

Building Trust to Promote Equity in CTE

This brief, the third in a series focused on equity in Career Technical Education (CTE), maps out steps state leaders can take to rebuild trust in marginalized communities that CTE historically failed to serve equitably.¹ It examines strategies that states are using to communicate the promise of CTE and gain buy-in from state agencies, communities, and stakeholders to promote equity in CTE.

Taking Action to Build Trust and Gain Buy-In

While CTE on its own cannot solve pervasive equity issues in the United States, it can play a key role in helping to promote equitable access and outcomes for learners by equipping them with the skills, knowledge and experiences needed for lifelong career success. However, the history of inequity in CTE, as covered in *Making Good on the Promise: Understanding the Equity Challenge in CTE*, may prevent learners and their families from trusting the value and promise of CTE.² Through actions internal and external to the state agency, state CTE leaders can take concrete steps to build trust in communities that do not view CTE as a viable mechanism to help them achieve their college and career goals. To build trust, state CTE leaders should:

1. Acknowledge that inequity is a problem;
2. Promote a culture that values equity and diversity within the state agency and instructor workforce;
3. Commit to transparency and advancing only high-quality CTE programs of study;
4. Implement strategies to gain buy-in from communities and stakeholders; and
5. Celebrate, lift up and replicate successful programs of study and practices.

“Communities have been burned by misinformation. Young people were historically tracked into low-quality vocational education programs. The first step to building trust in these communities is to acknowledge the history and why there is some mistrust.”

— Adenike Huggins, National Urban League

Acknowledge That Inequity Is a Problem

The first step to building trust in communities is to acknowledge the history of CTE and the equity gaps that exist within CTE. As discussed in the first brief in this series, state leaders need to acknowledge CTE’s legacy and understand the equity gaps that exist in their state if they want to begin to address inequities.

State leaders can use data as a flashlight to illuminate gaps in enrollment and completion by population. One critical opportunity is through the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V),

which requires states to disaggregate CTE data by special populations, Career Cluster® and CTE program/programs of study. States can leverage data as a starting point to identify equity gaps and illustrate their pervasiveness, persistence and geographic distribution. States also can use the data to implement strategies to close equity gaps, as covered in *Making Good on the Promise: Examining Access and Achievement Gaps*.³

In addition, state leaders must acknowledge the equity gaps that can exist before enrollment, particularly gaps in information. Some students may have never heard of or been exposed to CTE opportunities, while their peers may have the resources and champions, in the form of school counselors and instructors, with the capacity to make connections between students and CTE and to facilitate their integration into and through CTE programming. States must recognize that data may not illustrate the full extent of the equity gaps that exist.

States also have to be prepared to make the case for advancing equity in CTE. Acknowledging the equity problem in CTE goes beyond identifying equity gaps and confronting the tracking that has taken place — and sometimes continues to take place. It also involves accepting that not all stakeholders may value or prioritize advancing equity in CTE. If a state leader is going to acknowledge that an equity problem exists, he or she needs to be prepared to explain the history of the problem, the scope of the current problem, and the imperative and plans for solving the problem.

Making the Case for Promoting Equity in CTE

To appeal to stakeholders who may not prioritize advancing equity in CTE, state leaders can highlight the economic imperative to close the education and skills gap across race, gender, ability and socioeconomic status. As mentioned in the first brief in this series, CTE can offer an onramp to the middle class and help grow the economy by increasing high school graduation rates and placing students on a pathway to obtain a postsecondary credential of value.⁴ If the U.S. economy is going to continue to grow and remain globally competitive, leaders need to address equity gaps and ensure that all populations have equal access to the benefits of CTE, particularly as demographics shift in the U.S. For instance, by 2050 more than half of U.S. workers and consumers will be people of color,⁵ and if black and Hispanic/Latino children's educational achievement rose to that of white children born in the United States, the economy would be nearly 6 percent, or \$2.3 trillion, larger by 2050.⁶ By strategizing how to close equity gaps in CTE across populations, stakeholders are helping to foster a talent pipeline that will strengthen a labor market in which two-thirds of jobs will require some form of postsecondary education by 2020.⁷

Promote a Culture That Values Equity and Diversity Within the State Agency and Instructor Workforce

To advance equity in CTE effectively, state CTE leadership must make it a priority and lead by example. This focus signals to administrators, instructors and other stakeholders that the state is committed to advancing equity and that funding and policy decisions will align to this priority. To promote a culture that values equity and diversity, state leaders should take a two-pronged approach: engaging teachers, staff and administrators in professional development and learning that will result in greater inclusion, and creating a more diverse teacher pipeline.

Oklahoma's Equity and Diversity Training

Some states have signaled the importance of equity in CTE by creating equity-focused staff positions. In **Oklahoma**, the Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Education created the position of state-level equity and diversity specialist in 2016 as part of its senior leadership team. The focus of this



Source: Peninsula College, Port Angeles, WA

position is to provide trainings to agency staff, teachers, administrators, non-instructional staff and Career Technical Student Organizations to promote equity as a priority through both the secondary and postsecondary systems. These trainings raise awareness of and address issues pertaining to implicit bias, cultural awareness and diversity; they are interactive and involve role-playing to illustrate the effects of stereotypes and bias on people's everyday experiences. Since the trainings began in 2017, more than 2,100 people have participated each year. As the program continues to expand, stakeholders have requested customized training and helped to engage more groups. The trainings are evaluated to ensure that the needs of the participants are being met and to garner recommendations for continuous improvement.

Because the trainings are voluntary, in addition to advertising the trainings via media, the agency relies heavily on participants marketing the trainings through word of mouth. Urging training participants to recruit others creates a grassroots effort to shift mindsets on equity in CTE. By hiring a staff member to address issues related to equity and diversity, Oklahoma also is signaling that it values equity and is beginning the process of gaining buy-in within the state agency. While creating positions solely focused on advancing equity in CTE may not be feasible for other states, state agencies can invest in equity and diversity-focused professional development opportunities that equip staff with the knowledge to think and talk about issues through an equity and diversity lens, which helps to foster a culture that values equity.

Wisconsin's Efforts to Diversify the Teacher Workforce

Secondary students who are taught by teachers who share their gender and racial identity are more likely to understand class material and consider attending college.⁸ Yet, 90 percent of the national CTE teacher workforce is white, while the majority of the country's student population is now composed of students of color.⁹ Therefore, states should also examine the composition of the local CTE instructor workforce and administrative leadership. States should prioritize fostering a teacher pipeline that helps to build a teacher workforce that is more reflective of their learner populations. States can meet this goal by supporting alternative pathways to certification and working with industry-based affinity groups to develop teacher pipelines that promote a diverse instructor workforce.

Recognizing the importance of a diverse instructor workforce, the **Wisconsin** state superintendent initiated a plan to diversify the Wisconsin Department of Instruction's (DPI) staff and raise awareness about inequities in the state. Because this initiative encompasses the entire DPI staff and K-12 teaching workforce, it includes the CTE community. In 2017, 30 percent of students in the Wisconsin public school system were students of color, yet only 5 percent of teachers in the public education system were of color. To address this discrepancy, DPI established a work group to achieve parity between the demographic makeup of the DPI's teacher workforce and students in the state by 2040 in partnership with external groups, organizations and agencies, legislative allies and community partners.

The work group established a strategic plan to increase the percentage of teachers of color in Wisconsin from 5 percent in 2017 to 30 percent by 2020. This plan consists of five key strategies:

- Attract in-state high school students to a career in teaching;
- Eliminate barriers to teacher licensing for in-state and out-of-state teacher candidates;
- Recruit and develop out-of-state teacher candidates;
- Recruit and develop in-state educators; and
- Retain teachers of color.

To evaluate the success of these strategies, DPI will collect quantitative and qualitative data through annual reports and through interviews and focus groups with teacher candidates of color.

While this plan is still in its infancy, the act of bringing in external partners to strategize how to improve diversity and inclusion signals the state's commitment to promoting equity and diversity.

Commit to Transparency and Advancing Only High-Quality CTE Programs

The mistrust that exists in some communities stems from a history of learners participating in low-quality CTE programs with poor outcomes; therefore, it is imperative that states be steadfast in ensuring that they are approving and supporting only high-quality CTE programs of study that lead to positive outcomes for *each* learner. States must invest in resources, policies and programs that support and ensure quality. This effort also involves investing in processes to specifically identify and transform or close down low-quality programs. To help states understand when that may be necessary, *Advance CTE's Ensuring Career Pathway Quality: A Guide to Pathway Intervention* outlines the different types of interventions needed for programs of study to ensure that they are high quality.¹⁰

Ensuring that every learner has access to a high-quality CTE program of study requires attentiveness to equity. In 2017, **Massachusetts** launched the high-quality college and career pathways (HQCCPs) designation process to expand career preparation opportunities and align program offerings with priorities identified by industry. The HQCCPs take two forms: early college programs, which provide students with the opportunities to complete college-level academic coursework that articulates to postsecondary credit, and innovation pathways, which contextualize student learning through experiential work-based learning opportunities that connect students to in-demand growth sectors in the regional economy. Both the early college and innovation pathways are guided by five principles: equitable access, guided academic pathways, enhanced student supports, connection to career and effective partnerships.

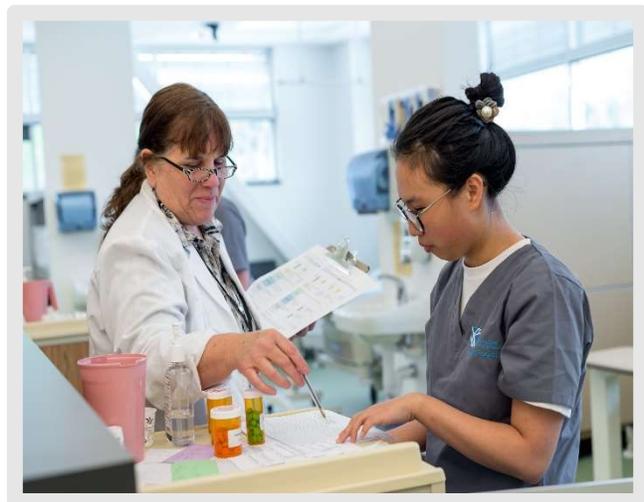
By intentionally including equity as a pillar in the design of its programs, Massachusetts recognizes that a high-quality CTE program is rooted in equitable access and signals to the public that equity is a clear priority for the commonwealth. To ensure that equitable access is a priority in the design of programs, sites in the designation process must demonstrate a commitment to equity and a plan to promote equitable outcomes to receive funding. Massachusetts scrutinizes applications in their initial rounds for evidence of these requirements, such as well-designed recruitment plans and admissions processes that are free of bias. It also looks closely at the demographics of proposed cohort groups and has already withheld designation from several applicants that had not made a sufficient showing of a commitment to equity, offering technical assistance to these applicants to help them strengthen this aspect of their plans. Building pathways through the lens of equity will help to promote high-quality programs that benefit *each* learner.

Implement Strategies to Gain Buy-In From Communities and Stakeholders

Gaining buy-in from local communities and stakeholders is necessary to advance equity in CTE and to build trust. In addition to conveying the importance of addressing equity gaps, state leaders can take concrete steps and leverage strategies to gain buy-in from communities and stakeholders.

Uplift and Engage CTE Champions

In 2017, Advance CTE, with the support from the Siemens Foundation, commissioned focus groups and a national survey to explore the attitudes of parents and students currently involved in CTE, as well as prospective CTE parents and students, to better understand the promise and opportunity of CTE. A key finding from this research was that school counselors, teachers and CTE students are among the most trusted sources of information about CTE for prospective parents and students alike.¹¹ By equipping these individuals with the tools to communicate the promise of high-quality CTE to school communities, state agencies can begin to address the stigma and concerns surrounding CTE.



Source: Lake Washington Institute of Technology, Kirkland, WA

States can build trust in communities by lifting up and engaging trusted CTE champions who are demographically representative of the communities states are engaging to illustrate the benefits of high-quality CTE programs of study. These CTE champions should be students, parents, teachers or business leaders who are trusted in their communities and understand the benefits and promise of CTE. Certain states, such as **Idaho**, have already begun this work.

As part of its work with Advance CTE and the Siemens Foundation to attract and recruit students into high-quality CTE programs of study, the Idaho Division of Career-Technical Education organized

stakeholder engagement groups, which primarily consisted of school counselors and administrators, in 17 school districts across rural, urban and suburban areas. These stakeholder engagement groups equipped school counselors and administrators with the tools they need to communicate the benefits and promise of high-quality CTE programs effectively to parents and students.

During the stakeholder engagement tour, Idaho presented findings from *The Value and Promise of Career Technical Education: Results from a National Survey of Parents and Students* so that school counselors and administrators would have the knowledge to discuss the benefits of high-quality CTE.¹² Following the stakeholder engagement tour, Idaho is developing assets such as flyers, brochures and toolkits for districts to help them communicate the promise of CTE to various populations.

These communications assets are tailored to meet the needs of the specific communities. For instance, the communications strategy being developed for rural communities focuses on helping rural districts



Source: Lake Washington Institute of Technology, Kirkland, WA

communicate with policymakers about the need to address the CTE teacher shortage, but urban districts' communications tools focus primarily on recruiting students into high-quality CTE programs. Following the development of these resources, Idaho will help the districts develop communications strategies to help their communities understand the promise of CTE.

By helping districts develop tailored communications strategies, Idaho is able to equip school counselors and administrators with the tools and knowledge necessary to gain buy-in from

policymakers, students, parents and communities. This messaging strategy can be used to convince stakeholders from marginalized communities about the value and promise of CTE programs of study.

Message CTE to Appeal to Various Populations

High-quality CTE programs of study are associated with positive outcomes that appeal to a wide range of populations.¹³ However, Advance CTE's research has found that specific outcomes associated with high-quality CTE appeal more to some groups than other groups. If states have the data to demonstrate that high-quality CTE programs are associated with positive outcomes, then they may use these outcomes and corresponding data to target their messaging to appeal to specific populations.

Outcomes Associated With High-Quality CTE

Advance CTE, with the support from the Siemens Foundation, commissioned focus groups and a national survey to explore the attitudes of parents and students currently involved in CTE, as well as prospective CTE parents and students, to better understand the promise and opportunity of CTE. When asked, “What elements [of high-quality CTE] are most important to you personally?” the following populations identified the following outcomes as most important more frequently than the average research participant:

- CTE students have a significantly higher high school graduation rate (90 percent) than the national average (75 percent).
 - Appeals more to parents and to African American, Hispanic and urban populations
- More than three out of four CTE students go on to study in college full time right after high school.
 - Appeals more to rural populations
- CTE programs provide opportunities for students to get certifications from several different industries and/or associations.
 - Appeals more to Hispanic populations

In addition, Advance CTE discovered that the following promises associated with high-quality CTE appealed across populations:

- CTE helps learners develop real-world skills through hands-on learning;
- CTE provides career benefits;
- CTE can help learners accrue college credits and scholarships; and
- CTE gives students an advantage in their future careers.

States may use these findings to convince stakeholders in specific communities about the value of high-quality CTE programs through marketing materials such as talking points, social media posts and brochures.

Elevate the Voices of Community Members in Policy and Programmatic Decisions and Solutions

States can build trust in communities by being inclusive of diverse voices and stakeholders, especially those who have been historically under-served by CTE, in conversations about policy and programmatic decisions that will affect them.

Wisconsin has begun this work through its community placemaking efforts. Notably, in 2017 the President’s Committee of the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) formed the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Work Group to promote equity in WTCS. Part of the mission of the work group is to share and implement equity-minded strategies driven by data and root cause analysis to improve student success outcomes. The work group developed the WTCS System-wide Equity Report using

equity data from the state and system to identify equity gaps and determine strategies WTCS can implement to address those gaps.¹⁴

Though data play a key role in helping WTCS determine actions it needs to take to address equity gaps, the representation on the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Work Group helps to elevate the concerns of the learners WTCS serves. The work group is made up of human resources representatives and diversity services professionals from all 16 technical colleges in WTCS. Each member of the work group is actively working on building trust with and addressing the needs of different marginalized student communities in their respective districts. As a result, committee members are able to bring up learner narratives and community concerns that the equity data may not be able to illustrate to help inform the programmatic and policy decisions WTCS makes.

Wisconsin: Elevating Community Voices to Promote Systems Alignment and Equity

As a whole, Wisconsin is strengthening cross-sector partnerships to align systems to address the needs of community members. An employer from Wisconsin spearheaded a community placemaking effort to address barriers to inclusivity in the state after witnessing the impact the lack of inclusivity had on the local economy and people's workplace, education and health experiences and outcomes.

As a result, in April 2019, the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) is hosting the Toward One Wisconsin Inclusivity Conference, bringing together neighborhood associations, churches, employers, educational institutions, affinity groups and local organizations that advocate on behalf of special populations to gain insight into specific barriers hindering inclusivity. The conference will address barriers to inclusion in the workplace, communities, youth-serving organizations and schools and health systems.

The conference will give community members the opportunity to have conversations with change makers and leaders across sectors, as they work together to brainstorm solutions to address inclusivity issues in Wisconsin. After the conference, WIPPS will produce a strategic report with goals and actionable recommendations for state and local governments, businesses, communities, educational institutions, health systems and non-profit organizations based on the findings from the conference. Additionally, WIPPS will generate performance measures for success in reducing barriers to inclusion to hold partners and institutions accountable.

Leverage Diverse Stakeholders to Inform CTE Priorities

Nebraska is using stakeholder engagement meetings to elevate the voices of community stakeholders while also gaining buy-in from industry. The Nebraska Department of Education and Nebraska Career Education held numerous stakeholder engagement meetings to help inform strategies for a strategic plan to address issues related to delivery, financing, quality and teacher supply across the secondary and postsecondary education systems.

The stakeholder meetings consisted primarily of business/industry and community leaders but also included a select number of educators from the secondary and postsecondary systems. To get business and industry to the table, the Nebraska Department of Education collaborated with the Nebraska Department of Labor and Economic Development. Nebraska sent targeted invitations for the meetings to ensure that appropriate industries and significant leadership in each of the economic regions were represented. Prior to the meetings, participants were provided with guides that contained background information on Nebraska's current approach to a CTE-related topic and possible alternative approaches to improve said topic. During the meeting participants selected their preferred approach and engaged in open-ended discussions about other ways to improve the topic.

Upon completion of the stakeholder meetings, key findings and considerations were published, which were used to inform a strategic plan to improve the Nebraska CTE system.¹⁵ While the Nebraska stakeholder engagement meetings were focused primarily on addressing access and quality issues and not on closing equity gaps, the stakeholder engagement tour model can be adapted with an equity lens to gain employer and stakeholder buy-in and allow community members to influence strategic planning to improve CTE.

Key Equity Questions for CTE

Providing an avenue for community members and leaders to help inform policy and programmatic decisions empowers communities and increases their investment in CTE. As a result, states should establish ways for community members to provide feedback. To ensure that these opportunities for feedback result in meaningful dialogue and comments, states must make information accessible and easy for community members to understand. State leaders should consider the following questions as they examine the accessibility of their information and feedback loops:

- What languages are state plans, data, policy and program information presented in?
- Is information presented in plain language that the average layperson can understand? Is education jargon translated into layperson terms?
- What timeframe for providing feedback is given? Who may be excluded from providing feedback due to the time/date?
- What languages may community members use to provide feedback?
- What methods may people use to provide feedback (written, verbal, etc.)?
- What delivery methods may community members use to provide feedback (online, mail, in person, etc.)?
- Where are opportunities to provide feedback held? Who may be unable to access these opportunities because of the location?

Celebrate, Lift Up and Replicate Successful Programs of Study and Practices

When state and local education leaders make significant progress toward advancing equity in CTE, states should celebrate, lift up and replicate these successes. Celebrating successes allows states to

recognize the accomplishments of local leaders in closing equity gaps, provides an incentive and motivation for local leaders to prioritize equity, and elevates relevant practices that other leaders can replicate.

States can accomplish this celebration through formally recognizing high-quality CTE programs of study. **Utah** has taken this approach by establishing the Utah Excellence in Action Award, an award administered by the Utah State Board of Education that recognizes high-quality CTE programs of study in the state. The award is a state-level version of Advance CTE's Excellence in Action Award, which recognizes and honors high-quality CTE programs from across the nation.¹⁶

Utah began the award program in 2017. Nominees are selected based on a set of detailed criteria, including evidence that shows the CTE program provides equitable access and outcomes for learners. Award recipients are recognized during a statewide CTE Directors luncheon. Award recipients receive state-wide recognition and promotional materials.

Since the inception of the program, Utah has noticed that local CTE Directors value the award because someone outside of their local education agencies nominated them for it. Additionally, Utah has seen an interest from other local education agencies to replicate the award-winning CTE programs. The Utah Excellence in Action Award has provided the Utah State Board of Education with a new method to uplift replicable programs that have positive, equitable outcomes for each learner.

A Path Forward

States must commit to both equity and quality in CTE programs to rebuild and gain the trust of all current and potential CTE stakeholders and learners. Through actions internal and external to the state office, state leaders can take concrete steps to message CTE to gain buy-in and trust from staff, learners, stakeholders and the community. State leaders should consider the following when working toward building trust in communities historically marginalized by CTE:

- **Acknowledge inequities in CTE:** The first step to building trust with communities historically marginalized by CTE is to acknowledge the history of inequities and the current equity gaps that persist today. While data can play a key role in showcasing equity gaps, state leaders should also solicit feedback from community members and stakeholders to understand the equity gaps that exist that may not be demonstrated by data.
- **Commit to advancing equity in CTE:** High-quality CTE programs should be rooted in equitable access and promote equitable outcomes for each learner. State leaders should be transparent about the equity gaps that exist in their state and how they plan to address the gaps to promote equity in CTE.
- **Elevate the voices of community members and stakeholders:** State leaders should create avenues through which community members and stakeholders can express concerns, hold the state accountable and engage in solution-driven discussions to help promote equitable policies and practices.

Methodology

The briefs in this series were informed by a literature review and input from a broad group of civil rights organizations, state policymakers and local leaders who are each working to confront access and opportunity gaps every day. Advance CTE is grateful for their input into this series.

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