



ExcEL Leadership Academy Micro-credential Pathway Adoption in Rhode Island

A Case Study



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Introduction

Educators are the most important in-school factor for student success.¹ To ensure they are most effectively serving students, they must receive high-quality pre-service training and ongoing meaningful professional development once they are in service. But for decades—despite a recognized need to modernize what and how educators are trained—the way we train, support, and grow educators has remained mostly unchanged.

By and large, educators have taken seat-time-based courses and collected credits to eventually earn the necessary credentials and certifications to teach. And once they are classroom educators, they complete their continuing education requirements in much the same way—through seat-time-based courses that translate into time-based units. This process is onerous both financially and logistically, and typically inflexible, requiring synchronous in-person or virtual instruction. Such requirements are particularly challenging for educators in rural communities or those with fewer resources to support synchronous professional development experiences.



Christina Morillo, Pexels

But some educator training and professional development organizations are taking an alternative approach. They are offering educators asynchronous learning opportunities—recognizing and validating learning through demonstrations of competence (also called mastery- or proficiency-based learning), an approach often referred to as “[competency-based education](#).” And rather than earning continuing education units or graduate credits, educators are earning “micro-credentials” in the form of digital badges, which capture both the skill the educator demonstrated and the evidence they used to prove their mastery of that skill.

Today, states have begun to offer meaningful value for micro-credentials educators have earned. According to a report from the New America Foundation, in 2020, 26 states had some formal policy in place around micro-credentials.² Of those, five offer career pathways and advancement, three offer license renewal, 15 have developed their own micro-credentials to support professional learning, and eight allow micro-credentials to be used for specific licensure endorsements.

1 Isaac M. Opper, “Teachers Matter: Understanding Teachers’ Impact on Student Achievement” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4312.html.

2 Melissa Tooley and Joseph Hood, “Harnessing Micro-credentials for Teacher Growth” (New America: 2021), <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/harnessing-micro-credentials-teacher-growth>.

The [ExcEL Leadership Academy](#) has developed a progression of 12 micro-credentials focused on the skills and competencies educators need to serve multilingual learners (MLLs) effectively. With the support of federal National Professional Development Program grants and UCLA’s Center X, ExcEL has worked with cohorts of educators across New England to engage in asynchronous learning modules that support educators to develop these skills and collect evidence of that skill in practice. Trained assessors then score that evidence against a rubric, and if the criteria are met, the educator earns the micro-credential.



In 2022, Rhode Island designated the first set of six ExcEL micro-credentials as an approved program for the state’s multilingual learner endorsement. In 2023, the state designated the full set of 12 micro-credentials as an approved program for the state’s English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) certification, allowing educators who have earned it to teach in an ESOL classroom. This makes Rhode Island one of the few states to allow educators to earn a full certification through a micro-credential pathway.

This case study tells Rhode Island’s story and provides recommendations for other states that hope to offer their educators high-quality competency-based pathways to certification and/or professional growth.

Background

The ExcEL pathways for educators of multilingual learners rely on competency-based micro-credentials to identify the individual skills educators must master and support the submission of evidence of that mastery.

What is a Micro-credential?

According to Digital Promise, one of the first organizations to build a system of micro-credentials for educators, “Micro-credentials are digital certifications that verify an individual’s competence in a specific skill or set of skills.”³ ExcEL Leadership Academy adds, “Micro-credentials are earned by demonstrating competencies in one specific area at a time. They allow teachers to build skills without ever leaving their classrooms, and to prove their capabilities by sharing evidence from their own teaching practices.”⁴ Micro-credentials were born of the desire to provide individuals meaningful ways to gain recognition for their learning as an alternative to seat-time or other traditional methods.

“Micro-credentials were born of the desire to provide individuals meaningful ways to gain recognition for their learning as an alternative to seat-time or other traditional methods.”

3 Digital Promise, Micro-credentials, accessed December 20, 2023, <https://digitalpromise.org/initiative/educator-micro-credentials/>.

4 ExcEL Leadership Academy, Micro-credentials, accessed December 20, 2023, <https://www.excellleadershipacademy.org/pages/micro-credential/>.

Typically, micro-credentials are housed on a platform and issued by an organization with expertise in a specific area of educator competencies. The issuing organization chooses a specific competency it wishes to credential, identifies specific pieces of evidence an educator must submit to demonstrate their competence in that skill, and develops a rubric showing the educator how their evidence will be assessed. Educators can then learn that skill however they choose, collect the specified evidence, and have it assessed by individuals chosen or trained by the issuing organization. Should the educator’s evidence demonstrate competence in the skill, the micro-credential is then awarded in the form of a digital badge the educator can share with peers and administrators. Should an educator’s evidence not demonstrate competence, the assessors provide feedback on which skills have not been demonstrated and how they can improve to demonstrate competence. In some states and districts, micro-credentials can be used to earn continuing education units or graduate credit, access career ladders, collect stipends, or gain new credentials.

Example: Wait Time

One example of a micro-credential is “[Wait Time](#)”, one of the oldest micro-credentials available through Digital Promise’s platform. This micro-credential focuses on the skill where an educator waits 5 to 10 seconds after asking students a question to allow them to think or consider their responses. Research suggests that this is an important tool during classroom instruction. A teacher who has developed this skill collects evidence in the form of a video recording of them demonstrating wait time during a lesson, and a written reflection on how wait time has changed their classroom practice. Trained assessors assess that evidence against a rubric and determine whether the educator has successfully demonstrated competence in Wait Time. The educator is then awarded the Wait Time micro-credential, which they can share on various platforms.



Digital Promise, (c) 2018.

About the ExcEL Leadership Academy’s Micro-credential Pathway

Every day, schools across the country welcome students who are new to U.S. culture and the English language. To most effectively support these multilingual learners, educators must develop skills to meet their needs and set them up for success. The ExcEL Leadership Academy (ExcEL) provides job-embedded, learn-by-doing professional learning opportunities for all educators to support high-quality, equitable education for multilingual learners.

Although research and practical knowledge reinforce the need for educator training to effectively serve multilingual learners, most states, districts, and schools do not require or provide any such training. What’s more, there is a documented shortage of teachers qualified to work with multilingual



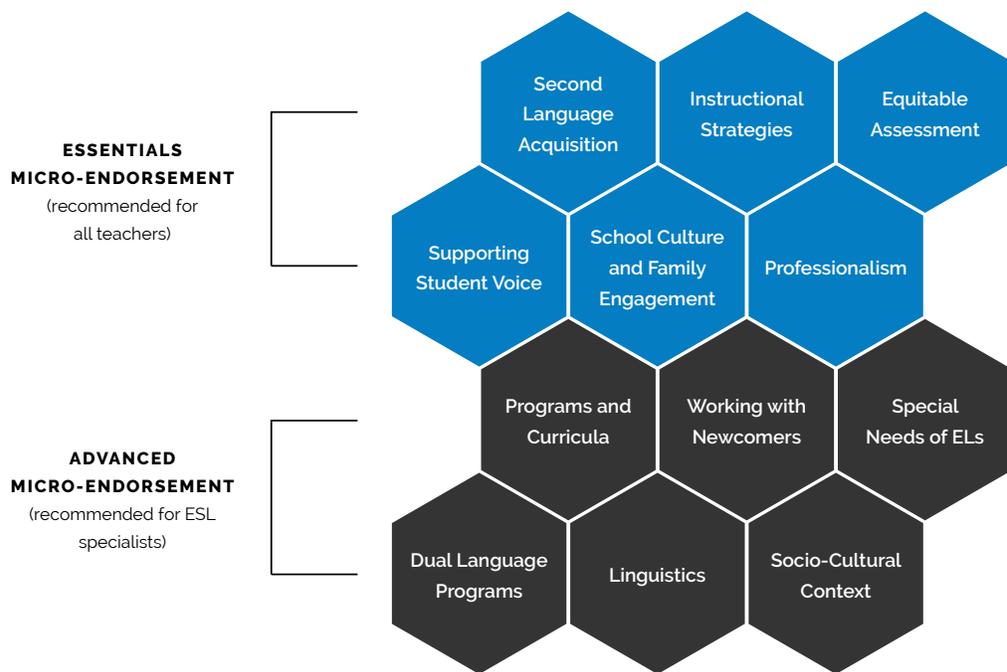
Allison Shelly, EDUImages

learners—in 2022-23, the U.S. Department of Education reported at least 29 states with shortages of teachers in this field.⁵ Many schools are unable to meet multilingual learners’ needs because their teachers are not properly trained and certified to serve them.

ExcEL has developed a program to address the lack of training opportunities and resources for educators serving multilingual learners. The program combines peer learning and support with asynchronous online modules that educators can engage with as they desire, and competency-based micro-credentials, which identify 12 individual competencies associated with supporting MLLs. To earn a micro-credential, educators develop and/or implement skills or strategies and then collect specific pieces of evidence associated with each competency and submit them to ExcEL to be scored against a rubric.

The 12 micro-credentials have been broken down into two sets of six, which ExcEL calls “micro-endorsements.” ExcEL defines them as “groups of micro-credentials representing competencies needed for certification in a given topic.” The micro-endorsements include:

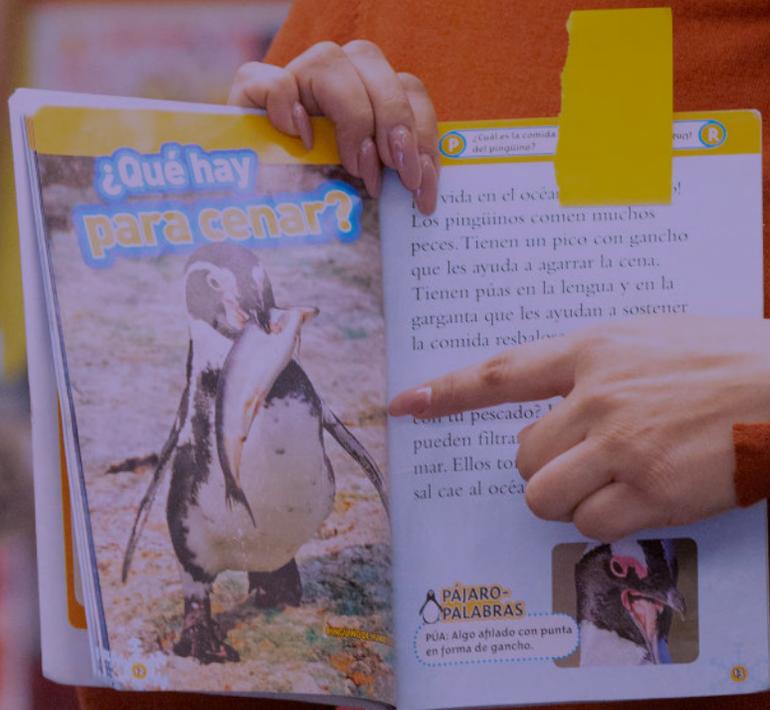
- [Essential Support for Working with Multilingual Learners](#)
- [Advanced Support for Working with Multilingual Learners](#)



ExcEL Leadership Academy, (C) 2023.

The Essential Support endorsement is designed for all educators hoping to provide more equitable learning experiences for all students. This micro-endorsement includes the six micro-credentials that represent the discrete skills educators need to provide a rigorous, engaging, and effective education for multilingual learners. In Rhode Island, educators earn the state [multilingual learner endorsement](#) upon completing this ExcEL micro-endorsement.

⁵ U.S. Department of Education, “Teacher Shortage Areas” (December 20, 2023), <https://tsa.ed.gov/>



¿Qué hay para cenar?



P ¿Cuál es la comida del pingüino? **R**

La vida en el océano es increíble! Los pingüinos comen muchos peces. Tienen un pico con gancho que les ayuda a agarrar la cena. Tienen púas en la lengua y en la garganta que les ayudan a sostener la comida resbalosa.

¿Con tu pescado? Los pingüinos pueden filtrar el agua del mar. Ellos toman el agua y el sal cae al océano.



PAJARO-PALABRAS

PÚA: Algo afilado con punta en forma de gancho.

The Advanced Support endorsement provides in-depth learning for educators who choose to become specialists in delivering and administering programming for multilingual learners. Participants master the skills needed to design and deliver effective programs that meet the diverse needs of multilingual learners in diverse settings. The discrete skills addressed in this micro-endorsement are aligned with national and state teaching standards associated with certification for ESOL, TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), and Bilingual/Dual Language educators. ExcEL has been working with states to identify formal pathways to provide value for the Essential Support and Advanced Support endorsements. Rhode Island is one such state.

Rhode Island’s Process of Adoption

As of late 2023, the first six ExcEL Leadership Academy micro-credentials (Essential Support) were approved in the State of Rhode Island for the educator multilingual learner endorsement, while the full set of 12 micro-credentials (both Essential and Advanced Support) were approved for the ESOL certification. This means that educators who complete all 12 micro-credentials may become the primary teacher in a stand-alone ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom. The ExcEL Leadership Academy micro-credential pathway is a fully competency-based and job-embedded pathway to endorsement or certification that offers educators a flexible, educator-driven approach to building their skills and furthering their careers.

This approval was facilitated by the Rhode Island Department of Education’s (RIDE) well-established, innovative process for approving new programs for educator certification and endorsement, which is overseen by the Office of Educator Excellence and Certification.⁶

MLL Endorsement Approval

Rhode Island offers educators a unique option to highlight their skills in specific areas that is not available in other states. RIDE calls it an endorsement. According to staff at RIDE, the endorsement system was created in 2018 as a result of efforts by the state commissioner of education at the time, Ken Wagner. Commissioner Wagner believed that educators needed a vehicle for differentiating themselves from their peers that was more accessible than a certification. The endorsement would make educators more marketable in high-demand areas such as computer science, social-emotional learning, and supporting multilingual learners. However, endorsements are not a state requirement to teach in Rhode Island. RIDE imagined that the endorsement system would be an opportunity for existing teacher preparation providers to participate, as well as open the door for alternative providers to participate in a more flexible state-approved process. For example, existing certification providers chose to submit pared-down sets of existing courses to be approved for an endorsement.



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⁶ The information contained in this section is derived from personal communication with current and former staff members in RIDE’s Office of Educator Excellence and Certification on September 8 and 22, 2023.



Allison Shelly, EDUImages

The endorsement system is not codified in legislation. Instead, it is codified in [regulations](#), which allows for greater flexibility. The regulations do not specify topics for endorsement, and RIDE has specifically kept the number of endorsements available low to maintain their value. Once an endorsement area is identified and approved by the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education, RIDE staff work with stakeholders and experts in the specific subject area to develop a set of approval criteria for the endorsement. Four state-approved endorsements are available in Rhode Island: Computer Science, Literacy/Dyslexia, Multilingual Learners, and Social Emotional Learning.

For the MLL endorsement, RIDE staff worked with educators and experts in MLL education to develop a set of competencies that educators must develop to receive the endorsement. RIDE staff stated that the MLL endorsement was a priority due to the state's growing MLL population. To become an [approved endorsement provider](#), a program must submit evidence documenting its qualifications, demonstrating that the program supports educators in meeting four competencies, detailing the offerings, and providing references.⁷ The submission is then scored against a rubric. If a program's submission does not meet the requirements, RIDE staff give feedback to the provider and/or request amendments to the application. This process is not as rigorous or robust as the certification program approval process.

The MLL endorsement requirements state that approved MLL programs must demonstrate the following competencies⁸:

1. Demonstrate and apply English language proficiency and serve as a language model for English learners in the areas of speaking, listening, reading and writing.
2. Design and implement standards-based instruction, use evidence-based research, make instructional decisions based on assessment data, and apply strategies within an approved curriculum specific to the needs of multilingual learners.
3. Understand and apply foundational concepts in the areas of Theories in First and Second Language Acquisition, and English Linguistics derived from interdisciplinary research.
4. Recognize how educator identity, culture, role, and biases may impact the interpretation of multilingual learners' strengths and needs.

A school leader in one of ExcEL Leadership Academy's partner schools in Rhode Island encouraged ExcEL to pursue the MLL endorsement approval process because it would give educators who earned the

⁷ Rhode Island Department of Education, Application for Multilingual Learners Endorsement Providers, https://ride.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur8o6/files/2023-03/Endorsement_Multilingual_Learner_Application_Form.docx (copy and paste link into browser to download)

⁸ Ibid.

micro-credentials more tangible value for their accomplishments. ExcEL decided to submit the first set of six micro-credentials for the MLL endorsement. Currently, [six programs](#) are approved providers of the MLL endorsement in Rhode Island. Two of them are competency-based. However, ExcEL is unique among them because it is both competency-based and not tied to graduate credit offerings.

RIDE staff said that because the ExcEL program is based on a defined set of competencies and already includes rubrics that define what an educator needs to do to demonstrate competence, approving the program for the MLL endorsement did not require special considerations. One former RIDE staff member suggested that the existence of the competencies and rubrics for the individual micro-credentials made the review and approval process easier because RIDE could tell how candidates would be assessed. In comparison, the assessment process is less transparent for programs that require candidates to write academic papers to demonstrate learning.

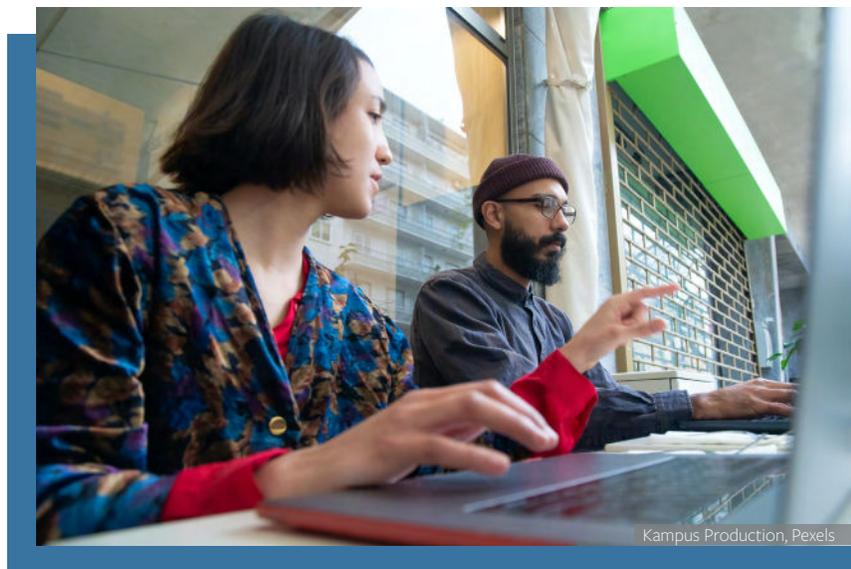
ExcEL's first six micro-credentials were approved for MLL endorsement in 2022, and seven Rhode Island educators had earned the endorsement by the end of 2023.

ESOL Certification Approval

Rhode Island's certification program approval process has been in place since the early 2000s. While the authority to develop the certification program is written into law, the process is specified in the same [regulations](#) that were used to create the endorsement program. Each certification area is guided by a set of competencies defined in the Rhode Island educator professional standards.

The [certification approval process](#) is much more rigorous and challenging than the endorsement approval process. It requires submission of extensive evidence in a ten-tab binder, including an overview of the program, an explanation of candidate experiences, an overview of the assessment system, and details on how the program will assess impact on student learning. Currently, [13 certification providers](#) have been approved, seven of which are approved for ESOL certification.

ExcEL chose to apply for the ESOL teacher certification approval shortly after submitting for the MLL endorsement approval. ExcEL submitted the required documentation for the full 12 micro-credential pathway because it represented the full set of competencies an educator must master to lead an ESL classroom. RIDE worked closely with ExcEL staff to ensure they understood the expectations for certification approval. RIDE staff said that because they were already familiar with ExcEL through the endorsement approval process, approving the program for certification took fewer staff hours than other program reviews did.



RIDE had some concerns about ExcEL’s ability to amend its program for Rhode Island’s educators in response to the feedback they provided on the original certification submission. Because the modules were already made, RIDE was uncertain whether they could be updated. However, ExcEL was able to make the necessary changes, which they believe resulted in an improved pathway.⁹ The changes largely focused on the coaching process, and ExcEL now has a more rigorous set of expectations for coaches and mentors who provide guidance to candidates.

The full set of 12 micro-credentials was approved for the ESOL certification in June 2023, and two educators had received certification by the end of 2023. Enrollment in the ExcEL micro-credential program has increased due to the full ESOL certification approval. At the close of 2023, 75 Rhode Island educators were enrolled and working toward the endorsement and/or certification. RIDE staff reported that they were excited to be able to offer educators a competency-based pathway to certification because it reflects a larger department goal to support more competency-based offerings for both students and educators.

Educator Experiences

Educators who have earned or are in the process of earning the ExcEL MLL endorsement or ESOL certification shared why they chose ExcEL’s programs over other options.¹⁰ For example, they appreciated the program’s flexibility because it allows them to work around their busy schedules and personal lives. While most other endorsement and certification programs require in-person coursework or meetings, the ExcEL pathways offer flexibility with a virtual, asynchronous, and job-embedded structure. Participants work in professional learning community teams with the support of a trained facilitator or coach. They have the option of in-person workshops and meetings, with most participants attending at least some in-person events, such as a summer institute. The educators interviewed felt this structure respected their limited time and capacity as full-time educators. It also removed time-based pressure from the learning process and allowed educators to lean into their love of learning by giving them the time and space to learn and grow.

“[The micro-credentials] allowed educators to lean into their love of learning by giving them the time and space to learn and grow.”

Also, educators said they liked that the ExcEL micro-credentials can be completed in any order. Educators can select which micro-credential they want to focus on based on their students’ needs or opportunities that come up. This allows educators to direct their own learning and customize their micro-credential pathway accordingly. Some educators pursue the same micro-credential at the same time as others in their professional learning communities to support each other as they collect evidence.

Participating educators shared that the micro-credentials’ competency-based nature allowed them to move at their own pace, rather than be held back by seat-time or course-based requirements. This meant that if they were competent at one micro-credential topic within two hours, they could begin collecting their

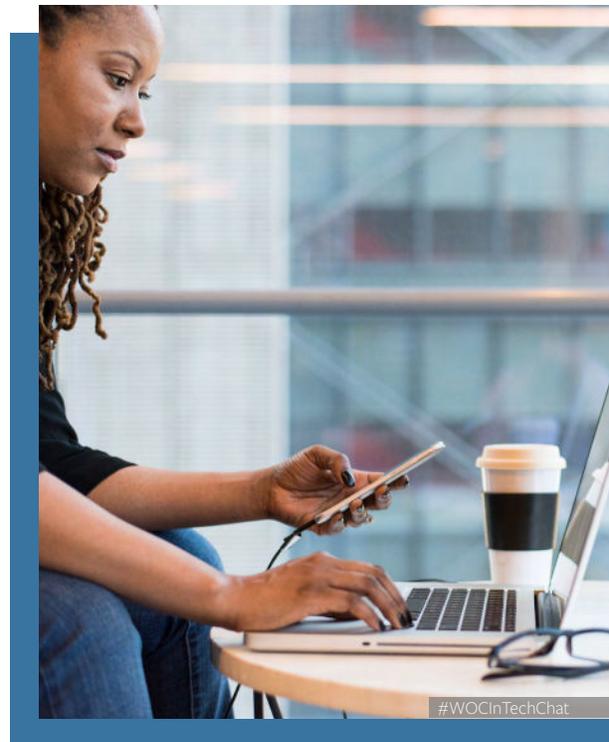
⁹ Personal communication with ExcEL staff on December 28, 2023.

¹⁰ Insights in this section derived from personal communications with Rhode Island educators on August 24 and 31, 2023.

evidence right away. Whereas, if another competency proved more challenging, they could invest the time needed to build the skill and implement it successfully. Similarly, more experienced educators were able to rely on their years in the classroom as part of their learning process.

Earning the first micro-credential was often the most challenging, educators found, because they had to shift their mindsets to focus on collecting the necessary evidence. They tended to overthink the evidence required, which made them indecisive or overwhelmed. However, once they earned the first micro-credential, moving on to others was much easier.

Educators also appreciated the value of receiving feedback on their micro-credential submissions. While one educator initially found it upsetting when she did not earn her first micro-credential on her first try, she began to appreciate the measured and supportive feedback she received and considered it a positive learning experience.



The first educator to earn the full ESOL certification in Rhode Island said that she found it empowering every time she earned a micro-credential. It took her one and a half years to earn all 12 micro-credentials. She decided to become an ExcEL coach afterward so she could support other educators in pursuing the program.

Educators who earned the MLL endorsement or ESOL certification reported feeling more effective and confident in their work with MLL students. They said they now have more strategies to employ in their classrooms and have honed their skills in engaging students' families and broader communities. One educator reported feeling like she was a better teacher for all her students, not only those who identify as MLLs. Another educator reported that she is now building competency-based learning into her own classroom to reflect the experience she had earning the micro-credentials.

Central Falls School District: Investing in the Capacity to Serve MLLs

In Central Falls School District (CFSD), a small, urban district outside of Providence, teachers have long been encouraged to be certified in ESOL.¹¹ Half of the student population has an official MLL designation, which makes the saying “we are all teachers of multilingual learners” more than a motto.

In their 2022 teacher contract, the district and union agreed to make attaining ESOL certification a requirement for all teachers. The provision includes a three-year window for current teachers to receive

¹¹ All quotations in this section are from personal communication on September 22, 2023 (J. Souza), September 27, 2023 and January 26, 2024 (S. D. Toledo), and November 27, 2023 (B. Comet, S. DeLeo, P. Garabedian, K. Leimer, R. McCarthy, and D. Upegui).

their certification. About 42% of teachers already had their ESOL certification when the contract provision was negotiated. To support access to training, the district partnered with the [Rhode Island School for Progressive Education \(RISPE\)](#) to offer cohorts for certification. RISPE offers a five-course pathway to certification, with in-person sessions as part of a cohort.

When RIDE approved the ExcEL micro-credential pathways for the ESOL certification, RISPE cohorts were already underway. However, the competency-based option, with its flexibility to be personalized to a person's role and past experience, as well as to be integrated into one's ongoing work, caught the eye of a few people in CFSD. While the CFSD team is still at the start of their experience with the ExcEL micro-credential pathway, the option promises to add value to the district by allowing administrators and teachers to build their skills in a flexible, job-embedded way and providing an additional personalized, asynchronous pathway to earn a certification.

An Opportunity for Leadership to Model and Support

The administrative team wanted to support teachers and model their own commitment to learning how to better meet MLL students' needs. Chief Academic Officer Joy Souza, who came from the Office for Educator Excellence and Certification at RIDE and knew about the ExcEL micro-credentials program, suggested using it as a pathway for administrators interested in deepening their skills to lead educators in their buildings to support MLL students. The contract requirement does not apply to administrative positions, but most principals, the superintendent, and other district administrators, including Souza, the special education director, and the deputy superintendent, opted to pursue the certification as a cohort. Souza explained that the administrative team "wanted to make sure that we had a knowledge base that allows leaders to be able to help drive the learning that happens in classrooms, that's really targeted towards what our MLL students need. And so that's why we all made this commitment to engage in the program together. And I think being able to work together with a cohort of supporters and people we can lean on and leverage along the way was really important."



Superintendent Stephanie Downey Toledo supported the administrative team's participation, including launching the cohort during summer 2023 at a retreat, highlighting the power of a community of practice, and encouraging people to make their professional growth goal related to earning the micro-credentials. By pursuing the MLL endorsement together, the administrative team hopes to both show support for teachers and deepen their own practice of using language development strategies and making evidence-based decisions about school and district policies, programs, and practices related to MLL students and families.

Elementary school principal Buddy Comet is serving as the ExcEL team facilitator and is organizing the local ExcEL administrative community of practice.

The group began meeting regularly to create a space for collaboration and accountability. They kicked off by reviewing the learning and evidence expected to earn each micro-credential. Each participant made a plan to move their learning forward. The administrative team is working to balance the micro-credentials' flexibility with structures that support their success. Prioritizing time to learn and complete the micro-credentials is essential and has been a challenge.

A few principals started in the summer and earned the “Professionalism” micro-credential by revamping their welcoming and support procedures for newcomers and their families, while others have not yet completed that micro-credential. For example, high school principal Bob McCarthy worked with the ESOL department to create structures around formative assessment but is in the process of documenting his work on the ExcEL site. McCarthy, who pushed for the administrative team to also commit to meeting the district requirement, feels like he needs the support of the community of practice for both collaboration and accountability. He reflected on the job's demands, saying that “anything we can do in our jobs right now that causes us to pause and think should be prioritized” because there is a real tension between the deeper work and the demands of the day to day.

The Value of Relevant, Flexible, Competency-Based Learning

While the administrative team has struggled with protecting the time to learn and complete the documentation for the micro-credentials, they see the clear connections to their practice and an opportunity to work on real priorities for students who are multilingual. Math instructional coach Pam Garabedian, who was already ESOL certified as an MLL math teacher, tries to help people connect their RISPE coursework to practice. For example, in math, where the focus on test scores can predominate, she tries to help teachers see the broader role of literacy in English in understanding math problems. She asks questions such as “How are we scaffolding that based on our knowledge of the students in front of us, who are MLLs, considering how long they've been in the country?” She believes it's too soon to really tell the impact of the certification requirement, in part because when educators are overwhelmed, they aren't necessarily putting learning into practice, and they can fall into a “just checking the box” mindset. Unlike traditional certification programs, the ExcEL micro-credential pathway builds the application of learning into practice by design.

David Upegui, a high school teacher with deep knowledge of working in responsive ways to meet MLL (and all) student needs, but without the formal certification, discovered that the micro-credential pathway “offered an option to still show proficiency, knowledge, and skills, but it was on my own time.” Upegui is a graduate of CFHS who was an MLL student himself and who has a Ph.D. in education focusing on social justice in evolutionary biology. He resisted taking the RISPE course because it overlapped with his existing knowledge and it met for two hours after school, when he would rather be with his students.

As of November 2023, Upegui had completed the first set of six micro-credentials, and is working on his second micro-credential from the advanced set. Much of his process was reflecting on and documenting his current practice to earn the credentials. He said, “It was just wonderful for me as a reflective practitioner to go back and say, ‘Oh, yeah, that is happening.’ So a lot of it was, for me, not so much new practices, although some of them were. A lot of it was giving a name and a space and recognition for what is happening ... and I'm more mindful of how it happens and why it happens.” He cited student-led conferences as an example of a new practice he incorporated, sharing that they “allowed me to open up a whole new level of conversations,

“It’s not like this is another thing that I’m doing; it fits within the work that I’m already doing.... And I get to see the impact of what I’m learning in a very natural way.”

— Chief Academic Officer Joy Souza

aside from ‘this is how they’re doing in class.’ [Now it is] ‘This is what your student says, this is their voice right here.’ And so it was really meaningful.... That’s a clear example of a practice that has changed.” Overall, he added, “I think the credentials are also really well organized ... they are logical and sequential and it felt cohesive and coherent.”

Souza has similar impressions of the micro-credential pathway. She explained that, with the micro-credentials “it’s not like this is another thing that I’m doing; it fits within the work that I’m already doing.... And I get to see the impact of what I’m learning in a very natural way.”

The union president and a CFHS English teacher, Steve DeLeo, also joined the administrative team in the ExcEL micro-credential cohort. He was looking for a more flexible approach to certification that would leverage his extensive teaching experience. From a leadership perspective, as union president, he knows that other teachers may observe and follow his lead in response to the new requirement, so he felt pursuing the certification was important. While he appreciates the importance of being skilled to serve the needs of MLL students, he also thinks that greater personalization for teachers, which is possible with micro-credentials, acknowledges educators’ range of experience, including those nearing retirement who have been successful professionals.

Comet said that the ESOL certification requirement is helping his staff focus their collaboration and deepen their practice and that the micro-credentials are helping him deepen his support. He noted that having a certification doesn’t guarantee that key strategies will be put into practice, and that he hopes “we can bring some consistency for kids with the strategies that are focused on this [endorsement]. These strategies are good for pretty much every student in our school.” He added that “the more we see the practices in action, the more engaged kids are and will be. But it is still a work in progress. We had a lot of teachers certified previously. I think we’re uncovering now, together, what should it really look like? What really should it feel like and sound like to kids in the classrooms?” Comet described how this work complements a longer-term shift in the culture and mindset of staff over time, from valuing assimilation to seeing language and culture as an asset and appreciating the many stories of learners, especially MLLs who had intense journeys traveling to Central Falls. He explained that they are exploring the “idea of cultural responsiveness and having that be a real thing, not just a catchphrase.”

Committing to a Shared Vision

Kim Leimer, the district MLL director and a former principal of the dual immersion program in CFSD, started in her position in the summer of 2023, at the same time the CFSD administrative micro-credential cohort launched. In her role, she aims to review and align the key systems shaping the experiences of MLL students in the district, and she works with the administrative team and staff to articulate a shared vision for supporting MLL students. Building the knowledge, skills, and mindsets of the administrative team—including through the ExcEL endorsement—forms a strong foundation from which to collaborate on this work and implement meaningful changes.

The theme of competing demands on time and attention will likely continue, which can make it overwhelming for administrators and teachers alike to apply their learning. Leimer said of this challenge, “I don’t think it’s a lack of will in Central Falls, I think it’s really about building skill and continuing to work on dispositions and linguistically and culturally sustaining practices. That goes along with some of the work that has been done to unpack racism and bias in the district. But I think that now, we are at a point where people who are leaders who are involved in the micro-credential program are starting to look at their systems and ask, ‘In what way are the systems at my school or in my domain of work supporting or not supporting the population of students and families that we have?’” Building from here, the opportunity lies in developing a collaborative vision of what policies, program models, and instructional strategies for teaching multilingual learners look, sound, and feel like.

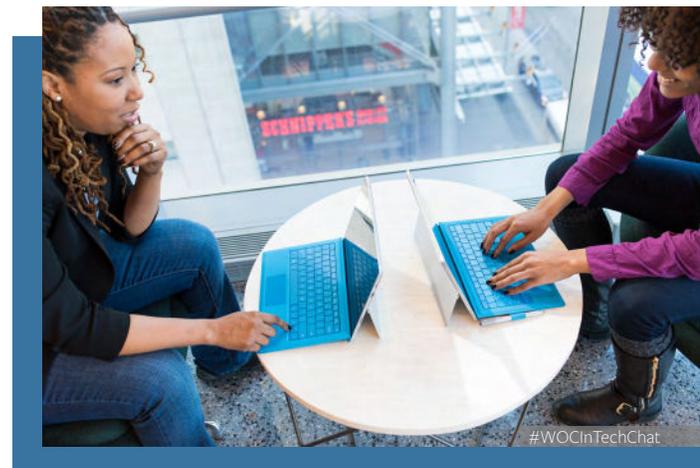
Superintendent Toledo explained that “certification won’t solve all of it, but expecting all CFSD teachers to be teachers of MLL students, including certification, is one way we show our values and commitment to our students. If someone is not interested in pursuing that learning, they are not likely a fit for a district where we are proud that MLL students are the majority.” Central Falls is early in the process, so it’s too soon to tell the full impact of the ESOL certification requirement and the addition of the ExcEL micro-credential pathway, but the district is hopeful. As Leimer concluded, “We need to prioritize the needs of multilingual learners and learn to leverage the assets they bring as emergent bilinguals from a wide variety of backgrounds, cultures, and individual experiences.” Principal McCarthy underscored the imperative of the work, saying, “We need to prioritize the needs of MLL students. They are over half of our official population, and in reality, an even higher proportion of students speak a language other than English at home.”

“Certification won’t solve all of it, but expecting all CFSD teachers to be teachers of MLL students, including certification, is one way we show our values and commitment to our students.”

— Superintendent Stephanie Downey Toledo

Policy Recommendations

The ExcEL Leadership Academy micro-credential pathway adoption in Rhode Island has several policy implications for other states and districts looking to implement competency-based certifications or professional learning opportunities for educators. It is important to note that Rhode Island’s endorsement and certification provider approval processes are defined by regulations, not legislation, which makes them easier to update and adapt to competency-based programs. In those cases, it may be relatively straightforward to update language to allow for competency-based certification programs like ExcEL to be considered for state approval. However, in states that require legislative approval for the certification program approval process, advocates will need to identify legislative champions who can sponsor new language.



State Recommendations

States working to implement competency-based certifications or professional learning opportunities for educators can:

- Ensure that certification programs can be competency-based. This means that certification programs cannot require a specific number of credit hours or other seat-time-based measures. Instead, certification can focus on the job-embedded application of learning.
- Ensure that certification programs are not required to be graduate-credit-bearing. To ensure that professional learning providers from across the field can make competency-based offerings available, certification programs should not be required to be tied to graduate institutions or other credit-providing entities.
- Encourage certification programs to better use hybrid, virtual, and asynchronous instructional modalities by adding flexibility and reducing or removing any requirements for in-person instruction.
- Design the certification program approval process around a clear set of standards or competencies that are assessed against a rubric or other clearly communicated process. By using competencies and standards to drive the program approval process, alternative and competency-based programs such as ExcEL are able to qualify for approval.
- Explore new vehicles for educators to differentiate their skills and abilities, such as endorsements, which may be more accessible. The endorsement system in Rhode Island provided an entry point for the competency-based program to gain acceptance in the state. This could also include considering new systems for identifying and validating educator skills, such as digital learning and employment records, which can host micro-credentials and other evidence of educator learning.
- Consider funding pilot programs for competency-based teacher certification programs that include longer-term supports, such as professional learning communities and coaches who stay with educators as they develop.
- Consider aligning efforts toward micro-credentials and competency-based learning for educators with broader state skills-based hiring initiatives.

District Recommendations

Districts working to encourage competency-based certifications or professional learning opportunities for educators can:

- Build a shared vision that names the values and mindsets that support equitable learning, and an asset-based frame that acknowledges students' full identities and lived experiences.
- Establish clear expectations for what changes look like in practice. Traditional certification doesn't necessarily guarantee a change in practice. Because micro-credentials are awarded based on evidence of practice shifts, they offer opportunities to foster lasting shifts in practice.
- Demonstrate the administrative team's commitment by modeling continuous learning and building their own understanding of what they are asking of teachers.

- Maximize the flexibility to leverage the asynchronous and job-embedded nature of competency-based learning, allowing teachers and leaders to build on the work they are doing as part of their position.
- Provide sufficient time for educators to collaborate and learn priority content and skills deeply.
- Offer multiple pathways to meet district requirements. An established and effective teacher of 20 years and a teacher early in their career need different supports.
- Design communities of practice to prioritize learning and support the micro-credential process. Communities of practice provide opportunities for both collaboration and supportive accountability.
- Identify and partner with other districts or support organizations doing aligned work.



Conclusion

Rhode Island offers an exciting road map for the formal state adoption of competency-based programs like ExcEL Leadership Academy’s MLL micro-credential pathway for ESOL teacher certification. Because of Rhode Island’s competency- and standards-driven program approval process, ExcEL gained approval for both its fully competency-based, asynchronous, and job-embedded MLL endorsement and its ESOL certification pathways. Educators report that the program not only worked well for their schedules, but also made them better teachers. As programs like ExcEL are more broadly adopted and more evidence of their impact is collected, we hope that other states follow this road map to formally adopt competency-based pathways to certification.



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