Effective Professional Development. Structured professional learning that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes. i.e., content focused, incorporates active learning, supports collaboration, uses models of effective practice, provides coaching, offers feedback and reflection, and adequate time to learn, practice, implement, and changes teacher practice.

Issuer. The group or organization that has created the micro-credential and validates the educator’s competence in the defined skill or set of skills.

Knowledge. The theoretical or practical understanding of a subject. Knowledge is acquired through learning or an experience. It increases with experience.

Licensure*. State/government defines a scope of practice, grants permission for the practice of a profession and to use a title. A license is a requirement for teaching in the public-school system, although the specific requirements for teacher certification vary on a state-by-state basis. The rules for licensure in North Carolina are set by the NC State Board of Education.

Micro-credentials. A verification of the possession of a discrete skill or competency that a teacher has demonstrated through the submission of evidence assessed via a validated rubric per New America.

NC Professional Learning Standards. NC State Board of Education adopted the Learning Forward Standards for Professional Learning as the guide for designing and
deploying professional learning across the state. The standards outline the characteristics of effective professional learning based on evidence-based practice, describes a set of expectations for effective professional learning to ensure equity and excellence in educator learning.

NC Teacher Standards. The North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards are the basis for teacher preparation, teacher evaluation, and professional development adopted by the NC State Board of Education.

NC Digital Learning Standards. State Board of Education developed and approved digital teaching and learning competencies in 2016 that demonstrate skills that teachers and leaders should integrate into their practice to create digital learning environments.

Portability. The credential has value locally, nationally and perhaps internationally in labor markets, education systems, and/or other contexts.

Recognizer. The person, organization or board that recognizes and accepts the micro-credential, stack, or credential as a representation of the educator's skill or competence.

Reviewer. An expert, oftentimes an educator that has previously demonstrated mastery of skill(s) required for the micro-credential, evaluates evidence to determine if the competency has been demonstrated.

Skills. Skills are the proficiencies you develop through training or experience. Skills are acquired through practiced or learned behavior. They can be developed through practice.

Stack. One organized set of credentials that an educator earns by demonstrating mastery of the described skills or competencies. Also referred to as a cluster, collection, assemblage, or amassment.

Stackable. The idea that micro-credentials build upon or complement each other to represent a carefully assembled set of recognized professional skills.

*Credentials is a broad term that can refer to a practitioner’s license, certification, or education. Licensure and Certification are often used interchangeably. In the absence of a clearly defined definition of both in NC policy, these 2 definitions are offered to clarify the difference between two during the Partners work.*
Appendix B: Work Plan
The work plan was developed based on feedback from the Partnership and other stakeholders. The desired outcomes for the workplan are to have:

- model micro-credential standards,
- criteria for credentialing agencies, and
- model policy for North Carolina and other states.

1. **Form a Task Force of those who will do the work as approved by the partners.**

   The Task Force will meet regularly to plan, align, and implement the work. The Task Force will:

   - Develop a schedule/timeline to accomplish the work as approved the partners.
   - Meet regularly to inform each other of their work and how they will collaborate and share learning as they implement each area of responsibility.
   - Seek input from the partners as they carry out the workplan as approved.
   - Update the partners on the work and learning so that partners are informed and have the information necessary to develop recommendations.
   - Develop a communications plan to inform the stakeholders groups and partners about the work.

2. **Develop a report around a comprehensive national review of the micro-credentials work including impact.**

   The report and/or policy briefs should reflect the interests of the stakeholder groups and include:

   - State, school district and school level work around micro-credentials.
   - Organizations implementing micro-credentials (for profit and nonprofit providers) and comparisons of the various models and approaches to micro-credentials.
   - Policies developed or policy considerations for micro-credentials including state and local policies and national policy organizations, i.e., Design, Assessment, and Implementation Principles for Educator Micro-credentials released by the Council of Chief State School Officers.
   - Lessons learned thus far about micro-credentials including but not limited to standards, quality control, third party assessing, access, and equity.

3. **Complete a North Carolina feasibility study about micro-credentials.**

   The feasibility study should include but is not limited to:
• State assets such as current investments and infrastructure used for credentialing.
• State policies, rules, and regulations and policies for credentialing and professional learning including those related in the Leandro report.
• State pilots and other programs for micro and other credentialing including those offered through higher education, i.e., Opportunity Culture, or Advanced Teaching Roles.
• Local school districts and their work in micro-credentialing including national and state organization support.
• Other state, regional or advocacy groups working on credentialing, i.e., NCICU Digital Learning Initiative, Human Capital Roundtable.
• Consider the business model, incentives, a third-party organization for quality control, i.e., National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and the market (ROI) for micro-credentials.
• Lessons learned thus far about micro-credentials

4. Understanding of licensure and credentialing in North Carolina.

The purposes include:

• Exposing the Partnership to the system in place in NC for licensure, credentialing, and license renewal
• State level work being done around micro-credentials
• Local district micro-credential initiatives
• Identification about what is working and what would improve the current system in place

5. Lead a series of three to five stakeholder meetings across the state in connection with partner meetings.

This will be in conjunction with developing the statewide survey should we proceed with the survey. Questions will be developed by RTI in collaboration with the Task Force and the Partners.

The purposes of the stakeholder’s meetings include:

• Learning about professional learning through discussions with teachers, principals, superintendents, local boards of education and higher education representatives.
• Communicating with the participants to begin developing interest and awareness about the work around micro-credentials.
6. Develop and administer a statewide online survey to stakeholders to get feedback about micro-credentials, licensure, and professional development. Questions will be developed by RTI using the results of the focus groups and in collaboration with the Task Force and the Partners. The purposes of the survey include:

   - Getting feedback about professional learning from teachers, principals, superintendents, local boards of education and higher education
   - Communicating with stakeholders and developing awareness about the work around micro-credentials.
   - Generating data that will help inform the NC Micro-credentials

7. Develop a preliminary report and presentation on what the partners are learning to the NC State Board of Education, Professional Educator Preparation and Standards Commission (PEPSC), which advises the SBE on licensure; the Joint Education Oversight Committee of the NC General Assembly; and the State Board of Education. The purpose of the report is to introduce and an update on the work being done about micro-credentials.

8. Review of the data and information gathered and develop preliminary recommendations.

9. Develop a full report of all information and data gathered to present and review with the full partnership group.

The initial goal is to have recommendations for the desired outcomes:

   a. model micro-credential standards,
   b. criteria for credentialing agencies, and
   c. model policy for North Carolina and other states.

Based on a review of the data and information, the partnership group will determine next steps and additional work needs.

10. A final review of the recommendations and approval by the partnership.

11. Presentations to NC State Board of Education, Professional Educator Preparation and Standards Commission (PEPSC), which advises the SBE on licensure; the Joint Education Oversight Committee of the NC General Assembly; and the State Board of Education.

12. Develop Phase 2 implementing the recommendations.