



Improving Equity and Access to Quality CTE Programs for English Learners



State Career Technical Education (CTE) leaders have a critical responsibility to ensure that each learner is supported in identifying and realizing their goals and has opportunities to achieve educational and career success.¹

To fulfill this responsibility, state leaders must identify and dismantle historical barriers and construct systems that support each learner in accessing, fully participating in and successfully completing a high-quality CTE program of study. This resource outlines five key actions that state CTE leaders can take to ensure that secondary and postsecondary English learners (ELs) are able to access and succeed in high-quality CTE programs.

BACKGROUND

The federal government defines English learners (ELs) in K-12 education as individuals aged 3-21, enrolled in or preparing to enroll in an elementary or secondary school, who:

Come from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of English language proficiency,

AND

Have difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding English that may be sufficient to deny them the ability to meet challenging state academic standards, succeed in classrooms where the language of instruction is English, or participate fully in society²

In fall 2018, there were more than 5 million ELs in the United States, with about 1.9 million enrolled in grades 6-12.³ Although the federal definition applies only to elementary and secondary ELs, and postsecondary institutions are not required to report data on students' language proficiency, many ELs are enrolled in higher education programs as well. In the 2018-2019 academic year, 520,417 secondary CTE participants were ELs.

At the postsecondary level, this number was 121,895.⁴ ELs as a whole were most involved in the following Career Clusters^{®5}:

- Business Management & Administration;
- Arts/AV Technology & Communication;
- Information Technology;
- Health Science; and
- Human Services.

Evidence shows that learners engaged in high-quality CTE programs have higher academic achievement, graduation rates and even standardized test scores.⁶

CTE programs provide skill-based, career-relevant language instruction in authentic, hands-on settings, which the Institute of Education Sciences has identified as a valuable instructional strategy for ELs.⁷ Additionally, CTE programs foster valuable employer-learner connections and extended networks that are especially important

for ELs, as many are immigrants or come from recent immigrant families that are still in the early stages of building social capital within education and the workforce. Fostering a diverse labor force, filling gaps in talent pipelines, and ultimately remaining competitive in a global marketplace requires ensuring that every individual receives the support, education and skills necessary to participate fully in the workforce.



BARRIERS TO CTE ACCESS AND SUCCESS



ELs face at least three major barriers in participating and succeeding in CTE programs:

1. Curricula and Entrance/Placement Assessments

The curricula that ELs are exposed to, in both general education and CTE courses, are often not personalized or relevant to their interests and learning levels. Additionally, remedial coursework sometimes keeps ELs from having time to take credit-bearing courses and often takes a one-size-fits-all approach that is not relevant to individuals' career goals and language needs. For example, some ELs might need more help with academic reading and writing to succeed in higher education, while others are looking to improve speaking skills to enter the workforce as soon as possible. Providing adaptive instruction focused on relevant skill-building is essential. Additionally, entrance exams and placement assessments are a barrier for many ELs seeking to enroll in postsecondary education, as they are tested not only on content knowledge but also

“

The curricula that ELs are exposed to, in both general education and CTE courses, are often not personalized or relevant to their interests and learning levels.

”

on language ability, putting them at an additional disadvantage. One of Advance CTE's [vision](#) principles states that an effective career preparation ecosystem must value all learning that occurs and ensure that each learner's skills and competencies are counted and valued.

2.

Out-of-School Commitments

Many ELs have competing responsibilities outside of school. ELs are disproportionately likely to reside in low-income communities — in the 2017-2018 school year, 79 percent of K-12 ELs attended a Title I school.⁸ Many learners are supporting families and need to work, often in low-wage jobs with demanding and unpredictable schedules. These family obligations may mean that ELs require child care and transportation assistance to get to class. Additionally, some ELs may be experiencing stress and worry associated with the immigration process, either for themselves or for a family member. Advance

“

ELs are disproportionately likely to reside in low-income communities —in the 2017-2018 school year, 79 percent of K-12 ELs attended a Title I school.⁸

”

CTE’s [vision](#) advocates taking each learner’s unique commitments into account to create integrated advisement systems and accessible and equitable CTE programs.

3.

Lack of Data and Feedback Mechanisms

Many programs do not meet ELs’ needs due to the absence of feedback mechanisms. Decision makers often lack access to the voices and lived experiences of ELs when considering CTE program improvement, and guidance for collecting and reporting data for ELs at the postsecondary level is exceedingly limited. Unlike K-12 schools, institutions of higher education are not required to collect data on learners’ language proficiency, and state governments typically do not provide guidance on how best to serve ELs in postsecondary education. These conditions result in an overall shortage of information about ELs’ participation rates in higher education and postsecondary CTE programs, as well as their subsequent academic and career outcomes. Advance CTE’s [vision](#) recognizes that fully diagnosing the scope of institutional barriers and providing meaningful, ongoing mechanisms for elevating learner voice are key steps for responding to ELs’ needs in CTE programs.

Considering the barriers that ELs face requires taking an asset-based approach that recognizes the “rich social,

“

Decision makers often lack access to the voices and lived experiences of ELs when considering CTE program improvement, and guidance for collecting and reporting data for ELs at the postsecondary level is exceedingly limited.

”

linguistic, cultural, and academic potential” that these learners bring to the table as emergent bilinguals.⁹ Given that the EL population continues to grow in the United States, developing a robust talent pipeline requires taking steps to promote equitable access to CTE. Employers recognize that global competence and the ability to communicate across cultural and linguistic borders are vital in an increasingly globalized economy.¹⁰



FIVE ACTIONS STATE CTE DIRECTORS CAN TAKE TO SUPPORT ENGLISH LEARNERS



1. Leverage federal legislation to ensure that secondary and postsecondary English Learners have access to high-quality CTE instruction.

The Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) includes provisions centered on increasing access to and success in CTE programs for members of special populations, including ELs. These provisions contain a designated state set-aside for recruiting members of special populations into CTE programs; a stipulation that representatives of special populations are consulted when developing state Perkins V plans; and an accountability requirement that states and eligible recipients make “meaningful progress toward improving the performance” of all learners, including special populations and racial subgroups.¹¹ Further, reducing or eliminating out-of-pocket expenses for special populations is an allowable use of funds under Perkins V. This presents a range of avenues for supporting ELs in CTE.

ELs are also eligible for additional services and supports under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which includes ELs in definitions of both individuals with barriers to employment and individuals who are “basic skills deficient.”¹² These populations are given priority access to career services, training and related supports. WIOA specifically allows local workforce development boards to use up to 10 percent

of funds from the Adult and Dislocated Workers funding stream to provide subsidized transitional jobs to help eligible individuals access work experience and build skills. States can also take advantage of WIOA to fund programs that integrate English language instruction and skill-building. For example, Pennsylvania provided \$135,000 in Digital Literacy and Workforce Development Grants to three community-based organizations offering literacy and English language classes in the state.¹³ These organizations can effectively address ELs’ language and literacy needs to help build skills for future education and employment opportunities.

States, local education agencies (LEAs) and providers should also seek out and apply for other federal funds that can be used to support ELs. For example, a CTE provider in Ohio leveraged grant funds from the Language Instruction for English Learner and Immigrant Students Act (Title III of the Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA]) to provide ELs with culturally responsive career counseling, as well as career exploration opportunities.¹⁴ Title III funding supports a wide range of activities to provide language instruction to ELs and immigrant students.

The Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) includes provisions centered on increasing access to and success in CTE programs for members of special populations, including ELs.

2.

Embrace best practices and technological innovation to meet learners' needs in curriculum and instruction.

CTE classrooms should prioritize implementing instructional strategies and practices that are proven to be effective for ELs, such as integrating academic language and content instruction, facilitating applied and hands-on problem solving, and providing small-group instruction targeted to identified learner needs.¹⁵ Perkins V mentions three frameworks that effectively teach a multitude of learners: “principles of universal design for learning, multi-tier systems of supports, and positive behavioral interventions and support.”¹⁶ These frameworks are especially beneficial for ELs and learners with disabilities.

In addition, technology and online learning enable access to more learners, flexible instruction, adaptive learning opportunities, and streamlined collection of data and measurement of progress. Although technological advances have opened a new range of

possibilities for CTE, developers and CTE instructors should ensure that these learning systems are appropriate for ELs and adapted to their language levels, especially those who are still beginners.

The state of Washington pioneered the Integrated Basic Education Skills and Training (I-BEST) model in CTE. I-BEST uses a team-teaching approach and enhances college and career readiness through simultaneously teaching basic skills (including English language skills) and occupational skills, providing an on-ramp to completion of postsecondary credentials. The program’s team-teaching model facilitates the inclusion of both an English as a Second Language instructor in the classroom and English language teaching components in curricula, making it especially well suited for ELs. Multiple studies have confirmed that the I-BEST model is effective at improving educational outcomes.¹⁷

3.

Invest in wraparound services and targeted support to remove barriers for English Learners and other special populations.

State and local leaders should work together to coordinate community services as much as possible to address barriers to learning and program completion. This coordination may include providing child care; physical and mental health services; and assistance with accessing food, housing and transportation. To cover the initial costs of connecting and scaling service delivery models, states and LEAs can braid state and federal funding streams and take advantage of resources such as federal stimulus funds and grant funding. As previously mentioned, reducing or eliminating expenses for special populations — including “supporting the costs associated with fees, transportation, child care, or mobility challenges for those special populations” — is an allowable use of funds under Perkins V.¹⁸

Additionally, states should ensure that ELs with demonstrated need receive timely targeted support and interventions. Recognizing this need, Georgia created the Coordinated Career Academic Education (CCAIE) and Project Success (PS) support services for members of special populations under Perkins V who are at risk of dropping out of high school, including ELs. Learners participate in CCAIE or PS programs to develop academic and employability skills and receive personalized guidance and support. At the postsecondary level, Georgia technical colleges employ Special Populations Coordinators who directly support these learners to successfully complete training programs and obtain employment.

Supporting the costs associated with fees, transportation, child care, or mobility challenges for those special populations is an allowable use of funds under Perkins V.

4. Leverage data and center learner voice to identify and close equity gaps.

States can take the lead in requiring or incentivizing all institutions of higher education to collect and report data on learners' language proficiency and completion rates. Data on EL enrollment in and completion of CTE programs, as well as program outcomes, should be collected and publicly disseminated. Since tests and examinations can be a major barrier for ELs, states should also collect data on the accessibility of assessments. Virginia developed and disseminated a [catalog of industry credentials](#) that included testing accommodations for ELs.¹⁹ The state directed school boards to create policies requiring principals to notify each EL about the availability of accommodations before taking these tests.

States should also leverage data provided by the Comprehensive Local Needs Assessment (CLNA) process required under Perkins V. CLNAs provide

valuable information on special populations' access to and performance in CTE programs; progress toward implementing equal access to high-quality CTE programs; strategies for overcoming barriers that result in performance gaps; and specific programs and activities that enable members of special populations to meet local levels of performance and build the skills necessary for employment.

The Illinois Community College Board chose to develop a [CLNA template](#) requiring sub-grantees to describe how every component of their plan meets the equity needs of each identified learner group.²⁰ Further, special populations are required stakeholders that must be consulted in the CLNA process, providing a valuable opportunity to elevate the voices of EL representatives and better understand the lived experiences of this population within state CTE programs.

5. Provide professional development and technical assistance to educators, counselors and staff.

All instructional, administrative and support personnel should have an understanding of culturally relevant instruction and advisement, as well as foundational knowledge of language acquisition. Professional development opportunities should focus on developing cultural competence, building knowledge of effective instructional practices for language learners, and training educators and support staff to adapt instruction and provide accommodations for ELs as necessary. Technical assistance should be available to provide extended support for implementation. Creating and expanding professional development programs for CTE personnel is an allowable use of funds under Perkins V. The law specifically includes "providing resources and training to improve instruction for, and provide appropriate accommodations to, special populations" as a possible component of this professional development.²¹ Additionally, Title III of ESSA created the National Professional Development Program to provide grants to institutions of higher education that collaborate with LEAs to provide professional development for educators and staff working with ELs.²²

Some states are already taking the lead in creating targeted learning opportunities for instructors. Arizona's CTE office is collaborating with other units in the state's Department of Education to develop professional development opportunities for CTE instructors centered on implementing strategies to address performance gaps among special populations, including ELs. Oregon created the Educator Advancement Council (EAC) to provide professional learning opportunities and technical assistance for educators (including CTE instructors), centered on culturally responsive teaching for learners from special populations.²³ The EAC also provides resources for recruiting and retaining linguistically diverse educators.

Without Limits: A Shared Vision for the Future of Career Technical Education (CTE Without Limits) calls on state leaders to identify and re-shape the systems and structures that limit learner success. These comprehensive actions and strategies promote equity and access to high-quality CTE programs of study for ELs and ultimately ensure that emergent bilinguals are able to reach their full potential in education and the workforce.



RESOURCES FOR STATE CTE DIRECTORS TO SUPPORT ENGLISH LEARNERS

[Preparing Tomorrow's Workforce: The Global Learning Imperative for Career and Technical Education Programs at Community and Technical Colleges \(Asia Society\)](#)

[CTE Supports English Language Learners \(Association for Career and Technical Education\)](#)

[Older Adolescent and Young Adult English Learners: A Study of Demographics, Policies, and Programs \(U.S. Department of Education Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education\)](#)

[Supporting English Learner Students: Recruitment and Retention Super Strategies \(Illinois Center for Specialized Professional Support\)](#)

[Funding English Learner Education: Making the Most of Policy and Budget Levers \(Migration Policy Institute\)](#)

[Adult Education & Language Learning \(Migration Policy Institute\)](#)

[Resource Library \(National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition\)](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This brief was written as part of the Making Good on the Promise series, a collection of publications that offer resources for state leaders to acknowledge CTE's history and close CTE equity gaps. This brief was made possible by support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Advance CTE recognizes and thanks the following individuals for their support in the development of this publication: Kimberly Green, Executive Director, Advance CTE; Nithya Govindasamy, Senior Advisor, Advance CTE; Allie Pearce, Federal Policy Fellow, Advance CTE; Dr. Julie Sugarman, Migration Policy Institute; Stacy Whitehouse, Senior Associate Communications and State Engagement, Advance CTE.

ENDNOTES

1. Advance CTE. (2021, March). *Without Limits: A shared vision for the future of career technical education*. <https://careertech.org/without-limits>.
2. Every Student Succeeds Act (section 8101 (20)).
3. National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). Table 204.27. English language learner (ELL) students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools, by home language, grade, and selected student characteristics: Selected years, 2008-09 through fall 2018. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_204.27.asp.
4. Perkins Collaborative Resource Network. (n.d.). Perkins data explorer. <https://cte.ed.gov>
5. *Ibid.*
6. Advance CTE. (2020, August). career technical education & earner achievement. https://cte.careertech.org/sites/default/files/documents/fact-sheets/CTE_and_Student_Achievement_2020_0.pdf
7. Institute of Education Sciences & Regional Education Lab Southeast. (n.d.). *Evidence-based instructional strategies for secondary English learner students*. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/infographics/pdf/REL_SE_Evidence_Based_Instructional_Strategies_for_Secondary_English_Learner_Students.pdf
8. Sugarman, J. & Lazarín, M. (2020, September). Educating English learners during the COVID-19 pandemic: Policy ideas for states and school districts. *Migration Policy Institute*. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-english-learners-covid-19-final.pdf>
9. Bergey, R., Movit, M., Simpson Baird, A., & Faria, A. (2018, March 5). *Serving English Language Learners in higher education: Unlocking the potential*. American Institutes for Research (AIR). <https://www.air.org/resource/report/serving-english-language-learners-higher-education-unlocking-potential>
10. Monthey, W., Singmaster, H., Manise, J., & Kreamer, K. B. (2016). *Preparing a globally competent workforce through high-quality career and technical education*. Advance CTE, Asia Society, Association for Career and Technical Education, & Longview Foundation for World Affairs and International Understanding. <https://cte.careertech.org/sites/default/files/GlobalCompetencyCTE-FINAL.pdf>; Woods, Y., Singmaster, H., Manise, J., Kreamer, K.B., Hyslop, A., & Wheeler, W. (2020). *Preparing tomorrow's workforce: The global learning imperative for career and technical education programs at community and technical colleges*. Asia Society, Advance CTE, Association for Career and Technical Education, American Association of Community Colleges & Longview Foundation for World Affairs and International Understanding. <https://asiasociety.org/education/preparing-tomorrows-workforce>
11. Perkins V (section 113(b)(3)(A)(i)(III)(bb)).
12. Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (section 3(5)).
13. Pennsylvania Pressroom. (2022, March 17). Wolf administration awards nearly \$900,000 to organizations building digital-literacy skills among Pennsylvania workers. <https://www.media.pa.gov/pages/Labor-and-Industry-details.aspx?newsid=665>
14. U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2022, March 30). Career and technical education: Perspectives on program strategies and challenges. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-104544>
15. Institute of Education Sciences & Regional Education Lab Southeast. (n.d.). *Evidence-based instructional strategies for secondary English learner students*. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/infographics/pdf/REL_SE_Evidence_Based_Instructional_Strategies_for_Secondary_English_Learner_Students.pdf
16. Perkins V (section 124(b)(5)(B)).

ENDNOTES

17. Zeidenberg, M., Sung-Woo, C., & Jenkins, D. (2010, September). Washington state's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training program (I-BEST): New evidence of effectiveness. *Community College Research Center*. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/i-best-new-evidence.html>; Martinson, K., Sung-Woo, C., Gardiner, K., & Glosser, A. (2018, September). *Washington state's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program in three colleges: Implementation and early impact report*. U.S. Department of Human Services, Administration for Children and Families Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/washington-states-integrated-basic-education-and-skills-training-i-best-program-three>
18. Perkins V (section 135 (b)(5)(S)).
19. Virginia Department of Education. (n.d.). The path to industry certification: High school industry credentialing. https://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/career_technical/path_industry_certification/index.shtml
20. Illinois Community College Board. (n.d.). *What is the Comprehensive Local Needs Assessment?* <http://www2.iccb.org/cte/clna-2/>
21. Perkins V (section 114 (e)(7)(G)(i)).
22. National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. (n.d.). *National Professional Development Program*. <https://ncela.ed.gov/national-professional-development-program>
23. Educator Advancement Council. (n.d.). *About the Educator Advancement Council*. <https://eac.ode.state.or.us/page/about-us>