



APRIL 2021

# Communicating Career Technical Education:

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Learner-centered Messages for Effective Program Recruitment

**ADVANCE**  **CTE**  
State Leaders Connecting Learning to Work



## Introduction

**AS THE WORLDS OF LEARNING AND WORK CONTINUE THEIR RAPID AND ACCELERATED TRANSFORMATION,** education cannot be a one-size-fits-all experience. Families face numerous choices and challenges to learn about and pursue engaging secondary education experiences that cultivate the knowledge and skills needed for a path to a meaningful career. Career Technical Education (CTE) is more valuable than ever, and it is critical that education leaders and advocates are equipped with effective messages and support to elevate CTE as the ideal option for each learner.

CTE meets the changing needs of learners and industry through rigorous coursework and high-quality, hands-on experiences that allow learners to explore careers and gain skills to achieve success in a career of their choice. While significant progress has been made in improving public knowledge and perception of CTE in recent years, the messages that resonate with policymakers and industry are not always the same messages that motivate parents/guardians and learners to consider and participate in CTE programs. Additionally, CTE continues to overcome systemic barriers in not only providing equitable CTE experiences but also ensuring equitable access to information about CTE.

Advance CTE, with support from the Siemens Foundation, commissioned focus groups and a national survey of 2,156 parents/guardians and learners currently involved in or considering CTE, with an oversample of Black and Latinx families and families with low income. This research re-examines themes and messages previously tested in 2017 to evaluate message resiliency; tests the impact of recent economic events on the perception of CTE; and identifies variances in message emphasis among historically marginalized populations, in particular Black and Latinx families and families with low income.

# Key Findings

## **CTE STILL DELIVERS FOR FAMILIES**

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Despite the challenges of program delivery during a global pandemic, CTE is still viewed as an option that meets the broader educational goals of families. CTE learners and families remained more satisfied with their education experiences, particularly the CTE-focused aspects of career exploration and gaining the skills needed for a meaningful career, than those not involved in CTE.

## **“PREPARING FOR THE REAL WORLD” IS A PROVEN MESSAGE FOR CTE RECRUITMENT**

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Parents/guardians and learners are most attracted to CTE’s potential to provide learners with real-world skills that will help them succeed in college and a career. This message was consistently effective across race, gender, income, region and geography (urban, suburban, rural) and was especially effective for prospective families

## **CTE PRIORITIES ARE VALUED DIFFERENTLY DEPENDING ON EXPOSURE, BUT FINDING CAREER PASSION IS A CONSISTENT PRIORITY**

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Opportunities for career exploration resonate more with prospective learners and parents/guardians, while those involved in CTE place more emphasis on skills attainment. However, both groups of families place high priority on leveraging career exploration and skills attainment to find a career their learner is passionate about.

## **CTE PREPARES LEARNERS FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER SUCCESS**

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Families are now more open than they were during the previous research to college paths other than a four-year degree, and CTE provides a path to those opportunities. Learners and families engaging in CTE were more confident in future postsecondary degree completion, a finding especially true for Black and Latinx families and families with low income. At the same time, learners and parents/guardians see CTE as offering increased opportunities for learners to jumpstart their postsecondary journey in high school.

## **INFORMED AND DIVERSE SCHOOL LEADERS ARE CRITICAL FOR CTE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION**

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Learners are in the driver’s seat on their education decisions, but they rely on trusted sources for information on education and career paths. Educators and staff closest to learners, particularly teachers and school counselors, must be fully informed about the benefits of CTE and how to effectively communicate those benefits to families. For historically marginalized families, equitable online access to information stood out as important for making decisions about CTE participation.

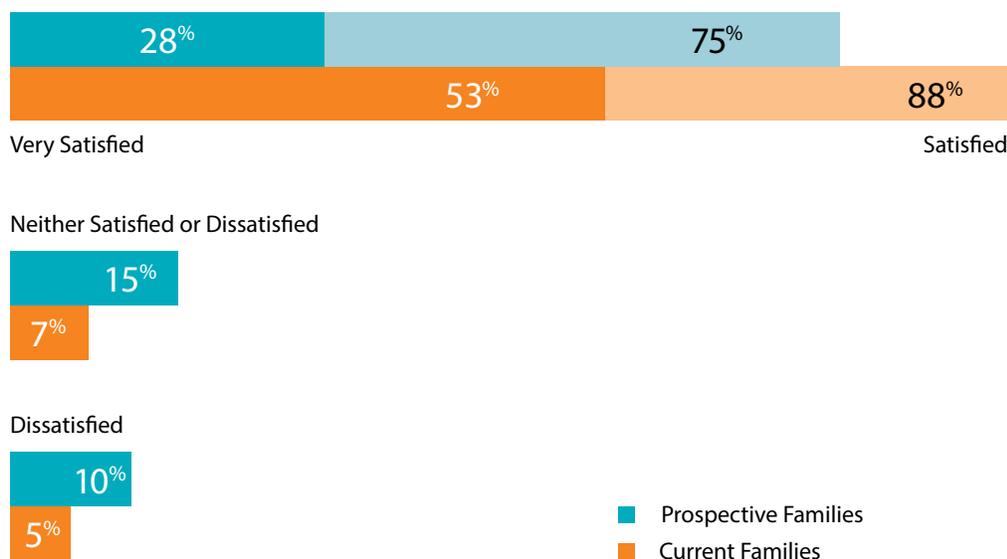
## CTE *Still* Delivers for Families



Parents/guardians and learners currently enrolled in CTE courses were significantly more satisfied with their education experience, reinforcing Advance CTE's research conducted in 2017. As shown in Figure 1, **88 percent of parents/guardians and learners currently enrolled in CTE were satisfied with their overall education experience compared to 75 percent of prospective parents/guardians and learners.**

Parents/guardians whose learners are enrolled in CTE were almost twice as likely to be “very satisfied” with their school experience (61%) as prospective parents/guardians (31%).

**FIGURE 1.**  
Satisfaction in Overall Education Experience by Parent/Guardian and Learner Group



## CTE *Still* Delivers for Families

Prospective parents/guardians and learners were most dissatisfied with education experiences that CTE directly addresses. Only slightly more than half of families were satisfied with opportunities for career exploration and gaining skills in a specific field, and less than 40 percent were satisfied with opportunities for networking with employers.

Enrollment in CTE programs increased satisfaction across almost all aspects of the educational experience, including the quality of classes and teachers, opportunities to take advanced classes, and particularly the key CTE experiences of career exploration and skill building, as illustrated in Table 1.

**Almost 85 percent of CTE families were satisfied with their school's experiences related to career exploration and gaining skills compared to only 54 percent of prospective families,** echoing findings from research conducted in 2017.

These two areas had uniform levels of satisfaction across race, ethnicity and income, making them effective aspects of CTE to communicate to all families.

**TABLE 1.**  
Satisfaction With Aspects of Education

Aspect of Education	Prospective Families	Current Families
Quality of classes	75%	86%
Quality of teachers	73%	85%
Opportunities to take classes that allow you/them to explore different careers of interest	54%	84%
Opportunities to earn college credit(s)	61%	83%
Opportunities to take classes that focus on skills in a specific field	54%	85%
Opportunities to take advanced classes	61%	81%
Opportunities to earn credits toward a certification	51%	83%
Ability to learn real-world skills	59%	79%
Opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities	67%	77%
Opportunities to take classes in the arts	62%	67%
Opportunities to participate in sports	61%	64%
Opportunities to make connections and network with employers	37%	68%
Opportunities for an internship	34%	66%

### Considerations for Historically Marginalized Populations

Not all CTE-related aspects of education reached equitable levels of satisfaction by race and ethnicity, which affects what aspects of the CTE experience should be emphasized in communications to families. While Table 1 shows notable differences in satisfaction for real-world skill building and opportunities to interact with employers between prospective and current families, Table 2 shows that White learners had higher levels of satisfaction than Black and Latinx learners in those categories. For example, satisfaction with opportunities for internships was 30 percentage point higher for White current CTE learners than for White prospective learners, while for Latinx learners there

was only a 12 percentage point difference and for Black learners experience essentially no difference in satisfaction. Additionally, while 60 percent of current White learners were satisfied with opportunities to network with employers, only 50 percent of current Black and Latinx learners were satisfied. Program quality must be a priority to ensure that communications about CTE can accurately elevate CTE as a valuable and equitable education experience for each learner.

**TABLE 2.**  
Satisfaction With Aspects of Education by Race and Ethnicity

White Learners			Black Learners			Latinx Learners		
Prospective	Current	Difference	Prospective	Current	Difference	Prospective	Current	Difference
<b>▶ Opportunities to take classes that allow you to explore different careers of interest</b>								
55%	80%	+25	71%	81%	+10	46%	81%	+35
<b>▶ Opportunities to take classes that focus on skills in a specific field</b>								
51%	85%	+34	69%	83%	+14	35%	79%	+44
<b>▶ Ability to learn real-world skills</b>								
52%	72%	+20	64%	74%	+10	61%	64%	+3
<b>▶ Opportunities to make connections and network with employers</b>								
28%	60%	+32	51%	50%	-1	44%	50%	+6
<b>▶ Opportunities for an internship</b>								
27%	57%	+30	47%	45%	-2	36%	48%	+12

## “Preparing for the Real World” is a Proven Message for CTE Recruitment



Consistent with Advance CTE’s research released in 2017, the overarching message about CTE’s value that most resonated with learners and their families is one that highlights CTE’s focus on preparing learners for the “real world.”

When asked to rank three messages related to the value of CTE, “Preparing for the Real World” was by far the top choice among current and prospective parents/guardians and learners across race, gender and income compared to messaging about making connections and providing career security during economic uncertainty. It is encouraging that the messages that most attract families to CTE remained consistent even in the midst of significant changes to systems of learning and work.

“Preparing for the Real World” was particularly effective among prospective families. **Latinx prospective families** were the most receptive groups to this message, with **69 percent ranking** “Preparing for the Real World” as their top message.

**TABLE 3.**  
Percentage Ranking “Preparing for the Real World” Top Message by Group

Current Parents/Guardians	52%
Prospective Parents/Guardians	64%
Current Learners	61%
Prospective Learners	63%
Current White Families	54%
Prospective White Families	61%
Current Black Families	57%
Prospective Black Families	64%
Current Latinx Families	51%
Prospective Latinx Families	69%

## “Preparing for the Real World” is a Proven Message for CTE Recruitment

The durability of this message is also reflected in the preferences expressed by families regarding the top benefits of CTE programs. When asked to rank their top three potential benefits and outcomes from participating in CTE, **current and prospective learners and parents/guardians consistently ranked preparing for the real world as their top desired outcome** out of 22 options ranging from earning college credit to finding a well-paying job and internship opportunities.

### “Making Connections” Message Resonates With Historically Marginalized Learners

While “Preparing for the Real World” is a top message across families and racial and ethnic groups, “Making Connections” with peers, instructors and employers with similar interests is a strong secondary message for states to consider when working to recruit and retain learners who are under-represented in CTE. As illustrated in Table 4, prospective Black and Latinx learners and learners with low income ranked the “Making Connections” message 9, 8, and 6 percentage points higher respectively than a more economic-focused message.

The preference was even stronger among current learners, which may be helpful when considering messages to improve the retention rates of current CTE students.

**Current Black and Latinx learners and learners with low income ranked the “Making Connections” message as their second choice 19, 15 and 18 percentage points higher respectively than a more economic-focused message**, the largest margin of any parent/guardian or learner group. This finding reinforces CTE’s unique ability to help learners build social networks with employers, their peers, instructors, and those who are passionate about the same things they are, which is particularly valuable for populations that have been historically marginalized and discriminated from making connections that are key to career advancement.

**TABLE 4.**  
Tested Messages for Learners by Race and Income

Learner Population	Primary Message	Secondary Messages	
	Preparing for Real World	Making Connections	Safe Bet in This Economy
Prospective White Families	60%	21%	20%
Prospective Black Families	66%	21%	12%
Prospective Latinx Families	69%	19%	11%
Prospective with Low Income	68%	19%	13%
Current White	61%	23%	16%
Current Black	57%	31%	12%
Current Latinx	53%	31%	16%
Current with Low Income	60%	29%	11%

## CTE Priorities are Valued Differently Depending on Exposure, but Finding Career Passion is a Consistent Priority

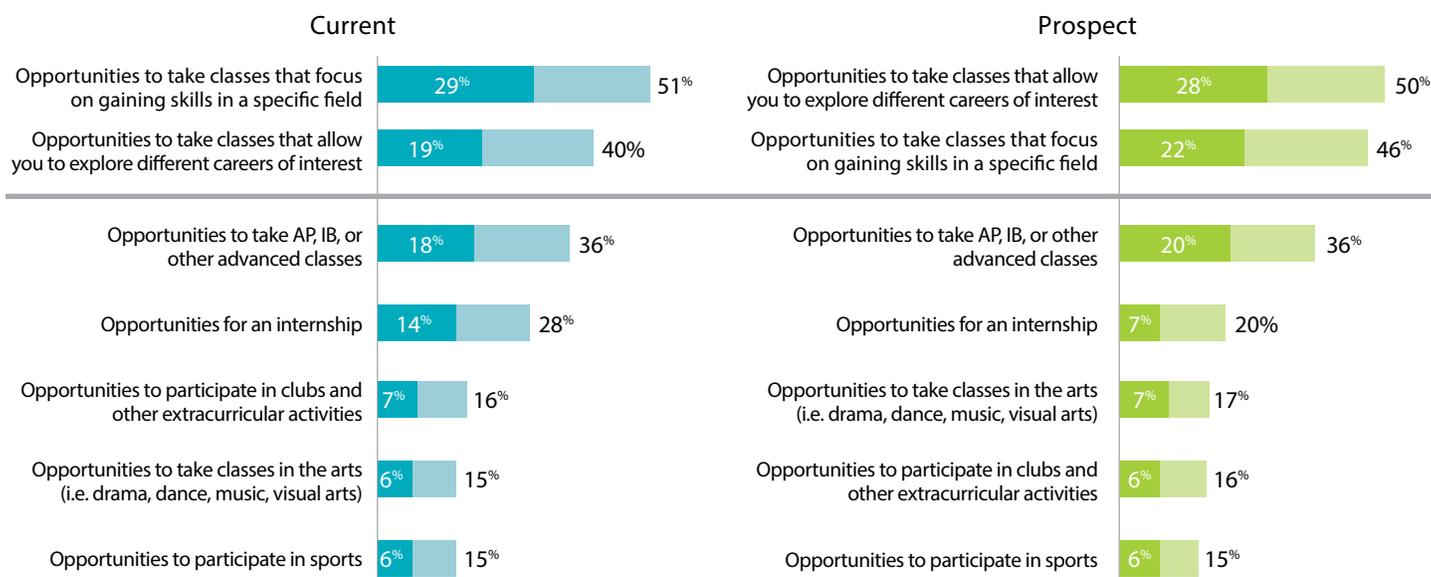


Both prospective and current families place high priority on an education experience that allows learners to prepare for the real world through career exploration and gaining skills in a specific field. When asked to rank aspects of their education in terms of importance, more than **45 percent of families — across race and income — chose career exploration and gaining skills as their top two priorities** compared to less than 20 percent of families that selected experiences such as participating in sports, clubs and extracurricular activities.

However, the findings indicate that families emphasize these two priorities differently along their CTE journey, and states should consider the process of career preparation when communicating the benefits of CTE to parents/guardians and learners. **Prospective families ranked career exploration above gaining skills in their top two most important aspects of education, while those taking CTE courses ranked gaining skills above career exploration in their top two.**

As shown in the chart below, 50 percent of prospective families placed career exploration as the most or second most important aspect of education compared to 40 percent of current families. Alternatively, 51 percent of current families placed gaining skills in their top two compared to 46 percent of prospective families. The findings were strongest among current learners.

**FIGURE 2.**  
Top Two Aspects of Education for Prospective and Current CTE Families



## CTE Priorities are Valued Differently Depending on Exposure, but Finding Career Passion is a Consistent Priority

While families place high importance on career preparation experiences in their education, they also want to leverage those experiences to find a career the learner is passionate about. When asked to rank potential benefits and outcomes of CTE in terms of importance, **“finding a career passion” ranked second after “preparing for the real world” among both prospective and current parents/guardians and learners out of 22 options.** Additionally, finding the “right fit” for a career ranked in the top five outcomes for both prospective parents/guardians and prospective learners.

These findings show that effective recruitment should include messages that market CTE as the best option to prepare learners for the real world through experiences that focus on career exploration and gaining skills to find a path to a career they are passionate about.

**Families also agree that CTE’s unique focus on providing hands-on experiences is a key element to learners finding and preparing for a career they are passionate about. Both prospective and current families ranked “getting hands-on experience” in their top four CTE outcomes.**

### Considerations for Historically Marginalized Populations

This finding was mostly consistent across race, ethnicity and income. One notable exception was Latinx learners — the percentage of Latinx learners ranking career exploration in their top two most important aspects was 18 percentage points higher among current learners compared to prospective learners, while the importance of gaining skills was six percentage points higher among prospective learners compared to current learners.

There were some slight nuances across race and ethnicity in the benefits and outcomes most desired from CTE. Prospective White and Black families were more attracted to benefits that provide hands-on experience and skill building than Latinx families. Prospective White and Black families ranked these experiences in their top two benefits and outcomes, whereas prospective Latinx families ranked these experiences 10th.

On the other hand, while finding a career passion was a consistent top outcome across race and ethnicity, Latinx learners were more attracted to finding a career that is the “right fit” through CTE compared to White and particularly Black learners. Latinx learners ranked the “right fit” benefit third in terms of importance.

## CTE Prepares Learners for College and Career Success



The belief that CTE effectively prepares learners for college and career success was evident throughout the research. In a time when families are looking for postsecondary experiences that are cost effective and have a direct path to meaningful careers, it is important for CTE programs to communicate that the benefits families are most attracted to also provide a path to postsecondary success.

When asked to share their plans immediately following high school, **78 percent of prospective families and 85 percent of current families expect their learner to pursue some level of postsecondary education** compared to only 5 percent that expect their learner to enter the workforce or military. Families in CTE are also more likely to have a clear plan after high school, with only 3 percent of current

families unsure about future plans compared to 13 percent of prospective families. Overall, learners are more confident than their parents/guardians about completing their postsecondary plans, but noticeable gaps exist among some historically marginalized populations as described below.

**TABLE 5.**  
Families' Plans Immediately Following High School

Post-High School Option	Prospective Families	Current Families
Obtain a bachelor's (college) degree	46%	52%
Obtain an associate degree	7%	12%
Take some college classes, though not necessarily earning a degree immediately	18%	12%
Obtain technical/vocational certification	7%	9%
Take a gap year before college	4%	5%
Enter the workforce	3%	3%
Enter the military	2%	2%
Not planning on finishing high school	0%	2%
Don't know	13%	3%

## CTE Prepares Learners for College *and* Career Success

Another finding that should be considered when communicating postsecondary paths through CTE is that families are more open to college opportunities outside of a four-year degree than they were during previous research. Just 46 percent of prospective families and 52 percent of current families surveyed expect their learner to obtain a four-year degree compared to more than 60 percent of both prospective and current families in 2017. States should consider strategies to communicate the flexibility, affordability and variety of postsecondary career pathways provided through CTE programs to increase the likelihood of successful completion of postsecondary education.

Families enrolled in CTE programs are also significantly more likely to be satisfied with opportunities to jumpstart their postsecondary journey in high school. **More than 80 percent of current families were satisfied with opportunities to earn college credit and take advanced classes compared to 60 percent or less of prospective families.** Satisfaction levels were relatively uniform across race and income, with Latinx parents/guardians and parents/guardians with low income participating in CTE experiencing the *largest differences* in satisfaction and Black parents/guardians experiencing the *highest levels* of satisfaction in these two categories.

### Considerations for Historically Marginalized Populations

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The survey findings regarding families' confidence in completing postsecondary education reinforce that historical and systemic discrimination and marginalization still create barriers today. Notably, prospective Latinx learners and learners with low income were respectively 10 and 12 percentage points less likely to report they will obtain a two- or four-year degree than White learners. This finding was even more prominent among prospective parents/guardians: while Black parents/guardians had the highest confidence in their learner completing a postsecondary degree (61 percent), only 23 percent of Latinx and 37 percent of parents/guardians with low income were confident in their learner completing a postsecondary degree.

Encouragingly, the findings indicate that CTE helps to close those gaps. **Among families with low income currently participating in CTE, 55 percent planned for their learner to complete a postsecondary degree compared to 42 percent of prospective families. Among current Latinx families, the increase was even more robust, with more than 60 percent of families planning for their learner to complete a postsecondary degree compared to 36 percent of prospective families.**

## Informed and Diverse School Leaders are Critical for CTE Recruitment and Retention



The research shows that parents/guardians and learners, particularly prospective parents/guardians, agree that the learner should be and is in the driver's seat on their education decisions. Seventy-one percent of prospective parents/guardians and 62 percent of prospective learners identified the learner as the lead decisionmaker on class choices.

The messengers for information on CTE can be just as important as messages themselves. Echoing the 2017 findings, parents/guardians and learners continue to primarily rely on the school leaders closest to them for more information about CTE programs. **Teachers, school counselors and college representatives were among the top four sources for prospective learners, current parents/guardians and current learners and top five for prospective parents/guardians.** Efforts by states to educate trusted sources both inside and outside of the CTE system about CTE programs and benefits are especially important for ensuring that learners are informed and empowered in their education decisions.

One of these top sources reinforces that families consider CTE's impact on postsecondary opportunities when considering whether to begin or continue participation in CTE programs. College representatives were selected as an informed source by more than 65 percent of families across race, ethnicity and income and were particularly favored among Black families, prospective Latinx parents/guardians and current families with low income. States should consider initiatives that educate postsecondary partners on widely offered secondary CTE programs to leverage their value as a recruitment and retention partner, particularly for marginalized populations.

Despite relatively uniform top messengers among family groups, the findings indicate that populations have varying levels of trust in different school sources. **While teachers were generally trusted across all groups,**

**parents/guardians from historically marginalized populations were more comfortable consulting school counselors than their learners.** While 84 percent of prospective Latinx parents/guardians would likely consult a school counselor about CTE, only 37 percent of prospective Latinx learners would. Among Black families, 74 percent of prospective Black parents/guardians would likely consult a school counselor about CTE while only 59 percent of prospective Black learners would.

Encouragingly, both prospective and current families placed CTE learners and alumni in their top five likely information sources. This finding was particularly prevalent among current parents/guardians, more than 80 percent of whom chose CTE leaders and alumni as a likely source. Parents and guardians were more likely to consider sources outside of the immediate school setting for information about CTE, echoing the importance of supplying key stakeholders with relevant and consistent recruitment messages to reinforce school sources. Nearly 50 percent or more of prospective parents/guardians and almost 70 percent of current parents/guardians were likely to inquire with their state department of education, local employers and community organizations for information about CTE. Families were least likely to consult their local Parent Teacher Association chapter or religious organization.

## Informed and Diverse School Leaders are Critical for CTE Recruitment and Retention

**FIGURE 3.**  
Top Sources for Information About CTE by Family Group

PROSPECTIVE	
<b>Parents/Guardians</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. School counselor</li><li>2. School website</li><li>3. Teachers</li><li>4. Google search</li></ol>	<b>Learners</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Teachers</li><li>2. College representative</li><li>3. School website</li><li>4. Tie: Google search and school counselor</li></ol>
CURRENT	
<b>Parents/Guardians</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. School counselor</li><li>2. Teachers</li><li>3. CTE students or alumni</li><li>4. College representative</li></ol>	<b>Learners</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Teachers</li><li>2. Google search</li><li>3. College representative</li><li>4. Tie: School counselor and CTE alumni</li></ol>

### Equity in Access to Information About CTE Key

In addition to having informed, trusted sources in schools, the findings also highlight that families, particularly historically marginalized learners, need easily accessible online sources of information about CTE programs. **Google searches and school websites were ranked as top information sources among both prospective and current families within historically marginalized populations.** Black prospective families and current learners across race and income ranked Google searches in their top two sources for information about CTE; prospective families with low income and prospective Black parents/guardians ranked school websites in their top two information sources.

States should ensure that online access to information about CTE is equitable to in-person resources, with information that is up to date, in multiple languages when needed, and written using digestible terms and formats that families not in CTE can easily understand.<sup>1</sup>

# Conclusion

The results of this research reinforce the value of CTE in enhancing each learner's education and illuminate the elements and benefits of CTE programs and experiences that most attract families to CTE. However, they also reinforce that race, ethnicity, income and stage of career preparation affect perceptions of CTE. As such, advocates should tailor communications to most effectively reach marginalized families, while still staying true to the overarching themes and messages that resonate across the board. Most importantly, these findings must be used to continue to empower learners with the information, support and trusted relationships needed to take charge of decisions about their education and their future to achieve CTE without limits.

**METHODOLOGY** A nationwide study was conducted during August to October 2020. The study began with 10 virtual focus groups over the course of one month with families of middle and high school learners who were currently participating in or considering CTE. These focus groups were followed by a national online survey of 2,156 parent/guardians and learners that was fielded October 14–26, 2020. The survey consisted of (1) 843 adults and 802 learners considering participation in CTE and (2) 255 adults and 256 learners currently participating in CTE. Both the focus groups and survey oversampled Black and Latinx families and families with low income. Prospective parents and learners were those who expressed interest (somewhat to extremely interested) in CTE during screening.

Survey respondents were recruited through an online non-probability sample, meaning findings are not projectable to the larger population. Quotas were set so that the survey was representative by known demographics.

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**ABOUT ADVANCE CTE** Advance CTE: State Leaders Connecting Learning to Work, first established in 1920, is the longest-standing national non-profit that represents State CTE Directors and state leaders responsible for secondary, postsecondary and adult CTE across all 50 states, the District of Columbia and U.S. territories. Advance CTE's mission is to support visionary state leadership, cultivate best practices, and speak with a collective voice to advance high-quality CTE policies, programs and pathways that ensure career success for each learner, and our vision is to transform and expand CTE so that each learner — of any background, age and zip code — is prepared for career and college success through state leadership, advocacy and partnerships.

<sup>1</sup> Advance CTE. (2021). Beyond the Numbers: Design Principles for CTE Data Reporting. Retrieved from <https://careertech.org/resource/beyond-numbers-design-principles-CTE-data-reporting>