

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

American education leaders face a tough challenge. The economic recovery is progressing, yet the match between school and work is imperfect. Students are supposed to be “college and career ready,” but there is no clear definition of what that actually means—and if “career focus” coursework is not aligned with local labor markets, it may be a waste of time. Thus, the need for greater clarity is pressing.

Because of its high poverty rate, heterogeneous demographic and geographic profile, and diverse economic base, Arkansas is both a compelling case study on its own and a potentially useful model for other states. It also reveals lessons useful for federal policymakers, especially as they consider reauthorization of the Perkins Act.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR ARKANSAS?

FIRST, STAY THE COURSE.

The results presented here show clear benefits to increased exposure to CTE coursework and contradict the notion that CTE is a separate track for low-achieving, disadvantaged, minority, and/or non-college-bound students. Though students don't necessarily have to fulfill Arkansas's career focus requirement by taking CTE classes, early implementation of Smart Core shows that students are, in fact, doing precisely that. Together, these findings suggest maintaining Smart Core, and promoting the idea that CTE is for students of all backgrounds and ability levels.

SECOND, MAKE KNOWN THE BENEFITS OF CONCENTRATING.

The findings suggest that there are benefits to concentrating, especially for male, low-income, and "priority cluster" students. Granted, concentrators may be different from other students who take similarly high numbers of CTE courses in ways that are related to their success and not necessarily about the decision to concentrate. But for students who have already started a concentration, there are potential advantages from a signaling standpoint (and possibly actually technical skill) that could be realized by counseling students to actually finish their program of study. This is especially true for students in clusters without a clear postsecondary pathway, and those who do not see themselves as college-bound or who aren't interested in enrolling in college right away.

THIRD, EXPAND DUAL ENROLLMENT.

Dual enrollment magnifies the benefits of exposure to CTE. Even if students are self-selecting, and are already interested in clusters with a path to college (like education and health professions) dual enrollment can smooth the transition and reduce the financial and information cost of enrolling. Dual enrollment also encourages students to set career goals in high school, since early on they must consider whether their desired career pathways can be achieved through high school, or whether they need a two-year degree or certificate, or a four-year college program—and whether any of the requisite postsecondary coursework can be completed in high school.

FOR OTHER STATES?

Although the positive results of this study matter most for Arkansas, they also suggest that other states should **INVEST MORE HEAVILY IN SECONDARY CTE.**

The findings presented here demonstrate that CTE improves outcomes for students who focus their studies on a specific career. And the fact that CTE coursework in high school is not related to enrollment in a four-year college, either positively or negatively, should reassure leaders wary of promoting secondary CTE for fear that doing so comes at the expense of an advanced degree.

Consequently, as they have in Arkansas, state education and labor departments could take the following steps:

- Examine state labor market projections to identify high-growth industries, and support schools to offer coursework and programs of study that match them.
- Encourage (or require) secondary CTE coursework so students can earn industry-recognized credentials for in-demand careers while still in high school.
- Encourage (or require) students taking multiple CTE courses to choose a concentration, rather than taking courses in an ad-hoc manner.⁵²
- Harmonize dual enrollment efforts by making credits "stackable" from high school into college, so that students can begin postsecondary credentials early and easily transfer credits as they progress.

FOR THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT?

The recent approval of the Every Student Succeeds Act may be good news for the less divisive Perkins Act, which has been overdue for reauthorization since 2013.

REAUTHORIZING PERKINS, WITH THOUGHTFUL MODIFICATIONS, IS IMPERATIVE.

The 2006 reauthorization called for an increased focus on STEM education, yet in Arkansas it's one of the least-popular concentrations (only the hospitality and tourism, and education and training, industries had fewer concentrators). Further, STEM concentrators are disproportionately male, white, and urban. So despite Perkins' encouragement, concentrating in STEM is not appealing, not useful, or not possible due to limited course offerings and high academic barriers to entry. Subsequent iterations of Perkins' block grants should not only create stronger incentives to grow and sustain high-quality STEM programs, but also ensure that they are available to students everywhere.

In addition, recent markups of the reauthorization include language that favors career academy models. Yet evidence from Arkansas suggests that exclusively focusing on these models may be overzealous: Most students take CTE at their comprehensive high school, and these students see positive results. Those crafting the Perkins reauthorization should be less prescriptive: allow states flexibility in the delivery method, and let them consider cost and context as well. At the same time, any new legislation should incentivize states to use research-based strategies when determining where and how to offer CTE (and to evaluate their decisions after the fact).

As the results presented here show, high school CTE improves outcomes for students seeking to start their careers quickly, but is no hindrance to those who want additional academic training. Granted, even the best CTE policy requires thoughtful implementation, since there is still risk that low-performing students will be “tracked” into courses that don’t leave them well prepared for college. But states can mitigate this risk by offering courses and programs of study that appeal to students of varying interests and abilities, and counseling all students into them. In light of the central findings therefore, the strongest and most general recommendation is this:

MAKE HIGH-QUALITY, LABOR-MARKET-ALIGNED CTE AVAILABLE TO ALL STUDENTS, AND ENCOURAGE (AND ENABLE) THEM TO PARTICIPATE.