

Testimony before the PA House Republican Policy Committee

Tony Miller, Administrative Director

Mercer County Career Center

November 4, 2021

My name is Tony Miller, and I am the Administrative Director of the Mercer County Career Center. I am honored to represent career and technical education on behalf of the twelve school districts of Mercer County to discuss economic development in Northwest Pa. Before I begin, I want to thank our lawmakers for your continued and strong support of career and technical education across the Commonwealth.

We cannot have strong communities and a vibrant economy without an educated and skilled workforce. Those of us working in career development and labor have been preparing for the skills gap created by baby boomers leaving the workforce for several years. The pandemic has forced this group out of the workforce even sooner than expected. This gap in the workforce is again compounded in our region due to decades of population loss and brain drain, college students leaving our region and not returning after they graduate. Therefore, career and technical education is one large piece in helping to solve this problem by preparing a workforce who is ready to step into these open positions. As our county has reinvented its manufacturing sector, areas like education, healthcare, retail sales and service, and transportation and logistics have created spaces for a skilled and successful workforce. MCCC has evolved to provide training in all these areas and has always been at the table with local government, school, business, and industry leaders to address our region's needs. However, to ensure we can continue to support the urgent labor market's needs, the following policy items should be recognized: elimination of CTE instructor certification obstacles, prioritization of CTE funding, and promotion of career and technical education through policy.

Changes to Instructor Certification

A critical issue facing career and technical education is attracting and training quality instructional candidates. Often these candidates leave good paying and stable jobs to enter the world of public education where they are suddenly faced with navigating a somewhat cumbersome certification process. One step in that process that needs reviewed is the need to sit for the Occupational Competency Examination. Currently, newly hired CTE teachers must take an Occupational

Competency Examination (OCA) in most career-technical areas to be awarded a Vocational Intern Certificate from the Department of Education. The OCA consists of written and psychomotor components. The psychomotor portion of the OCA exam has a significant amount of subjectivity, many have unrealistic cut scores (some are 100%), and the exam poses an undue cost to new teachers who often take a reduction in pay to transition from business and industry into the classroom.

The Department of Education has advocated for students to earn portable industry credentials; however, the Department, in most instances, does not recognize the portable industry credentials held by teachers. For example, it does not make sense to make an individual who has demonstrated proficiency and possess Master Status by the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) sit for an OCA. All parties would be better served if a list of industry credentials by classification of instructional program (CIP) was developed, and the OCA was moved to a credential review. If a new teacher does not hold the appropriate credential, then he or she would still be required to take the OCA in the current fashion. This could be a practical approach to ease an antiquated process to vetting instructional candidates.

Equitable and Increased CTE Subsidy Funding

The grants that were allocated by the state to CTE in response to the pandemic in the forms GEER, GEER II, and ARP ESSR CTE certainly helped career and technical schools navigate successfully through the changing tides of this ongoing crisis. In total, CTE in PA received \$73.5 million while our K-12 partners received almost \$8 billion through the three iterations of federal pandemic acts. In Pennsylvania, CTE was awarded just over 1% of the total education allocations of all pandemic funding.

In addition to the inequities in funding through grants spurred by the pandemic, this year's budget is year two of level funding to both the CTE Subsidy at \$99 million and \$5.5 million in equipment grants. CTE programs are expensive to run, and school leaders strive to have the latest equipment and technology for training. This equipment can cost tens of thousands of dollars. Program supplies like lumber have increased dramatically in the last year, hitting budgets hard. As a former English teacher, I had an annual budget of a few hundred dollars. In contrast, it costs \$15,000.00 dollars per year in supplies to run MCCC's Welding Program. Every dollar that goes to increase

the CTE Subsidy or Equipment Grants offsets the financial burden to our local districts and local taxpayers. Therefore, serious attention to the CTE subsidy and equipment grant funding is needed.

Promotion of Career and Technical Education

Finally, I would ask for continued support by promoting career and technical education in Pennsylvania. When legislation is discussed regarding K-12 Education, please keep CTE in mind. CTE appreciates the recognition that has been given over the past several years. One example is allowing NOCTI, CTE's end of course assessment, to serve as a possible pathway to graduation, but more needs to be done to show students that a career and technical education can lead to a successful future. Over my ten years in CTE, students are earning more and more industry recognized certifications. In years when we were unable to deliver the NOCTI due to disruptions caused by the pandemic, MCCC and several other CTCs were able to get seniors the necessary industry certifications for which employers seek. Also, eligible students can earn credit and a wage while participating in Cooperative Education programs where these students are often hired full-time upon graduation. Industry credentialing and work placement/internship/apprentice programs are vital for the economic health of our local communities providing a direct workforce pipeline. Keep in the forefront of your discussions of education policy that career and technical education implements these programs better than anyone else.

In closing, approximately 15% of eligible students attend our state's career centers. That is true for MCCC as well. As our county's student census has dropped, our enrollment has remained steady. This is a positive for our county, but our local economy is demanding more skilled labor than we are currently supplying. More students should be encouraged to attend CTE. However, students must have good a reason to leave their home schools to attend our building for half of their day. Quality programming is vital in that decision making for parents and students. Your support to ease unnecessary certification requirements, to increase funding for current and innovative programming, and to promote the opportunities for success that CTE offers through legislative policies only strengthens the quality of our programs and the overall success of CTE, ultimately building a strong economic future for Pennsylvania's communities. I want to thank the House Republican Policy Committee, Representative Wentling, and Chairman Causer for having this policy committee in Mercer County. I am always available for further discussion about career

and technical education, and I would extend an open invitation to visit Mercer County Career Center.