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EDUCATION

Before the

Committee on Education and the Workforce

on

*“Preparing Today’s Students for Tomorrow’s Jobs: Improving the Carl D. Perkins Career
and Technical Education Act”*

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I. Introduction

Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Miller, and Members of the Committee, thank you for holding this hearing on improving the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (the “Perkins Act”). I appreciate the opportunity to share the Department of Education’s (Department) efforts and the Obama Administration’s vision for improving career and technical education through the reauthorization of the Perkins Act, which was last reauthorized in 2006.

Today, postsecondary education and training are often prerequisites for the jobs of the new economy. Of the 30 fastest-growing occupations, about two-thirds require some form of postsecondary education or training (such as a postsecondary certificate, Registered Apprenticeship, 2-year degree, 4-year degree). With the average earnings of college graduates at a level that is about twice as high as that of workers with only a high school diploma, postsecondary education and training are now the clearest pathways into the middle class and future prosperity, and central to rebuilding our economy and securing a brighter future for all.

To that end, President Obama set a new goal for the country, that by 2020, America would once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. The President also has challenged every American to commit to at least one year of higher education or postsecondary training.

To achieve the President’s goals, we must ensure that every student in our country graduates from high school, prepared for both postsecondary education and a successful career. And we must ensure that more of our nation’s young people and adults can access, and complete postsecondary education and training to earn an industry-recognized certification, credential, or postsecondary degree.

Unfortunately, our education and training systems do not always prepare students for the jobs needed by our businesses. Too many of our employers report that they are having trouble finding workers for skilled jobs in fields such as healthcare, technology, and advanced manufacturing, even in times like today when unemployment is declining but still high. Strengthening all aspects of our education system and creating high-quality job-training opportunities are necessary to further our economic prosperity as a nation and to keep the American promise alive for all of our students.

Transforming career and technical education (CTE) is essential to this process. CTE represents a critical investment in our future. A recent report by the Georgetown Public Policy Institute, The Business Roundtable, and The College Board indicates that high-quality CTE has enormous potential to successfully prepare all Americans — including the disadvantaged — for college and careers. At a time when the U.S. labor market is providing relatively little opportunity for young workers to gain critical experience and on-the-job training, CTE has a vital role to play by providing students with work experience tied to skill-building and academics. In addition, CTE programs at the college level provide opportunities for adults who are entering or reentering the job market to obtain the critical skills in demand by employers.¹ Moreover, the Organization for Economic Development released a report that offered some policy recommendations for tackling the low skills of adults in the U.S. One of the recommendations included support for CTE programs for adults that are linked to work-based learning opportunities as a strategy for helping low-skilled adults to develop basic skills at the same time as employment skills. Linking basic skills attainment to career preparation is a promising route, which would engage low-skilled adults in learning and help them transition into good jobs, which in turn could offer a springboard for further learning and career development.²

To this end, the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 introduced important changes in federal support for CTE, including the provision for “career and technical education programs of study.” These programs combine academic and technical education; connect secondary and postsecondary education; offer opportunities for students to earn college credit while still in high school; and lead to an industry-recognized certification, credential, or postsecondary degree. However, the law required states to offer only two programs of study and their subgrantees such as local educational agencies and community

¹ *The Promise of High-Quality Career and Technical Education: Improving Outcomes for Students, Firms, and the Economy (2013)*, by Harry J. Holzer, Georgetown Public Policy Institute and Georgetown Center on Poverty, Inequality, and Public Policy; Dane Linn, The Business Roundtable; and Wanda Monthey, The College Board. <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/30470445/The%20Promise%20of%20High-Quality%20Career%20and%20Technical%20Education.pdf>

² OECD (2013), *Time for the U.S. to Reskill?: What the Survey of Adult Skills Says*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264204904-en>

colleges to offer only one program of study—far short of the number of such programs that would be needed to meet our nation’s demand for a strong, competitive workforce.

II. Preparing for Perkins Reauthorization

As the end of the current authorization of the Perkins Act approached, the Department undertook a public consultation process to examine how to transform career and technical education. Between Fall 2009 and Spring 2011, OVAE hosted over 30 community conversations with upwards of 800 participants around the country. Representatives of national organizations and associations representing the full range of student populations—from economically disadvantaged students and English learners to students in foster care and those seeking careers in nontraditional fields – shared their thoughts for improving CTE.

We heard from individuals both inside and outside the traditional CTE constituency, including from educators, parents, and, most importantly, students themselves. There were four major themes that emerged from these conversations:

1. Ensuring that every student is not only college-ready, but also career ready. Participants emphasized that being “career ready” is not synonymous with being “college ready,” although they share many similarities with regard to academic preparedness, particularly reading and math proficiency. To ensure “career readiness,” participants stressed the need for academic, career, and personal counseling, as well as opportunities for students to take part in work-based learning and to otherwise lead projects, solve problems, and build portfolios. Individuals also pointed out the need to expose all students to career exploration early in their school experience, instead of waiting until the latter part of high school. Finally, and perhaps the most pervasive theme throughout the conversations, individuals stressed the need to assess and improve students’ academic preparation to eliminate the need for remedial education at the postsecondary level. To this end, participants talked about the need for college placement testing in high school, tutoring, mentoring, and counseling.

2. Significantly expanding opportunities for students to participate in career pathways. Participants emphasized the need to create seamless transitions for students from high school to postsecondary education by updating and aligning standards, curriculum, and instruction, as well as implementing statewide articulation agreements. Participants spoke about the need for all programs to offer dual enrollment and stackable credentials—that this should be the norm, not the exception. Participants stressed the need to align the Perkins Act, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Higher Education Act, the Workforce Investment Act, and other relevant legislation to create seamless pathways for students. A student should be able to enter a career pathway, whether straight from high school, from an adult education program, or after many years in the workforce to upgrade skills or change career fields. Finally,

participants spoke about the need to improve teacher training and effectiveness to effectively implement career pathways.

3. Fostering more effective partnerships. Participants emphasized the need for strong K-20 partnerships—across secondary and postsecondary institutions; with business and industry; across local, state, and federal agencies; and with community-based organizations.

4. Improving CTE data and accountability systems. Over and over, participants stressed the need for uniform, cross-sector longitudinal data that would enable us to tell the CTE story. Participants also spoke of the need to demonstrate the “return on investment” to federal and state governments for CTE programs. Participants talked about the need to clarify the definitions of “performance measures” and “student participation” and emphasized the difficulty in tracking student information for postsecondary enrollment and employment. Many participants identified that employment is the most important measure for postsecondary CTE and that Unemployment Insurance wage records should be more systematically used in this regard. Finally, participants unanimously agreed that State and local CTE staff must be engaged in their State’s effort to design new longitudinal data systems.

The common thread across all of this feedback from participants is that every CTE student must be “college and career ready.” The Perkins Act is the primary tool that the federal government has to achieve this vision.

III. The Obama Administration’s Blueprint for Reforming and Strengthening Perkins

In April 2012, Secretary Duncan released *Investing in America’s Future: A Blueprint for Transforming Career and Technical Education*. The Blueprint lays out the Administration’s four key objectives and nine supporting reforms to usher in a new era of rigorous, relevant, and results-driven CTE. The four core principles are: effective alignment; strong collaborations; meaningful accountability; and increased emphasis on innovation. Each of the principles gives rise to specific reforms, many of which are already being considered and discussed in the field. I am pleased to share the principles and reforms with you as follows:

Effective Alignment. The first principle of reform seeks to ensure effective alignment between CTE and labor market needs to equip students with the skills they need for in-demand jobs within high-growth industry sectors. Our proposed reforms will provide States with clearer guidance on establishing high-quality programs and empower States to strengthen their work with their workforce and economic development agencies to identify the occupations and sectors on which CTE programs should focus. Our goal is to ensure that CTE Federal dollars are invested in preparing students for in-demand jobs within high-growth industry sectors.

Strong Collaborations. The second principle of reform emphasizes the importance of building and maintaining strong collaborations among secondary and postsecondary institutions, employers, industry partners, labor organizations, and workforce systems to improve the quality of CTE programs and providing a seamless experience to participants. Our reforms seek to ensure that Perkins funding is awarded to consortia among secondary and postsecondary institutions and their partners. In addition, we propose that States use a private sector matching contribution to strengthen the participation of employers, industry, and labor partners in CTE program design and implementation.

Meaningful Accountability: A hallmark of our Administration’s education reforms has been to re-design our education system to deliver the opportunity needed for every student to master college- and career-ready standards, and prepare him or her to graduate ready for college and a successful career. Our charge in the reauthorization of the Perkins Act is to dramatically improve the alignment of our federal investments in career and technical education programs to better support the mastery of rigorous college and career-ready standards.

A key step toward that goal is to establish meaningful accountability for improving academic outcomes and building technical and employability skills in CTE programs. Our reforms seek to provide States increased autonomy to select and fund high-quality programs that are responsive to regional labor-market needs. Thus, we are proposing within-State competitions to replace the current system under which funds are allocated by formula to local entities to ensure that Perkins funding supports only high-quality CTE programs. Our proposal, which reflects a commitment to promoting equity and quality in all CTE programs, includes several provisions to ensure that the competition will have no adverse impact on access for students, including those with disabilities, and those who live in rural communities, because the Administration believes that all students, regardless of their background, should have access to and be able to participate and complete high-quality CTE programs. Also, we are proposing that States establish common definitions and clear metrics for performance to create high-quality data systems that enable meaningful comparisons and identification of equity gaps. In addition, our accountability reforms include ways to reward local recipients that exceed their performance targets. These reforms are aimed at improving student outcomes and incentivizing the closure of equity gaps in CTE programs.

Increased Emphasis on Innovation: Lastly, our fourth principle for reform places more emphasis on innovation, by promoting innovative and effective CTE programs and systemic reforms in State policies and practices that will support the implementation of effective CTE practices at the local level. In line with this effort, we are proposing a competitive CTE Innovation and Transformation Fund (CTE Innovative Fund) —administered by the Department—to incentivize innovation at the local level and support system reform at the

State level. The need for innovation is great, and we've already started to see many communities taking the lead to create space for developing new ideas.

We believe the Blueprint, especially its provisions for high-quality CTE programs, can serve as a road map for transforming CTE across the country. In fact, through projects we are undertaking with support from CTE National Programs funding we are already working with eleven States as they begin the transformation process.

Career and technical education is central to rebuilding our economy and securing a brighter future for our nation. Our federal investment in CTE must be dramatically reshaped to fulfill its potential to prepare all students, regardless of their background or circumstances, for further education and cutting-edge careers. We look forward to working with Congress on the rewrite of the Perkins Act. Again, thank you for this opportunity to testify, and I am happy to answer your questions.