

CTE: The Choice for All Students



By Vince Bertram, Ed.D.

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In three and a half years as CEO of Project Lead The Way (PLTW), I’ve visited all 50 states and Washington, D.C., been in hundreds of schools, and talked with thousands of teachers and students. People often ask me whether PLTW is or should be considered a CTE program. My response is simple—all education should be Career and Technical Education (CTE).

I recently participated in a gathering of our nation’s education leaders focused on college and career readiness. By the conclusion of the meeting, we realized the real focus should be on career readiness. After all, students take many different pathways en route to their careers, but a successful career is the end goal. As a result, we must focus on career readiness for all students.

It makes sense, then, that CTE should be at the center of career preparation—not a separate program for some students, but an education for all students. CTE programs help students explore careers and develop valuable skills—skills that are relevant, in high demand, and lead to high-wage careers.

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Staying relevant

With career and technical education, we must ensure that the programs we offer are relevant to the job market and teach applicable skills across all sectors. Career readiness is not necessarily about a specific career, but rather a skillset that leads to opportunities. Through hands-on, activity-, project-, and problem-based learning, students—as early as elementary school—will develop critical thinking, problem solving, and

collaboration skills. As students progress through grades K-12, they can explore career paths, be mentored, and develop strong technical skills.

It’s about skills

CTE programs and educators are doing some of most important work in our economy. There is a growing realization across the United States—from governors to federal policymakers, and from local educators to the business community—that CTE is essential for our students, states, and nation. It is also becoming clear that education is not just about earning four-year college degrees, many that lead to underemployment and massive student loan debt. Rather, education must be about developing skills—skills that lead to the greatest career opportunities.



Moving forward, we must impress upon decision-makers the critical nature of this work. In the last several decades, CTE has suffered from a stigma that it is “the other choice.” Today, we find ourselves with 4 million unfilled jobs, over 8 million people who are unemployed, and millions more underemployed because they lack appropriate skills. To solve this crisis, and to ensure the United States remains a strong and prosperous nation, we must rethink the way we view education. Career and Technical Education is not just for some students, it’s for all students.