

Introduction

Career Technical Education (CTE) is a proven strategy to build economic self-sufficiency and expand opportunities for postsecondary education and lifelong learning. However, the CTE field has a conflicted history in delivering equitable opportunities and outcomes for learners. According to The Hechinger Report:

*[CTE] was seen as a dumping ground for students who weren't considered college material. A two-tier educational system tracked predominantly low-income students and students of color into career and technical classes, then known as vocational education. But in recent years, schools have revamped these courses to prepare students for higher education and lucrative work in fields such as technology, health care, and engineering.*¹

This history has led the CTE field to a unique paradox: Some marginalized learners continue to be tracked into low-quality CTE programs while others are kept out of high-quality programs. States can play a critical role in reversing these disparities, in part by engaging historically marginalized communities and establishing feedback loops to ensure that each voice is heard. By engaging marginalized communities and representatives of learners with special population status, states can begin to identify and reverse the systemic barriers that have resulted in inequitable access to and outcomes in CTE.

The Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) encourages states to promote equity in CTE through data analysis, funding, technical assistance, professional development, and regular engagement of stakeholders representing learners with special population status. The law defines special populations to include:

- Individuals with disabilities;
- Individuals from economically disadvantaged families, including low-income youth and adults;
- Individuals preparing for non-traditional fields;
- Single parents, including single pregnant women;
- Out-of-workforce individuals;
- English learners;
- Individuals experiencing homelessness;
- Youth who are in, or have aged out of, the foster care system; and
- Youth with a parent who is a member of the armed forces and is on active duty.

Other populations of focus in Perkins V include racially or ethnically minoritized learners, migrant learners and justice-involved individuals. And while Perkins V does not explicitly identify gender identity, sexual orientation or documentation status as special population categories, it is important to consider these groups in efforts to ensure that all learners have a safe and welcoming learning environment to pursue their career pathway of choice.

To expand access and support success for learners who fit into one or more of these special population categories, the law:

- Requires states to develop four-year state plans in consultation with:
 - Members and representatives of special populations;
 - Representatives of agencies serving out-of-school youth, children and youth experiencing homelessness, and at-risk youth, including the state coordinator for education of homeless children and youths established or designated under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act;
 - Representatives of Indian Tribes and Tribal organizations located in, or providing services in, the state; and
 - Individuals with disabilities.
- Requires local recipients to complete a Comprehensive Local Needs Assessment (CLNA) and local application with consultation from a diverse body of stakeholders including representatives of special populations; representatives of regional or local agencies that serve out-of-school youth, children and youth experiencing homelessness, and at-risk youth; and representatives of Indian Tribes and Tribal organizations.
- Requires local recipients to consult stakeholders on an ongoing basis.

While Perkins V has specific stakeholder engagement requirements, states should consider the law's requirements to be the floor, not the ceiling. States should continue and expand upon the processes they developed during the Perkins V planning phase to ensure that meaningful, responsive engagement with representatives of learners with special population status becomes the new way of doing business.

This resource is designed to help states establish processes and routines for systematically engaging representatives of learners with special population status at the state level. The report draws on Advance CTE's review of state Perkins V plans as well as key informant interviews in select states to document four steps for meaningful stakeholder engagement beyond Perkins V:

- **Step 1: Engage and build trust** with influencers, advocacy groups and state agencies representing learners with special population status.

- **Step 2: Build internal knowledge and capacity** at the state level by designating liaisons for targeted special population groups and deepening knowledge about the needs and interests of their communities.
- **Step 3: Operationalize engagement** by formalizing structures and routines for engaging representatives of learners with special population status and for coordinating services across state agencies.
- **Step 4: Act on stakeholder input and establish feedback loops** to ensure that resources and services are addressing stakeholders' most urgent needs.

Step 1: Engage and Build Trust

The first step in building statewide routines for stakeholder engagement is to identify communities and influencers, conduct initial outreach and build trust. A good place to start is by identifying statewide learner advocacy groups that represent the interests of marginalized populations. Additionally, there may be state agencies and offices dedicated to serving different special populations. For example, state departments of education often have a dedicated office or director responsible for implementation of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, who can support efforts to educate learners experiencing homelessness.

In **Maryland**, the Maryland Department of Education (MDE) recognized that effective collaboration requires a bi-directional relationship. MDE intentionally invited representatives of learners with special population status to participate in Perkins V workgroup planning meetings. To deepen collaboration, MDE staff participated in advisory board meetings for different agencies, advocacy groups and associations representing learners with special population status. This approach was far more effective because it helped MDE staff learn about the issues facing those communities, their priorities and how CTE could be a solution.

One of the lessons learned from Maryland's approach is the importance of involving senior leadership in outreach and engagement with special populations. Having senior leadership attend advisory meetings for different special population groups signals that the state prioritizes their interests. However, the State CTE Director or other leaders in the state office may not be able to attend every meeting. In that case, it helps for leadership to initiate the relationship and build trust, then designate staff members to play an active and engaged role in meetings and communicate on behalf of the CTE office.

In **Michigan**, a state with multiple sovereign Native American Tribes, state leaders in the Office of CTE conducted early outreach to engage and build trust with the Confederation of Tribal Education Directors. The state held multiple information sharing and consultation meetings throughout the Perkins V plan development cycle to understand the needs of different constituencies and prioritize opportunities to use Perkins V to prepare Native American youth for high-skill, high-wage and in-demand occupations.² The Office of CTE will continue working with the Tribal education directors throughout the implementation of the plan to ensure that the needs of their communities are being met.

To build trust and ensure effective engagement, consider meeting representatives of special populations where they are.

Similarly, the **Oregon** Department of Education leveraged Perkins V state planning to deepen engagement with the state's nine federally recognized sovereign nations. State CTE leaders reached out to Tribes and Tribal entities immediately after Perkins V became law to learn their priorities before the plan was developed. The Oregon CTE agency also asked how each Tribe wanted to be engaged at the beginning of the process and honored those requests. In addition, CTE leaders delivered Indigenous land acknowledgments at the start of meetings with Tribal representatives to recognize this history. Tribal priorities directly influenced the state to include an option in the CLNA and local application to allow for programs based on local labor market need.

Step 2: Build Internal Knowledge and Capacity

In addition to building trusting relationships, state leaders should work to deepen the knowledge of state staff and ensure that individuals at the state level are aware of the needs and interests of learners with special population status.

States can take multiple approaches to build capacity in this area. One approach is to establish a designated position with responsibility for coordinating with representatives of learners with special population status. This individual can serve as a liaison with representatives of learners with special population status and can help provide technical assistance and professional development to local recipients. In **Arkansas**, for example, the Arkansas Division of Career and Technical Education has two positions — a program adviser and a program coordinator — dedicated to supporting learners with special population status.³ In addition to supporting professional development, these staff members have partnered with the Arkansas Department of Education Office of Special Education, Arkansas Transition Services and Arkansas Rehabilitation Services on a co-teaching model and work-based learning opportunities for learners with disabilities. The staff also will be collaborating with the State Approving Agency for Veterans and the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children to support learners with parents on active duty.

Alternatively, state offices can distribute expertise and knowledge across their staff. In **Delaware**, each staff member in the CTE & STEM Initiatives office of the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) is responsible for managing a portion of the workgroup's equity portfolio. An equity strategy lead is assigned to manage the larger direction of the work, while individual staff address the needs of a specific special population or point of student transition to garner support for their respective population. Individual staff are responsible for identifying:

- The needs of the group;
- What resources exist to support the group; and
- How to direct those resources.

From that point on, each staff member serves as the lead point of contact for their respective special population. They are responsible for identifying opportunities for inter-agency collaboration and developing a plan to engage state partners in coordinating funding, resources and services to target their respective special population. This approach ensures that each special population is being supported by at least one state staff member at all times and that designated staff are building relationships with counterparts at other agencies.

States can also establish designated positions for supporting priority populations in CTE. **Louisiana's** state plan, for example, aims to improve the quality and impact of CTE programs delivered in youth and adult correctional facilities across the state.⁴ To support these efforts and strengthen coordination between the Department of Public Safety and Corrections (DPS&C) and the Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS), which is the designated state Perkins agency, DPS&C established a new full-time coordinator position to lead engagement efforts with corrections stakeholders for Perkins V planning and implementation. The state also aims to build capacity and coordination at the local level through a Perkins Regional Coalition model. Planning and budgeting for Perkins V will be conducted through regional partnerships, which are based out of LCTCS and include representatives from local juvenile justice and/or adult corrections education programs as required members.

Step 3: Operationalize Engagement

While many states initiated engagement with key stakeholder groups to inform the development of their Perkins V plans, fewer took steps to formalize continuous engagement throughout the implementation of their plans. To do so takes intention, resources and the commitment to follow through on recommendations from stakeholders. Examples of formalized stakeholder engagement operations include statewide advisory committees; inter-agency task forces; and in some cases, formalized agreements between partners.

Ohio has established formal engagement opportunities across state agencies and offices and with practitioners on the ground in an effort to strengthen the quality and impact of programs serving urban youth, justice-involved individuals and learners with disabilities.

In its Perkins V plan, Ohio established an urban expansion team with the goal of supporting CTE recruitment, expansion, planning and performance in the state's eight largest urban school districts.⁵ This team includes representatives from urban school districts who provide guidance and input to inform the work of the Ohio Department of Education (ODE). The state is also planning to improve the rigor and quality of CTE programs in state correctional facilities by building a more collaborative partnership across ODE, the Department of Higher Education, the Department of Youth Services, and the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction. This inter-agency partnership will not only help provide stronger oversight for CTE programs in correctional facilities through Perkins V funding approval, program development and comprehensive program evaluation but also allow correctional facilities to access strategic assistance and support.

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To expand supports and opportunities for learners with disabilities in CTE programs, ODE has also activated leaders of different offices as well as partners in other state agencies to braid funding and align service delivery. These efforts are supported from leadership all the way down to practitioners on the ground. Every month the State CTE Director meets with the director of the Office of Exceptional Children (OEC) to coordinate strategic priorities. One level down, staff at the Office of Career-Technical Education and OEC meet regularly through an inter-agency workgroup to implement strategies such as:

- Developing common messaging for learners with disabilities in CTE;
- Expanding and improving work-based learning opportunities;
- Developing a frequently asked questions resource on work-based learning for learners with disabilities;
- Issuing a joint memorandum to help practitioners understand how to provide special education services to learners with disabilities in CTE; and
- Building local capacity for supporting learners with disabilities in CTE (OEC has hired five full-time regional consultants who assist local CTE Planning Districts).

Another initiative to support learners with disabilities is the Ohio Transition Support Partnership.⁶ The partnership was started in 2015 by OEC and Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities to improve the coordination and delivery of vocational rehabilitation services to learners with disabilities. The partnership increases the availability of vocational rehabilitation counselors to learners as young as age 14, allowing them to access career exploration, work-based learning, skills development and transition services. In 2019, the partnership was expanded even further, and 58 full-time counselors are now available across the state.

Other states have established similar advisory groups, workgroups and task forces to formalize coordination in support of special populations. In **Arizona**, the CTE office will collaborate with different units in the Arizona Department of Education serving learners with disabilities, learners in foster care, learners experiencing homelessness and migrant learners to create professional development opportunities for CTE teachers and instructors.⁷ **Maryland** has an inter-agency agreement in place to coordinate supports for learners with disabilities.⁸ Under the agreement, members of the Interagency Transition Council for Youth with Disabilities come together four times a year to discuss strategies and take actionable steps to improve policies and practices affecting individuals with disabilities.

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In some cases, states are planning to continue engaging advisory stakeholder groups that were established to help develop the Perkins V state plan. The **Nebraska** Department of Education will rebuild a statewide CTE Advisory Council and continue to engage the Nebraska Partner Council throughout the implementation of its Perkins V plan.⁹ The Nebraska CTE Advisory Council will include CTE teachers, administrators, postsecondary faculty, career guidance and academic counselors, business and industry leaders, entrepreneurs, representatives from Indian Tribes and Tribal organizations, educational service unit representatives, parents and learners. The Nebraska Partner Council is a council of state agencies and statewide programs that meets quarterly to improve public service delivery for Nebraska citizens and strengthen workforce development activities.

And in **Maryland**, even though the state's Perkins V plan has been finalized, MDE still aims to continue the engagement that was started in service of the state plan to ensure continued input from key constituents. Maryland will invite stakeholders — including representatives from industry, local school systems, community colleges, special population groups and parents — to participate in activities such as monitoring visits, career counseling activities, teacher and faculty recruitment and other CTE-specific initiatives throughout the implementation of its Perkins V state plan.

Step 4: Act On Stakeholder Input and Establish Feedback Loops

Finally, and most importantly, states should be prepared to act on stakeholder input and either direct resources or make changes to policy and practice to improve opportunities and outcomes for special populations. This step is critical to maintaining strong relationships and trust with stakeholders.

Although implementation of Perkins V has only just begun, some states have already taken steps to respond to the feedback they received from stakeholders during the plan development phase. In **Massachusetts**, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has been coordinating regularly with stakeholders to change regulations, policies and practices related to both recruitment and admissions into Chapter 74 Career Vocational Technical Education programs to address concerns about equitable access to vocational technical education schools and programs for under-served learners.¹⁰

In response to feedback received from Tribal leaders, **Oregon** adjusted the process for disbursing money for the state-funded CTE Revitalization grant program.¹¹ While funding previously went to institutions directly, the state will now distribute grants to Tribal entities to give them more of a voice in how the funds are used.

In **Maryland**, the State Board of Education developed a Task Force on Achieving Academic Equity and Excellence for Black Boys.¹² Through this task force, MDE has focused its attention on improving success for Black males (although not a defined special population in Perkins V, this population is a priority subgroup in the state). MDE plans to leverage the work of the task force to explore how CTE can be a solution to improve educational outcomes for Black male learners in Maryland.

Figure 1: Delaware PIPEline to Career Success Model and Timeline



Source: Delaware Department of Education¹³

In **Delaware**, DDOE has made considerable progress engaging other state agencies around the support of learners with disabilities in CTE. According to the state's Perkins V plan, leaders from the Vocational Rehabilitation Division and the Employment and Training Division at the Delaware Department of Labor as well as the Division of Developmental Disabilities Services and the Division for the Visually Impaired at the Delaware Department of Health and Social Services have come together to coordinate supports for learners with disabilities across federal and state programs.¹⁴

This collaboration resulted in the state’s PIPEline to Career Success for Students with Disabilities project.^{15, 16} The project was led by state leaders in each of the aforementioned offices and agencies in partnership with the National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity (NAPE), building upon NAPE’s Program Improvement Process for Equity (PIPE) framework.¹⁷ The project is designed to build local capacity for supporting learners with disabilities in CTE by leading local practitioners through a multi-step process to examine data, understand root causes, and build a plan of action (see Figure 1). The program was initially piloted in three school districts in 2018 — Capital, Laurel and Appoquinimink. Building on the success of the early pilots, Delaware aims to bring the approach to scale, leveraging in-state and multi-state compacts to refine and expand the model.

Through all of these efforts, maintaining focus and being realistic about what is realistically achievable is important. As in **Maryland**, with its focus on Black male learners, states may be able to achieve more with targeted interventions for different special populations and subgroups instead of trying to address all special populations with one intervention. While special populations are grouped together under Perkins V, it is erroneous to address them as a monolith. The resources and supports that a learner experiencing homelessness needs to be successful are vastly different than those needed by a non-traditional learner or a learner with a disability. Rather, states should consider targeted interventions to improve access and success for individual special populations. In many ways, focusing meaningfully on a few specific populations is better than creating a one-size-fits-all strategy that is minimally effective.

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Effective stakeholder engagement is not a one-time activity or an exercise in compliance. Rather, effective and meaningful engagement is constant. States should open the door for ongoing communication with stakeholders by establishing formal feedback loops and sustaining engagement efforts through regular check-ins, initiatives, task forces and advisory meetings with representatives of learners with special population status and subgroups.

Communicating openly and frequently with stakeholders can help build trust. States should share how they are responding to stakeholder feedback and ensure that partners know what actions the state is taking to address their concerns. If no actions can be taken, states should ensure that stakeholders are informed of the decisionmaking process and be transparent about limitations for action.

Finally, states should monitor the impact of stakeholder engagement activities by setting goals and monitoring progress toward those goals. If targets are missed, the strategies for engaging stakeholders should be reassessed.

Summary and Considerations

Although this resource includes practices and lessons from states' Perkins V plans, routine engagement with representatives of learners with special population status is a persistent challenge for states. Many have statewide CTE advisory councils, but there is limited evidence that all special populations are represented on these councils or that they are engaged in ongoing discussions in any way. Perkins V provides states an opportunity to formalize the stakeholder engagement conducted during the plan development stage and ensure that special populations routinely have the opportunity to inform and guide CTE efforts and initiatives.

States can take the following actions to establish routines for engaging representatives of learners with special population status in an ongoing way:

Step 1: Engage and build trust with influencers, advocacy groups and state agencies representing the interests of learners with special population status.

- Which influencers, community and advocacy organizations, and state agencies are working to advance the interests of each special population?
- How can you establish relationships with new influencers, organizations or agencies? Consider including the State CTE Director and/or senior leadership in these meetings to signal the importance of relationship building.
- What is your purpose for stakeholder engagement? Develop and share a clear agenda for each meeting to ensure that partners can prepare effectively.

Step 2: Build internal knowledge and capacity at the state level by designating liaisons for targeted special population groups and deepening knowledge about the needs and interests of their communities.

- Who in the state CTE office is responsible for liaising with and coordinating services in support of each special population? Is there one designated special populations coordinator, or are responsibilities distributed across the team?
- What types of professional development and training opportunities are available for state CTE staff to understand the needs of each special population? Consider inviting organizations and state agencies representing learners with special population status to lead these sessions.

Step 3: Operationalize engagement by formalizing structures and routines for engaging representatives of learners with special population status and for coordinating services across state agencies.

- Are there existing councils, committees or organizations that regularly involve stakeholders in guiding education and workforce policy? How can they be engaged to provide input on CTE policy?
- Within state government, are there existing inter-agency task forces or workgroups advancing the interests of learners with special population status?

- How can services and funding be coordinated across agencies to maximize the efficiency and impact of CTE programming?
- How is learner voice represented in stakeholder engagement and decisionmaking at the state level?

Step 4: Act on stakeholder input and establish feedback loops to ensure that resources and services are addressing stakeholders' most urgent needs.

- What processes and routines are necessary to gather and respond to stakeholder input on a regular basis?
- How can you identify root causes and barriers in policy and practice that are inhibiting access and success for special populations?
- How are you informing stakeholders of any changes to policy or practice that are made as a result of their input?
- What are the formal organized structures (e.g., advisory committees) or key moments when stakeholders should be engaged?
- What metrics can you use to monitor the impact of stakeholder engagement efforts?
- How can you build capacity for local leaders to engage stakeholders and representatives of learners with special population status in the implementation of local Perkins V applications?

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Endnotes

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