

# COVID-19's Impact on CTE

## *Defining the Challenge and the Opportunity*



### The Challenge

Advance CTE defines Career Technical Education (CTE) as an educational option that provides learners, from as early as the middle grades through adult workforce preparation, with the knowledge, experiences and skills they need to be prepared for college and careers. CTE gives purpose to learning by emphasizing real-world skills and practical knowledge within a selected career focus.

What sets CTE apart from other educational pathways is its focus on real-world skills and applied learning. High-quality CTE programs provide opportunities for direct engagement between industry and learners and instructors, often include work-based learning (WBL) experiences, and enable learners to earn credentials of value.

Yet what sets CTE apart is also what presents unique challenges in the COVID-19 (coronavirus) era. While state and local CTE leaders are struggling with many of the same concerns as their peers across the education and workforce systems, CTE leaders face a number of specific challenges to support the learners and the communities they serve.

Within these challenges lies opportunity. As states and communities consider how to redesign their schools and colleges, instruction and student supports, there is great opportunity for innovation and modernization. Equitable

access to high-quality CTE experiences has been a pervasive challenge, but if states can develop and scale meaningful full-time or blended virtual courses and WBL experiences, CTE has the potential to reach far more than its current 11.8 million students.

Taking a longer view, CTE will be critical to the nation's economic recovery, and planning must begin now for that work. As of May 9, 36.5 million Americans had filed for unemployment since mid-March, a number that is guaranteed to rise. Looking ahead to the economic aftermath of the pandemic, a significant number of learners of all ages will need fast but quality upskilling and reskilling programs that will result in living-wage, in-demand careers. During the last recession, college enrollment increased by nearly 2.5 million students, largely due to non-traditional-age college students. A similar trend can be expected with the current predicted economic downturn.

With quality and equity as the two guiding principles, state and local leaders should design solutions that not only focus on the short-term crisis but also cast an eye toward reshaping the education system into something stronger and more responsive to the current and predicted needs of learners, employers and the economy.

## Areas of Focus

### Expanding Distance Learning

Across all content areas, schools and colleges have been forced to rapidly move curricula and instruction online. They have been challenged to provide high-quality education without sufficient professional development, training or digital and physical infrastructure. At the same time, the move to distance learning is deepening the digital divide between learners (and educators) who have access to the internet and technology and those who do not.



Adding to this universal challenge is that much of CTE coursework requires hands-on application. While some districts and states were making important investments in digital infrastructure and delivery of virtual CTE programming before coronavirus, their efforts largely focused on closing the gap for learners in rural areas and were not necessarily universal solutions. At the same time, CTE programs vary greatly. Some programs lend themselves more readily to distance learning, while others are much more difficult to implement without access to labs and equipment.

As states and communities continue to expand distance learning, they must take into account a wide array of instructional methods — both well established and cutting edge, such as the use of virtual reality — that allow for applied learning across a variety of program areas, from manufacturing and engineering to culinary arts and agriculture. Incorporating these diverse methods not only

will benefit learners during coronavirus but also has the potential to be a game changer by enabling individuals across the country to participate in CTE programs they previously did not have access to because of geography or local capacity.

### Providing WBL

Experiential WBL is a core element of a high-quality CTE program of study. High-quality CTE allows learners to take what they are learning in the classroom (whether physical or virtual) through rigorous coursework and apply it in real-world settings. Postsecondary students must be able to obtain and demonstrate technical skills to gain the degrees and industry-recognized credentials required to work, a particular challenge in the health care sector today. WBL is a major priority across the nation, with more than 30 policies passed in 2019 alone focused on expanding these experiences for learners. In addition, nearly half of states have selected WBL for their secondary program quality indicator under the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V). And more than 100,000 youth participate in summer youth employment programs each year.

Looking forward, states will need to identify and define what high-quality, virtual WBL looks like, especially for the more rigorous types of experiences such as internships or apprenticeships. There are some promising practices. A number of states and communities have virtual platforms, such as Nepris or Inspire, to connect learners, instructors and employers to provide mentoring, deliver lessons, or give feedback on student projects. Companies have launched virtual welding guides, and culinary instructors have sent



kits to learners at home to demonstrate proficiency in skills while cooking.

These strategies are appreciated and are important stopgaps, but they are not necessarily high quality or even close to being able to be scaled, especially equitably, across CTE program areas. Just like with distance learning, the shift toward virtual WBL is both a challenge and opportunity. If designed correctly — with quality and equity in mind — virtual WBL can help mitigate the access challenges many communities face when trying to place all learners into meaningful experiences. In fact, expanding virtual WBL may enable learners to be exposed to and get experience in a wider array of industries and companies, beyond those in their local communities. Virtual opportunities will also help prepare learners for a new reality in which many more individuals telework — a reality hastened by coronavirus.



Employers play a critical role in providing meaningful WBL for learners through opportunities such as job shadowing, internships, mentoring and apprenticeships. However, businesses small to large are facing unprecedented challenges and will need extra incentives and supports to re-engage with CTE programs, especially at the secondary level. They will also need support as they shift to supervising learners virtually in the coming months and beyond.

Finally, Career Technical Student Organizations are also an important part of delivering WBL and career exploration experiences to more than two million learners through activities such as skills-based competitions, mentoring programs, leadership development and more. State chapters

across the nation have had to dramatically scale back or cancel convenings. However, many are transitioning their activities online and have tested activities such as virtual awards, global virtual competitions and more. These opportunities are providing insights into how to connect learners across the country with each other and with industry partners.

## Earning Industry-Recognized Credentials

Another hallmark of a high-quality CTE program of study is that it is anchored in a credential of value, whether a postsecondary degree, a certificate or an industry-recognized credential. Many fields — including critical areas such as health care; transportation, distribution and logistics; information technology; and manufacturing — require credential attainment before employees can enter the workforce. States have been investing heavily in industry-recognized credentials, with 28 policies passed in 2019 alone to expand access to or the quality of credentials. And in some states, such as Virginia, earning a credential is required to graduate with a standard diploma.

Yet many learners have not been able to sit for their credential exams this year given restrictions around the proctoring of these exams and the fact that many exams require an in-person, performance-based component. This inability to take the exam has severe implications for students but also affects employers and the overall economic recovery. Some states are considering providing tests over the summer or on weekends or offering unique logins to students to take the exams at home, although nothing has been implemented at scale. Florida is allowing learners to sit for credential exams at home and is working with the various credential providers to support the transition. As of mid-May, Florida had identified more than 160 national and state credential exams that can be offered at home.

Coordination and collaboration across credential providers, such as industry associations or state licensing boards, has long been a challenge, especially given the sheer number of providers and the overwhelming number of credentials. The need for more flexible and nimble assessments and protocols during coronavirus presents an opportunity to step back and identify ways the providers can better align their access, processes and data, which would be of great benefit to learners and employers across the country.

## Collecting Data and Ensuring Accountability

Data and data collection are going to be a challenge across the entire education and workforce systems given cancelled assessments, incomplete courses and inconsistent grading practices, but there are also some unique challenges specific to CTE data. Most states have submitted or are in the process of submitting their state plans for Perkins V and are working with stakeholders and locals on implementation.

Nearly half of states have selected WBL as their secondary program quality indicator for Perkins V, meaning that they will need to report on WBL figures as part of the federal accountability system in the coming years. Another half selected the recognized postsecondary credentials option, which encompasses industry-recognized credentials. The fact that learners cannot actively participate in WBL or sit for credential exams presents some significant and specific hurdles related to CTE data and data collection. About a third of states selected attaining postsecondary credit in a CTE program as their program quality indicator, another area in which many states and districts are working through challenges to support equitable access and success.

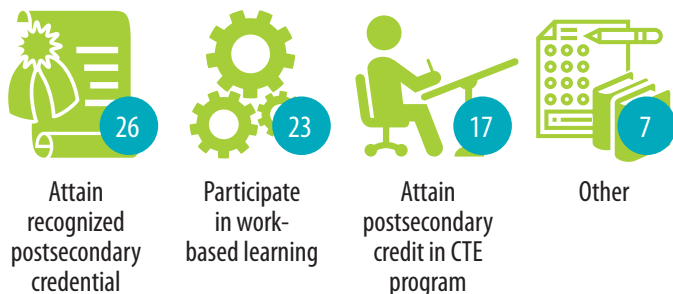
Many states are worried about their baseline numbers being extremely skewed given the way the 2019-20 school year is ending and the lack of clarity about the start of the 2020-21 school year. While the challenge of ensuring that data and accountability systems and mechanisms are meaningful and reliable extends well beyond CTE, CTE data and accountability must be part of the broader solution.

## Supporting Local School Districts and Postsecondary Institutions in the Implementation of Perkins V

When coronavirus hit, many states were just rolling out or were still planning how to support the comprehensive local needs assessment (CLNA) and local application process, one of Perkins V's most significant and necessary changes. The CLNA requires extensive stakeholder engagement and buy-in, which presents challenges because stakeholder meetings were cancelled or postponed and many stakeholders (employers, state-level agency representatives, instructors, school counselors, etc.) are dealing with more pressing issues.



### Number of States Selecting Each Perkins V Program Quality Indicator



*Counts are based on Advance CTE's analysis of state Perkins V plans and are subject to change as plans are finalized. A number of states selected more than one indicator, which is why the total exceeds 51.*

The U.S. Department of Education has provided states with flexibility on when the CLNA and local applications are due and local funding is distributed, which is much appreciated. However, there are still many outstanding questions about how and when to provide more flexibility to locals that want to amend their local applications to better support students during coronavirus. Perkins V requires the CLNA to be updated at least every two years, but states have the ability to require more frequent updates to ensure that districts and postsecondary institutions are reviewing the most recent and relevant data when making their funding decisions. If states choose to require the CLNA every year, they will need to redirect capacity to support those efforts.

Given the flexibility of Perkins V, states have a lot of room for innovation and can shift resources and supports to best meet the needs of their learners and communities. States already are moving their professional development and technical assistance to virtual spaces and reconsidering how to direct their state leadership and reserve funds to pilot projects that address many of the challenges discussed in the previous sections and the broader equity gaps that are only expanding due to coronavirus. More innovation and creative solutions undoubtedly will emerge in the months and years ahead.

## Planning for Re-Entry to the Classroom and Campus

Many learners who were already at risk of dropping out of or not completing CTE programs of study are likely at greater risk without the traditional supports in place for learners, further deepening entrenched inequities. Attention is needed to support states and communities in addressing the “COVID slide” and ensuring that students are kept on track and interventions are put in place so that students can move on to the next step of their education or enter their career.



In addition to ensuring that learners stay on track and are working toward high school graduation and postsecondary completion, attention needs to be paid to ensuring that learners continue to make progress within their CTE programs of study and can complete all relevant coursework, experiences and credentials.

Postsecondary institutions are very likely to see an increase in enrollment similar to the last recession as learners look to upskill and reskill so they can re-enter the new economy in

the coming years, with much of that enrollment projected to be through online programs. Additional resources and supports need to be in place to assist community colleges and technical centers in preparing for a potential influx of learners, many of whom may be enrolling online.

More broadly, states and communities are also beginning to identify what instruction may look like when schools and colleges reopen, including how many learners can be in a classroom at a time, how to allocate instructors, and what to do about more hands-on experiences that may require close contact. These challenges will be particularly present in lab-based CTE classrooms or CTE schools that are only part time and require transportation to and from a home high school. New models of class schedules, including modified school days, weeks and years, must be considered going forward, as well as an expansion of competency-based education and credit for prior learning opportunities, which move away from seat time and allow learners to demonstrate their mastery of knowledge and skills on their own time.

## Ensuring That CTE Remains a Priority

In the past decade, CTE has been a major priority at all levels, enjoying increased investments from the federal government and many states as well as the philanthropic community. At the same time, state CTE leaders have focused on improving the quality of their programs and, in recent years, have turned their attention to addressing equitable access and outcomes for each learner.

While this progress is incredibly exciting and important, if federal, state, local and private leaders do not continue to place a priority on CTE, momentum will be lost, and fewer students may be served. We will miss a key opportunity to ensure that the next generation of citizens gains critical career-ready skills starting in K-12 and to spark innovative ways to serve the millions of individuals who are out of work and looking to transition to a new career field with some new skill training.

Given the many unique considerations around supporting CTE learners, it is imperative that state and local CTE leaders have a seat at the table as states are mapping out their plans and strategies for re-entry, whenever that may occur. Maryland's draft plan for re-entry, for example, explicitly includes CTE as an instructional program area and requires CTE to be addressed directly in local districts “continuity of learning plans.”

## Advance CTE's Role in Leading the CTE Community During COVID-19

### Federal Advocacy

Advance CTE has worked with State CTE Directors, key partners including the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE), and Congressional staff to advocate at the federal level for CTE and state CTE leader needs.



Advance CTE and ACTE published an [op-ed](#) on the importance of investing in CTE during the pandemic and sent a [letter](#) to the chairs and ranking members of both the House Education and Labor Committee and the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee outlining priorities for future stimulus legislation, including a call for new investment in CTE funding to respond to current challenges and future economic recovery. The letter includes language to address the additional educational waiver provisions needed to support professional development and funding for states and local CTE funding recipients.

In early May, Congress introduced the [Relaunching America's Workforce Act](#), which would provide \$15 billion for workforce development and CTE programs, including \$1 billion to support CTE programs and activities, as well as \$2 billion to re-implement the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grant program. Advance CTE is pleased to support this bill. Also in May, House Democrats introduced the [Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions Act](#), a \$3 trillion stimulus bill. The package includes \$90 billion for K-12 and postsecondary education, with CTE an allowable use of this funding.

In addition, staff members have worked closely with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education to ensure that state CTE leaders' concerns related to Perkins V and other major issues are heard and addressed.

### Member Support and Resource Development

Advance CTE represents State CTE Directors and leaders from every state; four territories; and Washington, D.C., and has a crucial role to play in what the future of CTE looks like in communities large and small across America.

Advance CTE developed and launched a five-month virtual learning program that includes a spectrum of supports addressing topics that have particular resonance or importance in the CTE space and the concerns of our members: distance learning, WBL, credential attainment and equity. We are closely monitoring the reach and impact of these supports to adapt and extend virtual convenings and communities going forward.

With these topics in mind, Advance CTE has committed to:

- **State Director calls** organized by Advance CTE's [five regions](#) during which state leaders can discuss issues candidly and problem solve in real-time with their peers.
- State Director and State Member **Lunch and Learns** during which state leaders can gather more information from national experts and other state leaders on the topics outlined above.
- **Summer Learning Series** webinars for all members and the general public on topics crucial to CTE. While coronavirus is a priority, this series will encompass other major topics, such as CTE and the 2020 election, the future of work, talent pipeline management, and attracting diverse students at the postsecondary level.



- The [Navigating CTE During COVID-19](#) [blog series](#) for members and the general public to help make sense of CTE during coronavirus.
- [Fact sheets](#) and other assets that unpack the key issues and identify promising practices.

While we are still in the early stages of this work, Advance CTE remains committed to providing our members and the entire CTE community with the tools, resources and supports they need to continue to ensure that each learner has access to and can succeed in high-quality CTE.

## Conclusion

While we do not yet know the long-term impact this pandemic will have on our nation, we do know that education, especially CTE, will be at the center of rebuilding our economy and the lives of many Americans. CTE leaders have a host of challenges but also a very real opportunity to use this pandemic as a catalyst for change in the way we design, deliver and assess CTE programs to ensure that each learner, no matter their race, ethnicity, age, gender or zip code, is afforded access to and equitable delivery of high-quality CTE in their communities.

## About Advance CTE

Advance CTE is the longest-standing national non-profit that represents State Directors and state leaders responsible for secondary, postsecondary and adult Career Technical Education (CTE) across all 50 states and U.S. territories. Established in 1920, Advance CTE supports visionary state leadership, cultivates best practices, and speaks with a collective voice to advance high-quality CTE policies, programs and pathways that ensure career success for each learner. [www.careertech.org](http://www.careertech.org)