

November 6, 2024

The Honorable Phil Mendelson
Chair, Council of the District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20004

Re: Bill 25-741 Vocational Education for a New Generation Act of 2024

Dear Council Chair Mendelson:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on proposed Bill 25-741, especially as it relates to career and technical education, or CTE.

The Progressive Policy Institute (PPI) is a catalyst for policy innovation and political reform based here in Washington D.C., with offices in Brussels, the United Kingdom, and Kyiv. Its mission is to create radically pragmatic ideas for moving America beyond ideological and partisan deadlock. PPI is home to the New Skills for A New Economy Project, which works to ensure greater upward mobility for all Americans. More information on that project can be found here: <https://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/New-Skills-for-a-New-Economy-Project.pdf>.

I am Bruno Manno, a PPI Senior Advisor. For more information on my background, see the following: <https://www.progressivepolicy.org/people/bruno-manno/>.

My testimony will provide a national overview of high school CTE programs, including the federal role in these programs; the views of the American public, including young people, on how they understand career pathways to success; examples of successful career pathways programs; and how these programs relate to career education and an opportunity pluralism governing agenda.

This testimony speaks to several issues described in proposed Bill 25-741, including the importance of collecting accurate CTE data, ensuring CTE courses are sequenced so they are pathways to credentials linked with jobs that are in demand; the importance of career education frameworks in preparing young people for jobs; and the key role that go-between intermediary organizations — for example, one like CityWorks DC — play in working with employers and other partners on all aspects of CTE career pathways programs.

I would be pleased to answer any additional questions you have.

Respectfully submitted,

Bruno V. Manno
Senior Advisor

**CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION:
A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE TESTIMONY SUBMITTED TO THE DISTRICT
OF COLUMBIA COUNCIL ON PROPOSED BILL 25-741 VOCATIONAL
EDUCATION FOR A NEW GENERATION ACT OF 2024**

Submitted By Bruno V. Manno
Senior Advisor
Progressive Policy Institute
Washington, D.C.
November 6, 2024

Many Americans, including the last wave of Gen Zers now entering high school, want schools to offer more education and training options for young people, like career and technical education, or CTE. They broadly agree that the K–12 goal of “college for all” over the last several decades has not served all students well. It should be replaced with “[opportunity pluralism](#),” or the recognition that a college degree is one of many pathways to post-secondary success.

School-based CTE programs (there are also programs for adults) typically prepare middle and high school students for a range of high-wage, high-skill, and high-demand careers. These include fields like advanced manufacturing, health sciences, and information technology, which often do not require a two- or four-year college degree. CTE programs award students recognized credentials like industry certifications and licenses. Some programs also provide continuing opportunities for individuals to sequence credentials so that they can pursue associate and bachelor’s degrees if they choose.

CTE TODAY

The [federal role](#) in today’s CTE began in 1917 with the Smith-Hughes National Vocational Education Act. In 2006, what had been called vocational education in the Smith-Hughes Act was rebranded career and technical education in the Carl. D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act. Federal funding for CTE in [2023](#) exceeded \$1.462 billion.

Current-day CTE is unlike the vocational education of the past that placed students into different tracks based mostly on family background. That sorting process often carried racial, ethnic, and class biases. While middle- and upper-class white students enrolled in academic, college-preparatory classes, immigrants, low-income youth, and students of color typically enrolled in low-level academic and vocational training. As Jeannie Oakes and her colleagues at the RAND Corporation found in their influential 1992 report, “Educational Matchmaking,” educators often characterized vocational programs as dumping grounds for students thought to be incapable of doing academic work.

CTE rejects this biased presorting. It combines academic coursework with technical and career skills for middle and high school students that offer pathways to jobs and further post-secondary education, training, and credentials. The coursework of CTE programs is a structured progression that builds knowledge and skills for good jobs. They immerse young people in education, training, and work by connecting them with local employers through experiences like [internships](#) and [apprenticeships](#). These programs often include support services like job

placement assistance after graduation. They also build [social capital](#): strong relationships between participants and adult mentors.

Advance CTE has worked with stakeholders to [create](#) the National Career Clusters Framework, which organizes academic and technical knowledge and skills into a coherent sequence and pathways. The Framework is being [revised](#) but currently has 16 Career Clusters representing 79 Career Pathways. It is used in some form by all U.S. states and territories to organize CTE programs at the state and local levels.

Nearly all public school districts (98%) [offer](#) CTE programs to high school students, with about three-fourths offering CTE courses that earn dual credit from both high schools and postsecondary institutions. [More](#) than eight out of ten (85%) high school students earn at least one CTE credit, with technology courses being the most popular. [Some](#) 11% of high school teachers teach CTE as their primary assignment; almost two-thirds of them (61%) have ten or more years of teaching experience.

More than [one-third](#) (37%) of ninth-grade students have a CTE concentration, meaning they are earning two or more credits in at least one CTE program of study. This [concentration](#) is [associated with higher](#) levels of student engagement, increased graduation rates, and reduced dropout rates. Those with a concentration in CTE also are more likely to be employed full-time and have higher median annual earnings eight years after graduation.

THE AMERICAN PUBLIC ON PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS

CTE pathways to success align with what the American public, including young people, want from schools. A recent *Purpose of Education Index* [survey](#) reports that of 57 educational priorities among the American public, getting kids ready for college had dropped from its pre-pandemic rank of 10th to the 47th priority today. [Other surveys](#) report similar findings: a 2023 [Wall Street Journal-NORC](#) poll found that 56% of Americans do not think a degree is worth the cost, up from 47% in 2017 and 40% in 2013. Skepticism today is strongest among those 18 to 34 years old and those with college degrees. The *Index* also reports that Americans' top priority for students is "developing practical skills" (such as managing personal finances and the ability to do basic reading, writing, and arithmetic), with only one in four (26%) thinking schools currently do this.

Gen Z — those born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s — agrees. [Around half](#) (51%) of Gen Z high schoolers plan to pursue a degree, down more than ten percentage points pre-pandemic and 20 points since shortly after the COVID pandemic began. Gen Z [middle schoolers](#) are even less likely to say they plan to go to college. Moreover, Gen Z high schoolers aspire to continuous learning [on the job and throughout life](#). Two-thirds (65%), for [example](#), believe education after high school is necessary and prefer options like online courses, boot camps, internships, and apprenticeships. More than half (53%) want formal learning opportunities throughout life. Only a third of these students say their ideal learning occurs simply through coursework.

Gen Z high schoolers have a [practical mindset](#). They want academic knowledge but also want to learn life skills like financial literacy, communication, and problem-solving, which they say are overlooked in classrooms. [Nearly eight in ten](#) (78%) believe it is important to develop these skills before they graduate so they are better prepared to choose career paths. They also have an entrepreneurial spirit — a third want to start their own business.

PATHWAYS IN ACTION

CTE programs are one way to respond to this opinion shift. These programs can be created from the top down or the bottom up. “Top-down” programs include those created by governors and legislators from both political parties. [Delaware Pathways](#), for example, was started by Democratic Governor Jack Markell, while [Tennessee’s Drive to 55 Alliance](#) is an initiative of Republican Governor Bill Haslam. Similar programs exist in states as politically diverse states as [California](#), [Colorado](#), [Indiana](#), and [Texas](#).

“Bottom-up” CTE programs are developed by local stakeholders like K–12 schools, employers, and civic partners. Examples include [3DE Schools](#) in Atlanta; [YouthForce NOLA](#) in New Orleans; and Washington, D.C.’s [CityWorks D.C. Cristo Rey](#) is an effort comprising 38 Catholic high schools in 24 states. Other organizations like [Pathways to Prosperity Network](#), [P-Tech Schools](#), and [Linked Learning Alliance](#) form regional or local partnerships that provide advice and practical assistance to those creating pathways programs.

Cristo Rey, a network of Catholic high schools in 24 states, includes “bottom-up” CTE instruction to train its students in practical life skills. Here, students at Cristo Rey San Antonio learn how to operate a copy machine.

Successful programs have five features, which I have detailed in [another piece](#) for *Education Next*: (1) an academic curriculum linked with labor-market needs that awards participants an employer-recognized credential; (2) work experience with mentors; (3) advisors to help participants navigate the program; (4) a written civic compact among K–12 schools, employers, and other partners; and (5) policies and regulations that support the program.

Many of these programs award credentials that certify the successful completion of a specific course of instruction. These individual credentials can be sequenced as building blocks or [stackable credentials](#) that can be combined over time and lead to an associate or bachelor’s degree if that is what an individual chooses to do. [Credential Engine](#) identifies 1,076,358 unique U.S. credentials in 18 categories delivered through traditional institutions like secondary and post-secondary education but also includes other types of non- and for-profit training organizations and Massive Open Online Courses, or [MOOCs](#). U.S. spending on training and education programs by educational institutions, employers, federal grant programs, states, and the military is estimated to be \$2.133 trillion.

While credentials are not of equal quality, many do add value and yield significant benefits for those who earn them. Studies by RAND and the Brookings Institution show how individuals (especially [low-income students](#)) who stack credentials (particularly in [health and business](#)) are more likely to be employed and earn more than those who do not stack credentials. And there are organizations like the American Institutes for Research [CTE Research Network](#) that focus on measuring the impact of CTE programs on student outcomes. Other organizations have conducted case studies that examine state CTE programs as varied as those found in [Arkansas](#), [Colorado](#), [Connecticut](#), [Massachusetts](#), [Ohio](#), and [Texas](#). Additionally, studies like [one](#) conducted by economist [Ann Huff Stevens](#) of the University of Texas at Austin analyze CTE programs provided by public institutions like [community colleges](#), for-profit organizations, and safety net or federal employment and training.

A [Fordham Institute](#) synthesis of this growing body of research identifies five benefits that come from participating in CTE programs: (1) they are not a path away from college, since students taking these courses are just as likely as peers to attend college; (2) they increase graduation rates; (3) they improve college outcomes, especially for women and disadvantaged students; (4) they boost students' incomes; and (5) they enhance other skills like perseverance and self-efficacy.

CTE AND CAREER EDUCATION

K–12 students often do not receive information from their schools on programs like CTE that offer practical pathways to careers and opportunities. A Morning Consult [poll](#) reports that less than half of Gen Z high schoolers say they had enough information to decide the best career or education pathway for them after high school. And [two-thirds](#) of high schoolers and graduates say they would have benefited from more career exploration in middle or high school. This gap between what students want and need and what schools provide in career preparation has consequences. [Students](#) often struggle in the transition from school to work and receive lower wages when they enter the workforce. It's high time schools strategically invested in career education.

An effective CTE pathways agenda requires a thorough career education program with a goal of instilling career aspirations in students and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, skills, and relationships they need to reach their potential by the end of high school. The international 38-member Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has [documented program models](#) that integrate a young person's school life with increasing levels of knowledge and employment options organized by three categories: exposure, exploration, and experience.

- **Exposure activities** introduce students to jobs and careers. These begin in preschool and include reading books or telling stories about jobs and careers and visits from those who work in different jobs. Exposure also entails age-appropriate, outside-the-school experiences like workplace visits as young people move through school.
- **Exploration activities** allow students to explore work by engaging them in volunteer work, job shadowing, resume development, and practice job interviews. These activities typically begin in [middle school](#) and continue through high school.
- **Experience activities** include work-based learning, where young people engage in sustained and supervised projects and mentorships like internships and apprenticeships. These opportunities are an [options multiplier](#), creating bridges to other opportunities that lead to full-time jobs, more education, or both.

There are other useful frameworks. Colorado's work-based learning [continuum](#) uses an approach for middle and high schools organized by workplace activities: learning about work, learning through work, and learning at work. These approaches help young people develop new knowledge and skills, social and professional networks, and the capacity to navigate pathways that turn ambitions into reality. They can be combined with [platforms](#) like [YouScience](#) that use artificial intelligence to create assessments that help young people discover personal strengths and aptitudes and match them to potential careers.

Such career education programs have many benefits. OECD [examined](#) the link between young people's participation in career-preparation activities and adult career outcomes in eight countries. They report that there is "evidence that secondary school students who explore,

experience and think about their futures in work frequently encounter lower levels of unemployment, receive higher wages, and are happier in their careers as adults.” These programs also nurture the technical and material aspects of success and its relational dimensions: social networks for young people, [mentoring relationships, and professional networks](#) that help them throughout life.

Consider the United States Youth Development Study, [which followed](#) those born in the mid-1970s to age 30. It finds a positive relationship between those who worked part-time at ages 14 and 15 in internships and apprenticeships and those likely to agree at age 30 that they hold a job they want. It seems almost undeniable that greater exposure to the workplace better equips students to prepare for the type of career that suits them.

Career education also deepens young people’s knowledge of the culture of work and fosters their [capacity](#) to [aspire](#) to, create, and navigate the work pathways that make a reality of their ambitions. It also helps them develop an [occupational identity](#) and [vocational self](#), which gives them a better sense of their values and abilities. On a practical level, CTE creates [faster and cheaper](#) pathways to jobs and careers. Finally, career education fosters local civic engagement from employers and other community partners by cultivating the connections and bonds essential to innovation, economic dynamism, and a flourishing local civil society.

A GOVERNING AGENDA

K–12 education debates are often cast as a culture war between left and right, a story that divides Americans based on what we expect from schools. This story is mostly wrong and creates a false either-or narrative. In contrast, “opportunity pluralism” offers a both-and narrative, where CTE and other career pathways programs are discussed in the same breath as college preparation.

But broad agreement does not imply implementation uniformity. The give-and-take of negotiating legislation and regulatory proposals will produce diverse programs and priorities, or [implementation pluralism](#). That’s all for the better as we test new approaches and tailor them to community needs and use states and local communities as “[laboratories of democracy](#).”

Opportunity pluralism can provide policymakers across the political spectrum with a commonsense governing agenda that reorients the goals of K–12 public education. It’s a program led by civic pluralists who seek to nurture civil society by building different career pathways programs for young people. Taken together, it suggests a sea change in education — one that has the potential to allow students to flourish and reach their potential at the same time as we ease our seemingly intractable political divides.

Bruno V. Manno is a senior advisor at the Progressive Policy Institute and a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education for Policy.