



Career and Technical Education's Role in DROPOUT PREVENTION

ISSUE SHOOT

FEBRUARY 2009



In the past 50 years, high school completion has grown in importance as the labor market has been transformed in the knowledge economy. Yet alarmingly, nearly one in every three students who start high school in the ninth grade fails to complete the 12th grade within four years. Literally millions of young people are out of school and grossly ill equipped to compete in the 21st century workforce and economy.

CTE Provides a Solution

High-quality *career and technical education* (CTE) can help more students persist in and complete high school, preparing them for the postsecondary education and training that will be critical to future economic successes.

- Students have a decreased risk of dropping out of high school as they add CTE courses to their curriculum, up to a point at which they are taking one CTE course for every two academic courses. (Plank, et al., "Dropping Out of High School and the Place of Career and Technical Education," National Research Center for Career and Technical Education, 2005.)
- High-risk students are eight to 10 times less likely to drop out in the 11th and 12th grades if they enroll in a CTE program instead of a general program. (Kulik, "Curriculum Tracks and High School Vocational Studies," University of Michigan, 1998.)
- The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network has identified the 15 strategies that have the most positive impact on

the dropout rate. These strategies include "career and technology education." According to the Center, "A quality CTE program and a related guidance program are essential for all students." (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, "Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention.")

Increasing Student Engagement

What the research suggests is that today's CTE offers students relevant learning experiences that answer the age-old question "Why do I have to learn this?" while at the same time enhancing students' academic achievement and meeting industry needs. CTE has become a leader in ensuring flexible, relevant learning opportunities to engage students and provide a real-world, career-oriented curriculum.

- One significant reason students drop out of school is that they lose interest and motivation in education because the curriculum does not seem to have a real-world application (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, "The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts," 2006). Academics are often presented in isolation, instead of in a way that shines a spotlight on how the subject is applicable in the context of the real world.
- A 2006 poll by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc. of at-risk California ninth- and 10th-graders found that six in 10 respondents were not motivated to succeed in school. Of those students, more than 90 percent said they would be more engaged in their education if classes helped them acquire skills



and knowledge relevant to future careers.

- CTE has been at the center of numerous alternative delivery methods that attempt to address the dropout issue, such as magnet schools, smaller learning communities, middle college high schools and accelerated programs. These programs seek to provide the more relevant curriculum that leads to increased student engagement, and the positive adult-student relationships that can motivate student success.

Building Positive Relationships

Students need to be connected to their peers and to positive adult relationships. In the *2006 High School Survey of Student Engagement*, 24 percent of students who have considered dropping out of high school cited the reason “No adults in the school cared about me.” Mentoring and providing positive relationships with adults in the school and community are hallmarks of quality CTE programs.

- Career academies, smaller learning communities with a focus on CTE, were found in the 2008 MDRC study “Career Academies: Impacts on Students’ Initial Transitions to Postsecondary Education and Employment” to increase the attendance rate and the likelihood of staying in school for students who entered the programs at high risk of dropping out.
- In Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSOs) such as DECA, FCCLA, FFA, FBLA, HOSA, SkillsUSA, TSA and BPA, 2 million young people work regularly with an adult advisor. A 2007 study by the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education found that CTSO activities positively affect students’ academic engagement; and the stronger the student’s involvement, the better the results.
- Whether through a formal mentoring program, or by placing students in job shadowing or internship opportunities, CTE links

students to the community using work-based learning opportunities in ways that many other high school programs cannot.

Policy Action Needed

To support CTE efforts to address the dropout crisis, the following federal policy steps should be taken:

- Increase funding for the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, which has actually decreased since FY 2002.
- Increase the focus on secondary school completion through comprehensive dropout prevention and reentry strategies in the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act.
 - Provide incentives and eliminate disincentives for schools to register “drop in” students – students that are returning to continue their education.
 - Develop a consistent definition of secondary school “dropout” and require schools to disaggregate and report dropout and graduation data.
 - Support research and development for flexible re-entry and completion programs, including those that employ career development and CTE strategies.
 - Ensure federal flexibility for reporting “extended-time” graduation rates.
 - Put additional emphasis on secondary school completion rates within calculations for Adequate Yearly Progress.
- Preserve the Workforce Investment Act’s (WIA) current focus on serving both in-school and out-of-school youth, maintaining funding for youth programs, and maintaining WIA’s Youth Councils to ensure that local communities continue to focus on the employment concerns of young people, which are linked to the dropout issue.