CTE ON THE FRONTIER:

CATALYZING LOCAL EFFORTS TO IMPROVE PROGRAM QUALITY

Introduction

No symbol of the American public education system is more timeless than the rural single-room schoolhouse. Today, rural schools and institutions of higher education are increasingly asked to do more with less to adapt to the expectations of the 21st century economy. In particular, many state and local leaders are working to develop innovative strategies that expand options for rural learners and ensure that meaningful career pathways leading to sustainable, high-wage careers are available to all, regardless of their background or geographic location.

This series focuses specifically on access to high-quality Career Technical Education (CTE) in rural communities, identifying strategies to strengthen the rigor, breadth and quality of rural career pathways at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels. While some states have larger rural populations than others, the National Center for Education Statistics reports that every state serves learners in rural school districts and institutions, making delivering high-quality career pathways in rural communities a shared challenge nationwide.[1] CTE programs are often available in rural communities, but such programs are often limited in breadth, of questionable quality, and not aligned to employer and industry needs.

The Challenge

Expanding access to high-quality CTE in rural communities is an imperative for all states. Rural learners make up a sizable portion of the student population in the United States. More than half of the nation's school districts are in rural areas, serving approximately 9.1 million K-12 students.[2] Yet, rural communities are home to only about 16 percent of degree-granting two-year postsecondary institutions[3] — which often provide advanced education and training to prepare learners for high-skill careers — necessitating either a long commute or relocation for many learners pursuing high-quality career pathways at the postsecondary level. As a result, only 28 percent of rural adults above age 25 held at least a two-year degree in 2015, compared to 41 percent of urban adults.[4]

In this environment, it is critical that state and local policymakers ensure that all learners can access high-quality career pathways in their own communities and engage with experts in the classroom and workplace. CTE helps learners gain the real-world skills they need to be successful in their chosen careers and is a powerful strategy to boost rural economies by closing critical skills gaps that harm local employers. CTE students are more likely to graduate from high school,[5] have higher achievement in academic subjects,[6] and be prepared for credit-bearing college coursework immediately after graduating.[7] At the postsecondary level, four out of five students who earned a CTE certificate or associate degree were employed within six years of starting their degree, and more than half considered their job to be the start of a career.[8] State policymakers have a critical responsibility to

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CCSSO Council of Chief State School Officers
ESG Education Strategy Group
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ensure that all learners — regardless of their geographic location — benefit from high-quality career pathways that prepare them for success in a career of their choice.

Yet there is no question that rural communities face unique challenges when it comes to delivering high-quality CTE programs in multiple Career Clusters®. Quite often, CTE programs have high startup costs, and rural schools have few resources to serve a sparse student population. Additionally, rural communities often have fewer employers, many of whom may run small companies in niche industries. This situation can lead to limited industry partnerships, fewer work-based learning opportunities, and incomplete information about careers in the region. And the physical distance between secondary schools and postsecondary institutions can make ensuring that CTE programs can offer smooth transitions between high schools and two- and four-year institutions challenging. In light of these challenges, rural schools must be innovative with the resources at their disposal to strengthen the quality and variety of CTE programs they provide.

CTE on the Frontier

To help states unpack the challenges and potential approaches to expanding access to quality CTE programs in rural communities, Advance CTE — in partnership with the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Education Strategy Group, through the New Skills for Youth initiative — is releasing a series of briefs titled *CTE on the Frontier*. The series will explore some of the most pressing challenges facing rural CTE, including program quality, access to the world of work, leveraging partnerships to expand program offerings, and the rural CTE teacher pipeline.

Through interviews with state CTE leaders at both the secondary and postsecondary levels, Advance CTE identified promising practices and strategies to strengthen access to and the quality of career pathways in rural communities. This brief explores how states are supporting efforts to increase the quality of career pathways at both the secondary and postsecondary levels.

The State Role in Improving Rural Career Pathways

Some of the challenges with high-quality rural CTE delivery include ensuring that all programs are responsive to employer needs and that secondary and postsecondary programs are aligned. Issues of quality are not exclusive to rural settings — ensuring that CTE programs are high quality is critical to the success of a statewide career readiness strategy — but the nature of CTE delivery is different in rural institutions, which may necessitate a more focused strategy.

For example, decentralization, lack of resources and more limited employer relationships in rural communities can result in the preservation of legacy programs over more industry-relevant career pathways. Decisions about what programs to offer can be driven by the availability of equipment or facilities, teacher supply and even tradition. Many state CTE leaders reference outdated programs that are preserved simply because they have always been offered. Without careful planning, decisions can easily be determined by the availability of resources rather than by learner or employer need, resulting in inequitable access to quality programs across the state.

Despite these limitations, leading states like Nebraska and South Dakota have launched initiatives to catalyze local strategic planning efforts and strengthen CTE program quality in all communities. Such states have taken a bottom-up approach to improving CTE quality, equipping district superintendents,

Rural CTE in Federal Policy

There are a number of explicit avenues to leverage federal policy to support rural CTE. Additionally, state leaders and policymakers often have the flexibility to leverage both federal policy and federal dollars for rural CTE. Some examples include:

Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 (Perkins Act): State Reserve Funds

While states must distribute 85 percent of Perkins funds to local recipients, they can choose to dedicate 10 percent of those funds to a Reserve Fund, which can be used to support CTE in rural areas or areas with high percentages or high numbers of CTE students. Many states choose to focus at least some of their Reserve Funds on supporting rural areas.

Perkins Act: Forming Consortia and Pooling Funds

At the local level, Perkins grant recipients may elect to form consortia (an option for local recipients that qualify for less than $15,000 in grant funds) and apply for a Perkins grant collaboratively. Local recipients may also pool a portion of their funds with other eligible recipients for certain uses, including activities related to implementing CTE programs of study (e.g. professional development for CTE teachers, administrators and faculty). States can use Perkins state leadership funds to support these efforts through incentive grants.

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA): Governor's Set-Aside

Under Title I of WIOA, governors may elect to reserve up to 15 percent of their state's allocation "for statewide workforce investment activities."[9] This funding stream is fairly flexible in terms of allowable expenses and includes career pathway development and implementation, job-driven strategies and local-sector partnerships.[10]

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP)

Through REAP, ESSA supplies formula funds for eligible districts in rural areas with low numbers of students. These funds can be used for a number of authorized purposes, including bolstering CTE efforts.[11] REAP also supplies additional funds that state education agencies can distribute to local education agencies via subgrants. Similarly, districts can leverage these dollars for a variety of initiatives to support rural CTE.[12]

postsecondary leaders and local administrators and educators with tools to make strategic decisions about which programs they provide. Additionally, states like Idaho and Mississippi are tackling the challenge of program alignment by adopting policies to connect CTE programs vertically, from high school to college, as well as horizontally.

How Nebraska's reVISION Initiative Fuels Local Planning Efforts

Nebraska has a significant rural population. Even though the state is more than 77,000 square miles, more than half of the student population is located in the districts surrounding Omaha and Lincoln, the only two urbanized areas in Nebraska. About 80 percent of Nebraska's 244 school districts are considered rural.[13] Yet participation in CTE is high across the state, with students taking an average of 5.5 semester-long CTE courses throughout their education careers.

To ensure that all career pathways provided across the state are high quality and responsive to regional labor market needs, state leaders in Nebraska established reVISION — a process that empowers local communities to work

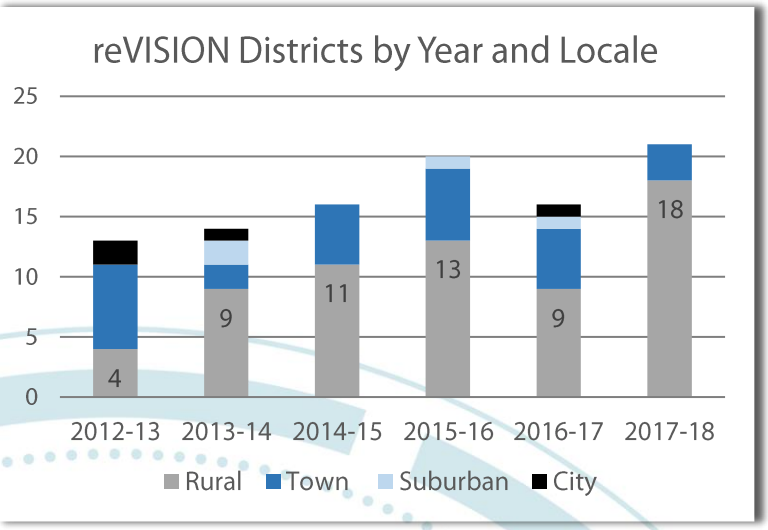
collaboratively and strategically to strengthen and improve their own career pathways. While reVISION is a statewide initiative, Nebraska has taken measures to ensure that the program targets rural schools and districts.

Nebraska launched its reVISION effort in 2012 using state Perkins Reserve Funds. Since then, the program has been scaled to serve 87 districts across the state, with an additional 21 beginning the initiative in the 2017-18 school year. The approach requires participating districts to engage regional stakeholders, evaluate the quality of their program offerings, and rethink the way CTE is delivered in their communities. While the districts applying in the initial round of the program were evenly distributed across different geographic regions, state leaders have made an intentional effort to recruit rural districts to ensure that the benefits will affect programs statewide. By the second year of the program, participation by rural districts more than doubled, and by 2017 two-thirds of the districts served through reVISION were rural.

The reVISION initiative is a year-long process that begins with a local inventory of a school's career education programs. Before meeting with the Nebraska Department of Education, participating schools are required to examine the breadth of programs of study offered in their buildings, the degree to which those programs are aligned with postsecondary entrance requirements, and any available extended learning opportunities. Once the school-based inventory has been completed, the school sets up a meeting with representatives from state agencies to unpack the data and collaborate around potential strategies to increase access and quality.

In addition to Department of Education staff, school counselors and administrators, the initial meeting is attended by representatives from the Department of Labor and the Department of Economic Development to ensure that regional and state labor market needs are a consideration from the outset. This meeting is often the most valuable part of the reVISION planning process. During the meeting, representatives from the state pull up data from Nebraska's H3 website, which provides real-time labor market and economic data and identifies what the state refers to as "H3" — or high-wage, high-demand and high-skill — jobs.[14] Structuring the planning conversation around data enables local leaders to identify growing industry sectors and prioritize their work accordingly.

Another key pillar of the reVISION process is community and industry engagement. Once school leaders have met with staff from the Nebraska Department of Education and identified areas of growth for the local school's CTE program, the next step is to reach out to regional employers and community members to gather input on how local CTE programs can better meet their needs. This process is largely driven by regional employers, who can speak to the talent gaps and relevant competencies in their respective industries.



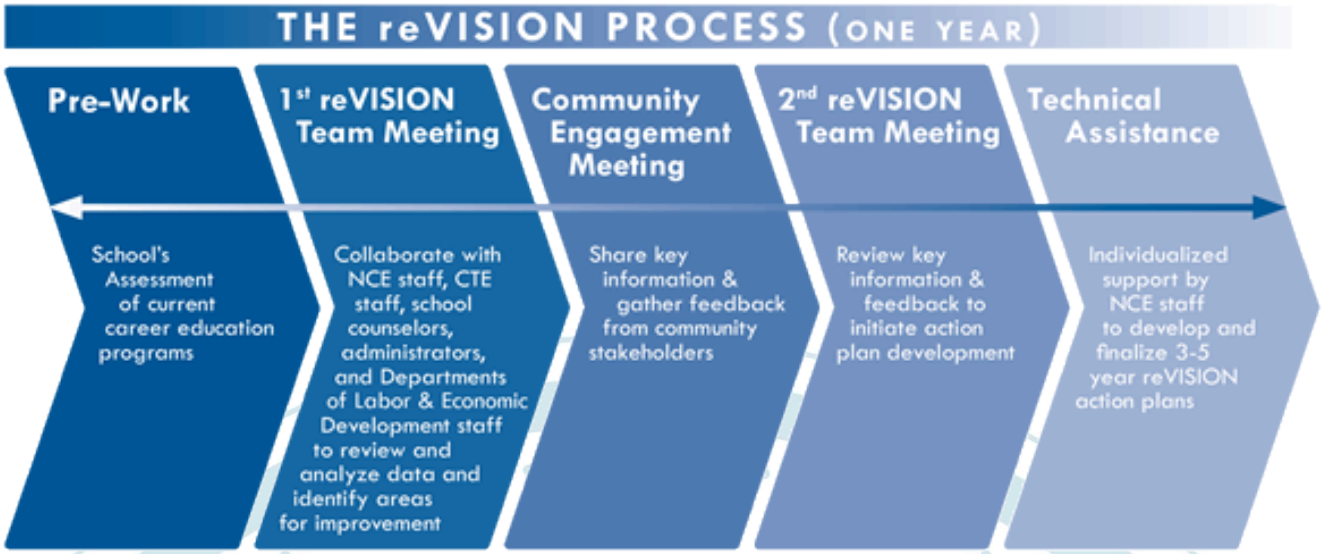
Participating schools report that these meetings have helped build relationships with local employers. One leader reflected that, despite a small business base in the community, the district was able to get great feedback from local employers through reVISION and was responding to this feedback by developing a district-level coordinator role to improve community connections. Another reported that stakeholder engagement through reVISION helped identify desirable traits for employability in high-wage, high-demand industries.

Based on input from these meetings, school staff develop a strategic action plan to address gaps in the school's CTE programs. The action plan describes the school's three- to five-year vision, outlines strategies for addressing the gaps identified in the needs assessment, and provides specific next steps and roles for executing the action plan. Once the action plan has been completed, schools submit their plans to the Nebraska Department of Education, which provides support and technical assistance to help schools and districts deliver on their plans. Additionally, schools and districts that complete the reVISION process are eligible to apply for competitive, one-year action grant funds to support their ongoing work.

Not all schools that apply for the action grant are awarded funds, but many report that the work completed in the action planning stage is enough to get the ball rolling. District leaders report that reVISION helps their schools set long-term goals, align programs with industry needs, and even identify additional private-sector funds from partnerships established through the initiative.

Nebraska's reVISION was launched with a relatively small investment from the state's Perkins Reserve Fund. As more schools and districts adopted the approach, the Nebraska Legislature diverted state funds to support reVISION expansion. Since 2013, the state has awarded nearly $3 million to more than 40 schools through both the planning and action stages of the initiative.[15]

One of the primary benefits of reVISION's regional approach to strategic planning is that it leverages a small amount of funds to enhance career preparation activities and better meet labor market and community needs. As a result, school leaders and CTE program administrators can hear directly from employers, families and other community members in their service area and use their input to identify and address gaps in quality and access.



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Additionally, reVISION puts labor market data in the front seat, empowering local leaders to make data-driven decisions about which programs should be offered. Through the reVISION process, local leaders have identified underperforming or outdated programs and redirected resources to support programs in high-demand career pathways. For example, many districts identified a growing need to strengthen career pathways in Health Science, spurring an intentional shift toward offering more related content and retraining educators in less-demanded career pathways such as Family and Consumer Sciences. In a recent survey of participating school districts, 87 percent reported at least one new CTE course or program that was adopted as a result of the reVISION initiative, and many reported adjusting or discontinuing outdated programs.

Lessons Learned in Nebraska:

- Taking the time to examine and re-evaluate CTE program offerings at the school and regional levels provides a critical check to ensure that programs are high quality and meet the needs of learners and employers.
- Labor market data, supported by meaningful employer partnerships, should be a core driver of rural program improvement activities.
- A small but strategic state investment can serve as a powerful catalyst to fuel local efforts to strengthen program quality.

The thoughtful inclusion of staff from the Department of Labor and Department of Economic Development in the early planning process, as well as the examination of labor market data, helps equip school leaders with the information they need to prioritize certain programs. This prioritization has resulted in intentionally redirecting resources away from outdated programs and toward those identified as high wage, high demand and high skill.

Catalyzing Local Innovation through South Dakota's Workforce Education Grants

Nearly half of **South Dakota's** elementary and secondary students are considered rural,[16] which is why the Rural School and Community Trust named South Dakota one of the top 10 highest priority states in rural education for 2017.[17] Like many rural states, South Dakota's biggest challenges include expanding access to CTE coursework (less than half of secondary students take CTE classes), ensuring that learners have access to a variety of options, and leveraging scarce resources to promote high-quality CTE programs and discontinue those that are outdated.

South Dakota has made progress in recent years on strengthening rural CTE through strategic investments and grants. While funding is always a critical resource, simply funneling additional dollars into local programs is not in itself an effective strategy for ensuring program quality. To be truly effective, state funds must be distributed strategically, aligned with quality outcomes and distributed with an eye for scaling impact.

In 2014, Gov. Dennis Daugaard issued more than $8.5 million of discretionary funds to 12 South Dakota school districts. These funds were designed to catalyze local partnerships and strengthen secondary CTE programs. While the program objectives were clear, districts were given the flexibility