



CTE Is Hot Right Now. Should It Be?



Career and technical education is very much the flavor du jour in K-12 education.

Enrollment in so-called CTE programs that aim to introduce students to careers and prepare them for the workforce [increased](#) 10%, to 8.6 million, between 2022-23 and 2023-24—even as total public school enrollment [declined](#). A 2023 [report](#) found more than half of states had increased CTE funding for secondary schools in the past decade. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) embraces CTE in ways that NCLB did not.

In a time of pronounced partisan polarization, politicians on both sides of the aisle have at the very least [paid lip service](#) to supporting the model. “Career and technical education may be the last bipartisan issue in America,” Matt Barnum of *Chalkbeat* [wrote](#) last month.

There are good reasons to support CTE. A 2020 NEPC [brief](#) notes that CTE programs can lead to increases in attendance, high school graduation rates, workforce participation, and earnings. Some evidence sug-

gests that students who take CTE courses feel more connected to school. The approach has been especially effective for males, whose academic outcomes and labor market participation have stagnated in recent decades, according to the brief's authors, NEPC Fellow [Emily Hodge](#) of Virginia Commonwealth University, [Shaun Dougherty](#) of Boston College, and NEPC Fellow [Carol Burris](#) of the Network for Public Education.

At the same time, the brief notes that CTE is not a new concept, and that its history offers reasons for caution and concern. Once known collectively as vocational education, programs that prepare high-school students for careers steered Black, low-income, disabled, and immigrant students into tracks that limited opportunity by preparing participants for low-wage jobs, but not for college. Voc ed's origins also trace to the desire of employers to shift employee training costs onto the public schools, regardless of whether the skills taught would set up students for success down the road, when the companies and their current job openings might or might not exist.

Supporters renamed vocational education in the 1980s to reflect its current focus on preparation for a wider array of careers, including those that require substantial postsecondary education. The renaming was also a way to distance the approach from some of the uglier realities of voc ed's history.

Even as CTE shifted shape, Hodge, Dougherty and Burris pointed to evidence that it continues to replicate some of the old inequities by, for example, offering students in affluent areas more opportunities than students in low-income neighborhoods. For this reason, the brief concludes with recommendations that educators carefully monitor programs for signs of racialized or class-based tracking. Are historically minoritized students underrepresented in college prep programs associated with higher-paying jobs? Over-represented in pathways that focus on lower-paying careers? Do the CTE programs fail to prepare graduates for postsecondary education?

In comprehensive high schools where academic tracking is often deeply ensconced, the brief recommends avoiding a system of multiple levels of CTE-related coursework (e.g., college prep versus general) by instead offering everyone a rigorous curriculum, along with additional supports

provided at the first signs that students are struggling. Policymakers, they write, can help by equitably distributing CTE resources such as funding for equipment and instructional support.

Wise recommendations were also offered back in 2017, when the late NEPC Fellow [Mike Rose](#), writing five years before OpenAI's public release, [prophetically](#) warned about the “last half-century [of] the increased automation of manufacturing and, more recently, the ‘hollowing out’ of seemingly secure white-collar professional jobs that can be broken down into component parts and digitized, from bookkeeping to reading medical images.”

This increase in computer power and resulting hemorrhaging of jobs will increase exponentially, the forecasters predict, aided by the post-industrial reorganization of work, the loss of union power and collective bargaining protections, and the rise of new industries – like ride-sharing or Airbnb – that substitute part-time, entrepreneurial labor with no protections or benefits for traditional jobs like taxi driver, dispatcher, or hotel worker. These conditions have given rise to a new vocabulary of work – “precarious” being the key adjective.

Rose recommends “a philosophy of [career and technical] education that has at its core a bountiful definition of intelligence and that honors multiple kinds of knowledge and advances the humanistic, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of an occupational as well as more traditional academic course of study.”

Otherwise, the education of future workers will be cognitively narrow and politically passive, adding little more to the current curriculum than additional training in computer skills or techniques of self-promotion. Teach those things, of course, but also educate young workers so that they have multiple skills and bodies of knowledge to draw on, so that they are able to analyze and act upon opportunities to affect the direction of their employment, and so that they can strive to create meaning in their working lives.

NEPC Resources on Education and the Workplace

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