

Rigor, Relevance and the Future of CTE

Remarks prepared for U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan

April 19, 2011

We're at a time when Americans everywhere are asking some very tough questions about education. But it all comes down to one: What will it take to dramatically improve public education in America?

To this end, there's an urgent need to re-imagine and remake career and technical education. CTE has an enormous, if often overlooked impact on students, school systems, and our ability to prosper as a nation.

At the same time, we need a frank discussion about the shortcomings of the current system. At the heart of the matter is that CTE programs need to strengthen their rigor and relevance – and deliver better outcomes for students.

Today I want to help define the conversation about the future of CTE.

For far too long, CTE has been a neglected part of the reform movement. That neglect has to stop.

But focusing more attention on CTE also means committing to increased innovation, rigor and results. At a time when local, state, and federal governments are facing tremendous budget pressure, CTE advocates must make a compelling case for continued funding.

To accomplish these things, the mission of CTE will have to change. It can no longer simply be about earning a diploma and landing a job after high school. The goal of CTE 2.0 should be that students earn a postsecondary credential or an industry-recognized certification – and land a job that leads to a successful career.

There is a lot of talk these days about the need to boost college and career-readiness. But the truth is that most people, – and I include myself here – have focused primarily on college-readiness. Too often, career-readiness is an afterthought.

One reason for this is that it seems easier to define college-readiness than career-readiness, even if there is a great deal of overlap.

At the Department, we define a college-ready student as someone who has the knowledge and skills to succeed in credit-bearing courses from day one, without remediation. That standard must be the new bar for success for all high schools, and for all students – instead of the old goal of getting students a diploma.

The bar for a career-ready student is just as demanding. CTE students also must have the academic skills to be able to engage in postsecondary education and training without the need for remediation. The cause of strengthening CTE programs should

never be an excuse for reducing rigor and tracking students away from pursuing a college degree.

Students pursuing non-degree postsecondary credentials still need college-ready academic skills. Airplane mechanics and X-ray technicians may not need a four-year degree. But they do need advanced math skills, including Algebra 2.

Yet a career-ready student must also have the knowledge and skills that employers need from day one. That means having critical thinking and problem-solving skills, an ability to synthesize information, solid communication skills, and the ability to work well on a team.

So I start with the basic premise that it is the responsibility of K-12 educators to prepare all students for both college and a career. This must be "both/and", not "either/or." High school graduates – not the educational system – should be choosing the postsecondary and career paths they want to pursue.

For too long, public schools have gotten this wrong. Too often, the K-12 system made these choices for children, tracking them into dead-end courses – instead of providing them with the skills necessary to succeed in college and careers and the guidance students needed to make good decisions about their future.

Students need the same set of skills for both college and the workplace, particularly in reading and math. And it's the job of the K-12 system to prepare them for both options. In our globally-competitive, knowledge-based economy, all Americans are likely to face the challenge of a lifetime of continued learning. And all need a common core of skills.

Today, these career skills are poorly-defined in America's K-12 system. But they are one of the universal hallmarks of world-class education systems in the 21st century.

U.S. students will need both the hard skills of math and English language arts and science, and the soft career skills, to thrive in our flattened world. In fact, many of the nations that are out-performing us educationally today have far more effective career and technical education systems than the United States.

To be a winner in the future, President Obama has urged every American to get at least a year of higher education or postsecondary career training. "Whatever the training may be," the President says, "every American will need to get more than a high school diploma."

In effect, the President has suggested that every American earn a minimum of two pieces of paper – a high school diploma, and a degree or industry-recognized certification. In the years ahead, young adults are likely to need those two credentials to secure a good job. That will become the ticket to success and a positive future.

For all its importance, the role that CTE plays in building the nation's economic vitality often gets overlooked. Too many educators assume that career and technical training is for the last century, not this one. Many reformers treat CTE as old school – rather than as a potential source of cutting-edge preparation for careers.

In the new CTE we are working toward, all career and technical programs would serve as viable and rigorous pathways to postsecondary and workforce success.

Career pathways now spelled out in the rigorous Programs of Study initiative would span secondary and postsecondary education by design, and concentrate much more on high-demand, high-wage occupations.

Statewide articulation agreements must become the norm. Employers will be much more engaged in designing programs of study and promoting stackable, industry-recognized credentials. And instead of applying the POS framework to just a few CTE initiatives, we would like to see it applied to all Perkins-funded CTE programs.

I want to acknowledge that this – like all education reform – is extremely hard work. But it is absolutely essential that the CTE community take on this challenge.

I don't need to remind you that these are extraordinarily difficult fiscal times at the local, state, and federal levels.

With few exceptions, states have yet to recover from the Great Recession. Many communities are still feeling the pain of the housing market crash in the form of lost property tax revenue. And at the federal level, the President and Congress are engaged in a serious effort to reduce the federal deficit.

In this environment, programs that promise to deliver results will continue to thrive. But others will have a difficult time maintaining their funding.

Right now, CTE programs receiving federal support under the Perkins Act need to make a convincing case for funding. That starts by showing that you're improving student outcomes. And there's no better data to demonstrate that than by identifying how many students are going on to postsecondary education and starting careers in the pathway they studied.

We should be able to look at every CTE program in your state and answer how many students graduate from high school and transition successfully into and complete at least one year of postsecondary education or training. If a program cannot deliver these outcomes or provide these data, then we should re-tool it.

Under the fiscal 2011 bill negotiated by the President and Congress, Perkins Act programs will receive a cut of roughly \$137 million. For fiscal 2012, the President has proposed additional reductions to bring the total funding for CTE to \$1 billion.

I understand that these cuts will be hard for your programs. And it was a difficult choice for us to make.

Despite today's challenging fiscal environment, we must sustain the progress of every aspect of our cradle-to-career agenda – from early learning programs that put our youngest children on the path to success in school and in life, to programs like Race to the Top, which is driving a quiet revolution of reform across the country, to Pell grants that are making college affordable for millions of students.

And, we are committed to building CTE programs worthy of new investments.

As the reauthorization of the Perkins Act approaches, we will be working with Congress to ensure CTE programs are preparing college- and career-ready students. We will strengthen and align them with K-12 programs under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Once CTE programs deliver on the promise of truly preparing students for success in college and careers, their successes will make a compelling case for further investment. I will be your strongest advocate for ensuring that these programs receive the funding they need to help students achieve.

I am confident that the CTE community can make that happen. I believe we can take CTE reforms to scale because we are seeing how these programs can transform the lives of teenagers and adults.

I can see the seeds of success across the country.

Not far from here, Northern Virginia Community College has started an early college CTE academy that allows students to graduate with associate degrees in year 13 of school, in high-demand fields like science, technology, engineering and math, or STEM. And, they are working with schools to help students explore STEM careers, in as early as eighth grade.

In Washington State, the Granite Falls High School Shop Girls built homemade cars focused on fuel-efficient designs. They designed a diesel-powered vehicle that got a staggering 470 miles to the gallon. They called their car the "Iron Maiden." You won't be surprised to hear that the Iron Maiden won the diesel fuel design competition--and the cash award that went with it.

And last month, the President and I visited TechBoston Academy – a school where students are studying a rigorous curriculum that includes four years each of math, science, and technology. These courses combine the academic rigor of a college-prep curriculum with real-life experiences in Web development, entrepreneurship, and criminal forensics.

Students can take Advanced Placement courses as well as classes that prepare them to complete professional certificates recognized by industry leaders such as Microsoft and Cisco [SIS CO] Networking.

Northern Virginia Community College, Granite Falls High School, and TechBoston – these are examples of excellence that I want to become the norm. They provide rigor and relevance. They offer a springboard to higher education and postsecondary training – not a dead-end.

Let's all work together to make this happen.

Thank you.