Testimony of Doug Major

Superintendent and CEO

Meridian Technology Center

House Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education

Improving Career and Technical Education to Help Students Succeed in the Workforce

October 27, 2015

Thank you Chairman Rokita, Ranking Member Fudge, and all the members of the committee for the invitation to be with you today to testify on behalf of Meridian Technology Center and career and technical education (CTE)—a profession that I am very passionate about. My passion stems from my personal experiences as a career and technical education student, teacher, and now an administrator. Throughout the years, I have had the opportunity to witness the dramatic positive effects that CTE has on literally thousands of students.

Today I am representing Meridian Technology Center in north-central Oklahoma, where I currently serve as the Superintendent of Meridian Technology Center. I am also a former national President of the Association for Career and Technical Education.

Meridian Technology Center is a publicly funded, "shared time" CTE school, which means high school students are on our campus for half the day and at their home high school for half the day. In 1973, the citizens of six local P-12 school districts voted to collectively provide their students with a broad array of CTE classes as a part their high school experiences. Since that time, four additional schools have made that election. As a result, high school students, as well as adults, from those districts have the opportunity to select from more than 70 career majors that help prepare them for careers and further studies. We offer opportunities in health, trade and industry, personal services, information technology, and STEM-related curriculum to a diverse range of students. Our full-time equivalent enrollment last year was 841 students, of which 60 percent were secondary and 40 percent were postsecondary.

This morning, I would like to take a few minutes to highlight some of the hallmarks of our high-quality CTE programs.

First, our curriculum is based upon recognized industry standards and is guided by employers, trade association representatives, and community leaders working with our public school teachers. All of our programs have active business advisory committees, with more than 294 individuals involved. The role of our advisory committee members is not merely to attend one or two meetings a year, but to give us in-depth input on curriculum, as well as to commit to helping our students throughout the year by providing job shadowing opportunities and on-the-job training placements, serving as judges in our competitive events, and helping to prepare our students for job search and placement.

In addition to local councils, Meridian is involved in several state-wide, industry sector-specific initiatives to ensure that we are meeting the workforce education needs not only of the local area but for the state and the nation. For example, we participate in an aerospace consortium in which multiple technology centers contract with an individual to serve as a liaison between our local schools and aerospace employers in the state. This ensures that our program offerings are meeting the needs of employers and students beyond our geographic boundaries.

Second, we have high expectations for our students to demonstrate the technical, academic and employability skills and knowledge they need for future success. Our graduation requirements stipulate that all students must earn a "C" or better in each course, and achieve appropriate scores on tests of applied mathematics, reading for information and locating information that research shows are predictors of success in their chosen career fields. We use some of our Perkins funds to assist students who struggle in their academic or technical curriculum to become more successful, and work hard to provide equitable access to our programs for all our students. For example, to ensure new Hispanic students can meet our high expectations, we added a bilingual teaching assistant to our staff so students had the extra help they need in order to be successful.

We also provide the opportunity and encouragement for students to earn two additional endorsements: "Citizenship Ready" and "Postsecondary Ready." A common concern of employers today is that applicants and new hires don't possess the work ethic or other skills that allow them to be successful employees. These skills are often called "soft" skills—but there is nothing really soft about them, as they are critical to our students' success. Our "citizenship ready" efforts aim to expose students to those traits that employers want in addition to technical skills. As a part of these efforts, we offer career and technical students organizations for all students to participate in. Through these organizations, our students have the opportunity to engage in leadership seminars, community service activities, and competitive events. Last year, we had representatives of each of our CTSOs who won state competitions, and we sent 36 of our students to national events, providing opportunities for them to network with other leaders from around the country and apply their skills in real-world situations.

We also know that our students will need to continue to learn. To that end, they need to leave our school ready for whatever postsecondary learning opportunity that their chosen career field requires. For us, this means meeting the minimum requirements for entry into a two- or four-year degree program regardless of whether that is their immediate plan or not. Experience tells us that many students come to our school not planning to continue their education beyond high school, but, as they learn more about the requirements of their chosen field, decide college may be for them.

Our success is well documented. Based upon follow-up conducted with graduates, our average "positive placement rate" is 93 percent. This consists of students who are employed directly after graduation, who are engaged in military careers and/or are continuing their education. Many of these students, 51 percent, are pursuing a postsecondary degree pathway.

Third, we focus on career exploration opportunities and career guidance and counseling. As I mentioned, many of our students move through the education system without a plan for

their futures. We use some of our Perkins funds for career exploration and guidance to ensure that all our students, even prior to their enrollment at Meridian Technology Center, have access to information that will help them make smart career decisions. An area that I would like to see expanded is the use of Perkins Funds earlier in the educational cycle for more career exploration. Locally, we have had the ability to co-sponsor three "Gateway to Technology" programs in our two largest partner school districts. In this relationship, middle school and junior high students are afforded the opportunity to participate in a curriculum that helps them connect academics and careers. Through project-based curriculum, they explore different industry sectors, identifying their strengths and career interests. This allows them to begin focusing their course-taking patterns toward those options earlier in their education.

In addition, for the past four years, we have applied for and received a special allocation of Perkins funds to operate a program that we call GirlTech. This is coordinated by our instructional directors and allows our female students to hear from and interact with women who have gone into and been successful in nontraditional career fields. We have also used some of the funds to put on a summer camp for girls designed to help them learn more about STEM programs, specifically our pre-engineering curriculum.

Fourth, our coursework is relevant to students and for many, the opportunity to participate in CTE courses as a high school student is the "hook" that keeps them in school. Because our courses are typically project-based, hands-on, and address real-world problems, it is easy for students to find a purpose in the curriculum. For example, a student enrolled in our Pre-Engineering career major while in high school can easily see how the curriculum will help them when they advance to a four-year college engineering program. Or, for the student who is interested in becoming an Automotive Technician, the opportunity to learn in an environment that resembles a dealership service facility lets them see their future. Or maybe it is the student who aspires to be a labor and delivery nurse that is able to participate in clinical rotations at their local hospital while still in high school, which solidifies their career choice and also helps them to see the importance of the science, English, and mathematics courses they are taking while enrolled in their CTE program. For the vast majority of students, the opportunity to participate in applied learning provides the engagement and motivation for success.

Research has documented and I've seen firsthand on my campus two direct benefits of this applied learning: first, the role that CTE plays in lowering the dropout rate and, second, a higher rate of success for CTE students in academic courses. For the past three years, the high school graduation rate of students participating in programs at Meridian Technology Center was 98.32 percent while the reported graduation rate from our partner sending schools was lower, ranging from 75.5 to 95 percent. We believe this is due to the fact that when students are using education to prepare for their defined future, they are more engaged.

Finally, we work to ensure there are clearly defined pathways for our students, or Programs of Study, as they are defined in Perkins, from secondary to postsecondary education. Meridian Technology Center works with Northern Oklahoma College and the Oklahoma State University Institute of Technology, both degree-granting institutions, to identify programs of study that align our curriculum with theirs. Students who graduate from Meridian have the opportunity to receive "Prior Learning Credit" upon completion of 12 hours of study at

those institutions. For many students, this means that they can earn up to half of the credits that they need for a two-year degree while still in high school.

A recent success story related to our pathways involves a student, Justin, who attended our pre-engineering academy and was very successful. Upon completing the program, he enrolled in a 4-year degree program at Oklahoma State but, although he was doing well, decided to take a different route to pursue his postsecondary education and joined the Navy. He was back on our campus this past week to participate in our program's advisory committee and took the opportunity to visit with our current students. During that presentation he talked about how much better prepared he was for his college curriculum because of his experience in Meridian's program. He also talked about the difference he could see between the students who had participated in a pre-engineering program and those who hadn't. In terms of his Navy career, he has been able to use the knowledge he learned at Meridian to more quickly advance through their training program. He feels that his experience has put him way ahead of others who enlisted at the same time he did. Through the military, he will be able to continue his postsecondary education without the costs associated with traditional college.

The second organization I am representing today is the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE). It is the largest member-driven association in the country dedicated to CTE and a leader in our national conversation on education. ACTE provides resources that coordinate the content and quality of programs across the United States. By providing curriculum resources, leadership development programs, and world-class professional development opportunities to its members, ACTE plays an instrumental role in ensuring that students across the country have access to high-quality CTE.

Through my involvement in ACTE, I have had the opportunity to visit numerous other states and have discovered that my school, and those like it in Oklahoma, are not unique—in fact, high-quality CTE programs are prevalent across this country and have success rates similar to ours.

What is hard for me to understand, however, is why all students aren't given the opportunity to learn in a way that meets their needs—in an applied, hands-on learning environment. Why is this the case?

We must shine a spotlight on these high-quality CTE programs to make sure all students have such opportunities. At the federal level, the reauthorization of Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act is Congress's opportunity to ensure that these learning experiences are available to every student nationwide. As Congress considers reauthorization, I would like to encourage emphasis on the high-quality elements that have made Meridian a success, including business engagement, a rigorous and relevant curriculum, career exploration for students early in their studies, and true programs of study that link secondary and postsecondary education, but in a way that allows local flexibility to meet the needs of their students and their local economic environment.

We also need more resources to support more students. CTE classrooms must be equipped with specialized equipment that gives students the opportunity to learn through projects which involve high-tech machinery aligned to employer needs, and consumable materials. When funds

allocated to CTE are limited or cut, schools often elect to reduce the number of CTE programs offered—a move that I believe is counter to student success. Along these lines, I strongly encourage you to maintain the Perkins Basic State Grant as a formula grant to states and local recipients, as any consideration of funding based upon competitive grants or a required industry match will eliminate opportunities for many students, particularly those in rural areas.

I believe the benefits of CTE are largely misunderstood in terms of its place in the overall education landscape; particularly that of education reform—where CTE should be seen as the new norm and not just a separate model. Too often, CTE is viewed as the place for students to go—both school-aged and adults—after they have been failed by the education system. Instead, CTE should be viewed as a way to engage students in rigorous academic studies AND prepare them for postsecondary success; whether that takes them directly into a career or further study. CTE should be recognized as an integral part of a robust education system, supported by Perkins funds that are available to all schools that are willing to embrace quality.

We must place more emphasis upon career guidance, helping students take focused sequences of coursework related to a preliminary career goal, and assisting them in their transition from school into a career or further study. This echoes the recent shift toward broadening the term "postsecondary education" to be more inclusive of educational opportunities post-high school that include things such as on-the-the-job training, internships, apprenticeships, and advanced technical studies in addition to the traditional four-year college experience.

In closing, I am sure that by my remarks you know that I hold a strong belief that CTE is not only highly effective but it is the "hook" that keeps many students in school through high school completion and transitions them to postsecondary programs of study or careers that interest them and achieve their goals. I have attached some additional recommendations for Perkins reauthorization from the Association for Career and Technical Education and the National Association of State Directors of CTE Consortium for the record.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony, and I look forward to your questions.

Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act
Reauthorization Recommendations

Federal education policy should not only assist states, schools and colleges in meeting current needs but also seek to support systems as they innovate in response to future or anticipated needs. The National Assessment of Career and Technical Education has long-cautioned federal policymakers that the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins) has indeed been a reflection of current needs, as it has evolved since the Smith-Hughes Act, but in that evolution it has shed few of its mandates, requirements, or uses of funds. To that end, the law has become a reflection of nearly a century's worth of education and workforce demands, diluting its focus, effectiveness and ability to drive innovation.

To meet the needs of the future economy, NASDCTEc and ACTE chose to begin our process for determining Perkins priorities by taking a step back, assessing what the needs of the field are or will be and considering what role the federal investment in CTE should have as compared to state and local investments. To that end, this document proposes a set of recommendations and aligned legislative language that will bring clarity by streamlining the Perkins Act to focus on increasing access to high-quality CTE programs of study that are responsive to economic priorities. To accomplish this goal, it was necessary to craft new language that would in certain places replace entire sections of the current statute, while in other places, simply adapt existing language.

Our recommendations are based upon a set of design principles:

- **We believe the law should focus on increasing equitable access to high-quality CTE programs that are responsive to economic priorities.**
  To accomplish this, we propose that the federal investment focus on the design and delivery of quality CTE programs of study that ensure a spectrum of career exploration through career preparation opportunities for all students, regardless of their geographic location, race, gender, disability status, socioeconomic background, or any other population characteristic.

- **We believe more coordination is needed between planning, spending and accountability.**
  To accomplish this, we drafted new state and local plan language adding a needs assessment, significantly reduced and refocused uses of funds, and integrated requirements to ensure decisions and investments are guided by data.

- **We believe the law should continue to prioritize, and in fact should seek, to strengthen connections between secondary and postsecondary education.**
  To accomplish this, we propose that all programs funded by the Act meet a more specific "CTE Program of Study" definition, linking secondary and postsecondary education and leading to meaningful credentials; as well as a state-level focus on systems alignment.

- **We believe that the law should emphasize increased engagement with business and industry in the design and implementation of programs**.
  To accomplish this, we propose more robust stakeholder involvement in local planning and program delivery and required alignment of programs to labor market demands.

- **We believe the law should be streamlined to make it clearer and more consistent by ending duplication between and within sections.**
  To accomplish this, we have significantly streamlined the law to focus on outcomes while giving states and local communities flexibility in how best to meet their state and/or local community's unique needs, as well as included significant WIOA alignment provisions.

This set of recommendations is informed by and reflective of research, builds upon the positive momentum begun under Perkins IV and focuses on what states, schools and colleges know works, while also ensuring currency and innovation of programs, expanding stakeholder engagement and a setting a high bar for quality. Our goal is that

through this proposal CTE can help more students find success and to ensure country's economic strength and prosperity. For specific legislative language, please contact Alisha Hyslop, ACTE's director of public policy, at ahyslop@acteonline.org, or Steve Voytek, NASDCTEc's government relations manager, at svoytek@careertech.org.