

Majority Policy Committee
PA House of Representatives

Hearing – Student Opportunities in Career and Technical Education

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Representative Reed, Representative Knowles and members of the House Majority Policy Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about *Student Opportunities in Career and Technical Education* (CTE). I have worked for more than 30 years in a variety of capacities in education and workforce development, most of which have been in the field of career and technical education. Over the years I have observed firsthand the very positive impact that career and technical education has on students. I have also observed the impact of regulations and state-wide policy on CTE.

Every year approximately 1800 high school students participate in an approved CTE program at Berks Career Technology Center (BCTC). For the overwhelming majority, they would tell you it is the best educational experience they have ever had. They would also tell you that attending the BCTC has made all the difference in their lives. The teaching and learning process at CTCs is as authentic as it gets. By working on real projects students learn both academic and technical content by “doing”. Students find learning to be relevant, personally meaningful and, consequently, enjoyable. Most all students find their niche. They establish career goals, develop plans to achieve those goals and are highly motivated to achieve them. For a vast majority of students CTE has truly changed their lives – ask any CTE graduate or their parents – they will confirm what I tell you is absolutely true!

Pennsylvania has a strong CTE system in place, probably, one of the best in the nation. It is working extremely well for a lot of students. However, the system has many limitations and there are challenges that must be addressed in order for CTE in Pennsylvania to realize its full potential.

First and foremost, we must change the mindset that continues to exist among too many persons in the community and our public schools. Too many people still believe that if you want to go to college, you shouldn't attend a CTC. I frequently hear from some of our best students about the tremendous obstacles they have had overcome and bias they have had to endure to attend our school. This culture is destructive to the overall educational process and damaging to kids, not to mention the detrimental impact it is having on workforce development in Pennsylvania.

From my experience this is our biggest challenge. We must change that mindset and attract more academically proficient students into advanced technical programs at the CTCs. Some possible solutions to this problem include the following:

1. We must provide school districts with financial incentives that support districts that encourage more academically proficient students to attend their CTC. Currently, it costs districts more to send "regular education" (non-IEP) students to a CTC than it does for them to remain at the high school. In addition, districts save money when students with IEPs attend their regional CTC. For example, it costs districts approximately \$7,000 to send a half day student to BCTC. Comparatively, it costs a district about \$6,000 if a "regular education" student remains at the high school and about \$9,000 if a student with an IEP stays at the high school. So, for every regular education student who attends the CTC, it cost them about \$1000 more and for every student with an IEP who attends, it saves them about \$2000. To make matters worse, all special education state subsidies to support students with IEPs remain at the district (i.e., those dollars rarely follow the student to the CTC). A districts incentive to save money should not be at the expense of a student's career choice. This needs to change.
2. We must look at state requirements for high school graduation with the 21st century eyes. Currently, too many academically proficient students who would chose to attend a CTC are unable to do so due to scheduling conflicts. We need to provide districts with more flexibility in granting graduation credits. Possibly, CTE credits could be applied toward graduation in lieu of required non-core academic courses. There should be financial incentives for districts to encourage the offering of supported, online courses for CTE students. This would also create more scheduling flexibility. Regardless of the solution, the system should not force students to choose between meeting graduation requirements and attending a CTC.

3. We need to provide CTCs, community colleges and state universities with incentives to develop partnership programs where students can continue their career program beyond high school without course duplication and punitive entrance requirements. Students (and their parents) must see clear pathways from CTCs to associate and baccalaureate degree programs. The real value of placement testing and the impact of requiring developmental courses that don't count toward degree programs must be reconsidered. State regulations, coupled with financial incentives, are needed to encourage CTCs and postsecondary systems to form strategic alliances so they operate as one seamless system as opposed to independent fiefdoms.

4. Pennsylvania has a tremendous resource in its CTCs and community colleges. Unfortunately, Pennsylvania is underutilizing and not getting full value from this critical resource. Encouraging more of today's academically proficient youth into advanced technical programs must be a state priority. The "one size fits all" mindset, where we tell these young people that success can only be achieved by staying at the high school and then going to college, must change. This culture has created a skills gap which is hindering workforce and economic development and has created a one trillion dollar debt service in financial aid for higher education. Our current system has created high unemployment among our youth and student debt that no hard working person will be able to pay back in any reasonable timeframe. A comprehensive state-wide marketing campaign, supported by business and industry, is needed to highlight the many success stories of students who have chosen to attend CTCs. What company spends hundreds of millions of dollars developing a product or service and then does not spend one dollar promoting it? For Pennsylvania to get a return on its CTE investment, a comprehensive state-wide marketing plan must be part of the solution.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective on the importance of CTE and the critical need to change public policy and state regulations to improve workforce development and the broader educational system.