



Meeting the Professional Learning Needs of Career and Technical Education Teachers

The Need for Professional Learning in CTE

Like most professionals, career and technical education (CTE) teachers are required to update their skills beyond traditional or alternative certification to keep pace with the evolving instructional rigor within the field. The national emphasis to prepare students of all ages for both postsecondary academics and the workforce has placed increased demands on CTE teachers. The growing need for postsecondary credentials for most family-sustaining career paths charges CTE teachers with providing comprehensive instruction in technical, workplace, and academic domains.¹ In the past, a “false dichotomy between knowledge and skills”² was advanced, directing some students to college and others to vocational tracks, thereby creating silos that separate disciplines and types of student skill development. Today, however, the push to prepare all students for both college and careers lessens the divide.

Since 2010, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have increased attention on the alignment of K–12 education with states’ workforce development systems, resulting in an emphasis on postsecondary transitions, integrated academic and technical training, and digital literacy to increase college and career readiness. Following suit, in late 2011, 41 states and Washington, DC, committed to developing Common Career Technical Core (CCTC) standards for CTE.³ These standards, publicly released in June 2012, represent an update to the benchmarks used for the National Career Clusters[®] Framework⁴ and therefore align with the 16 knowledge and skill areas and the 79 Career Pathways within the Career Clusters.⁵ Most recently, in 2013, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Vocational and Adult Education—now the Office of Career and Technical Education—released benchmarks for adult learners in the report, “College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education (CCR).”⁶ Given the varying standards and diverse federal, state, and local mandates, CTE instructors are confronted with many requirements and expectations.

Facing these changes, state directors, state and district staff, and individual teachers have identified a need for professional learning that enables CTE teachers to help their students meet the CCSS, CCTC, and the CCR standards, and to respond more effectively to contemporary shifts in policy and instruction requirements. The most highly desired topics for professional learning, as identified through a 2011 survey of state directors conducted by the Association for Professional Development in Career and Technical Education, include

- integrating academics into CTE instruction;
- using industry-based certifications to plan instruction;
- using student data for decision making;
- providing dual enrollment and articulation programs;

- teacher certification; and
- curriculum development and revision.⁷

As noted below, however, providing CTE teachers with the professional learning opportunities they want and need is not always easy.

Challenges to Meeting CTE Teachers’ Professional Learning Needs

Although agreement about the professional learning needs of CTE teachers is increasing, providing the appropriate opportunities for satisfying that demand is challenging. Several significant barriers exist and must be overcome. For example, the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education (NRCCTE) reports that up to 75%⁸ of CTE teachers enter the teaching profession without formal teacher preparation and instead are hired based on their experience in business and industry. Although they bring extensive content expertise, these CTE teachers often need ongoing training and support to incorporate academic skills, use best instructional practices, and manage the classroom.

In 2013, American Institutes for Research (AIR) surveyed California CTE administrators from public and private institutions about what they perceive as the greatest obstacles to CTE teachers’ participation in professional learning. From the 69 responses received, the greatest obstacles were identified as (1) lack of dedicated or available time (71%), (2) scheduling complexities (66.7%), and (3) lack of funding or resources (58%). To help overcome these barriers, it is important that the professional learning opportunities made available to CTE teachers are both efficient and effective.

Providing Professional Learning Opportunities That Work

To improve skills and build capacity, CTE teachers need access to high-quality professional learning opportunities and sufficient time to engage in them. But the question remains: What does quality professional learning look like for CTE teachers? Research from NRCCTE⁹ and AIR’s survey of California CTE administrators revealed that CTE teachers preferred collaborative and experiential learning, finding these approaches helpful in meeting their need to master technologies, techniques, and skills specific to CTE courses and content. Furthermore, in a follow-up focus group of California CTE administrators conducted by AIR, the participants said that teacher collaboration in planning, teamwork in instructional delivery, and an increased focus on student learning rather than on teaching would promote more positive student outcomes.

NRCCTE research¹⁰ indicates that professional learning opportunities should include practices that increase the likelihood that CTE reform measures such as the following will be successfully implemented and sustained:

- Deep collaboration skills with fellow teachers
- Face-to-face trainings and electronic learning communities
- Focus on immediate implementation
- Formative assessment and resulting data-driven instruction
- Instructional leadership and administrative support and involvement
- Sufficient intensity and duration

These practices can be achieved through a number of programmatic and policy approaches, such as:

1. Induction programs for new teachers to orient them to policies and teaching methods, and provide them with mentoring from veteran instructors;
2. Peer support through in-person and online professional communities of practice;
3. Collaborative curriculum and lesson planning between academic and CTE teachers; and
4. Teacher evaluation procedures that support best practices in both content and instructional delivery.¹¹

All of these professional learning approaches require systemic changes, some of which may be daunting for program or school district administrators and teachers to take on. However, comprehensive professional learning and development models for teachers do exist. In these models, professional learning is job-embedded and ongoing rather than occurring in isolated, periodic training sessions, and uses evidence-based teaching practices and increased collaboration between CTE and academic teachers. Therefore, a challenge lies in identifying the approach that would be the most effective for teachers. Through the aforementioned surveys conducted by the Association for Professional Development in Career and Technical Education and by AIR, state directors and administrators have already shared their views on professional learning that will help CTE teachers do their work. It is now imperative to hear directly from CTE teachers about what professional learning support is needed to meet the demands of the profession and to serve their students most effectively.

Make Your Voice Heard!

The AIR survey and focus group that helped inform this brief provided some educators with an opportunity to be heard. Now we want to offer you a chance to contribute to the conversation. Please participate in our online survey and tell us what you think are CTE teachers' professional learning needs, the greatest challenges in achieving them, and ways these challenges can be overcome. To participate, please scan the code to the left or go to <http://tinyurl.com/airctep1>. The confidential survey will be available from November 20, 2014, through January 30, 2015. After the survey closes, AIR will analyze the results and publish a more detailed summary report of the findings, in service of the field. This updated report will help inform decision makers about the current professional learning needs of the CTE instructional field.

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Endnotes

1. See the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education (March, 2011) report on professional development in CTE.
2. This report from the Association for Career and Technical Education, National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium (NASDCTEc) and Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2010) highlights how CTE can address the skills needed to be competitive in the current global economy.
3. Since 1920, NASDCTEc has been a national leader in secondary, postsecondary, and adult CTE advocacy reforms. See their website, www.careertech.org.
4. The Career Clusters and Career Pathways were developed by NASDCTEc.
5. This Special Issues Brief authored by Catherine Jacques and Amy Potemski (2014) is produced by American Institutes for Research's Center on Great Teachers and Leaders.
6. This report presents college and career readiness standards representing content in English language arts, literacy, and mathematics that is most relevant for preparing adult learners for success in college, technical training programs, work, and citizenship.
7. The Association for Professional Development in Career and Technical Education has conducted this survey annually since 2004. Respondents rank their top 10 out of 49 professional development priorities.
8. In a survey of 14,000 CTE teachers at 30 High Schools that Work sites, 75% responded that they became teachers through alternate certification.
9. See the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education (March, 2011) report on the impact of professional development for secondary CTE teachers. http://www.nrccte.org/sites/default/files/publication-files/improving_ed_through_pd.pdf
10. See the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education (March, 2011) for details on professional development models and induction for CTE teachers who did not receive traditional teacher training.
11. See the 2014 Special Issues Brief from the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at AIR.

References

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