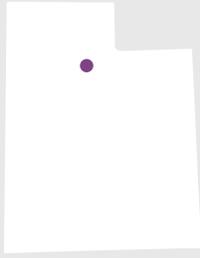




Weilenmann School of Discovery

CASE STUDY



LOCATION: Park City, UT

Micro-credentials in Action

How competency-based professional learning is gaining ground at one school in Utah.



“Competency-based learning always has the advantage over any other learning because it is genuine, and it is immediately felt... It’s the only way to learn. There isn’t another way.”

The Weilenmann School of Discovery is blazing new trails in professional learning. Listen as administrators, new teachers and masters of pedagogy share what they’re doing, and why it matters.

On the outskirts of Park City, Utah, sits a school.

It’s tucked out of view from the highway that streaks past. You’d drive right by if you didn’t know it was there — but if you’re someone who cares about high-quality teaching and learning, that would be a mistake.

Parents and students alike are drawn to the Weilenmann School of Discovery for its project-based learning program that integrates science, the arts, outdoor education, technology and more into its core curriculum. Teachers come for the tight-knit collegial community and the collaborative culture of professional development.

That’s not an accident, said Cindy Phillips, Weilenmann’s executive director. *“Teaching...tends to lend itself to burnout, and the only way to really counter that is to have a dynamic environment — both the inner mind and the organization that you work in — that feeds that inner student.”*

Like any school, teachers at Weilenmann need ongoing professional development. College coursework and student teaching aren’t enough to provide new teachers with all of the content or pedagogical knowledge they’ll need. And many teachers follow alternative routes into the profession.

Cindy and her team set out to create an environment that challenges teachers to continually refine their practice. One that teachers love, that keeps burnout at bay. They saw their teachers differentiating instruction for students, and knew that to meet the needs of a teaching force with disparate backgrounds and experience levels, they needed to do the same in professional development.

Enter competency-based learning.

Cindy said that competency-based learning, with its emphasis on mastery rather than hours spent, gives teachers the ability to truly master a skill and apply it with confidence right away. Weilenmann grades students on mastery as well, rather than points. *“It’s the only way to learn. There isn’t another way.”*

Competency-based professional learning allows the school to meet the needs of the most veteran teachers, as well as those with the least experience. And it helps Weilenmann innovate as a school. *“I believed that, were I to bring this opportunity to my teachers, they would embrace it — that many of them would go far and above what the minimum requirements are, and that it would stimulate them to bring us new and innovative ideas for our school.”*

Cindy and her team looked for a way to provide personalized, competency-based learning to every teacher and staff member. They wanted a curriculum with depth, something that was multi-faceted and would not be one-size-fits-all. It had to be user-friendly, relevant, something that could be used right away on Monday morning, and it had to meet Weilenmann's demanding quality standards.

They chose Frontline Professional Growth, offering educators three primary tools to drive their own professional learning:

- **Micro-credentials.** Teachers or other staff can choose a given competency or skill in which to pursue a micro-credential, and in Frontline Professional Growth, they work through a series of steps — providing evidence to demonstrate mastery, engaging in additional learning if required — to earn the credential.
- **Groups and classroom video.** Collaborative groups in Frontline Professional Growth provide a place for teachers to work together, share lesson plans and artifacts, and — key to what Weilenmann is doing — record and share videos of teachers' own instructional practice. Peers, mentors, coaches and administrators can then offer feedback on those videos, and videos are required as evidence to earn certain micro-credentials.
- **Online courses and videos.** A library of over 800 SCORM-compliant courses and over 2,300 videos of real-life classroom practice offer just-in-time learning to support each individual teacher's goals. Online videos are also often used to provide supplemental learning for micro-credentials.

"The multi-dimensional nature of this tool, I felt, best met the multi-dimensional needs of our people."

Taking a step in a new direction.

Prior to using Frontline, professional development at Weilenmann looked a lot like what you would see in other school systems. They brought in experts to speak. They sent teachers to conferences, then asked them to bring back what they learned and present to the rest of the faculty. Now, they use micro-credentials, groups and online video to supplement those efforts and provide more personalized learning opportunities.

Starting out, it was new territory. *"None of us has ever done what we're trying to do. We've never seen it done. It wasn't done for us as students,"* Cindy said, but they knew they wanted to give it a try. *"We talked about how glorious it would be if we could bring something with this kind of differentiation to our teachers."*

Spoiler alert: it's working. But pivotal to Weilenmann's success, in Cindy's view, was undergoing a 2½ day "boot camp" known as Strategic Success Planning. This service from Frontline Education helps ensure that schools and districts actually see success in implementing micro-credentials. Initially, they were skeptical, thinking it would be dry and redundant. *"We dutifully went anyway."*

During this time, Cindy and her team spent several days off-site spelling out their professional learning vision, setting goals, mapping the tools in Frontline Professional Growth to address their challenges and creating a 3-5 year plan for success. *"We were absolutely surprised by how effective and streamlined this boot camp was run. And we got a great product out of it. In the end it really comes down to that, doesn't it?"*

With documented vision and goals, including specifics for timelines, accountability measures, incentives and support, the administration at Weilenmann began to roll out their new professional learning initiative.

Out of the gate.

They knew that if teachers didn't see it as valuable, the effort would be dead on arrival. So prior to the start of the 2017-2018 school year, they introduced the idea to teachers, giving examples of some of the curriculum that teachers could access. They set modest requirements and gave teachers a small financial stipend for each of the first three micro-credentials they completed.

Just as importantly, teachers chose the micro-credentials they wanted to pursue. That's critical, Cindy said. Even for those teachers who were on formal improvement plans, discussions about which micro-credentials to earn were collaborative, not unilateral.

“There are all kinds of ways to incentivize, but to remind people that that time was valuable to you, that you now expect them to use it and to enrich their colleagues, their students, the institution, and that you expect them to come back to you at some point and tell you how to do what you’re doing better at the school... if you have a culture that allows for all of those things, the professional development is incredibly meaningful.”

A few micro-credentials, though, are required as teachers work toward school-wide goals and priority standards. In 2017-2018, Weilenmann set their sights on a culture of achievement, so they assigned topics like classroom management, building relationships with students and collaborating with students.

Other micro-credentials are more nitty-gritty, like one covering bloodborne pathogens for teachers who worked in safety-critical situations. New teachers coming through alternative routes were assigned micro-credentials with a strong component of professional practices. *“The completion of a micro-credential like that brought a measure of professionalism to that colleague that I’m not sure we could have achieved within even a two-year period of experience,”* said Cindy.

Micro-credentials are also tied to teacher evaluation results. *“They’re usually attendant to an observation that’s formal or informal, because we do both, and we ask our teachers to set very specific goals that are aligned to our state standards of professionalism,”* Cindy said. Then, they identify the micro-credentials that support those goals.

Classroom video.

From a teacher’s vantage point, micro-credentials can be both comforting and stretching. They’re comforting because they can fit into otherwise busy schedules like a Tetris piece, and provide a safe space to learn and grow. They’re stretching because they necessarily focus on areas the teacher can grow.

For teachers, Cindy said, recording a video of a lesson in the classroom is stretching as well, in all the right ways. Sometimes teachers will submit a video as evidence for a micro-credential. Sometimes, for self-reflection, or to share with colleagues

and get feedback. As every teacher at Weilenmann is asked to engage in the process — administrators included — the benefits become clear. *“It’s hard to watch, but very beneficial,”* said 2nd grade teacher Kacey Warburton. *“It’s super beneficial because I’m not going to make those same mistakes again...it made me more aware of how I teach.”*

Recording and sharing classroom video doesn’t have to be a big production. While the school provides some technical support and swivel cameras that track a teacher around the room, a smartphone will get the job done as well. Once the video is uploaded through an app, teachers can review for self-reflection or invite peers to watch as well. Colleagues leave time-coded comments and observations about the teacher’s delivery and interaction with students, and about students’ behavior and how they engaged with the lesson.

Assistant Lower School Director Kat Mitchell told the story of a first grade teacher who was quite nervous to record herself teaching. But thanks to Weilenmann’s trusting environment, she did, and she shared those videos with her team. *“That group was able to say, ‘Oh, these are the things that went well for her. These are the things that didn’t go well.’ And then they also helped her solve a problem of behavior management within her classroom. That was wonderful.”*

Kat also appreciates the way Frontline Professional Growth lets teachers connect and share ideas. *“Whenever they have the time — they don’t have to be together to collaborate — they can record and submit, and other teachers can watch what they’re doing. They can share problems they’re having. They can share successes they’re having. They can ask for help. They can say, ‘This is the lesson I recorded. I’m having a problem connecting all of these pieces together.’ And as an administrator, you can watch it. Why would you not want that option?”*

They key, she said, is creating a safe environment for these conversations to happen. *“Once they know that recording is not like a formal evaluation, they’re much more comfortable. They’re much more open to feedback.”*

A vast video library.

For Steve Williams, an English teacher at Weilenmann and the Middle School Dean, middle schoolers get a bad rap. *“They are pretty energetic, and for the most part, love to learn. They love to be challenged, and they enjoy being treated with respect.”* Steve comes from a family of teachers (*“It’s part of who I am”*) and is constantly looking for ways to better serve his middle school students.

The challenge, though, is making sure that the time he spends in professional learning is relevant to his classes right now.

“Sometimes what happens with professional development is you get really excited in the moment, and then you come back and it’s three months before there is an opportunity to use it.” Frontline’s library of online videos gives him the option to engage in just-in-time learning that he can put into practice right away. *“In fact, that’s how I’ve used the videos themselves. I’ve had questions like, ‘I’m struggling with how to work with students who maybe are on the autistic spectrum.’ And I’ve looked up videos. ‘Oh, here’s an idea, I can try that right now. I can try this in 10 minutes when I have these students in class.’”*

Melissa Shunn-Mitchell, the Lower School Director, agrees. *“A resource where the topics and concepts are already organized helps streamline my job in supporting teachers because I can identify what it is I’m looking for. Having the concepts and strategies organized on the website saves so much time – I’m not having to search for things.”*

One year in.

The Weilenmann School of Discovery is now in year two of their plan. They are already seeing tremendous growth.

For starters, Cindy said, they’re now much more effective at customizing a curriculum of study for novice teachers – those who are struggling or who have just entered the field, and those who left the profession and recently came back. And she loves having resources that align with their institution as well

as state goals. *“We finally have amazing resources that we can bring to bear on the mentoring and support we’re trying to give our teachers,”* she said.

Weilenmann’s foray into competency-based learning has even impacted their more traditional professional development. *“When you’ve experienced the micro-credentials, the collegial films and collaborative groups that you can access through Frontline, you now know what good, consistent, yearlong professional development looks like. And you actually impose that structure as much as possible on the traditional professional development you’re bringing in....That has been one of the unexpected, delightful and productive results it has had on other types of development and training that we do at the school.”*

Teachers, Cindy said, feel it too. They have never had so many aces up their sleeve – ways to address weaknesses, improve strengths and collaborate with colleagues. *“It helps them to achieve their yearly personal goals. It helps their entire team to elevate itself. They also understand that it’s as a team – that you elevate yourself not just as an individual – and they have implemented observably better teaching practices in their classrooms, and better pedagogies in general.”*

Teachers love having the ability to direct their own learning, Cindy said. With an eye toward goals rather than a focus on deficits, professional learning empowers teachers, encourages collaboration and cuts through the isolation that many teachers feel. It helps to build the collegial community that is so attractive to the teachers at Weilenmann.

But what about student growth? Cindy said that, yes, using Frontline Professional Growth has made a noticeable impact in the classroom.

“We have a happy school that I think is improving in its culture because when you have happy teachers who know what they’re doing, students simply respond to that. We’re seeing it most in our RTI results, interventions, where you are giving tiered instruction to students who need additional support. That requires a teacher who has a lot of tools in his tool bag. It requires somebody who is not going to become discouraged because the

first two interventions didn't work, but if you don't have more than those two interventions, what are you going to do? You develop, you discover, you try tested and true interventions that you have been able to learn, access and see modeled through [Frontline Professional Growth]. And that ability to expand the offering of multi-tiered systems of support for our students at our school, I believe, has made a measurable difference in the improvement of interventions. We've been able to leverage and support students' learning to get them back to grade level or move them forward beyond grade level."

The future of professional learning.

Competency-based learning, including micro-credentials and the support for online collaboration that Frontline Professional Growth offers, Cindy said, is the wave of the future. "We're going to need this kind of tool, the tool that Frontline has provided us, to ensure that the quality of teaching is up to standard at our institution, but then continues to improve and push the envelope on excellence in pedagogy."

"Making a reality of what you always hope you can bring to your teachers as an institution – you always hope you can bring continuing education, essentially. You always hope you can bring a group that is dynamic, that has a growth mindset, that wants to help each other, that isn't afraid to continue to learn and to say, 'I need learning.' That is always your goal as an institution, but it's actually really hard to create."

"Most of us do it all right. But by using this tool, we have actually come close – I think that next year might be even a better year, and we had a wonderful year last year – but we have come very close to achieving our goals of making meaningful, usable, satisfying, collaborative, continuing education a seamless part of everything we do at our school. And that's my favorite thing about using Frontline Education, and I just love it for that reason."

Yes, micro-credentials can work for you, too.

Just as the teachers at the Weilenmann School of Discovery use the Learning & Collaboration Resources in Frontline Professional Growth to access micro-credentials, share classroom videos and collaborate together, the teachers at your schools can, too.



Want to see how it works? We can't wait to show you.

Schedule a demo at www.FrontlineEducation.com/UtahMC

