

Talking Points and Frequently Asked Questions: CTE in Pennsylvania

Background and Purpose

In 2017, the national career technical education (CTE) leadership organization, Advance CTE, conducted focus group research to determine which messages about CTE are most meaningful to parents and students.

Through the research, they discovered three simple messages about CTE at the high school level which are very effective:

CTE Delivers

- (1) real options for college and rewarding careers;
- (2) real high school experiences with more value; and,
- (3) real world skills.

These talking points for multiple audiences are aligned with the core message that CTE delivers for students.

CTE in Pennsylvania Talking Points

CTE Delivers Real Options for College and Rewarding Careers

A technology and innovation explosion has changed our culture and workforce. Today, employers may be more interested in a job candidate's employability and technical skills than their academic achievements. Employers need workers who are problem-solvers, critical thinkers, communicators and collaborators. Of course, workers must be highly knowledgeable, but the real competitive edge comes from an education that connects academic knowledge with real-life applications.

Pennsylvania's career and technical education (CTE) meets the challenge of preparing students for both college and careers. In fact, a large percentage of students who complete a CTE program go on to pursue higher education or career training. While some enroll in a four-year college, others choose career-focused, two-year technical degrees or training opportunities that open the door to high-pay, middle-skill jobs while saving them - and their parents - time and money.

CTE programs combine college preparation with real-world career skill development, giving students a jumpstart on both postsecondary education and careers.

Old "Vo-Tech" vs New Career Technical Education

Many of us remember "vocational education" or "vo-tech" as an option for kids who preferred working with their hands to sitting in a classroom.

This model put less emphasis on academics and greater emphasis on basic skills training. It worked well for many years primarily because the workplace offered middle-class wage jobs to high school graduates who had some skills and a willingness to work hard. But the economy and workplace have changed and many of those jobs no longer exist.

While it's true that middle-skill trade jobs (such as welding, plumbing, and auto mechanics) may still be a viable path to the middle class, these jobs now require advanced academics and technical skills.

Pennsylvania's CTE system has responded to this shift by developing more in-demand programs, increasing academic and technical rigor and ensuring that its teachers are highly experienced in their field and receive ongoing teacher training.

A Competitive Edge

For high school graduates who choose to go directly into the workplace, CTE students are far better prepared to enter a skilled career rather than a low-skilled, minimum wage job and little room for upward movement. CTE graduates have relevant and highly marketable employability skills.

Further, in addition to completing their CTE programs, almost one third of CTE students earn at least one industry-recognized credential while in high school, giving them a competitive edge when looking for employment.

CTE Delivers Real High School Experiences with More Value

Career and technical education is public education in Pennsylvania; there is no tuition for students and transportation is provided. Some programs take place at students' local high school, but most are offered at the 84 regional career and technology centers (CTC).

Instructors have both state teaching credentials and years of work experience in their program area, allowing them to connect academics to real-world applications.

Students have flexibility in selecting a CTE program and in leaving the program if they choose.

The Value of Exploring Career Options

CTE opens the door for high school students to explore different careers and discover their passion. Young people who are interested in what they're learning, who see relevance and value in it, actually want to go to school. As graduation nears, they're excited about the next step on their career path and have a viable plan. Not surprisingly, the high school graduation rate is higher among students who are enrolled in CTE programs, almost 100 percent for CTE program concentrators vs. 86 percent for the general student population.

And finding your passion in high school pays off in college. An often-overlooked benefit of CTE programs is that high school students have a no-cost opportunity to explore careers and discover their passion before selecting a college and major. Without a doubt, changing a college major costs time and money.

Other benefits

Increasingly, students who complete CTE programs graduate with some college credit and at least one industry-recognized credential.

Students who attend a regional CTC for part of the day can still get involved with extracurricular activities at their home high school. For example, CTE students participate in sports, fine arts, clubs and other activities at one or both of the schools they attend.

Many CTE students report that attending the CTC with students from other school districts is a great experience and significant benefit.

Up-to-Date Equipment & Program Connections

Pennsylvania's career and technical education classrooms are equipped with the same or similar equipment and tools you'd find in the workplace. Learning on real-world equipment from the start, CTE students are prepared to step outside the classroom and participate in job shadows, internships, community projects, and other real-world experiences.

These experiences help students determine whether or not they're interested in specific careers, give them a sense of workplace culture and expectations, and allow them to network with business and community members.

Career Technology Student Organizations

National student organizations are an important part of career and technical education. Local chapters of these dynamic clubs help students to develop leadership and employability skills through competitions that are based on solving career-related problems. Pennsylvania is proud to have had many students reach national levels of competition.

CTE Delivers Real World Skills

Across Pennsylvania, over 66,000 students are enrolled career and technical education programs. More than 1,747 career programs have state approval including health sciences, supply chain and logistics, mechatronics, engineering, and building trades.

In every program, students work through a carefully developed list of tasks and must demonstrate competency in each task before advancing.

Students choose the program and have the option to change their mind if it isn't a great fit.

Experienced Teachers

CTE instructors typically enter the teacher profession with at least five years of on-the-job experience. Many worked in management level or owned and operated successful businesses. Instructors also earn state required teacher certifications.

Hands-on Learning

Many students value the hands-on learning, student-centered approach to CTE instruction and are better able to retain what they learned because of this. Coursework is relevant and authentic, simulating real work situations and demands. Problem-solving and innovation is not theoretical; it's pursued with the same tools and equipment used in the workplace, under the personal guidance of an experienced instructor.

Each student works to complete a state approved list of tasks that were co-developed with experienced educators and members of Occupational Advisory Teams, required at every career and technical center for every CTE program.

Student Skills Validated

In their senior year, students who have completed a CTE program sit for both the written and hands-on NOCTI exam, a nationally recognized occupational assessment. By this time, it's not uncommon for students to have earned at least one industry-recognized certification and some college credits.

Student Enterprises

Taking real world learning one step further, many CTE programs include student-operated services that are open to their community. Restaurants, salons, in-school banks, auto repair shops, and childcare centers are just a few examples. Here, students develop workplace skills and confidence while also figuring out if this is a good career fit for them.

CTE in Pennsylvania

Frequently Asked Questions

Who can take career and technical education (CTE) classes in Pennsylvania?

Although an increasing number of middle schools are offering CTE course electives, state-approved CTE programs begin in high school. Some programs are open to students in grades nine through twelve and others begin in sophomore, junior or senior year.

Students with limited English proficiency, Individualized Education Programs (IEP), and who are homeschooled may enroll in CTE programs

Where are CTE programs offered?

CTE programs in Pennsylvania are delivered in a few ways:

- (1) Students attend their local high school for part of the day and are transported to a regional career and technology center (CTC) for the other part of the day. Students graduate from their local high school.
- (2) The regional CTC offers full-day enrollment, providing students with both academic and CTE courses. Students graduate from their regional CTC.
- (3) The local high school offers state-approved CTE programs. Students remain at their high school all day.

In scenarios one and two above, students attend classes with peers from other school districts. Most CTE students report this to be a social benefit.

How do I enroll in CTE classes and what is the cost?

First, the good news: CTE programs are tuition-free! There may be some minor costs to the student, but assistance is often provided on an as-needed basis. For example, some programs require safety shoes or a program uniform. Be sure to ask your guidance counselor what to expect based on the program you choose.

Enrolling in CTE programs is as easy as filling out a form. Talk to your middle or high school guidance counselor for specific information. Keep in mind, some CTE programs fill up quickly and may even have a waitlist. It's best to be prepared with a second choice just in case.

What will my schedule look like?

That depends on whether you are attending a full-day or half-day career and technology center. In any case, all CTE students are required to complete their district's graduation requirements and state assessments. For example, this includes four years of English and three years of math and science.

Talk to your guidance counselor. Together, you can develop your own four-year high school plan.

What if I change my mind?

You always have options. If you enroll in a CTE program and discover that it's not the right fit for you, you might be able to transfer into a different CTE program (based on availability). Or, you may wish to leave the career and technology center (CTC) altogether. Because CTE students have to complete all graduation requirements, you won't be "behind" if you leave.

Some career and technology centers and their sending school districts allow students to leave or enter the CTC at any time while others require students to finish the marking period or semester. Check with your guidance counselor to learn more.

How long does it take to complete a CTE program of study?

Career and technical education is competency-based, meaning students learn a set of skills and knowledge in a subject area before advancing to the next set (rather than moving ahead as part of the class whether or not they have learned the material). As such, approved CTE programs require a specific number and the successful completion of a carefully developed list of tasks. To complete some programs, students should enroll in freshman year; other programs may require less time.

Seniors who have completed their task list may be eligible to sit for the nationally recognized NOCTI exam which includes both a written and practical section.

Completing a program is optimal, but depending on when you entered the program, it may not be possible. Whether you're considered a "program completer" or not, you may have opportunities to earn industry-recognized certifications and early college credits, giving you a jumpstart on postsecondary education and careers.

Who teaches CTE classes?

CTE instructors are required to have industry experience, giving them a significant advantage in connecting learning to real-world situations. In addition, they earn a Pennsylvania teaching certification. At the career and technical centers, teachers and students spend up to three-hours a day together. This allows for plenty of individual support and mentoring.

Where can I find more information?

One of the best sources for information is the guidance counselor at your school and/or at the career and technology center. Find out when tours and open house events are offered. Check out school websites to review the CTE programs offered at your high school and/or your regional career and technology center. Talk to friends and family members who have recently attended CTE programs. Ask questions until you find the answers you need to make a decision about enrolling in a career and technical education program that fits your interests.