

Increasing Student Enrollment in CTE Programs

Parent Engagement Tool

Career Technical Education (CTE) has an ongoing stigma issue, with too many parents and students still believing that CTE is a lesser option compared to traditional high school. However, we know from *The Value & Promise of Career Technical Education: A National Survey of Parents and Students*, that parents and students involved in CTE programs of study are extremely satisfied with their education. We also know from this research, that parents are a critical audience to reach if you want to increase student enrollment into CTE programs.

To successfully engage parents and encourage them to consider CTE as an option for their child requires a deliberate and strategic plan for your core team, and those communication ambassadors who will engage directly with parents.

It is necessary to use consistent messaging not only throughout your organization, but also among all communication ambassadors to be effective. This requires that you involve ambassadors across multiple groups, including state agencies; employer groups that may not be used to contributing to education or CTE issues; and those on the ground, including administrators, educators, counselors, and community groups.

Research shows that parents trust those closest to them for information regarding CTE programs. This includes other parents, teachers and counselors. However, principals, state education agencies and employers play a critical role in delivering information about CTE programs in their community. It's necessary to not only coordinate parent engagement and communications efforts at the state and district levels, but also to reach down and encourage those trusted messengers to utilize effective messages with parents.

This guide will aid you and your team in creating a strategy to engage with parents, while also identifying and educating critical ambassadors that can successfully communicate your message,

An ambassador is someone you can trust to effectively communicate your message directly with parents and students.

How to Use the Tool

To use this tool, designate one person on your team to coordinate your parent engagement strategy. This person will not necessarily be conducting all outreach, but he or she will be in charge of the overall strategy and plan. Then use the list below to choose an initial ambassador to engage and leverage. This ambassador will be someone you trust to communicate your messages effectively directly with parents.

Once you have chosen an ambassador, you can begin to think through how they should be prepared to carry out your messages. The lead can complete this worksheet on his or her own and then share with the broader team or facilitate a conversation with a few team members to complete the worksheet together. This worksheet is designed to inform your communications efforts but is not intended to serve as your entire strategic communications plan.

Steps for Effectively Leveraging Ambassadors:

- Step 1: Clarify your goals
- Step 2: Engaging with parents
- Step 3: Use the right messages
- Step 4: Leverage multiple vehicles
- Step 5: Communicate often and in a timely manner
- Step 6: Make sure your ambassadors are on message
- Step 7: Keep your team informed

Choosing an Ambassador

You will likely complete this exercise for multiple ambassadors, but you should focus on each one separately to be strategic with all of them. Additionally, you should think about which ambassadors take priority based on their influence, reach and willingness to help out.

Below is a list of potential ambassadors. This list is by no means exhaustive so do not feel limited by it. As you begin to determine how you and your ambassadors will best reach parents, it's important to consider the parents you are trying to reach. Parents will vary in their knowledge and attitudes about and of CTE, and it's necessary to tailor your messages and support your ambassadors accordingly. For example, consider utilizing parents of CTE students as your potential ambassadors and champions of CTE to sway those parents who are not as knowledgeable about CTE.

Potential Ambassadors

Parent and Student Groups

- PTA/PTO
- Career Technical Student Organizations
- Current CTE Students and Their Parents

Districts and School Staff

- Local Education Agency Staff (LEAs)
- Teachers
- Principals and Administrators
- Counselors
- CTE Administrators
- Charter School Leaders, If Applicable

Communities

- Local Employers
- Civil Rights Organizations
- Community Centers
- Community Religious Organizations

Choose your ambassador to parents: _____

Step 1: Clarify your goals

Before you ask your ambassador to reach out to parents and students, you must be clear about your overall long-term goals for parent engagement, goals around student recruitment and your objective for engaging those groups. The goals must be widely shared across the state for alignment across agencies. The questions below will help clarify your state's overall strategy to engage parents

Remember to consider parents' prior knowledge of the content — avoid edu-speak!

Once the goals are clear, you must then consider your objectives for ambassador interactions to engage parents. What do you expect from them in the short term? Engagement with your ambassadors should not be done just for the sake of compliance or for appeasing certain groups; it should be designed to seek input, support and feedback.

Overall Goals

- 1) Why are you reaching out to parents? Do you just want to inform them of your efforts, do you need input and/or support, or do you want them to change their behavior?
- 2) What are your short-term goals for parent engagement (e.g., increasing student enrollment in CTE; helping parents become CTE advocates; instilling positive images of CTE)?
If completing this exercise in a group setting, have each participant independently write what he or she believes the goals are and then compare answers. Does everyone largely agree?
- 3) What are your long term goals for parent engagement?
If completing this exercise in a group setting, have each participant independently write what he or she believes the goals are and then compare answers. Does everyone largely agree?
- 4) Do other people within your agency understand and agree with these goals?
Try asking a sample group of colleagues what they believe the goals are and see how it matches with what you have written above.
- 5) Do your ambassadors understand and agree with these goals? How do you know?
If you complete this part of the exercise and realize that your state goals are not widely shared, consider a separate effort to develop an internal communications strategy and raise awareness of or clarify your goals.

Step 2: Engaging with parents

Not everyone will come to the table with the same level of understanding of or interest in CTE programs. There is also evidence that parents necessarily don't go to or trust the information coming from a state education agency, which is why it is so critical that you have knowledgeable ambassadors that carry forth your messages to parents. It's important that you have a strategy in place, and understand which parents you are trying to reach. The questions below will help you think through the types of parents you want to reach.

- 1.) How do you currently engage directly and indirectly with parents (e.g., staff presents to parents, social media, website, brochures, partnership with PTA)?
- 2.) What is the interest level in CTE of the parents you are trying to engage with? (e.g., are they parents of current CTE students, or have they demonstrated low interest in CTE?)
- 3.) How much do these parents understand about the CTE programs offered?
- 4.) What are your current core messages to parents?

Step 3: Use the right messages with parents

Research shows that there are three core messages that resonate with parents when encouraging them to consider CTE as an option for their children. If this is your goal, consider using these three messages as part of all of your communications materials with parents.

All written, online or presentation materials should be concise, easy to understand and developed with specific audiences in mind. Frame content around how parents will be affected by CTE, taking into account their level of comfort and background with the topic. You can also extend the use of your materials by deliberately creating resources that your supporters can share with others.

Regardless of your goals, it is critical to be consistent in your messaging with parents, and ensure your ambassadors are remaining consistent and on message as well.

Use the questions below to ensure that your materials are appropriate for parents:

- 1) What types of messaging and information might be most effective to convince parents and students to consider CTE? These could range from testimony from students to labor market data.
- 2) What form will your materials take? Consider various formats, including fact sheets, infographics, brochures, PowerPoint slides and talking points. Are concepts explained using visuals where possible?
- 3) Do your materials contain any CTE or workforce development jargon that needs to be more thoroughly explained?
- 4) Have these materials been reviewed previously by either your ambassador or a stakeholder with a similar background?
- 5) How should your ambassador use these materials? Should he or she share them or craft his or her own messages based on them?

Core Messages *CTE Delivers for Students*

CTE Delivers Real Options for Students for College and Rewarding Careers

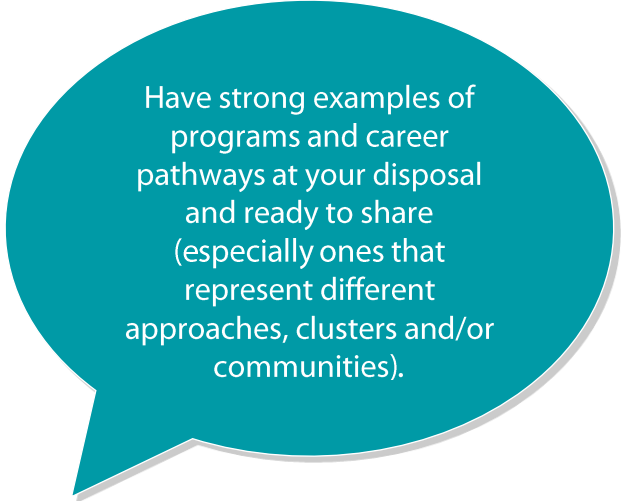
CTE Delivers Real-World Skills for Students

CTE Delivers a Real High School Experience with More Value for Students

Step 4: Leverage multiple vehicles

To effectively engage a wide variety of individuals and groups, you must use multiple methods of communication. On average, it takes 11 touches for impact – that is, an audience needs to hear a message at least 11 times before they start to absorb it. These methods can include town hall or other in-person meetings, social media, blogs, webinars and emails. Varying your approach is important as well; if you use the same channels each time, you will continue to engage the same people. More parents might be motivated to participate if you meet them where they are – leverage communication methods they already use and speak at meetings they are already scheduled to attend.

You should not simply put all of the information parents need on your website and consider the task completed. In particular, parents who are not used to looking to your website for information are not likely to find your communications on their own.



Have strong examples of programs and career pathways at your disposal and ready to share (especially ones that represent different approaches, clusters and/or communities).

- 1) What method of communication will you use for your first interaction?
Consider any meetings already scheduled that you or your ambassador could be a part of, such as back to school events, parent teacher conferences, PTA meetings, or consider any popular blogs or social media channels that are regularly used.
- 2) What method of communication will you or your ambassador use for ongoing communications with parents?
Consider any existing channels that you could use, including newsletters and social media channels.
- 3) How will you track engagement with parents, particularly if that engagement is happening through an ambassador?
This tracking could include a log of conversations kept in a database or evidence of more passive interactions on your website or social media channels.
- 4) If you publish information online, how will you know if parents have accessed and understood it?

Step 5: Communicate often and in a timely manner


You must be proactive in letting parents know about CTE offerings. Many parents don't understand what CTE is, how it's delivered or how their child can experience it in their high school. Demonstrating the nuts and bolts of CTE programs, and the benefits students receive from participation, is critical.

You must also share information in a timely manner. For example, students and parents may need certain information before registering for classes or signing up for certain extracurriculars. Use your ambassadors to help disseminate information broadly.

- 1) Communications with parents should not happen only on an ad hoc basis. How often will you engage parents?
- 2) Are there key dates, deadlines or events that should be taken into consideration for your engagement of parents?
- 3) What parents are you hoping to reach (e.g., parents across the state vs parents in a specific school or district)?
- 4) How often should your ambassador be engaging with parents and students?
- 5) What channels can parents use to reach out to you directly for more information? Is the ambassador aware of these channels and how best to leverage them?

Step 6: Make sure your ambassadors are on message

Ambassadors should be chosen for their unique connection to parents. Whenever possible, involve ambassadors in the conversation early in your efforts to tap their expertise. Ask them what types of programs and initiatives make sense given their experiences. Approach them with draft versions of documents to get their input as to whether or not your materials will accomplish the objective.



Remember to ask ambassadors to review materials before you share them with other audiences.

Once you have received input and feedback from an ambassador, make sure that you have a system in place for following back up and letting them know the current status of the discussions in which he or she was involved. For example, assign one point of contact within your agency for your ambassador with whom to interact. This contact will not be the only person who speaks with this ambassador, but he or she will be consistently available for questions and requests.

- 1) What background or experience does your identified ambassador have in CTE? What background or experience does the ambassador have with parent engagement?
- 2) What information related to CTE does the ambassador need to share with parents to achieve the objective you have in mind for engagement?
- 3) How will CTE benefit parents specifically? Is the ambassador aware of those potential benefits?
- 4) What information does your ambassador need to know to be effective partners, advocates or supporters? Try to limit your materials to just that information.
- 5) How will your ambassador's perspective differ from your own? What would that mean for the content of the message the ambassador delivers? Is there a specific way to frame your communications that will help the ambassador be effective in sharing your message?

6) Your ambassador must be prepared with a pitch that conveys your goals and message. How will you help your ambassador create this pitch?

7) How do you plan to keep your ambassador and related stakeholders consistent and on message?

Step 7: Keep your team informed

Members of your internal team are both critical messengers and potential ambassadors. Make sure they are included in any outreach you do with parents, and provide them with access to information about key themes, dates and decision points.

Also provide them with talking points so that any time they are communicating with ambassadors or directly with parents, your team is coordinated and its messages are aligned.

- 1) Who else on your team needs to know about interactions with your ambassador and with parents?
- 2) How and when will you inform your team more broadly about your parent engagement goals?
- 3) If staff from your agency or partner agencies communicate with parents, what are the key messages they should keep in mind?
- 4) If other staff from your agency or partner agencies communicate with parents, how will you know about it? How can you go about coordinating communications?