

Career And Technical Education Is The Theme

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It has almost become cliché to say that it is an exciting time for career and technical education (CTE), but only because it continues to be true. Over the past few years, the interest and support for CTE has grown exponentially. Policymakers at all levels have been working to advance opportunities for learners to engage in CTE, and they have been working to strengthen the links between CTE and the labor market, as well as other significant education efforts.

In 2013, for example, all but three states had some legislative, regulatory or administrative action around CTE; and 2014 is shaping up to be an even bigger year for state action on CTE-related policies and issues, with about a dozen governors explicitly mentioning CTE in their State of the State addresses. In the past 12 months, Congress has held three hearings on the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins), and CTE was a key feature in President Obama's State of the Union's education priorities.

Those in the CTE community have long understood its value in preparing individuals with the skills they need to succeed in the workplace. And, as times have changed, we have come to understand that CTE needs to evolve to better align to the shifting demands of our economy, employers and students. This can best be demonstrated by the evolution from vocational education to career and technical education.

This is not just a name change or a rebranding effort, but rather a true transformation of the field. While vocational education was primarily focused on preparing a subset of students for jobs right out of high school, career and technical education is focused on helping all students build pathways to the careers of their choice.

In 2010, the state CTE directors from all 50 states and U.S. territories came together in support of a common vision for what high-quality CTE can and must be to meet its full promise. This vision was encapsulated in the document, "Reflect, Transform, Lead: A New Vision for Career Technical Education" (www.Careertech.org/cte-vision), which defines our principles and beliefs and charts a bold agenda for the future.

This vision for CTE is structured around five interconnected principles— global competition, employer engagement, college and career readiness, programs of study and data/return on investment. Each of these principles represents both a theme in high-quality CTE, as well as a driver of many of the emerging state policies to advance CTE. And these principles are all central to ongoing discussions in Washington, D.C., about the reauthorization of Perkins, providing a glimpse into possible future federal policy.

Principle 1: CTE Is Critical to Ensuring That the u.S. leads in Global Competitiveness

Our nation's competitiveness largely comes down to two factors: our ability to innovate and our overall productivity. High-quality CTE is central to both these factors, in terms of its ability to offer education and training in highskilled and high-demand fields, as well as provide many opportunities for students to demonstrate their innovation and ingenuity through hands-on, project-based learning. In short, this principle speaks both to the need to expand high-quality CTE and as a call to action for ensuring that the CTE programs being offered are of the highest quality.

One ongoing barrier to our competitiveness is the skills mismatch, or the disconnect between the skills demanded by employers and the skills of our current workforce. CTE is the most proactive approach to addressing this challenge, as it can provide secondary and postsecondary students with both specific occupational skills, as well as the broader and transferable knowledge, skills and dispositions that position them as adaptable workers and lifelong learners.

In fact, some states—such as Alabama, Tennessee and South Carolina— have used their investments in CTE to lure and retain international companies and prepare students to vie for jobs across the globe.

Principle 2: CTE Actively Partners With Employers to Design and Provide High-quality, Dynamic Programs

There is widespread agreement that employers are essential to guiding CTE programmatic content and technology to keep it on the cutting edge. Employers are key partners in offering students workbased learning opportunities, as well as opportunities for teachers and faculty to stay up to date in the industries in which they teach.

Recently, there has been growing support to find ways to better engage the business community by providing grants to support partner-driven programs (Arizona and California), expanding apprenticeship programs (Iowa), creating tax

incentives for companies providing work-based learning opportunities (Indiana and Connecticut) and developing guidelines for local High School to Work Partnerships (Virginia), among others.

Principle 3: CTE Prepares Students to Succeed in Further Education and Careers

“College and career readiness” has become the new norm, with every state around the country anchoring its education system in the goal of students being prepared for life after high school. While college and career readiness is defined in many ways, we believe that to be college and career-ready, students must possess the academic, technical and employability skills that prepare them for the careers of their choice.

Or, to put it another way, too often there is still a false choice between being college-ready and being career-ready. With more than two-thirds of jobs requiring education and training beyond high school, the reality is that college is now a part of any student’s career pathway. The overlap between college and career readiness is particularly clear, given that approximately 30 percent of all dual-enrolled credits earned by high school students are in CTE courses, and that 75 percent of high school graduates who took at least three CTE courses enroll in postsecondary education within two years.

Some states are tackling college- and career-ready policies using a comprehensive approach. Wisconsin, Tennessee and Arizona are identifying ways for rigorous CTE courses to count toward academic requirements, while North Carolina and Ohio have built endorsements on top of their college- and career-ready diplomas for students engaging in CTE coursework and experiences. Georgia has made CTE participation and success a major element in its new college- and career-ready accountability system.

Principle 4: CTE Programs Are Delivered Through Comprehensive Programs of Study Aligned to the national Career Clusters® Framework

As CTE evolves to meet 21st-century demands, the structure and delivery system has had to change also. Stand-alone courses that provide only narrow, occupationally focused training at the secondary and postsecondary levels are increasingly being phased out to make way for programs of study, which are non-duplicative sequences of academic and technical courses that include both secondary- and postsecondary- level content and opportunities for high school students to earn postsecondary credit, and culminate in industry-based credentials and/or postsecondary degrees (as appropriate).

With multiple entry and exit points for students, programs of study provide a model that works at the secondary, postsecondary and even workforce development level to offer a more coordinated and comprehensive education and training experience.

Many states are transforming their CTE systems through programs of study. Nevada and Tennessee have both committed to approving only course standards for courses that fit within a program of study. Minnesota only funds CTE programs that are jointly developed by secondary and postsecondary consortia. The move toward programs of study was also the driver of the development of the Common Career Technical Core, which are end-of-program-of-study standards developed by 42 states.

Principle 5: CTE Is a results-driven System That Demonstrates a Positive return on Investment

The final principle embraces the critical importance of accountability and data-driven decisions to ensure programs are aligned to the economy’s needs and that resources are directed toward areas of highest need. We understand the necessity to demonstrate a positive return on investment and have been working for data systems to collaborate and coordinate to ensure that this is possible.

There is a range of strategies and approaches one could take to measure return on investment—by student achievement, attainment and post-program success; employer satisfaction; the market value of degree and industry certifications being earned; and reduction of the skills gap or mismatch in a state or community. By marrying authentic anecdotes with hard data, we have been able to make the case for CTE more credibly, with clear payoffs.

While most state accountability systems are not set up in a way to assess the full picture of a CTE program’s return on investment, there are some states leading the way. The Kentucky Community College System has codified “high-demand” and “high-wage” careers and aims to only offer programs aligned to those constructs. Missouri, Florida and Kansas are working to evaluate the range of industry-recognized credentials and technical skills assessments and only support those that have clear value to students and employers. And organizations like the Workforce Data Quality Campaign are leading efforts to bring about strong data systems that link K–12, postsecondary and workforce development data.

Conclusion

As I wrote earlier, the cliché holds true— it's an exciting time to be in CTE. There's little question that we are in the middle of a truly transformative moment. In fact, CTE has reached a tipping point, one we can capitalize on only if we keep on challenging ourselves and our programs to continually improve. We cannot and should not rest on our laurels. For CTE to continue to attract attention and support from the broader education and policy community—and meet its inherent goal of preparing students for the careers of their choice—we must all commit to developing, promoting and sustaining programs and policies that fully reflect the new vision for CTE.

STATE SPOTLIGHT

SOUTH DAKOTA

In the past year, South Dakota has made CTE a major priority for the state. In 2012, Gov. Dennis Daugaard established South Dakota WINS (www.southdakotawins.com), a 20-point plan to get more South Dakotans trained and ready to work in a rapidly growing and changing economy, which has a core focus on preparing youth.

In early 2014, Daugaard awarded \$8.5 million to 12 school districts that were the recipients of the Governor's Grants for Career & Technical Education (funded by South Dakota's Future Fund). These grants are being distributed across the school districts to expand dual enrollment in CTE, add CTE at the middle school level and modernize equipment and facilities. The governor also made \$3.7 million in equipment grants and \$1.5 million in critical workforce-needs scholarships available to high-demand programs at the state's four postsecondary technical institutes. Finally, the legislature approved a tuition buy-down for the 2014–15 school year to keep the cost of postsecondary technical programs affordable for students.

As the governor noted in his State of the State address: "CTE is at the intersection of education and economic development. ... I cannot overstate the importance of these programs. CTE programs are very closely aligned with our state's workforce needs, from welding and machining, to healthcare and information technology, to engineering and biosciences." According to State CTE Director Tiffany Sanderson, "Gov. Daugaard values CTE as an important component of the state's workforce development strategy ... and seeks to bolster regional implementations of rigorous, high-quality CTE programs at all levels. In turn, existing programs will be strengthened, new programs will be developed, stronger alignments between secondary and postsecondary programs will be created and workforce needs will be met."

TENNESSEE

Over the past two years, Tennessee has undertaken a significant overhaul of its CTE system and basic way of doing business. This overhaul is driven by statewide initiatives like Pathways Tennessee, the Tennessee Promise (www.state.tn.us/education/cte/PathwaysTN.shtml), which covers tuition for the first two years of postsecondary education and a multi-phase revision of the state's CTE course standards, programs of study and assessments.

Overall, the state's transformation has four main components:

1. Employment of data-driven decision-making throughout all aspects of work and the ability to fully justify every recommendation made using said data.
2. Development and promotion of a secondary-postsecondary-industry pathway approach, facilitated by the creation of a strong interagency strategy for braiding education and industry to align with the state's priorities. Tennessee is only approving and developing CTE courses with rigorous standards that fit within a program of study with clear alignment to postsecondary and industry offerings. The state's programs of study also include general education courses, early postsecondary courses (i.e., dual credit and advanced placement) and capstone work-based learning opportunities.
3. Development of a new and robust "lifecycle approach" to CTE teacher and CTE director training and professional development.
4. Hiring of a well-skilled, highly motivated senior team and staff members who are committed to transforming CTE in Tennessee.

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