



GETTING SMART
ON
COMPETENCY-BASED
Career Advancement
AT
HARMONY PUBLIC
SCHOOLS



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Back to School with Harmony

BY: ERIC NENTRUP

Harmony Through The Years

In 2016, [Getting Smart produced a series on Harmony Public Schools of Houston, Texas](#). At the time, the staff was focused on growing sustainably, attracting attention from families wanting a different learning experience for their children. Harmony was serving over thirty thousand students shared across 40+ schools and lead by over 3,000 teachers, administrators, and support staff. At the launch of the 2020-2021 school year, the administration is expected to see enrollment near 40,000.

	2016 (then)	2020 (now)
# of Schools	46	58
# of Students Enrolled	30,735	38,976
# of Students Applied	47,421	52,880
# of educators	3,151	3,752

The Harmony team has developed an attractive learner-centered experience chock full of engaging STEM and project-based work for students. This progress stems from a bedrock culture the staff have cultivated over the past twenty years and recent indicators show they have even more innovation to prove yet. As their staff says about Harmony's culture, it's a school that puts core values into action.

Exactly what changes have been made to elicit such progress in just a few years? Where has the school network's focus been after getting their STEM program

up and running? Robert Thornton, a curriculum director and grant facilitator for Harmony said, "There's a sustained focus from what we were doing then and we didn't quit—we doubled down." With that, Getting Smart is once again taking a close look at the bold innovations being implemented by the Harmony team.

Investing in Students by Investing in Teachers

Specifically, we are curious about their progress implementing a grant-funded, radical new approach to how they invest in the professional development of their teaching staff. But first, let's revisit the steps taken a few years ago to position this public charter school system to become the fastest-growing of its kind in not only the region but across the country as well.

Even as they continue expanding, Harmony is dedicated to a personalized learning experience, an innovation mindset, high expectations for all members of the learning community, personalized, STEM and project-based learning (PBL), and a college-bound disposition for graduates. From administration, to teaching staff guiding students with parental support, the success stories abound across the charter network.

Recent graduate, Muntazir Panjwani says "Harmony has teachers that are energetic and love what they do." Muntazir was a founding member of Harmony's Innovation Lab and still works there today. "Not every school is giving their teachers this opportunity to further their studies. That gives us a severe edge because we're already ahead of the game. It's an amazing edge they're giving us."

Harmony in a time of Global Discord

As the pandemic shut down school operations around the world, Harmony rallied. Teachers and leaders in Harmony launched an initiative with their students to support healthcare workers to the extent they were able. Students took this real-world problem of the COVID-19 outbreak and used their PBL expertise along with the school's 3D printers to mass-produce shields and masks that were donated to local health care institutions. This is the contribution and responsiveness that demonstrates the leadership capabilities of the students working with the right guidance to make a laudable contribution to their community. Harmony is committed to difference making as the means of learning and preparing students for what comes next.

In another example of what can happen when Harmony students are empowered by their instructors, students have used the Innovation Lab to serve other needs. Last year, they even produced prosthetic limbs for a young amputee.

There's a sense of purpose driving students into solving real-world problems. That purpose has staying power, as several Harmony graduates continue to stay involved, but now as part-time employees at the Innovation Lab while they continue their postsecondary work as college freshmen. These students see it as their mission to give back.



Harmony Innovation Lab students assembling face shields. Courtesy of Harmony Public Schools.

Imran Abukaker, a 2019 graduate said, "I've amassed this knowledge I want to pass along to other kids. All of us at the Lab have an affinity for teaching....My parents wanted to expose me to as many different perspectives as possible, and at HPS there are people of all different backgrounds." This includes the staff.

The stories, awards, and other notable accomplishments of students and staff at Harmony are the fruits of their labor and commitment to excellence. To sustain that in a manner equitable to all, Harmony has worked intensively to direct their energies on maintaining that high level of performance, particularly with cultivating talent in a commendable way.

Agency in Professional Learning

The leadership of Harmony has taken principles and best practices of competency-based education that we've known to be a better way of assessing student growth and applied it as an investment in their staff as well. Harmony has built a competency-based approach to career advancement for educators. Using **BloomBoard**, Harmony developed a replete set of competencies to be nurtured in their educators, awarding achievement with micro-credentials and incentive compensation. Their method is a departure from the top-down observation models prevalent in most school systems in the US and arguably more effective in developing modern practitioners. It includes short term action research and validating the informal continuing education teachers experience in their practice.

We sat down with a number of Harmony educators to hear how the program was impacting their practice. Assistant Principal of **Harmony School of Endeavor in Houston**, Mehmet Cellik says, "what makes this work is the action research component. You can read a book and write a paper. This microcredential program goes beyond the paper." His peers share a similar sense of what is valuable.

Over the next four posts in the series, we will share how HPS has elevated professional learning just as they have for students—by empowering teachers to take charge of their career advancement.

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Meet the Culture Hackers:

MICRO-CREDENTIALS AREN'T JUST FOR STUDENTS

BY: ROBERT THORNTON

How We Started with Microcredentials & Career Pathways

When Harmony Public Schools (Harmony) received a Race to the Top grant in 2012 a lot of expectations changed across the system. As student-centered models for instruction took hold, teachers demanded higher quality professional learning experiences and requested more academic leadership from their administration including more collaboration with their colleagues. The competency-based approach to professional learning by awarding microcredentials on completion reinforces the skill-sets that Harmony believes are critical to success across a variety of roles within our system.

Ultimately, to play a part in the success of students within Harmony we must all be willing to engage in job-embedded learning experiences related to our roles. With microcredentials, our educators know they will be encouraged to implement new learning within their practice in a way that is aligned to their aspirations as a professional.



Next Big Education Breakthrough



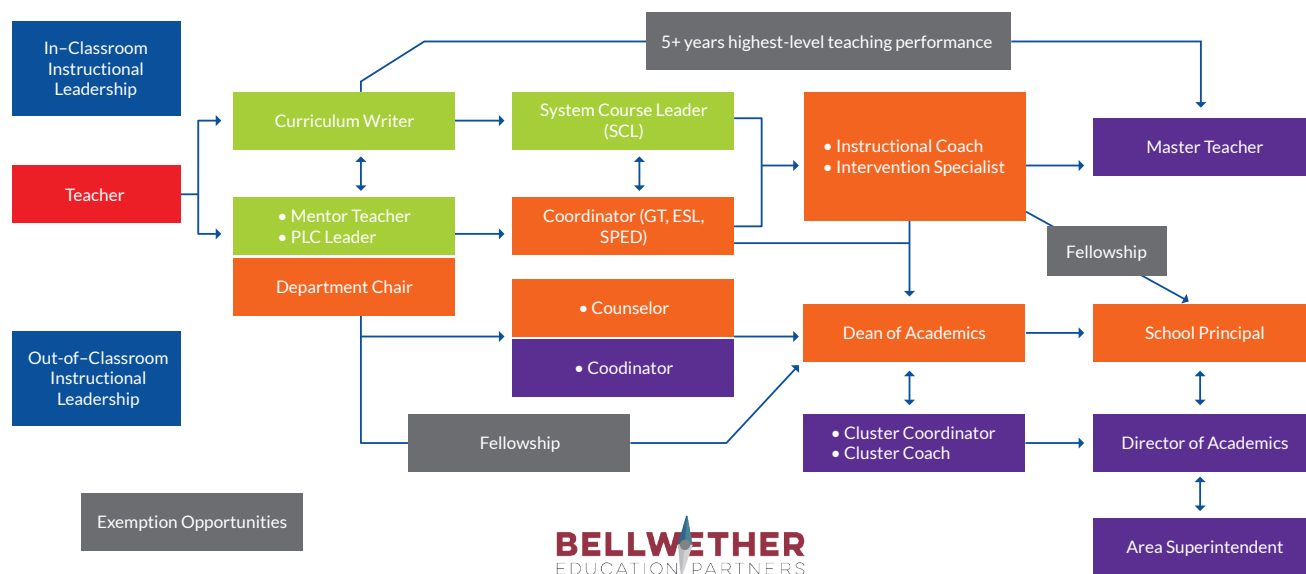
Administrators



Teachers

Starting with Career Pathways

Career Pathway Map



Graphic by Bellwether Partners and Harmony Public Schools

When administrators use the idea of career pathways to coach teachers on their campus they are providing the learning experience they expect their teachers to provide to their students. Before any microcredential work can begin, the administrator must learn about the teacher:

- How much experience do they have?
- How confident are they as instructors?
- Do they want to stay in the classroom and lead teachers?
- Do they enjoy working with curriculum and assessments?
- Do they want to leave the classroom and enter administration?

Based on what they learn from the teacher, they can match their short or long-term aspirations to specific options for professional learning, all while the teacher stays engaged in their classroom or program.

Developing Microcredential Tracks

Whenever possible, we begin with an existing job description or work with our senior leadership to develop a clear role for a teacher to aspire to, taking into consideration current and near-future system-wide programs within our school system. In some cases, our programs are developed around initiatives such as **Teach Like a Champion** or Instructional Coaching. From there, our partners at **Bloomboard** guide a small group of central leadership and current role holders through a process that results in a list of competencies and descriptions. This process continues via task design, rubric creation, and support resources.

Process for Educators



Personalize
your own
knowledge
acquisition



Engage in
facilitated
discussion



Learn by
doing



Upload evidence
and receive
feedback



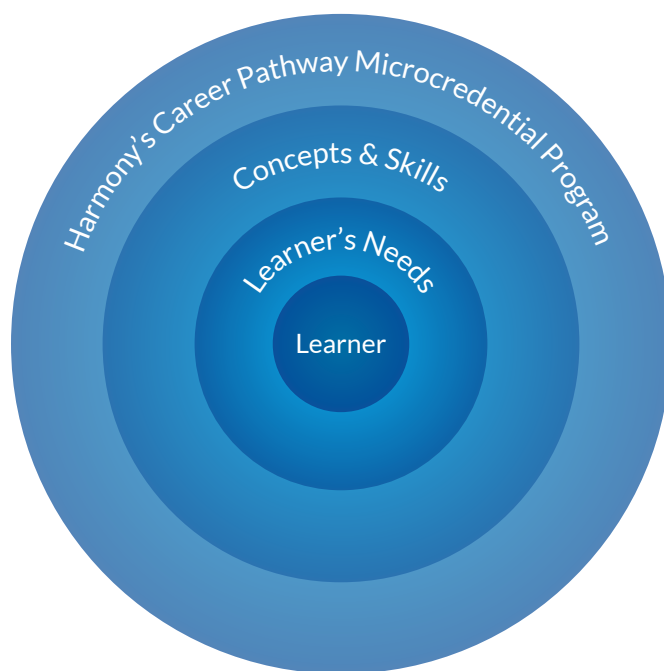
Engaging in a Professional
Educator Learning Community

Be recognized
for your
professional
learning and
share your
expertise!

Graphic by Bloomboard for Harmony Public Schools

We enjoy being involved at each point in the process to ensure that Harmony values and resources are continually embedded within a product designed to meet the rigorous expectations of a Bloomboard microcredential. Sometimes we decide to make changes to existing microcredentials based on trends in participant submissions brought to us by Bloomboard or develop support mechanisms based on overall program data.

Recently, Bloomboard created a microsite to help Harmony broadly communicate information around microcredentials to educators across our system. There are also several internal documents that administrators, support staff, or teachers themselves can leverage to engage the program.



When a teacher logs in to review microcredential tracks, they will see clickable graphics where teachers can directly engage microcredential and overall program information. At the core of the experience is the Bloomboard platform and Bloomboard's reputation for timely support requests. Harmony educators submit all of their artifacts of learning and receive feedback on their submission via the Bloomboard platform. Our administration can generate reports to target specific educator populations across our vast school system.

Adjustments

For all our planning, we've still encountered a couple of snags to smooth out. And they're somewhat predictable whenever trying to change your professional learning culture:

- 1 When we lost some early momentum.** Early on, there was a lot of program information delivered directly to teachers. This generated a lot of excitement among teachers that did not resonate with administrators because the way they supported teachers also had to be changed for this culture shift, which led to the next adjustment.
- 2 When leadership recognized the need to offer school administrator tracks as well.** With teaching and learning supports in place, and the former administrator's responsibilities for observations evolving, it was just a matter of time before the school leaders needed to learn new skills for their leadership roles. Administrator microcredential tracks were the solution, especially for those moving into education leadership from the classroom.
- 3 When it became 'one more thing'.** There was a lot of effort put into defining micro-credentials and making sure everyone understood the process. The problem was that all of these programs aligned to existing roles that full-time employees hold so earning a micro-credential was viewed as 'one more thing' by many people. Over time, we have been able to coordinate professional learning, evaluation, and role support that in the best cases, seamlessly weaves in microcredentials.

The key to implementing a microcredential program as Harmony has accomplished is to recognize the inherent competing interests as the days keep moving forward, that each teacher has their learners to prioritize before tending to their growth. But they have to. And at Harmony, we're helping teachers prioritize their own needs and put time into their schedules so they can be even more effective with those students. It has positively impacted our professional learning culture and will continue to do so in times like we're currently facing as we all look for new ways to keep learning continuous for all at Harmony.

Robert Thornton is a curriculum director and grant facilitator for Harmony Public Schools. Follow him on Twitter at [@YNWAThornton](https://twitter.com/YNWAThornton).

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A Commitment to Microcredentials:

A CLOSE LOOK AT HARMONY'S PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE

BY: ERIC NENTRUP

Launching an altogether different model for shifting from professional development sessions to a professional learning culture is a desire of many edleaders. And as we've discussed this spring, it's more essential than ever to keep up with new variables affecting our practice. Getting to a place of continuous and iterative improvement that is personalized to the educator's aspirations and contextualized to their practice can happen in our schools, however. It takes a commitment to establish a system replete with natural opportunities to invest in a teacher's career advancement and Harmony Public Schools has made that commitment. As Harmony's Robert Thornton said in his recent post, starting a microcredential track is often born out of a very near-future desire to close a gap in one's practice. For Harmony's leaders, the microcredential program surfaces the inherent and emerging talents and skills within the team.

Harmony teachers and administrators have earned 815 microcredentials since launching the program with funding from a TIF grant and technical assistance from their vendor partner, **Bloomboard**.

As we've discussed in prior pieces of this series, finding the path forward involves shifting an overall attitude about assessment and priority for self-agency — just like with our students. Harmony has put systems and processes in place to facilitate this shift, and as the team has adapted to it, recognized the value of the program, and applied the work in their practice with their students, it's perpetuated

a culture of striving and growth, motivating each other to make the investment in Harmony's overall quality of teaching and learning, one microcredential at a time. Harmony's leaders realize this is not easy. It's a rigorous process to consider approaching a microcredential offering, seeing a manner to apply it in your classroom or school, and developing an approach in conjunction with your respective administrator or coach. Director of instruction for the school system, Burak Yilmaz says, "this is a portfolio assessment....they get quality feedback on every piece they submit".



Jason Fletcher, Math Department,
Harmony Science Academy, Waco, TX

Former Harmony Teacher of the Year and instructional coach Jason Fletcher has become known as “Mr. Microcredential” amongst his peers at Harmony. After earning a few in the early days of the program, Jason started to encourage his fellow teachers to participate. As an instructional coach, Jason helped his peers find a way to honor the expertise they’d been accruing informally in their practice. It was a natural transition for Jason to start aligning his coaching sessions with the microcredential options, suggesting to his teammates which ones would be most relevant. His peers joke that he should wear a shirt that says, “there’s a microcredential for that”. Advocating for the program was easy for Jason because of his commitment to improving his practice. “I liked having an avenue that I can control, regarding my career advancement.”



Amber Conner, Science & Social Studies Department Chair |
5th & 6th Grade Science Teacher
Harmony Science Academy - Austin

Teachers coming to Harmony after working in other school districts know they are having a different experience in professional learning. Amber Conner is a Harmony teacher of six years who has noticed how Harmony’s professional learning program has improved her ability to respond to leadership opportunities in her school and across the Harmony network. She’s served as a department head, PLC leader, and a system course leader, writing common assessments and providing instructional guidance to her peers. She says, “I would rather be in a system that values growth than one that has stagnated...I feel supported. If I wanted to advance up to a different position, Harmony would support it.”

She likes how this professional learning aligns with what she’s learned in her experience as well as in her pursuit of an M.Ed. It supports her teaching philosophy of being the lead learner before her students. “I’m a student, just like you!” Amber says. It gives her a chance to share her approach to learning and motivate her students by example. “Having a teacher that enjoys learning helps students realize that they can enjoy learning too.” She has appreciated the microcredentials that have immediate application, such as improving her understanding of how to use Google’s G Suite for Education with her students.

Learning new techniques from the program can be rewarding for an immediate return, but being able to routinely promote from within is one of the most invaluable benefits for Harmony. Kimmi McClure is yet another teacher turned administrator, serving for her third year as an assistant principal in Harmony Science Academy in Cypress, Texas. Now in her tenth year with Harmony, Kimmi is actively growing as a leader. She touts Harmony’s shared value of distributed leadership for building great culture because teachers no longer need to rely solely upon the principal for guidance.

For Kimmi, the microcredential program came about while she was still a classroom teacher with these growing leadership aspirations. She earned credits in short sprints, conducting research, recording evidence, and reporting on her findings with her students. Kimmi noticed other teachers were encouraging her to pursue

Kimmi McClure, Assistant Principal and Dean of
Academics and her teammates at Harmony Science
Academy, Cypress, TX



more credits in the realm of education leadership. “As I became a district PLC leader, the microcredential program came up again, and working with TeachPlus, it opened my eyes as to how to be a leader among adults.” Earning her last one in supporting teachers with high-quality feedback opened a door for others in her school to approach her for help on that topic. Kimmi is currently continuing her career advancement towards a vision of being principal of her own school someday.



Mehmet Cellik, Assistant Principal,
Harmony School of Endeavor in Houston

Mehmet Cellik an assistant principal in Harmony Houston’s middle school, came to the US from Turkey in 2009, learning English along the way. He has an energetic and sincere personality with a clear heart for serving the students and families of Harmony. Over a decade later, Mehmet has served in several Harmony’s schools, earning his master’s degree along the way while mentoring new teachers, serving as department chair, and leading various clubs and competitions for Harmony students. It is his continued pursuit of microcredentials that keep his edge sharp, whether the track he’s working on is about education leadership or data-informed instruction.

He sees that participating in earning these microcredentials has prepared him overall to be a more effective educator. Mehmet said, “They helped me be more organized and more specific,” that “...using data correctly is very important for differentiating our lessons and also reteaching. Another track taught him how to better serve ESL/ELL students after studying data from the **TELPAS assessment**, Texas’s language proficiency tool.

These are just a few stories from Harmony’s journey thus far. As an evolving professional learning experience, the value for the entire Harmony community cannot be understated as they continue to improve the education they offer families across the network.

In the next post of the series, we hear from one of the Harmony microcredential program leaders, Burak Yilmaz, as he explains the broader work of designing career pathways and how the program is evolving for Harmony.

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Change Management at Harmony Public Schools:

WHEN PRIOR INNOVATIONS BECOME STATUS QUO

BY: BURAK YILMAZ

One of the reasons I enjoy working at Harmony Public Schools so much is the fact that a culture of innovation is rooted in this dynamic network. The only thing constant at Harmony is change itself.

At Harmony, we take innovation and change management so seriously we won't start something significant unless there is a well thought out strategic planning process that clearly shows all the necessary steps with design, rollout, implementation support, evaluation, and most importantly, sustainability. That is why most of our biggest innovations start with a carefully written competitive grant proposal, which not only helps with having a solid 5+ year plan but also provides the necessary seed funding to get off to a strong start.

How We Started

The **Race to the Top District Grant** has been a great program for Harmony to create student-centered and personalized learning environments across the network powered by a flexible blended learning model and a unique approach to project-based learning (PBL). This massive investment in designing a tech-powered, unique learning experience for students revealed other gaps over time that we needed to invest in just as vigorously. Namely, a similar personalized professional learning for our educators. If learning is personalized for children, why should it be any different for adults? This gave birth to a new idea and our next attempt at another big grant. It was time to rethink professional learning and the

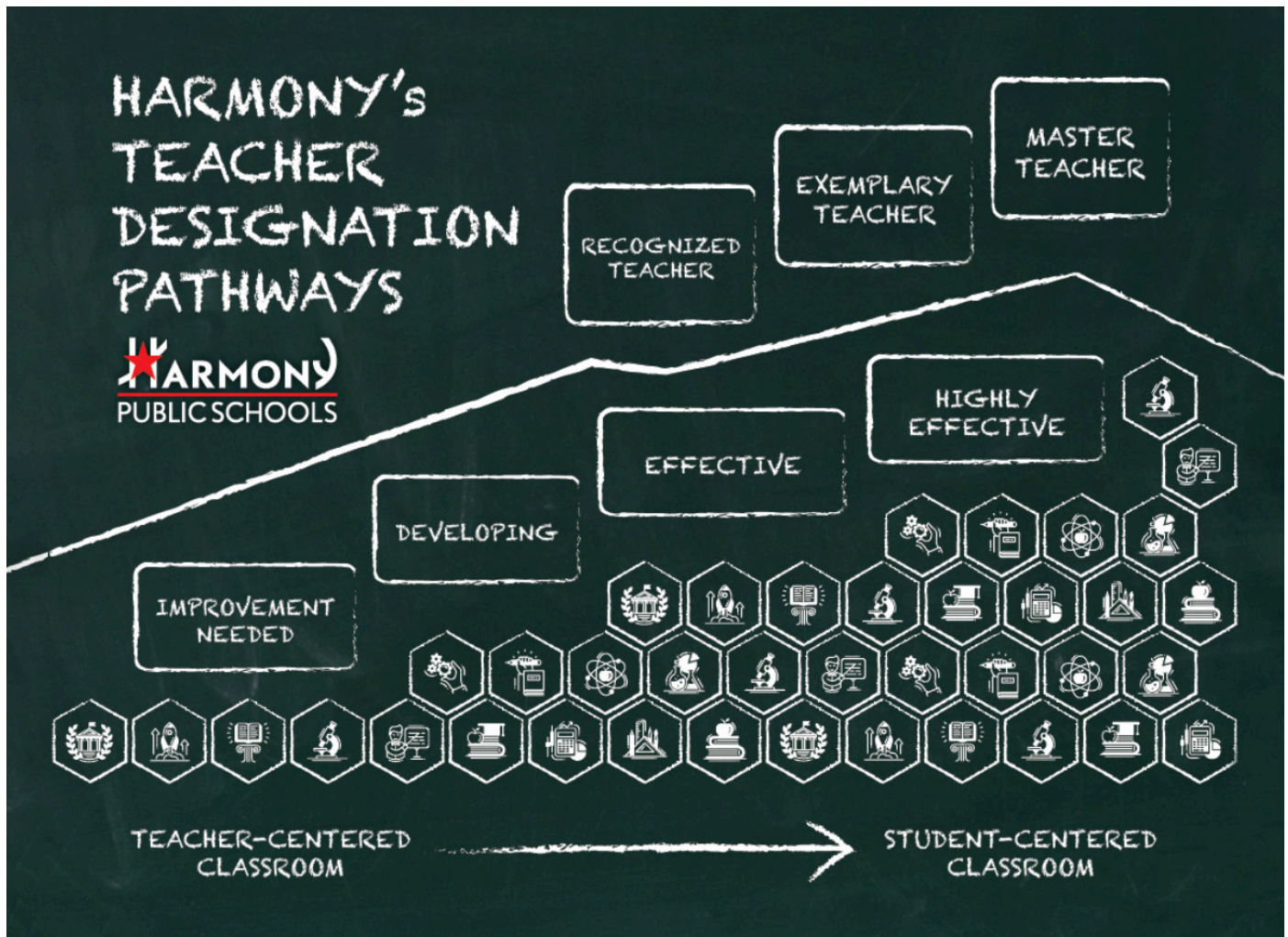
Teacher Incentive Fund was a great opportunity for us to do just that.

When drafting a proposal for the Teacher Incentive Fund, Harmony leaders thought about several challenges the organization faced with professional learning. Our conversation was driven by these key questions:

How can we see the application of PD in our classrooms at scale? (moving from theory to action)

- How do we align PD to educator evaluation and student outcomes more clearly?
- What can we do to support teachers with their career aspirations?
- How do we approach the placement of effective educators into leadership roles and ensure their success in those new roles?

We were confident that if we could come up with innovative solutions to tackle these issues, we would achieve the ultimate goal of retaining our top talent, and Harmony Public Schools would be an organization where all educators with a growth mindset could thrive. The more we thought about changing educator practices, connecting PD to student outcomes, making PD more job-embedded and personalized, and integrating professional learning into career pathways, the more inspired we've become as a team to dream bigger for our students and teachers. We landed on microcredentials as the means to accomplish this.



Harmony Public Schools Teacher Designation Pathways Diagram

Developing from Within, Promoting from Within

Since the inception of our charter network, Harmony has been obsessed with developing homegrown talent — especially for school and district leadership positions. Microcredentials gave us the idea of creating a badging system where promising educators could slowly but surely build their competencies to prepare themselves for a leadership role they aspire for. The idea of defining excellence for each role within the organization and then identifying core competencies needed for success in those roles created the much-needed clarity and transparency for career pathways and understanding how one can move up within the organization.

Through microcredentials, the competency-based approach to professional learning connected to career pathways has been a game-changer for Harmony. Before microcredentials, when we needed an educator to serve in a leadership role — in or out of the classroom — we would naturally select someone with a strong record of success in the classroom. However, in the absence of a role-aligned PD and support system, many of these talented educators would underperform and feel frustrated, which often leads to increased attrition. These leadership roles require a completely different set of skills that needed to be built over time.

Microcredentials helped us build those pathways and now educators can see what is available to them to advance their careers and more importantly they have a clear path ahead and a professional learning plan to get there, whatever their career aspirations may be.

Though exciting and promising in theory, it was not easy to create excitement and buy-in from frontline educators. Microcredentials are still a relatively new development in our field and it requires a significant mind shift for teachers and school leaders to leave behind traditional practices and embrace this new outcomes-based approach. This calls for educators to get out of their comfort zone and allow themselves to be vulnerable during the process. To overcome these implementation challenges, Harmony decided to do four things very carefully and strategically:

- 1 Vision:** This big culture shift requires a clear vision and alignment from key stakeholders within the organization. Educators need to understand why this is important, where it fits in the bigger picture, and how this will impact them.
- 2 Incentives:** Without meaningful incentives, it is never easy to engage people and create good momentum. Harmony created both short term incentives that award stipends for earned microcredentials and also long term incentives that unlock career advancement opportunities in the future.
- 3 Phases:** Change at this scale takes a long time until it becomes part of the culture. It is important to design a phased approach and start with a manageable pilot rather than trying to boil the ocean. Rolling out microcredentials in phases also allowed Harmony to see opportunities and challenges before expanding the program and implementing it at scale.
- 4 Supports:** This is probably the most critical and hardest part. Educators will need lots of support, especially in the beginning until microcredentials become fully integrated into the organization's professional learning culture. Adjusting to the new way of learning and navigating through uncharted waters will require a lot of mentoring, coaching, and other forms of support even for some of your talented veteran teachers.

Putting It All Together

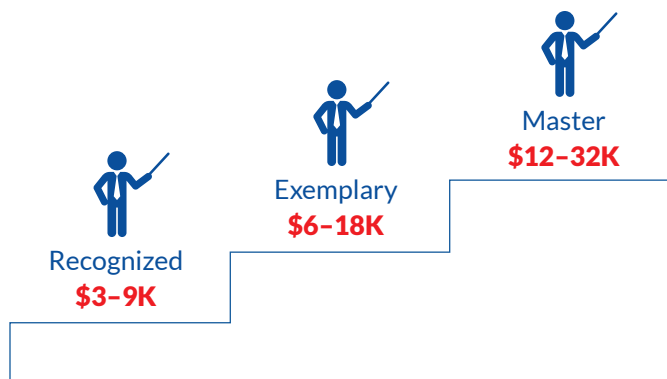
Most educators need a clear pathway for career advancement and a means for making incremental progress to get closer to their aspirations. Other districts may be invested in microcredentials but only for professional learning. Harmony has been intentional from the beginning, linking all microcredentials to leadership roles within the career pathways, in or out of the classroom.

To make this work, organizational readiness is critical. There are many elements of the larger human capital management system (HCMS) often operating in silos in networks and organizations. Harmony was no exception to that. We had many silos operating independently such as educator evaluation, professional development systems, career advancement, licensure requirements, and pay-based incentives. The lack of clear alignment across these various elements resulted in staff frustration and confusion, higher attrition, and cost inefficiencies.

Microcredentials allowed us to create a universal alignment of these HCMS elements to career pathways, which helped the organization achieve critical outcomes such as clarity of vision, significant cost savings, higher employee retention, and more time spent on what matters most: improving outcomes for kids.

Sustainability

The Teacher Incentive Fund provided Harmony a great opportunity for establishing a robust teacher evaluation and support system, creating competency-based career pathways via microcredentials, and most importantly designing a performance-based compensation system (PBCS). The historic **House Bill 3 in Texas** provided many exciting opportunities and additional funding for public school districts in the state. One of them is the **Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA)**. Through this allotment, districts in Texas can create a local teacher designation system and award Recognized, Exemplary, and Master designations based on classroom observation scores and student growth measures. And there are significant pay increases for these designated teachers, up to \$32K, all compensated by the state with no additional cost to districts.



However, according to this bill, districts can only apply for the Teacher Incentive Allotment after they have designed a performance-based compensation system and have already paid incentives to their high performing teachers at least once. Harmony had the required system in place and has been awarding performance pay for the past 5 years. This presented a golden opportunity for Harmony to sustain its efforts around career pathways and performance-based compensation. In addition to teacher observations and student growth measures, Harmony added a teacher portfolio component to its local designation system, which is driven by microcredential attainment. With our TIF grant winding down, the rollout of TIA designations gave microcredentials more leverage for our organization and a tremendous motivation for our effective teachers to invest in their portfolios and make themselves eligible for a designation. TIA is not only helping Harmony with the sustainability of its HCMS but also strengthening our core message to our most effective educators. Now, leaving the classroom is not the only option for moving up the career and compensation ladder. As the commissioner of education in Texas says, TIA will give Texas teachers a realistic path to a six-figure salary.



Microcredentials are still a relatively new development in our field and it requires a significant mind shift for teachers and school leaders to leave behind traditional practices and embrace this new outcomes-based approach.

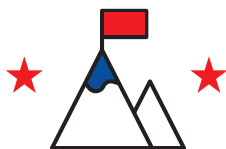
What is next?

Now, as we are focused upon the **Teacher and School Leader (TSL) grant from the US Department of Education**, Harmony's goal is to create performance metrics informed by a "skills profile" for each educator, and similarly develop a "needs profile" for each campus based on school performance and characteristics. The educator skills profile will be powered by microcredentials and will be used for setting up an educator-school match system running on a smart algorithm to recommend matches based on these profiles. This will allow us to place our best talent in the highest need schools where the skills and needs fit together like a jigsaw.

This is a work in progress for the near future at Harmony and is a prime example of how artificial intelligence can transform human capital in building capacities in our educators and maximize their performance.

Burak Yilmaz, Ed.D., is the Director of Instruction at Harmony Public Schools.

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Harmonizing with Microcredentials:

7 STEPS TO REIMAGINING YOUR SCHOOL'S PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

BY: ERIC NENTRUP

Over the past four stories, we've taken a look at how Harmony Public Schools, an extraordinarily innovative and hardworking group of educators and leaders, have fortified their teaching staff with a concentrated focus on career advancement. Their commitment to awarding microcredentials aligned to career pathways is more than an act of good faith; it's an investment in what makes Harmony so valuable to their entire learning community of nearly 100,000 staff, students, parents, and collaborators spread across Texas.

We've heard the voices representing these roles and have seen how the program has been well-received by the teachers participating and even the students on the receiving end of their action research projects. In short, the commitment to building these pathways and offering incentives to teachers to sharpen their skills has made Harmony stronger and more effective in delivering high-quality learning experiences for their learners.

So, what if you would like to follow their lead in developing a new approach to professional learning for your educators? There are seven steps Harmony's leadership has taken to make this shift.

1. Defining a vision for a human capital investment plan.

Any project of this scale requires a plan replete with a thoroughly engineered approach to defining the scope. What problems are being solved? And what deficiencies and inefficiencies would be eliminated? Harmony

took their success from their prior grant-funded STEM program and thought out the long-term vision over a five-year plan for improvement laid out by their CEO, Fatih Ay. This document informed by conversations representing all stakeholders was the source for developing the microcredential program and clarified the project. They include:

- Evaluating the current state: we've learned at Harmony the current state often has some of the necessary pieces but working in silos and this needs to be addressed so they align on one another and work as gears propelling us forward.
- Setting the vision for the future state: we've known we wanted to improve practice in each classroom. We have also wanted to drastically improve retention of talent as teachers and administrators progress in their career journeys.
- Mapping out a plan to get there: researching the means to accomplish what we want to deliver in teaching and learning so we could devise individualized pathways for our staff to prepare for those shared goals.

2. Choosing a microcredential system:

Assessing elements that were already in place, the project team conducted a gap analysis for their processes and the needed system investment to operate it in a satisfactory way. For Harmony that meant partnering with **BloomBoard** to build the career pathways options and the modules that would constitute mastery to an end

where promoting a Harmony staffer to a new leadership role would be a decision they could feel confident about. With the outcome and system pieces defined, the project team set about designing the program.

Each organization is unique with its own priorities and needs. It might be hard to find an off-the-shelf system where you can plug in all microcredentials into your career pathways. Start with your organization by looking at roles and job descriptions, define what excellence/success should look like for each role, and then build out essential competencies and micro-credentials. One may find some ready-to-go microcredentials you can just take and plug into your system but you'll likely have to build some of your own desired competencies so the process looks more organic and appealing to your educators.

3. Building consensus & support

Harmony has a culture where taking on big projects is more the norm than the exception. Harmony curriculum director and grant facilitator, Robert Thornton said, "We make big launches, which is risky, but we listen to feedback and are quick to adapt to challenges with extra support, different expectations, or more clarity as needed."

To support this culture of taking calculated risks on initiatives that will affect all in the extended Harmony network, leaders have worked hard to implement what they hear from the field. Burak Yilmaz, Harmony's Director of Instruction said they prioritize, "...ongoing efforts to collect feedback and input, and when educators see that their input is making a difference, it impacts the consensus-building positively. They are more open and positive to engagement."

Asking more of the staff is always a sensitive topic for leaders. However, at Harmony, they've built a culture of supporting teachers with efficient changes in direction, and the microcredential and career pathways initiative was no different. Even so, such a program would only be successful if their teachers and administrators saw that this was a very realistic and approachable way to invest in themselves and their practice. Yilmaz expanded upon this saying, "As we get more input and consequently build more support systems to address educator needs, this is seen as an investment into their professional learning."

4. Funding the program

Harmony has an excellent track record of **winning grants** for funding their initiatives. Without grant funding, it might be more challenging to start such a journey, but looking at how much districts spend on professional development (PD) with little to no return, you realize it is worth the investment because ultimately the microcredentialing approach is more cost-effective than the traditional PD costs. So with careful and strategic budget planning another school or district can use other funding sources (such as state funds like the **Texas Education Agency affords schools here**) and still make a difference converting long-term planning and spending into a similar investment in teachers and principals.

5. Implementing the project plan

With a funded plan and all stakeholders current with the timeline, Harmony's central leadership brought in their school-level leaders across their entire network of schools. Sharing the project plan and delegating messaging responsibilities helped principals socialize the project as well as identify early hand-raisers from each building's teaching staff. These "mavens" served as front-running examples for their peers, earning the first microcredentials and seeing how the strategy accounted for competencies they had already mastered. This accelerated the adoption by way of testimonials shared among peers.

By increasing support systems tailored to educator needs and challenges, implementation scale also increases and we get better success. Harmony's "Share and Shine" method which was also highlighted in the previous Learner-Centered STEM series. For any new initiative, our approach is to share early successes in abundance and let those early champions shine under the spotlight. This approach provides acknowledgment and appreciation of our early adopters and motivates them to go further and deeper. It also gives critiques and nay-sayers real insider examples of how this can be done successfully and turns them into advocates as well. "Share and Shine" build optimism and expands our pool of early champions.

6. Changement management

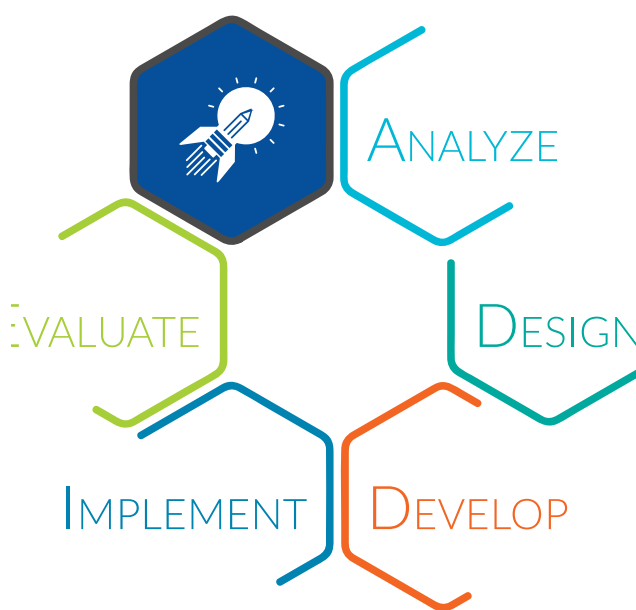
Like many schools, the culture of Harmony is one of the high expectations for students and staff alike. Those high expectations apply consistently to supporting staff in the same manner staff would support those students. This means no teacher is left to fend for themselves. The program may be voluntary, but that's to promote and recognize the agency of each educator to advance their career by targeting mutually agreed upon skills to master. When things don't go as planned, or a career pathway hits a snag while a staffer is attempting a module, leaders figure out who is struggling and why to intervene in a way the participant and the program are both tended to in a timely manner.

Harmony's leaders have found over the years that when it comes to supporting teachers with their microcredentials, peer support is more valuable and effective. That is another testimony to Harmony's teacher-led professional learning focus. Therefore, they have added a new support role for career pathways: Microcredential Ambassadors. These are teacher leaders who have already earned a bunch of microcredentials and are tasked with providing individual or group support to other teachers on their campuses to make their microcredentials experience more positive and help them cross the finish line.

7. Continued operation of a project

When Harmony's leaders approach a new initiative, they do so intentionally building upon existing work to fill gaps and revive the efficacy of those prior projects. When there's a sizable overlap in these initiatives, they merge or collapse the projects to reduce overhead and burden on all resources. Therefore, the microcredential program augmented their prior work establishing professional learning communities, that extended their professional learning work to shift to a project-based learning model. Undergirding all of these is their universal mission of creating a personalized learning experience for both teachers and students alike.

As microcredentials become a more integral part of Harmony's professional learning culture, leaders see the potential for other professional learning that can be augmented with microcredentials such as coaching, mentoring, SLOs, and even more traditional PD sessions. Harmony's instructional leaders have learned how to align a PD session with a microcredential to give participants a more hands-on PD experience where they get to analyze their current reality, design and develop a plan or a solution to a problem, and as soon as they leave that PD session, to implement that plan in their classroom and then reflect, evaluating their practice, using the ADDIE design framework embedded into professional learning cycles.



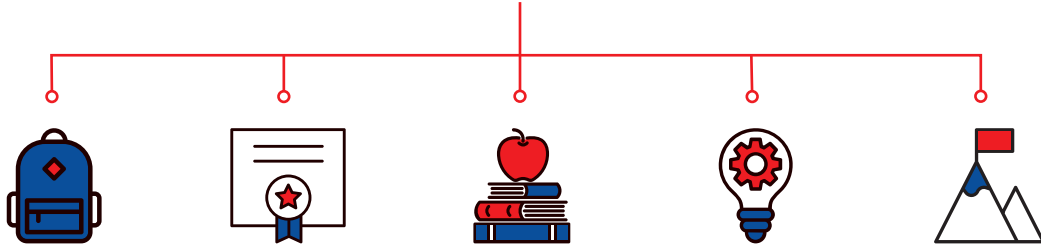
ADDIE Design Diagram, from BloomBoard

This approach helps teachers complete half of their microcredential requirements within a PD session and complete the remainder when they return to the classroom armed with a plan of action.

Harmony continues to refine its enterprise resource planning and strategic investment in their talent, promoting from within and increasing the value of the learning experience for thousands of teachers and learners across the state of Texas.

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Additional Resources



- [Microcredentials: A New Currency for Educator Advancement](#)
- [Developing A Student-Centered Workforce Through Micro-Credentials](#)
- [Teacher Incentive Allotment: Rewarding Teacher Excellence In Texas](#)
- [Harmony Microcredential Initiative](#)
- [Harmony Microcredential Initiative FAQ](#)
- [Bite-Sized, Tailored, and Job-Embedded](#)
- [Western Governor University: Professional Development vs. Professional Learning](#)
- [Getting Through: Distributive Leadership](#)
- [Harmony Public Schools Career Pathways Through Micro-Credentials](#)
- [Designing a Rigorous Microcredential Assessment Process](#)
- [Competency-Based Pd: A Recipe for Educator Success](#)
- [Microcredentials: A Game-Changing Opportunity for Teachers' Professional Growth](#)
- [HPS Microcredentials & Career Pathways Program Catalog](#)



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