

Career Technical Education & Employer Engagement

A Five-Year Progress Report on Reflect, Transform & Lead

In 2010, the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium (NASDCTE) convened a seminal event that resulted in all 50 states and many partners committing to the principles and action steps defined in [*Reflect, Transform & Lead: A New Vision for Career Technical Education*](#), specifically that, for CTE to reach its full promise, it must:

1. Ensure that the United States leads in global competitiveness;
2. Actively partner with employers to design and provide high-quality, dynamic programs;
3. Prepare students to succeed in further education and careers;
4. Be delivered through comprehensive programs of study aligned to The National Career Clusters® Framework; and
5. Be a results-driven system that demonstrates a positive return on investment.

This Vision has been impactful, resulting in tangible advances – some of which we will highlight below – as well as many intangible benefits. Most importantly, this Vision has provided a clear signal to the CTE community about the direction in which we are moving collectively and to the nation that we are committed to high-quality programs.

Now, five years later and with more interest and activity around CTE and career readiness than ever before, it is time to revisit this Vision. In anticipation of “The Future of CTE Summit,” we have written a series of short briefs to take stock of what has been accomplished and what still needs attention since the release of the original Vision.

This brief will explore the second principle: ***CTE actively partners with employers to design and provide high-quality, dynamic programs***

CTE aligns its programmatic offerings to current, emerging and projected labor market needs. Therefore, partnership with business and industry is absolutely essential to our success. Drawing our curricula, standards and organizing principles from the workplace, employers are critical partners in the design and delivery of CTE programs.

To accomplish this, we will:

- ✓ Partner with business and industry organizations to develop and implement rigorous, internationally benchmarked CTE programs of study that are aligned to state, national and international economic demands and industry standards
- ✓ Partner with business and industry organizations to ensure that the credentials earned by CTE students are valued by the labor market and are, at a minimum, nationally portable
- ✓ Close skills gaps by providing learners of all ages with access to the education and training necessary to be highly competitive in the labor market, including ongoing skill development of the existing workforce

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PROGRESS TO DATE

Employer partnerships are a longstanding hallmark of CTE – one that sets it apart from other education enterprises.

There are many examples of high-quality CTE-employer partnerships across the country from high-profile national coalitions and initiatives to the program level where local and regional employers are teaming up with educators to develop a pipeline of skilled employees. However, until we meet the full promise of this principle and leverage existing relationships to transform employers from casual advisors to co-owners of the CTE enterprise throughout the entire system, these sterling examples will remain exactly that – examples.

“Companies today are seeking associates who have three key ingredients: Knowledge, training and passion. You’ll find individuals who possess these traits at CTE.”

– Jim Lentz, CEO
Toyota North America

Employers are Getting Involved in CTE Program Design & Development

In 2014, NASDCTEc published a 50-state report, [“The State of Career Technical Education: Employer Engagement in CTE,”](#) which explored how employers were engaging throughout the CTE enterprise. One key finding of the report was that over 80 percent of State CTE Directors have seen employer engagement increase over the last 10 years, and all but three states expect it to continue growing in the decade to come.

Perhaps even more importantly, many employers are beginning to push beyond “checkbook partnerships,” or simple donations, to engage in activities that have a meaningful impact on CTE systems and programs. Forty-three states said employers participate in the process to develop CTE standards and/or determine which credentials or skills assessments should be used in CTE programs.

- In **Kansas**, employers drive the credential approval process through the state’s Business & Industry Committee, which provides recommendations on nationally recognized, third-party industry credentials. This curated list of credentials also serves as a baseline for the state’s “Excel in CTE” initiative, which helps students obtain postsecondary credit and industry-recognized credentials in high-need occupations.
- **West Virginia** employers worked shoulder-to-shoulder with state officials to develop the statewide “Simulated Workplaces” initiative. The two-year pilot was a response to employers’ demands for workers with proven technical *and* employability skills. These “workplaces” transform the CTE classroom into a company to simulate the workplace experience for students. The pilot has seen much success in employer engagement and student outcomes – so much so that, as of the 2015-16 school year, the initiative will become the way CTE is delivered throughout the state.

Employers are Advocates for CTE and Perkins

In the past few years, employers and industry associations have stepped up their public support and engagement around the reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins).

- In 2014, an employer-led coalition of 248 companies, industry associations and other stakeholder groups, including NASDCTEc, [sent a letter](#) to Congress urging them to reauthorize Perkins, which

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has been due for renewal since 2012. The letter will be re-released in 2015 with even more signatories. The letter emphasizes the importance of CTE and calls for the new Perkins law to incorporate these three employer-driven principles:

- Align CTE programs to the needs of the regional, state and local labor market;
 - Support effective and meaningful collaboration among K-12, postsecondary institutions and employers; and
 - Increase student participation in experiential learning opportunities and promote the use of industry-recognized credentials.
- [Opportunity America's Jobs and Careers Coalition](#) is another relatively new coalition of employers and industry associations that aims to support a skills agenda on Capitol Hill and help change perceptions of CTE and related careers. To date, this coalition has focused on raising the visibility of CTE through well-placed op-ed columns in prominent national [newspapers](#) and [magazines](#).

Employers are Launching Their Own Initiatives to Advance CTE

- The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's [Talent Pipeline initiative](#) seeks to close the skills gap by applying supply chain management strategies to the education enterprise, with a particular focus on postsecondary education and training programs. This initiative positions employers as the end-consumers of education-workforce partnerships, which requires a much stronger role for the business community in shaping education priorities.
- Industry associations such as [The Manufacturing Institute](#), the [Industry Workforce Needs Coalition](#) and the [National Network of Business and Industry Associations](#) (National Network) have been lending their voices to call for quality industry-recognized and nationally-portable certifications, as well as leveraging their members to validate or evaluate specific credentials
- IBM's [Pathways in Technology Early College High School](#) (P-TECH) model combines rigorous academics with a career focus. The innovative six-year program blurs the line between high school and college and students graduate with both a high school diploma and a no-cost, industry-recognized associate's degree. Graduates are also first in line for positions with IBM. IBM has released a "[Playbook](#)" to encourage others to replicate the P-TECH model. By early 2015, 40 model schools are open for business or being established across the country. With champions in [President Barack Obama](#), [multiple governors](#) and even a [prime minister](#), these numbers are likely to keep growing.
- In 2014, JP Morgan Chase committed \$250 million to its initiative, "[New Skills at Work](#)." Over five years, it aims strengthen and scale effective workforce training programs through targeted investments and fund data-driven analyses of local markets to determine skills gaps.

Employers are Partnering on Major Initiatives to Advance CTE

- The Obama Administration's [Upskill Initiative](#) is a public-private partnership intended to create clear pathways for millions of front-line workers to develop skills and abilities that will help them progress up the career ladder into higher-paying jobs. Employers are [committing](#) to increase access to apprenticeships and other training opportunities.

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- Between 2011-2012, 3,500 employers, K-12 and postsecondary educators, and state leaders participated in the development of the [Common Career Technical Core](#) benchmark standards.
- The IT industry association, CompTIA, worked with Illinois to [link](#) state and certification data safely and securely. The [project](#) has now been expanded to include a group of national organizations, states and industry associations for a multi-year effort to develop a national data exchange clearinghouse that allows states and educational institutions to gain access to data on industry-recognized credentials earned by students.
- Demonstrated employer partnerships are [increasingly](#) becoming a requirement for local education institutions to qualify for state funding for innovative grant programs and pilots.

WHERE MORE WORK IS NEEDED

While much progress has been made, there is no question that more work needs to be done to address systemic gaps and fully meet the promise of this principle.

A Persistent Skills Gap

Closing the skills gap was central to the 2010 Vision. Today – despite burgeoning efforts at the national, state and local levels – this gap seems as significant a challenge as ever. A 2014 [CareerBuilder report](#) found that 80 percent of employers had at least some difficulty filling open jobs. Taking a closer look at critical industries such as manufacturing, the gap is even more daunting – over the next decade [two million](#) manufacturing jobs are expected to go unfilled due to the skills gap.

Some countries have created solutions from which the U.S. can learn. In Switzerland, Germany and Singapore, employers participate as fully vested partners in their education systems because they see how their coordinated investment of time and resources impacts the ultimate product – a well-prepared, skilled workforce. Work-based learning opportunities, such as apprenticeships that rely heavily on employer involvement, figure prominently in these systems.

While some major U.S. companies are becoming champions of CTE as a driver of change, the majority of American employers still don't recognize their role in shaping the future workforce and view efforts to support education as charity or community service. Increasingly, state and national policymakers are seeking ways to better align education and training programs to in-demand occupations, particularly by getting employers involved in standards and credentials review, incentivizing work-based learning and engaging in sector strategies work. Yet, for many states and employers, a scaled, coordinated effort to fill the talent pipeline remains only a goal.

“The easiest way to close the skills gap is for schools, government and industry to work together to close the training gap.”

*– Eric A. Spiegel
President & CEO, Siemens USA*

Sending Clearer Signals for Standards and Credentials

The 2013 [“Skills Beyond School”](#) report had mixed praise for the U.S. CTE system, but called the decentralization of CTE – in particular at the postsecondary level – deeply troubling. With thousands of credentials, degrees and certifications in the market place, the guarantee of quality can be hard to come by.

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Employers can play an important role in cutting through the noise to send clearer signals to CTE programs about which training leads to a job and which credentials and degrees are most valued by the labor market. Done right, credentials could be one solution to closing the skills gap, but not every industry group issuing credentials has rigorous quality control processes.

CONCLUSION

As we approach the five-year anniversary of the CTE Vision and prepare for an even bolder and broader initiative to create a common vision for high-quality CTE later this year, it is critical to step back and recognize the advances CTE has made in recent years.

But in order for employers to become true co-investors in the CTE enterprise, we must look ahead collectively to consider those issues and challenges still not fully addressed, such as:

- How do we transform the relationship with employers from advisory or checkbook philanthropy to full co-developers, co-owners, co-implementers?
- How can states leverage the full power of employer engagement to pivot from episodic examples of high-quality partnerships to collaborations at scale that benefit all students?
- How can CTE and employers work together to form sustainable partnerships that persist through economic cycles, both good and bad?
- What is the role of employers in guiding CTE standards and industry credentials?
- How can local advisory committees – which consist almost entirely of employers – transform from perfunctory input bodies to agents of change for CTE programs?
- What is the right balance between short-term labor market needs and expanding the qualified pipeline of future workers who have adaptable skills?