



# RESEARCH BRIEF

## Leadership for Equity Micro-Credential: Lessons Learned on Design and Implementation

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As part of its Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the Center for the Study of Education Policy in partnership with LEAD Hubs, created a series of micro-credentials focused on leadership for equity. American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) was contracted to conduct a series of interviews with principals about their experience with micro-credentials to inform the ongoing micro-credential work.

This research brief will discuss the existing research on micro-credentials, the Leadership for Equity micro-credential content, the analytical approach that informed this research, and findings from the interviews. It concludes describing some challenges participants experienced and considerations for micro-credential adopters and providers.

## Micro-Credential Background

States and districts have recently begun developing and implementing micro-credentials as a means of providing high-quality and flexible professional learning experiences at scale. Micro-credentials are quick competency-based certifications that illustrate mastery of a skill. The micro-credential design breaks complex professional practices into “subtasks” or

“micro-tasks,” which are written in observable and measurable terms along with a list of competencies for learners. For example, the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders (GTL Center) micro-credential brief (GTL Center, 2020) describes an example elementary micro-credential of morning meeting for social and emotional learning (SEL). Learners then self-assess and submit evidence for evaluation of competency. In areas where competency is not evident, learners may review learning modules, readings, videos, or other resources to build competency and apply learning to practice. To meet the requirements of the micro-credential, the teacher “prepares her evidence from her classroom morning meetings, including a series of three videos, a set of activity plans, a short justification statement detailing [her] understanding of the purpose of the morning meeting and its connection to student SEL, and a morning meeting structure design” (GTL Center, 2020, p. 3).

Micro-credentials differ from other professional development designs in that educators can actively develop and demonstrate competency in complex skills through their work, and educators have a choice in which skills to address. Micro-credentials may also be sequenced or “stacked” to allow learners to organize skill acquisition and see a learning progression toward competency in highly complex practices. For instance, Digital Learning provides a series of six micro-credential stacks on deeper learning concepts (Digital Promise, 2016, p. 13). One of these concepts, “learn how to learn,” includes four micro-credentials: design thinking and doing, self-reliance and autonomy, choosing learning strategies, and crafting driving questions (Digital Promise, 2016, p. 18). By completing all four of these micro-credentials, an educator would demonstrate their competence in the deeper learning concept of learning how to learn. Micro-credential accomplishment may be tied to professional recognition. For example, educators displaying competency in a professional practice by earning a micro-credential might be able to receive graduate credits or professional development units toward recertification.

## Research on Micro-Credentials

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The research on the effectiveness of micro-credentials remains scarce (GTL Center, 2020; Ross, 2016). The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at AIR (2020) noted that “the authors did not find any rigorous impact studies that examined educator or student outcomes” of micro-credentials (p. 10). This finding aligns with Ross’s description from 2016 that there are “no empirical research studies related to the use of micro-credentials in K–12 educator professional learning” (p. 5).

While micro-credentials themselves have little research behind them, there is significant research on educator professional learning that suggests micro-credentials might be a promising approach (Brown, 2019). The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders (2020) summarized the educator professional development research that supports micro-credentials as follows (p. 12):

- **Job-embedded professional learning:** Research has shown that “high-quality PD [professional development] is individualized, relevant and self-directed, and has active learning opportunities to try new strategies in context” (Chung, 2008; National Staff Development Council, 2010; Sato et al., 2008).
- **A cycle of inquiry:** “High-quality PD is problem centered and interactive, helps teachers use data to inform their practice via plan-do-study-act, and have follow-up and continuous feedback” (Bryk et al., 2011; Cushman, 1999; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2017).
- **Rigorous evaluation and assessment:** “High-quality PD includes teachers examining and responding to their own performance data, is based on mastery and demonstration of specific content and practice and has a valid and rigorous review process” (Garet et al., 2001, 2010; LeBreton & Senator, 2008; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).
- **Job-embedded supports and collaboration:** Research has shown that “high-quality PD provides opportunities for collaboration among teachers, is delivered by someone who understands and respects teachers, and has embedded coaching, follow-up and feedback” (Archibald et al., 2011; Harwell et al., 2000; Hill et al., 2010; Putnam & Borko, 2000).

Micro-credentials build on existing understanding of adult learning and education, which suggests that micro-credentials would have a positive impact on educator practice. More direct research on micro-credentials will be necessary to learn what features of micro-credentials are most effective.

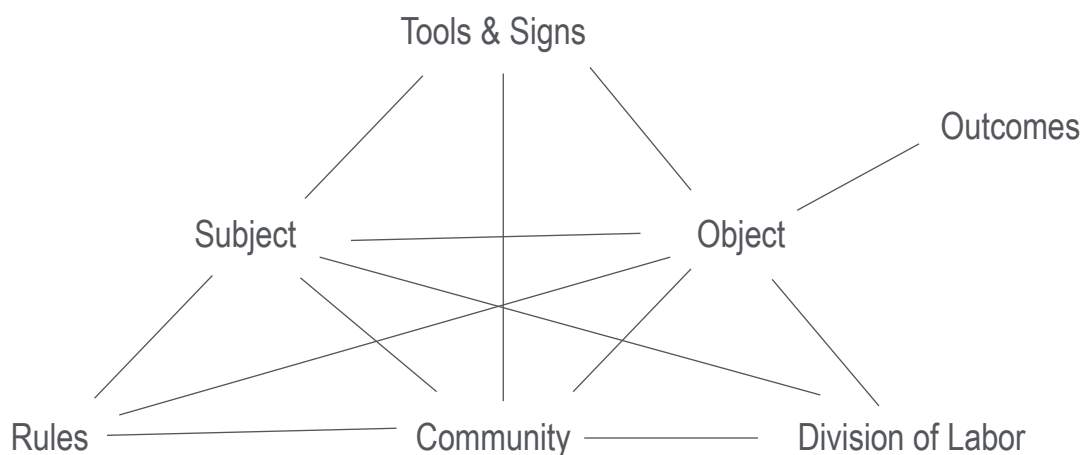
## Leadership for Equity Micro-Credential

The Center for the Study of Education Policy, working in partnership with LEAD Hubs, developed the Leadership for Equity micro-credential, a performance-based, self-paced, job-embedded certification requiring competency of leading with an equity leadership lens hosted on an online learning platform. This Leadership for Equity micro-credential focuses on leaders learning about implicit bias, making an equity commitment, and applying it to their school context. To complete the micro-credential, learners must submit assignments that are assessed by subject matter experts or micro-credential assessors. To earn this micro-credential, learners must submit their equity statement along with evidence of their commitment to work in this area of leadership in their school community.

## Analytical Approach for Interviews

AIR used cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) to organize the principal interview protocol and analysis approach. With CHAT, “the actions of an individual are seen as embedded within an activity system including the subject (individual), the object of action, and a community engaged in collective activity” (Beatty & Feldman, 2012, p. 4). This orientation of the individual within a system in the CHAT framework allows for the analysis of the elements of the system as well as the interactions between elements. Exhibit 1 provides a visual representation of the CHAT activity system.

### Exhibit 1. CHAT Activity System



Source: Adapted from Beatty & Feldman, 2012 and Engeström, 1987.

The elements of the CHAT framework are defined below, as well as a description of how they apply to this research in particular.

- **Subject.** The subject is “the person or sub-group whose actions we seek to understand: the point of view for our analysis” (Beatty & Feldman, 2012, p. 4). In this case, the subject is the principal who is undertaking the micro-credential.
- **Division of labor.** The division of labor describes the tasks of the subject. In this brief, it includes any information about the principal’s role.
- **Object.** According to Beatty and Feldman (2012), “the object of the activity system motivates the actions of the subject” (p. 4). The object in this research is the Leadership for Equity micro-credential.
- **Outcome.** The outcome is the result of the activity system. The outcome sought by principals includes what they want to learn by completing the micro-credential and their motivation for undertaking the micro-credential.
- **Rules.** Rules refer to any direct or implied guidelines or parameters for completing the task. Rules would include any incentives that might encourage participation and completion.
- **Tools and signs.** Beatty and Feldman (2012) described that “the subject uses tools, which can be physical, cognitive, or symbolic, to direct actions towards the object and to produce outcomes” (p. 4). For this research, tools refer to the web platform that houses the micro-credential. Signs refers to the micro-credential content on leadership for equity and include any resources.
- **Community.** The community of the framework encompasses the “participants engaged in collective activity with the subject” (Beatty & Feldman, 2012, p. 4). It includes the cohort of other principals engaged in working toward earning this micro-credential.

These elements of the CHAT framework do not exist independently. By discussing these individual elements, we see when they contradict each other. For example, when the rules or guidelines of the micro-credential come into conflict with a principal’s role, or division of labor, the principal may not complete the micro-credential. Tensions between the elements are not necessarily negative; they can lead to development and innovations. After describing the results and analysis of the interviews, based on the CHAT framework, we will discuss some conflicts that the participants experienced between these elements.

## Subject

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The subjects of analysis for this research are the 11 principals who participated in the interviews (August and September 2020). To identify the participating principals, AIR worked with CSEP to identify and contact micro-credential participants who completed the process as well as those who left the micro-credential before officially completing it. Nine interviewees completed the micro-credential and two did not.

## Division of Labor

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The division of labor relates to the principal’s job, role, and length of time as administrator. Exhibit 3 shows the number of years that each interviewee had worked as an administrator at the time of the interview. Most interviewed administrators had 10–14 years of experience as a principal. On average, completers had 11 years of experience. The two interviewed non-completers had an average of 18 years of experience.

Principals who were interviewed worked in a variety of settings. Most interviewees (eight of 11) worked at the elementary level and three worked at the high school level. Principals who started the micro-credential came from a wide variety of public-school districts. Eight unique districts across the state of Illinois were represented.

# Findings

## Outcome

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The outcome in the CHAT framework includes what principals want to learn from the micro-credential and their motivation for attempting it.

### *Motivation*

Principals were enthusiastic about taking on the additional responsibility of completing the micro-credential. All 11 principals discussed their motivation to engage in the micro-credential process. Four principals described how the equity topic aligned with school or district priorities. One principal explained:

As a school district, we've been really focusing on equity and getting specific training about it, and I just felt like it's an opportunity for me to actually do something about it and [not] just listen, to actively engage in a process that's going to help me confront any equity issues or things like that.

Principals discussed an intention to bring information back to their districts or schools. One principal said:

I thought that it would be a really good learning experience because I've been working with my staff on equity and on being culturally responsive teachers, educators. So, I just thought that this would be a nice additional piece of education to bring back to my staff.

Principals described their passion for equity. Finally, one principal mentioned that the topic aligned with that individual's Ph.D. dissertation topic. In describing their passion for equity, one principal said:

I am passionate about equity leadership, and I view it as my role as a principal to—especially as a principal of a public school—to be a leader, a formal leader in our equity work within our district. I recognize that as my responsibility. I recognize that as an important function of administration, to make sure that our school is aligned to our equity mission and vision, and that we are serving all students at our school equally well.

### *Micro-Credential Approach*

Because principals needed to seek out and complete the micro-credential, interviewees were probed to discuss what they found appealing about the approach. Five principals discussed the appeal of the micro-credential approach, noting that it allowed them to deeply focus on the topic of equity. For example, a principal stated:

What was appealing to me was just an independent learning design. It was appealing to me to be able to go deep in a topic, but to be able...to do it somewhat independently and to do it in a context that was personal for me.

Another principal shared:

I guess where I saw the micro-credential was in the middle, which would be a short-term experience that would be intensively focused on a topic I was interested in and would challenge me to engage in a little bit deeper work than just a workshop attendance, where there was really no accountability to put anything into practice. At the same time, it wouldn't be all of the hoops that you have to jump through when you're doing a traditional course for a degree-granting program. I think it was that middle ground that was attractive to me.

## Rules

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Rules in the CHAT framework describe the direct or implied parameters for the system. Beatty and Feldman (2012) explained, “[R]ules both implicit and explicit, including regulations, norms, conventions, and other beliefs, shape the behavior of the community members” (p. 4). The time commitment of the program and incentives that are provided to micro-credential completers fall under the rules of the CHAT framework. Other aspects that relate to rules can be found in other sections in the report. For example, collaboration requirements are discussed in the community section and feedback on content covered can be found in the Tools and Signs section.

### *Time Commitment*

Micro-credentials may require a greater time commitment than traditional administrator professional development options, though a lesser time commitment than a degree-granting program. Principals were asked about the amount of time they spent on earning the micro-credential. On average, the responding principals estimated that completing the micro-credential took 18 hours.

Principals were asked whether the amount of time required to complete the micro-credential was too much, about right, or too little. Of the six respondents who answered this question, one said that it was too much time and five said the time commitment was about right for the topic.

Principals were also asked about any advice they would provide to other principals regarding the time commitment of the micro-credential. Of the nine principals who responded to this question, four encouraged other principals completing the micro-credential to manage their time well to complete it.

### *Incentive to Participate*

Principals had incentives to complete the micro-credential. Completers received professional development hours and a designation of their competency on their professional license. The seven principals who responded to this question reported that in general, incentives did not play much of a role in their choice to complete the micro-credential. Rather, those incentives were a nice bonus to add to their primary motivation about learning about leadership for equity.

## Tools and Signs

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The tools and signs for this micro-credential according to the CHAT framework include the web platform (tool) as well as the micro-credential content (sign).

### *Platform*

Interviewees were asked to provide feedback on the platform. In general, participants found the platform to be simple and intuitive to use, but interviewees shared a few small suggestions.

### *Content*

In general, the interviewed micro-credential participants found the content to be useful and relevant to their roles. When asked about the relevance of resources, most principals who responded mentioned the Tennessee Leaders for Equity Playbook by name as a particularly useful tool. The only interviewee who did not mention that tool was someone who did not complete the micro-credential. This resource was developed by the Tennessee Department of Education in partnership with a statewide team



of school, district, community, higher education, and state leadership. It is designed to support school, district, and community leaders who are committed to providing and sustaining equitable outcomes for all students.

## Community

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The community refers to the group of principals engaged in the micro-credential. Encouraging collaboration among the community of principals completing the micro-credential was not a primary area of focus of the micro-credential.

Principals suggested ideas for collaboration. For example, the micro-credential program could recommend that two or more administrators from the same building complete the micro-credential at the same time so they can collaborate throughout the process. Another noted that more intentional opportunities for collaboration could be useful.

## Contradictions

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The relationship between the components of the CHAT framework is complex. Sometimes the components contradict each other, making micro-credential completion particularly challenging. For example, interviewed principals mentioned the following conflicts:

- Several principals noted that the commitment to being a responsive school leader (micro-credential content, a “sign” in the CHAT model) may contradict with the time commitment required to complete a micro-credential.
- Another contradiction is that between the independent, self-paced design of the micro-credential (an appeal of the micro-credential approach) and the collaborative work that is necessary for a principal to illustrate equitable leadership (content).
- Finally, some principals noted that the content (building an equitable community) at times contradicted the fact that they were not allowed to work with others on the assigned tasks (rules).

It is vital for micro-credential providers and adopters to untangle the possible contradictions for learners to improve the professional development experience.

## Considerations for Micro-Credential Developers, Adopters, and Providers

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Although micro-credentials are a form of self-directed, online, applied professional development, providers and adopters of micro-credentials must remember that micro-credential learners are members of a bigger community. Similar to traditional, in-person learning, learners need clear communication and support to stay engaged and complete a program.

Principals offered the following recommendations for developers, adopters and providers to improve the micro-credential experience. This feedback was shared with CSEP and modifications were made to the LFE MC series to accommodate these suggestions.

- **Prioritize online community.** Learners shared that building a sense of community and collaboration among the online learning community would be helpful for the micro-credential program. The pilot program was self-directed, but when obstacles arise having fellow learners going through the same experience may help learners persevere during the challenging times. Enhancing the community of micro-credential participants, either virtual or in person, is one area of refinement of the Leadership for Equity micro-credential developers could consider.
- **Encourage collaboration.** Find ways to embed a collaborative approach into the micro-credential tasks. For example, in this case, equitable leadership requires a school leader to work in partnership with others in a school building to ensure that equitable resources are sustained. Micro-credential developers should mirror the collaborative approach required for content mastery. Collaboration is one of the Learning Forward standards for professional learning and one of CCSSO's recommendations for micro-credential implementation principles (CCSSO, 2020; Crow, 2017). Micro-credentials should allow leaders to practice collaborative approaches either within their school or district while completing the Leadership for Equity micro-credential.
- **Embed ongoing support.** Along with building a learning community, learners mentioned that having a "micro-credential coach" would be beneficial. A coach provided by the micro-credential provider could help when curriculum expectations are unclear, and learners' frustrations increase. If micro-credential adopters provide an ongoing coach to learners as they go through the program, in alignment with the Learning Forward standards for professional learning, micro-credential completion rates may increase (Crow, 2017).
- **Enhance communication.** Learners urge micro-credential providers to provide channels for open communication between the assessors and the learners, so they understand their growth areas. Learners have questions and need somewhere to turn. This aligns with CCSSO's recommendation that micro-credential assessors provide targeted feedback to learners (CCSSO, 2020).

If micro-credential developers, adopters and providers prioritize the learning community and embedded communication of this nuanced form of professional development for leaders, the field may see more educators complete micro-credentials.



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