



Office of the Washington State Auditor

Pat McCarthy

Performance Audit

Leading Practices for the State's Secondary Career and Technical Education Programs

While some high school students pursue a bachelor's degree after graduation, others are looking for good jobs that do not require four years of college or university education. Many mid-level-skill jobs, in industries as diverse as robotics and computer programming, carpentry and medical technology, pay well and require no more than two years of education from a community or technical college.

Students can shorten that time by taking college-level career and technical education (CTE) courses while in high school. Opportunities also exist for some CTE students to enter into apprenticeships or other mid-level jobs right out of high school. However, Washington employers report being unable to fill many of their mid-level-skill openings.

The audit found that the state's secondary CTE courses with the highest enrollment could more strongly align with high-wage, high-demand occupational areas. It identifies four areas for improvement. If Washington adopts leading practices in these four areas, the state could create more opportunities for students while closing the gap between students' skills and employers' needs.

1. Improve career guidance given to students, and provide it in a classroom setting in the 7th or 8th grade

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and district CTE officials said many students and their parents are unaware of the many careers and jobs that pay well but may not require a four-year degree. This lack of awareness can be a problem when students try to develop their High School and Beyond plans. While recent legislation requires an inventory of each student's career interests and skills in the 7th or 8th grade, more could be done to address this lack of awareness.

According to educational research, a major reason that students drop out of high school is they cannot see the connection between their high school courses and a job. Helping students explore the many career options that are available to them in a comprehensive way in the 7th or 8th grade is a recommended practice incorporated in career-focused educational models to address this problem.

2. Strengthen employer engagement to better align CTE programs and courses with high-wage industry-needed skills

Businesses report difficulty finding job candidates with the technical skills they need. More coordinated outreach through CTE advisory committees would strengthen school districts' ability to incorporate the skills employers need into coursework. The CTE courses schools currently offer do not always reflect the skills and trades most in demand.

To prepare students for the postsecondary world of education and work, the Workforce Board, OSPI and the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) can do more to ensure that schools and colleges strengthen their engagement with employers. Establishing a systematic approach to engagement could achieve three benefits: better aligning industry expectations across college and district CTE curricula; reducing some of the duplicative effort employers expend by serving on multiple committees; and allowing regional employers to reach a wider group of schools and colleges.

3. Update the list of high-demand programs, strengthen the review of local labor demand data and clarify laws to help reduce the skills gap

OSPI currently lacks an updated list of statewide high-demand programs. State law requires OSPI to work with the Workforce Board, SBCTC and the Washington State Apprenticeship and Training Council to develop this list to help inform school districts about what types of programs are needed. When districts want to propose additional CTE programs, state law requires them to submit evidence of local high demand to OSPI when seeking approval for those programs. To ensure that each district's CTE programs help address the state's skills gap, OSPI reviews this evidence before approving the district's CTE plans.

OSPI could strengthen the approval process for new and existing programs if it consistently reviewed actual labor market data or analysis that is sufficient to demonstrate high demand. Collecting and reviewing this type of evidence for all CTE programs, and having the Legislature define key terms in the state's CTE statutes, would help OSPI better assess whether district CTE programs are helping to address the skills gap.

4. Expand the number of CTE dual-credit opportunities to increase the number of pathways from high school to college

Students can take CTE courses in high school that align with similar courses in college programs, allowing them to gain "dual credit" at the college level. This dual credit is typically achieved through articulation agreements between one high school and one college. While all colleges are required to give equivalent credit, some may only award the credit as an elective. Articulated CTE courses offered and transcribed by one college might not be accepted towards the same CTE program at another college, forcing students to retake courses to gain full credit. The content and the number of these agreements between school districts and colleges can vary significantly across the state because they are managed and negotiated between the faculty of individual colleges and high schools – a time-consuming and costly process. Indeed, the state as a whole lacks a mechanism to develop statewide agreements for CTE that could serve many districts and colleges more efficiently.

Developing a statewide approach to articulation could increase the number of dual-credit opportunities for students and reduce administrative costs to school districts and colleges.

A stronger, more coordinated CTE system could improve student outcomes

The agencies that deliver, oversee and operate Washington's CTE programs do so with little coordination. No agency has the statutory authority to require other agencies to cooperate or hold them accountable. Consequently, the full report makes recommendations to the Legislature, OSPI, Workforce Board and SBCTC that will clarify statutes and improve coordination, oversight and cooperation across Washington's career and technical education system. These recommendations should help improve career guidance for students, increase dual credit opportunities for college courses taken in high school, smooth secondary to postsecondary transitions and strengthen engagement with the state's business community.

Recommendations in brief

We recommend the Legislature:

- ✓ Require OSPI to establish a model course framework required for all students in the 7th or 8th grade to increase awareness of the multiple career paths available through CTE
- ✓ Require the Workforce Board to establish a workgroup that is funded by the Legislature and consists of staff from the Workforce Board, OSPI and SBCTC, to address statewide articulation and employer engagement
- ✓ Revise statute to:
 - Define the terms "skills gap" and "high wage"

- Require districts to submit evidence of high local labor demand for existing CTE programs

We recommend OSPI:

- ✓ Emphasize to school counselors the importance of discussing CTE and apprenticeship paths with students
- ✓ Update the list of high-demand CTE programs
- ✓ Strengthen requirements to assess whether CTE programs correspond with local high demand

We recommend the Workforce Board:

- ✓ Enhance the Career Bridge website