

The Challenge

Providing learners with multiple, high-quality pathways to meaningful careers is a critical component of a strong education system, regardless of zip code or geography. Ensuring equitable access to such pathways is a challenge, especially in rural areas. Career Technical Education (CTE) can provide an on-ramp for rural learners to access meaningful, high-wage careers while simultaneously strengthening the talent pipeline to meet regional labor demand. Yet rural learners all too often face an uphill battle when it comes to accessing high-quality CTE. Scarce resources, limited regional employers and an expansive service area make it challenging for rural institutions to provide robust, high-quality CTE programs of study across a breadth of subjects.

To help states meet the rural demand for high-quality CTE, Advance CTE launched an initiative called *CTE on the Frontier*. Through interviews with state CTE leaders at both the secondary and postsecondary levels and national partners, Advance CTE is working to identify promising strategies to help states expand access to high-quality CTE programs of study in rural communities. The initiative explores common challenges faced in rural areas across the nation, including:

- [Ensuring all courses and programs of study are of the highest quality;](#)
- [Connecting rural learners to the world of work;](#)
- Providing a breadth of diverse course options; and
- Strengthening the rural CTE teacher pipeline.

The Opportunity

Through this initiative, Advance CTE identified a number of federal leverage points that states can use to accelerate CTE program development in rural areas. These leverage points are present throughout major federal education and workforce laws: The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 (Perkins Act); the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, reauthorized in 2015 as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA); and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

Even when rural CTE delivery is not an explicit priority in the law, federal policies often have significant flexibility, allowing state leaders and policymakers to leverage both federal policy and federal dollars for rural CTE if they choose to do so.

How to Use This Document

Advance CTE developed this cheat sheet to help rural policymakers identify leverage points across federal education and workforce programs to support and expand access to high-quality rural CTE at both the secondary and postsecondary levels. The document is meant to be a conversation starter. It should illuminate opportunities for partnership and spark strategic planning and collaboration across sectors and regional delivery systems. Some of the state examples included below were drawn from the *CTE on the Frontier* briefs and are described in more detail in those publications.

This cheat sheet describes the key federal leverage points to support and expand rural Career Technical Education (CTE). Federal programs covered in this brief include:

- The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 (Perkins Act)
- The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)
- The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins)

The Perkins Act is the federal law that provides support for CTE programs in all 50 states and U.S. territories. The law focuses on the academic and technical achievement of CTE students, strengthening the connections between secondary and postsecondary education and improving accountability.

Opportunity: Reserve Fund

Overview: Perkins requires that the eligible state agency (the agency that administers the state's Perkins Basic State Grant, the federal investment in CTE authorized in Perkins) distribute 85 percent of those funds to local eligible recipients (which include any school districts, area technical centers, community/technical colleges and/or other institutions of higher education that have developed a state-approved local CTE plan). Of this 85 percent, the eligible agency can choose to dedicate up to 10 percent to create a *reserve fund*. The funds are to be used for specialized projects benefitting rural areas, areas with a high number of CTE students, and/or areas with a high percentage of CTE students. States can choose how to distribute these funds to local recipients: a formula, through competitive grants, or a combination of formula funds and competitive grants.¹

Opportunity in Action: Many states use the Reserve Fund to issue competitive grants in rural areas or catalyze innovative programs. In 2017, 38 states reported dedicating a portion of the local allocation for the creation of a reserve fund, up from 35 states in 2014. Of these, 27 states (71 percent) reported that supporting rural areas was at least one of the focus areas for their reserve fund during the reporting year.²

Montana, for example, has taken advantage of the reserve fund to strengthen Big Sky Pathways in rural schools.³ Over the past several years, the Montana University System has prioritized the expansion of dual credit course taking opportunities, issuing reserve funds to local recipients to help them provide dual credit opportunities in rural high schools. As a result, Montana has seen a marked increase in enrollment and attainment, doubling the number of small, rural high schools offering dual credit. Now, Montana is shifting its focus to high-quality work-based learning and plans to leverage the Perkins reserve fund to expand such opportunities to rural learners.

Opportunity: Pooling Funds

Overview: The eligible state agency may also use Perkins state leadership funds to award incentive grants to local eligible recipients that are pooling their funds for certain uses, such as implementing CTE programs of study or providing professional development for CTE teachers, administrators and faculty.⁴ In 2017, only 7 states reported using state leadership funds to incentivize pooling.⁵

At the local level, local eligible recipients may elect to pool a portion of their Perkins funds with other eligible recipients for similar uses, even if they are not awarded an incentive grant from the state.⁶ Pooling funds for these purposes may allow local eligible recipients in rural areas to accomplish more than they could alone.

Opportunity in Action: In 2002, school districts across the state of **Georgia** banded together and pooled their local Perkins grants to create the Career, Technical and Agricultural Education Resource Network (CTAERN).⁷ CTAERN develops and provides high-quality professional development for CTE teachers statewide. In the 2015-16 school year, the network delivered 366 workshops to nearly 8,000 attendees, achieving an exposure and impact that individual school districts could not reach alone. By pooling resources and aligning professional development efforts, local recipients across the state – including those in rural, suburban and urban locales – can achieve economies of scale and reduce duplication of effort.

Opportunity: Forming Consortia

Overview: Under Perkins, the minimum grant award (which is determined by a specific formula based on population and poverty) that an eligible local recipient can receive is \$15,000 at the secondary level and \$50,000 at the postsecondary level.⁸ If the formula yields an award lower than that threshold, an eligible recipient may form a consortia with other recipients at the same learner level in order to qualify for the minimum amount. This requirement is waived for local recipients in rural areas. However, the option to form a consortia may allow for rural recipients to partner and provide opportunities to students that may not otherwise be available.

Opportunity in Action: Applying for Perkins CTE funds as a consortium is a widespread practice in many rural states. In **Nebraska**, only 19 out of 244 districts qualify for direct Perkins funding. The vast majority of other districts do not qualify for the minimum \$15,000 Perkins award, so they form consortia to apply for funds. Consortia are managed by Educational Service Units, regional bodies established to support and provide supplemental services to rural districts in the state. This structure also allows rural districts to collaborate with one another to provide targeted professional development and other supports.

Idaho has also made use of the consortium model to help rural districts qualify for Perkins funding. In turn, this approach has helped close access gaps and connect rural learners with meaningful career preparation opportunities. The Idaho Falls Consortium, for example, includes the populous Idaho Falls School District along with two smaller districts that do not alone qualify for the minimum grant award. The consortium uses funds in part to cover transportation for local industry tours as well as exploring CTE opportunities at the postsecondary level.

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)

WIOA was reauthorized in 2014 and is designed to support workforce development activities, including job training programs for displaced youth and adult workers. One of the strategies for driving workforce development under WIOA is the creation of career pathways, which combine education – including CTE – training and other services to help learners earn credentials in high-demand industries.

Opportunity: Statewide Set-aside (i.e., Governor's Set-aside)

Overview: Under Title I of WIOA, Governors may elect to reserve up to 15 percent of the state's Youth Workforce Investment Activities allocation "for statewide workforce investment activities."⁹ This funding stream is fairly flexible in terms of allowable expenses and includes career pathway development and implementation, job-driven strategies and local sector partnerships.¹⁰ Further, states are permitted to revise their distribution formula for issuing local grants to incorporate

additional factors, such as excess youth poverty and unemployment in rural areas.¹¹ This flexibility allows state leaders to augment work related to CTE access and quality in rural areas.

Opportunity in Action: A 2017 report from the National Skills Coalition found that 12 states are making use of the Governor’s WIOA reserve fund, a significant increase since 2015 when only one state was using the fund.¹² Many of these states are using the set-aside to support sector strategies and career pathways development, including in **California**, where funds are being used to support the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office’s (CCCCO) “Doing What Matters for Jobs and the Economy” Initiative. Through that work, the CCCCCO is providing funding and supports for CTE planning at community colleges across the state, many of them in rural areas. The CCCCCO uses labor market data to inform and prioritize the development of CTE programs.¹³

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

ESSA was passed in 2015 and reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, a federal program providing funding for K-12 schools nationwide. Through accountability, funding for low-performing schools, and supports for teacher professional development and other activities, ESSA aims to make a “well-rounded education” available to all learners.

Opportunity: Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP)

Overview: This program has two programs embedded:

- *Small, Rural School Achievement Program:* provides formula funds to eligible districts in rural areas that have low numbers of students. Districts can use these funds for certain authorized purposes, such as Title II, Part A (Supporting Effective Instruction) and Title IV, Part B (21st Century Community Learning Centers), which can both be used to bolster CTE efforts.¹⁴
- *Rural and Low-Income School Program:* supplies funds to state education agencies (SEAs) to distribute to eligible local education agencies (LEAs) via sub-grants. Similarly, districts can leverage these dollars for a variety of initiatives to support rural CTE (e.g., teacher recruitment and retention; Title IV, Part A (Student Support and Academic Enrichment); and others).¹⁵

Opportunity in Action: REAP is designed to supplement federal programming at the local level and provide additional resources for small, rural and low-income districts that would not otherwise be able to compete for federal funding. As such, district leaders are empowered to use REAP to support activities under other titles in the law. Given the elevated role of CTE and career readiness in ESSA, school districts can use these funds to supplement professional development for CTE teachers, the design and expansion of CTE programs of study, and other related activities.

While most state ESSA plans defer to local leaders to prioritize REAP funds, some states, such as **New York**, provided additional guidelines and recommendations. In New York, the State Department of Education encourages local recipients to use REAP funds to provide learning tools and resources that help learners obtain the knowledge necessary to succeed in postsecondary education and employment. Specifically, the plan describes how funds could be used to expand access to well-rounded educational opportunities, including access to STEM programming and college and career guidance, under Title IV, Part A.¹⁶

Conclusion

Through Perkins, WIOA and ESSA, states are presented with a number of leverage points to strengthen rural CTE programs. By braiding dollars, aligning policy priorities, coordinating service delivery and working to actively remove barriers across federal programs, state and local policymakers can accelerate ongoing work and help reach economies of scale in rural areas.

Often, conversations about braiding funding and aligning program delivery can be met with resistance, particularly in an environment of tightening state and federal purse strings. These strategies should be approached delicately and with a foundation of trust. If state and federal funding is the fuel that accelerates local CTE program development, then trust is the oxygen that allows it to breathe.

It is our hope that state policymakers will find this brief instructional. Additional policy briefs and case studies developed under the *CTE on the Frontier* initiative are available in the Learning that Works Resource Center at <http://careertech.org/resource-center>.

¹ Sec. 112(c)

² Taken from Advance CTE's Perkins Implementation Survey. The survey was conducted from June 23, 2017 through August 8, 2017. The survey garnered a nearly unanimous response rate with 50 states, the District of Columbia and Guam reporting. Non-responding territories included Palau and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

³ Montana University System. Strengthening Big Sky Pathways Proposals and Grantees. Retrieved from <http://mus.edu/BigSkyPathways/BSP-RFP.asp>

⁴ Sec. 124(c)(10)(B)

⁵ From Advance CTE's Perkins Implementation Survey.

⁶ Sec. 135(c)(19)

⁷ Career, Technical and Agricultural Education Resource Network. Retrieved from <https://www.ctaern.org/>.

⁸ Sec. 131(c)(1), Sec. 131(c)(2)(A)(i), and Sec. 132(c)

⁹ Sec. 128(a)

¹⁰ Wilson, Bryan and DeRenzi, Brooke. (April 2015). *Realizing Innovation and Opportunity in WIOA: A Playbook for Creating Effective State Plans*. National Skills Coalition. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/2015-09-WIOA-playbook-for-creating-effective-state-plans.pdf>.

¹¹ Sec. 128(b)(3)(B)(i)

¹² Wilson, Bryan. (September 2017). *Sector Partnership Policy: 50-State Scan*. National Skills Coalition. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/Sector-Partnership-Scan.pdf>.

¹³ "Doing What Matters for Jobs and the Economy." California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. Retrieved from <http://doingwhatmatters.cccco.edu/>.

¹⁴ Sec. 5211

¹⁵ Sec. 5221

¹⁶ New York State Education Department. "ESSA New York Consolidated State Plan." (2017). Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/stateplan17/map/ny.html>.