Over the past several years, career and technical education (CTE) has received a great deal of attention at both the state and federal level. The following article provides some helpful background information as well as the author's perspective on the importance of CTE to both students and the economy. It was written by Glenn Cook and originally appeared in asbj in February, 2016.

Coming Around Again
The old vocational education model is gone, thanks to technology

Congress’ passage of the long-awaited successor to the No Child Left Behind Act was a major victory for many who opposed the constraints posed by the federal law on school districts. It also represents the completion of a full-circle comeback for a program that had seen its influence on policy decline amid demands for more academic rigor, college access, and standardized testing.

Career and technical education, known as CTE, is fully incorporated into the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Obama in [December 2015]. CTE now is included in the definition of “a well-rounded education” along with math and English, among other traditional academic subjects.

This step is big for a program that was on the verge of elimination a decade ago. The Bush administration tried unsuccessfully for six years to slash or eliminate CTE funding altogether to pay for its NCLB reform efforts.

It also represents a major victory for advocates devoted to giving students the opportunity to earn certification, degrees, and hands-on learning experience starting in high school.

And, more fittingly, it represents a long-overdue acknowledgment that the best way to ensure students leave school—regardless of their future academic or career path—is through integrated programs that focus both on academics and workplace skills.

The old vocational education model is gone, and in many respects, we have technology to thank for that.
Multi-pathway approach

My wife and I are the children of educators. We have worked for and with public schools for more than two decades. And yet two of the four children in our blended family are not taking the traditional four-year college route after high school.

As parents, we’ve had to resist the urge to push them in that direction, knowing that their future life success will not be contingent on their ability to earn a bachelor’s or master’s degree. What that success hinges on is their interest, motivation, and whether they receive appropriate training in and out of school.

“We’ve created a culture that says if you want to be successful, you graduate from high school, you go directly into a four-year university, you get a degree, and you go to work,” said Tim Johnson, director of government relations for the National Center for Construction Education and Research, during a House Education and the Workforce Committee meeting earlier this year. “And I think that there are so many more pathways.”

Adopting a multi-pathway approach is not something schools historically have done well. The result, intended or not, has been an either/or system that is separate and often not equal. And for decades, vocational education was a prime example, as programs generally focused on agriculture, home economics, and various trades that did not require education beyond a high school diploma.

That changed as technology’s presence became pervasive in society. As the world started to flatten, tech-prep programs were created in an effort to make vocational education courses “stackable.”

In other words, students receive high school and/or community college credit when they successfully complete a course, and have the opportunity to earn either a one-year certificate or two-year degree depending on the program. Continuing education classes in the programs also are offered to help workers maintain their skills.

Today, CTE covers 30 different subjects—including computer science, nursing, fire science, culinary arts, and hospitality management, among others—and serves as a link for many students to careers in the STEM field. Almost 80 percent offer connections between secondary and postsecondary courses, according to a 2014 American Federation of Teachers survey. Other research has shown that students enrolled in strong CTE courses are less likely to drop out and more likely to graduate on time.
While schools have focused on closing achievement gaps for decades, CTE offers an opportunity to narrow the skills gap that currently exists between today’s graduates and what business and industry expect new hires to know. And with the cost of a traditional college education skyrocketing, CTE is increasingly becoming a smart choice for those with limited options who still want a well-paying career.

**What Next?**

Now that CTE is part of the largest federal education law, what does the future hold on the federal, state, and local fronts?

With ESSA signed, Congress can turn its attention to the overdue reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act. The law, which provides more than $1 billion to schools for CTE programs, has not been reauthorized since 2006.

The Council of Chief State School Officers is working in 17 states on a career readiness initiative, providing resources and coaches to states that are looking to build up existing CTE programs. The goal is for the states to develop strategic plans and new policies that will lead to more funding and new CTE initiatives.

Meanwhile, school districts should start reviewing their existing CTE programs to see what should be done to further integrate them with traditional academic subjects. According to ESSA authors, this should be done “through coordinated instructional strategies that may incorporate experiential learning activities and promote skills attainment important to in-demand occupations or industries.”

Another key factor is making sure your counselors provide students with access to information about potential careers in your local labor market. Giving students opportunities to job shadow local employers also is important, starting as early as middle school.

**Middle school reach**

Douglas Major, superintendent and CEO of Oklahoma’s Meridian Technology Center, says reaching middle school students is critical because they often “are unable to see how that formal education will affect their future.”

“If we have the flexibility to provide more career exploration, more career guidance, in those middle school levels, I think, in the long run, it will help with our high school success and our high school graduation rates,” Major said during the House Workforce and Education Committee meeting.
Because most parents were enrolled during the days of vocational education, showing them how CTE has evolved also is critical. But Major believes, rightly so, that the biggest sales pitch is the one your staff will make to students.

“That student engagement piece is what I think is missing in a lot of K-12 systems ... that validation of, ‘Why is it important that I learn this academic knowledge?’” he said. “When they’re able to put that into some real-world use, then it makes sense.”

CTE’s comeback, while by no means complete, truly has come full circle. And it all comes down to a simple reason: It makes sense.

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