

National Association of State Boards of Education

Career Readiness and CTE in a Post-NCLB World

By Ace Parsi

Policymakers have long realized that integration and alignment of core academics with career and technical education (CTE) and hands-on learning significantly improve student achievement, on-time graduation, and postsecondary success and increase future wages.¹ Despite efforts to bridge the chronic divide between academics and CTE, the two domains have remained stubbornly separate in many states. A few have made headway in helping students become career ready, and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides new incentives for more states to do likewise.

Students in many US schools have long been tracked down either a college preparatory or a CTE road. This tracking has often been inequitable, with students of color and other traditionally underserved students being sent down the vocational track while their white and more affluent peers are sent down the academic track.

Another problem with segregating academics and CTE is that success in many careers in the 21st century economy requires both rigor in academic disciplines and hands-on, engaging experiences typically reserved for those in the vocational track. A recent survey of American companies highlighted that a third of companies had positions for which they couldn't find qualified workers.² A survey of Business Roundtable members showed that 95 percent were reporting skills shortages—a fact reaffirmed in both employer and postsecondary faculty surveys.³ State and federal policymakers have a role in ensuring that students are

better prepared for success in the US economy by acquiring knowledge, skills, and dispositions during their K-12 years.

FEDERAL LAWS

Two laws were originally designed to separately support academic education and vocational experiences. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed in 1965 to equalize opportunities and access to a strong academic education regardless of background. Congress passed the original Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act in 1984 to support students' vocational experiences. As these laws have been reauthorized over the years, there has been greater convergence between them. For example, the 2006 reauthorization of the Perkins law replaced the phrase “vocational education” with “career and technical education” and emphasized the importance of integrating traditional vocational experiences with rigorous academic experiences.

ESSA, the 2015 reauthorization of ESEA, places greater emphasis than its predecessors on integrating CTE with college preparatory academics and hands-on learning. These ESSA provisions expand opportunities for states and districts:

State Plans. In ESSA-required state plans, states must address how their academic standards align with the requirements of both state postsecondary education institutions and relevant state CTE standards.

Local Education Agency (LEA) Plans. ESSA encourages LEAs to use their plans to address how they will use funds to integrate academic, CTE, and work-based learning opportunities.

Educator Capacity. Title II funds under ESSA can be used to support professional development and instructional strategies that integrate academic and CTE practices.

Serving Traditionally Disadvantaged Students. ESSA includes several references to using CTE as a resource to serve traditionally disadvantaged students, including through direct student services. Provisions of the law specifically mention services to Native American students and English language learners.

STATE POLICY ACTIONS

States can take several proactive policy actions to seize the benefits ESSA makes available:

Align academic and CTE standards in ways that enhance the rigor of both. States can facilitate opportunities for CTE and non-CTE educators and experts to come together to better align CTE and academic standards and promote coherence among courses.

Prepare educators to integrate CTE and academic disciplines. States can ensure their Title II plans emphasize how all educators—not just CTE educators—can integrate academic, CTE, and work-based learning, and states can support partnerships between schools and employers.

Incorporate career-relevant indicators in state assessment and accountability systems. States can leverage the new authority ESSA provides in developing state assessment and accountability systems to embrace indicators such as attainment of industry credentials, participation in work-based learning opportunities, and results on performance assessments that call on students to demonstrate their learning in more meaningful ways.

Leverage approaches that integrate academics and CTE within school improvement systems. States can

choose school improvement strategies for persistently failing schools that use evidence-based approaches such as career academies and small, thematic learning communities as pillars of their overall school improvement systems.

In taking these and similar actions, states can have the best of both worlds: a higher bar for learning in academics and meaningful opportunities for students to apply their learning to real-life situations. Fortunately, many states recognize the value in this convergence. A number of innovative state efforts can serve as models for other states.

Kentucky. While many states have made “college and career readiness” their mantra, career readiness has often lagged behind. Kentucky, by contrast, has focused on breaking down the barriers between college and career readiness. In 2012, the state moved oversight of all CTE programs to the state education agency. This step reinforced a number of others: Kentucky added performance on ACT WorkKeys and attainment of industry certifications as a statewide accountability indicator for career readiness and recommended that districts provide professional development for all educators emphasizing content and integration of academic and CTE disciplines.

Tennessee. In 2012, Tennessee began a three-phase process to strengthen the rigor of its CTE courses. First, it eliminated redundant courses and streamlined others to align with statewide postsecondary demands (Phase 1, 2013–14). Next, the state revised existing courses and developed ones that focused more intensively on the knowledge and skills students need to succeed in postsecondary education and the workforce (Phase 2, 2014–15). Now it is using more rigorous approaches to assess how successfully it has integrated CTE and academic disciplines (Phase 3, 2015–17). At the same time, the state has set up teacher externships to give educators a better understanding of the postsecondary and workforce demands their students are expected to meet.

California. Perhaps no state has done more to infuse academic-CTE integration into

its educational DNA than California. It has aligned over 13,000 CTE courses that now meet statewide admission requirements set by the University of California postsecondary education system. In 2008, the California State Board of Education approved a state plan for CTE, “A Bridge to the Future 2008–12,” which gives further guidance to CTE programs on how they can remain dynamic and responsive to changing workforce needs. The state also provided lesson plans and professional development to support its vision for CTE.

The most significant action the Golden State has taken to integrate CTE and academics is its adoption of Linked Learning, a strategy to integrate college preparatory academics with a CTE industry theme, work-based learning, and support services. In 2013–14, the state legislature allocated \$250 million for a Career Pathways Trust initiative that funded a number of these schoolwide programs. Past evaluations of similar comprehensive programs—in particular, California Partnership Academies—have shown increased graduation rates and completion of college preparatory courses when compared with peer students not in the program.

What these and other programs that integrate academic and CTE disciplines demonstrate is that states can view academic and career programs as a single track—reinforcing elements on one road toward getting all students college, career, and civic ready. As ESSA gives states greater flexibility over their education systems as a whole, more states can seize the opportunity in this area to ensure brighter futures for their students and the workforce.

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RESOURCES

National Association of State Boards of Education. *Bolstering the Second ‘C’ in College and Career Readiness*, Report of the NASBE Career Readiness Study Group. Alexandria, VA: NASBE, 2015, <http://www.nasbe.org/study-group-report/bolstering-the-second-c-in-college-and-career-readiness/>.

Advance CTE. “Putting Learner Success First: A Share Vision for the Future of CTE.” Silver Spring, MD, 2015.

Council of Chief State School Officers. *Opportunities and Options: Making Career Preparation Work for Students*, Taskforce on Improving Career Readiness. Washington, DC: CCSSO, 2014, <http://www.ccsso.org/documents/2014/>.

Achieve Inc. and Advance CTE. *How States Are Making Career Readiness Count: Update 2016*. Washington, DC, and Silver Spring, MD, 2016, <https://careertech.org/sites/default/files/MakingCareerReadinessCountUpdate-2016.pdf>.

ConnectEd: The California Center for College and Careers has a number of publications that are relevant to academic and CTE integration. Resources are available at http://www.connectedcalifornia.org/linked_learning/resources.

NOTES

1. Association for Career and Technical Education, *CTE Works* (Alexandria, VA, 2016); J. Kemple, *Career Academies: Long-Term Impacts on Work, Education, and Transitions to Adulthood* (New York, NY: MDRC, 2008).
2. Manpower Group, *The Talent Shortage Persists* (Milwaukee, WI, 2015), <http://www.manpowergroup.us/campaigns/talent-shortage-2015/assets/pdf/2015-Talent-Shortage-Infographic.pdf>.
3. Business Roundtable, “Workforce Skills Survey: Results Overview” (Washington, DC, 2012); American Management Association, AMA-- 2010 *Critical Skills Survey* (Washington, DC, 2010); Jill Casner-Lotto and Linda Barrington, *Are They Really Ready to Work?* (New York: Conference Board, 2006); David Conley, *Redefining College Readiness* (Eugene, OR: Center for Education Policy and Research, 2007).