



Strengthening America's Investment in Career and Technical Education



Opportunities to Improve the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act

PURPOSE

America's students deserve multiple educational pathways that prepare them for meaningful careers and economic mobility. High-quality career and technical education (CTE) can benefit [many students](#), including those excelling academically and seeking real-life applications of academic concepts, disengaged or struggling students who are not served well by traditional academics, students at risk of dropping out entirely, and [students with disabilities](#).

ISSUE

Families, employers, school districts, states, and the federal government all are [eager](#) to expand high school and postsecondary CTE pathways. At the federal level, the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act is the main legislation that supports state and local investment in K-12 CTE education. Its bipartisan reauthorization in 2018 (known as "Perkins V") was an important step forward, encouraging stronger alignment with labor market demands, multi-course "programs of study," and data-driven performance targets.

Even so, the CTE system still is not delivering the outcomes that students and taxpayers deserve. As leading researchers [note](#), the prevalence of low-quality CTE risks giving "a false sense of progress," as "in too many places, CTE remains a loose set of electives with little structure or alignment to industry standards." Most industry-recognized credentials are [not valued](#) by industry and [do not deliver](#) economic gains. Students experience [widely varied](#) outcomes. Further, it remains difficult for states and districts to align their CTE plans with other education and workforce strategies, resulting in a fragmented, inefficient system that is hard for students to navigate.

SOLUTION

Congress can improve economic opportunity by passing CTE policies that focus the system more on program quality and labor-market relevance, direct taxpayer funds to evidence-based models, and help states streamline their education and workforce systems.

- **Prioritize High-Quality, Relevant CTE Pathways**
 - › **Set a strong and clear floor for "high-wage" pathways towards which states must deploy funds.** Perkins V emphasizes pathways that focus on a "high-skill, high-wage, or in-demand sector or occupation." That "or" should be an "and." Policymakers should require states to emphasize pathways that are in high-wage fields and lead to [credentials of value](#).
 - › **Support states in analyzing the outcomes of various pathways and credentials**, and require that they adjust accordingly. States like Indiana, Georgia, Mississippi, and Arkansas are pioneering the use of "[return on investment](#)" analyses of CTE programs. Federal policy can help make the needed data more accessible and call for states to adjust CTE programs based on outcomes without mandating specific adjustments.



- **Direct Funding to Programs that Work**

- › **Encourage evidence-based innovation and evaluation.** Congress should enhance the Perkins Innovation and Modernization grant program by creating a tiered funding structure based on evidence thresholds like those established in the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program authorized in the Every Student Succeeds Act.
- › **Support more comprehensive CTE models and more rigorous program approval criteria.** The best evidence for CTE's impact comes from multi-year, well-structured models like [CTE-focused high schools](#) and “[career academies](#)” (i.e., career-focused schools within schools), which integrate technical, academic, and professional skill-building. CTE-focused dual enrollment is also showing promise, but access [varies widely](#), and [new evidence](#) highlights potential benefits of raising the bar on CTE programs offered in traditional high schools, too. CTE policy should encourage models like these, which demonstrate better outcomes than thinly spread funding, scattershot courses, and low-value credentials in rigorous studies.
- › **Revisit and modernize historically bipartisan performance-based funding authorities and bonus fund pools** to expand access to high-impact postsecondary CTE programs that are especially impactful for low-income students and students in rural areas.

- **Support States in Building Aligned Education and Workforce Systems**

- › **Encourage stronger alignment across Perkins CTE and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) state plans** by preferencing combined plans. A few states currently have combined plans, which provide a structure for improving alignment between youth and adult systems, including common definitions and prioritized credentials that allow for smoother interaction between the 2 systems. Policy could encourage more combined planning, such as by requiring federal agencies to expedite review of combined plans and incentivizing them with blending, braiding, or reporting flexibilities.
- › **Revise performance indicators to focus more on outcomes and align with other policies**, such as by looking at earnings growth relative to program cost for postsecondary CTE, which would parallel Workforce Pell and the proposed A Stronger Workforce for America Act. The federal government can also provide clarity to states on concepts like participation in work-based learning to improve data consistency, usefulness, and alignment with indicators under consideration elsewhere.

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