

By Alisha Hyslop

Focusing Resources on High-Priority Areas

THE NEW PERKINS LAW ALLOWS FOR MORE FLEXIBILITY IN THE STATE-LEVEL "RESERVE" FUND. EACH STATE IS REQUIRED TO DISTRIBUTE 85 PERCENT OF ITS OVERALL PERKINS ALLOCATION TO LOCAL PROGRAMS, BUT IT MAY RESERVE UP TO 10 PERCENT OF THIS AMOUNT TO DISTRIBUTE OUTSIDE OF THE POPULATION- AND POVERTY-BASED FORMULA MANDATED IN THE LAW.



Perkins Implementation
Spotlight Series

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WHILE THE NEW PERKINS LAW CERTAINLY INCREASES ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION (CTE) PROGRAMS, it also provides more flexibility to encourage innovation and program improvement. One of these areas of flexibility is the state-level "reserve" fund. Each state is required to distribute 85 percent of its overall Perkins allocation to local programs, but it may reserve up to 10 percent of this amount to distribute outside of the population- and poverty-based formula mandated in the law.

The reserve funds may be distributed in any manner, as long as they are targeted to rural areas or areas with high numbers or percentages of CTE students. This option existed in the prior Perkins Act, but had more requirements and was only utilized by 21 states at the secondary level and 11 states at the postsecondary level. As state CTE leaders worked through the process of developing new state plans under the 2006 Perkins Act, many decided that one way to better focus resources on their top priorities was to use the reserve fund as authorized in the 2006 Perkins Act.

Tennessee's Perkins IV Planning Committee, made up of secondary and postsecondary educators and administrators and state leaders, grappled with how to best improve CTE programs in the state within the framework set out in the law. Early in discussions, the group voted to try the reserve grant approach as a new method for spawning innovation, and first

included the option in the state's transition plan for the 2007-2008 school year.

Ralph Barnett, assistant commissioner of CTE at the Tennessee State Department of Education, wasn't sure what the reaction of the field would be since utilizing the reserve option would reduce each school district's Perkins allocation. That reaction turned out to be quite positive. "School district leaders, especially in the smaller districts in the state, realized that a larger, more focused innovation grant every few years could really help them to expand CTE offerings for students in ways that the small amount of funding they receive each year cannot," he said.

State leaders chose to reserve the full 10 percent allowed by the Perkins Act for use in the new grant program. Of those funds, 20 percent is being used at the postsecondary level to support transition activities, and the remaining 80 percent is being used for competitive grants at the secondary level. The state had very clear goals in mind for its secondary grants and outlined them in the state plan and grant application. "The purpose of the grant is to prepare all students for high-skill, high-wage or high-demand occupations, emerging opportunities and support linkages between secondary and postsecondary CTE programs. The purpose of the grant is to support new and innovative opportunities at the local level, not to expand or improve existing programs at the school."

In its first year of implementation, \$1.78 million was awarded through 26 secondary level reserve grants to 28 school districts. For the 2008-2009 school

year, 23 secondary reserve grants in the total amount of \$1.74 million have been awarded to 27 different school districts. Grants are generally set up to range from \$5,000 to \$100,000, and include activities such as secondary-to-postsecondary transition programs, distance learning, programs of study implementation, smaller learning communities, new and emerging programs, and programs to meet the needs of special populations.

Key to all of the grants is the focus on high-skill, high-wage and high-demand occupations. The state partners with the U.S. Department of Labor to help identify these career areas, and applicants must use Local Workforce Investment Area data to justify program choices. Grants have included a focus on fields such as engineering, aquaculture and hydroponics, biofuels, health science, automotive technology and business. Barnett emphasized the importance of making decisions about high-skill, high-wage and high-demand areas. "This wasn't something that was done subjectively, it was based on data. We looked for grant proposals that matched the guidelines defining those career areas, and chose programs that would best prepare students for the career opportunities that will be available in the future."

One of Tennessee's 2008-2009 reserve fund grantees is the Bristol Tennessee City Schools system in northeast Tennessee. The grant project, Providing PEOPLE (Postsecondary Educational Opportunities Pertaining to Life Experiences), focuses on distance learning in high-demand career areas such as health care. Through the grant, a virtual learning lab has been created at Tennessee High School in partnership with Vanderbilt University and Northeast State Technical Community College.

While the school had been engaged in e-learning for a number of years, the virtual learning lab not only allows the high school's health science students to enroll



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in distance education dual enrollment courses at the community college, but also to take virtual field trips in the health care arena. The lab, complete with three 60-inch high-definition LCD screens and a six-foot interactive board, brings new content and curriculum to students from across the country, something that was never possible before.

For example, the school partnered with the University of St. Louis to provide students the opportunity to observe a virtual autopsy. The class had a direct and interactive connection with a forensic pathologist who was in a lab conducting the autopsy. Students were able to observe every step and ask questions along the way. Other activities have included observing a surgeon doing knee surgery (while the procedure was explained), and

learning about health care careers from a nursing educator at the University of Vanderbilt.

Blair Henley, assistant director and CTE director at Tennessee High School, summed up the benefits of the reserve grant for his students. "It's access. Access to more curriculum, enrichment and people that are out working in the CTE field." With three major health care or biomedical employers in the area, Bristol students can get an early jump on future careers through the activities funded by the Perkins reserve grant ■

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