Executive Summary

The National Assessment of Career and Technical Education (NACTE) is charged with evaluating the implementation and outcomes of the *Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006* (Perkins IV). As part of Perkins IV, the U.S. Secretary of Education commissioned an Independent Advisory Panel (IAP) to provide guidance on NACTE and to prepare an independent report. This document constitutes the IAP’s report.

Having followed the progress of the NACTE over five years, the IAP concludes that career and technical education (CTE) can play an important role in preparing young persons for college and careers, a key national goal of the U.S. education system. However, the IAP has identified three major challenges that must be addressed if CTE is to maximize its contributions, and reauthorization of the *Perkins Act* presents a timely opportunity to enact these improvements.

1. **Integrate Career and Technical Education with Broader Education Reform**

   **Challenge**

   CTE in the United States has developed largely independently of broader education reforms. Recent decades have witnessed the emergence of innovative forms of CTE, but these advances are vulnerable because they are not regarded as essential to the major goals of U.S. education. CTE risks being left out of far-reaching reforms such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

   **Recommendations**

   - Eliminate bureaucratic and financial incentives for maintaining CTE as a silo of isolated activities. Instead, promote integration of CTE activities within mainstream education reforms.
   - Develop expectations for the outcomes of CTE that are related to the broader college- and career-ready agenda and fold them into primary accountability systems for schools, districts, and states.

2. **Develop Greater Coherence between Secondary and Postsecondary Career and Technical Education**

   **Challenge**

   *Perkins IV* nonregulatory guidance has improved the coherence of CTE programs of study that span secondary and postsecondary levels. However, many gaps remain, particularly in the area of performance metrics that fail to connect secondary and postsecondary program offerings.

   **Recommendations**

   - Strengthen requirements for articulation agreements (i.e., guaranteed transfer processes) between secondary and postsecondary institutions as integral to programs of study.
• Promote alignment and coordination across related federal programs—including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Perkins Act, and the Workforce Investment Act—to strengthen opportunities for successful transitions within career pathways.

• Provide incentives for the use of industry credentials to measure technical achievement and to create a system of stackable credentials (i.e., a sequence of earned credentials) that facilitate student progression in a career pathway.

• Allow relevant postsecondary nondegree courses to be recognized in a program of study.

3. Gather Robust, Actionable Information about the Implementation and Outcomes of Career and Technical Education

Challenge

Consistent and timely data are lacking for a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation and outcomes of CTE. Part of the problem is that the NACTE begins at the same time as the Perkins Act is reauthorized, which means that the NACTE begins before implementation occurs and ends before the outcomes of the Perkins Act can emerge. Yet another major challenge is that, with few exceptions, longitudinal data at the individual student level are not available to enable evaluators to assess CTE effects on labor market outcomes.

Recommendations

• Support states in their efforts to build systems that link administrative data sets, and facilitate research use of these data to answer important CTE-related questions.

• Provide clearer definitions of CTE outcomes, and set standards for the validity and reliability of participation and outcome measures.

• Encourage states to develop a small number of actionable indicators to monitor CTE implementation as well as progress toward college and career readiness and occupational goals.

• Shift the timing of the national assessment to begin after federal guidance has been put into place and to continue beyond the legislative timeline so as to allow assessment of outcomes as well as implementation.

Conclusions

Continued federal investment in CTE is warranted, but today’s CTE must make itself part of the repositioning of the broader landscape of K–12 and postsecondary education for the 21st century. It must embrace the new Common Core State Standards to support student academic achievement as well as students’ long-term success. CTE must reposition itself not just as a vocational alternative to college prep but as a pathway into postsecondary programs that links degrees and credentials to occupations.

CTE is part of the long-term solution to America’s economic recovery and sustained prominence as the world’s largest economy. CTE can take a leadership role in preparing students for meaningful, sustainable careers in a globally competitive 21st-century workforce that will need higher and more applied levels of science, math, communications, and digital skills.