

THE ASSOCIATION FOR CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION



# REINVENTING

THE AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

A POSITION PAPER

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THE AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

STRENGTHENING A NEW VISION FOR  
THE AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL  
THROUGH THE EXPERIENCES AND RESOURCES  
OF CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b> .....	1
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	4
<b>PART 1. UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE AND CURRENT EFFORTS IN HIGH SCHOOL REDESIGN</b> .....	5
Multiple Challenges: Skills, Education and Competition.....	5
The Current Performance of U.S. High Schools.....	5
Making an Honest Appraisal .....	5
The Emerging Agenda for High School Redesign.....	6
<b>PART 2. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE</b> .....	8
1. Career and College Readiness.....	8
2. Personalization in Planning and Decision-making.....	10
3. Personalization in Relationships .....	12
4. How Academic Content is Taught.....	13
5. Core Curriculum in an Interest-based Context.....	15
6. High Quality Teaching in all Content Areas .....	18
7. Re-entry and Completion.....	19
8. Connection of CTE and High School Redesign Efforts.....	20
9. Beyond “Seat-Time” and Narrowly Defined Knowledge and Skills.....	22
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	24
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	25
<b>ENDNOTES</b> .....	26

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE ASSOCIATION FOR Career and Technical Education (ACTE), on behalf of career and technical education (CTE) professionals in the United States, advocates for clearly focusing American high schools on the goal of preparing EVERY student for full participation in a spectrum of college opportunities, meaningful work, career advancement, and active citizenship. We call upon leaders to make needed changes in school culture, instructional strategies and organizational priorities that will support this new purpose.

CTE is a major enterprise within the United States' P-16 education system. More than 95 percent of high school students take at least one CTE course during their high school career, and about one third of high school students take a concentration of three or more related CTE courses before they graduate. In addition to CTE courses offered within most of the nation's more than 16,000 typical high schools, there are approximately 1,000 regional career technology centers that offer more targeted and technology-intensive CTE programs preparing students, both young people and adults, for further education, and in some cases, for direct entry into the workforce. Further, a large number of high school reform strategies and new small schools employ interest-based programs, including CTE, as a way to increase student motivation and engagement.

Given the magnitude of the CTE enterprise, it is vital that CTE educators and leaders participate in the important discussion about how to redesign American high schools for the needs of the 21st century and bring CTE's resources and areas of expertise to that discussion.

In our discussions about high school redesign, we suggest a number of strengths and resources CTE can bring to the table for overall high school improvement. To provide clarity for the role of CTE, we suggest a three-fold purpose of career and technical education at the secondary school level. CTE should:

- **Support students in the acquisition of rigorous core knowledge, skills, habits and attitudes** needed for success in postsecondary education and the high-skilled workplace;
- **Engage students in specific career-related learning experiences that equip them to make well-informed decisions** about further education and training and employment opportunities; and,
- **Prepare students who may choose to enter the workforce directly after high school** with levels of skill and knowledge in a particular career area that will be valued in the marketplace.

In light of the current and future challenges facing our youth, the members of ACTE believe a new working model for high school is long overdue. We make the following recommendations to help guide the reinvention of the American high school:

### **RECOMMENDATION 1.** **Establish a Clear System Goal of Career and College Readiness for All Students**

All students need a strong arsenal of reading, comprehension, reasoning, problem-solving and personal skills to be ready for the world of meaningful postsecondary education and training as well as entry into the high-skilled workplace. Standards should be aligned to the demands of career and college readiness, and all students should be challenged to enroll in a rigorous college and career readiness curriculum. Extra help, including structured transition services, should be provided to support this curriculum, and opportunities for additional advancement across broad areas should be provided. Traditional academic and CTE teachers must share the goal of preparing students for both further education and careers.

### **RECOMMENDATION 2.** **Create a Positive School Culture that Stresses Personalization in Planning and Decision-making**

At a minimum, every student should be led through a process of academic and career awareness, exploration, and planning. This should include learning about the economy and career options, self-assessment for areas of interest; deeper exploration of how personal interests relate to career opportunities and gaining education and career decision-making skills; and knowledge and understanding of local, state, and national educational, occupational, and labor market opportunities, needs, and trends. Policies must be in place to ensure that ca-

reer development and postsecondary planning are core activities within the high school as part of a comprehensive guidance program. Each student, and his or her parents/guardians, should develop an individualized plan for graduation and beyond that will guide the high school experience.

### **RECOMMENDATION 3. Create a Positive School Culture that Stresses Personalization in Relationships**

Schools remain one of the best opportunities for connecting youth and adults in positive ways, giving students the sense that they are valued and cared for, and reinforcing the message that whether they succeed or fail actually matters to someone. A system goal must be to help every youth become involved in structured activity that strengthens positive relationships with peers and adults and encourages the student's sense of confidence and belonging in school. These activities could include advisory periods, smaller learning communities, co-curricular interest-based activities—such as career and technical student organizations (CTSOs)—or other activities that provide a positive adult relationship.

### **RECOMMENDATION 4. Dramatically Improve How and Where Academic Content is Taught**

Teachers and researchers must work together to identify strategies that show promise for helping all students attain proficiency in high-level courses. As each state refines and clarifies its standards for career and college readiness, it should recognize that “academic” skills can be acquired in a variety of settings, not just the traditional academic classroom. The achievement problem is not just one of low-level course-taking; it is also related to unfocused curriculum and instructional methods that are not reaching all students. Integration of academic competencies into CTE curricula and of real-world content and applied methods and examples into traditional academic classes can raise student achievement levels and increase understanding of rigorous concepts. Flexibility must be in place for delivering academic content across the curriculum.

### **RECOMMENDATION 5. Create Incentives for Students to Pursue the Core Curriculum in an Interest-based Context**

From across the school reform spectrum, there is ample evidence that connecting rigorous academic expectations with the relevance of an interest-based curriculum can help connect students to learning in powerful ways. Interest-based areas can be organized around various broad themes, such as the fine arts, or more specific themes like biotechnology, pre-engineering, hospitality, and finance. There must be resources and policies in place to support the development, implementation, and review of these interest-based areas.

### **RECOMMENDATION 6. Support High Quality Teaching in all Content Areas**

The No Child Left Behind Act creates mechanisms for assuring that every teacher in the academic core subjects is highly qualified, meaning the teacher holds a bachelor's degree or higher, grasps content at a deep level and can teach that content effectively. The crux of these standards, deep knowledge of content and skills in effective teaching methods, should apply to CTE teachers as well, including those entering the teaching profession through traditional teacher education programs and those transitioning into teaching from business and industry through alternative certification programs. CTE teachers should be able to demonstrate content mastery through a method appropriate to their areas of expertise, utilizing industry-based credentials or assessments aligned with career clusters where available. An expanded focus must be placed on professional development for all teachers in academic and technical integration and contextual teaching strategies.

### **RECOMMENDATION 7. Offer Flexible Learning Opportunities to Encourage Re-entry and Completion**

True quality high school reform must include effective strategies to re-engage and reconnect young people who have failed or are in danger of failing to complete high school. These young people have been failed by the current high school system. With a national graduation rate of approximately 71 percent, millions of young people are out of school and grossly ill-equipped to compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce and economy. To re-

form high school without a strategy to re-engage these young people who have already dropped out would be to abandon them to, and accept the social costs associated with, bleak futures marked by reduced earning potential, poverty, crime, drug abuse, and early pregnancy. High schools must provide a continuum of flexible interest-based learning opportunities that utilize effective teaching methodologies and are responsive to students' varied needs and life circumstances.

### **RECOMMENDATION 8. Create System Incentives and Supports for Connection of CTE and High School Redesign Efforts**

In many states and school districts, CTE leaders are providing the major impetus and resources for rethinking the instructional and organizational design of the traditional high school. However, in some locales, superintendents, school leaders and school reform advocates are reportedly overlooking the role of CTE in providing meaning, relevance, and experience in deeply contextualized learning of subject matter. This oversight will limit the effectiveness and impact of the high school redesign agenda. Policymakers at the federal, state and local levels should see academic and interest-based courses as complementary of one another, and create initiatives that support rich, interest-based programs to be built around a core of rigorous academic expectations.

### **RECOMMENDATION 9. Move Beyond “Seat-Time” and Narrowly Defined Knowledge and Skills**

U.S. high schools operate on a well-established set of expectations for size, time of day and seasons of the year that programs and classes are offered, how instructional material is delivered and what constitutes success in terms of the students' knowledge and skills. In order for our education system to adopt the new goal of getting every student ready for careers and college, we suggest a shift in focus to the underlying principles for what students learn and how we teach it, including what knowledge and skills are measured, how students are asked to demonstrate their knowledge and skills and how school is offered for all young people, particularly for the many students who are currently disengaged and leaving, or have already left, the traditional high school.

Clearly, we believe that CTE courses and instructional

methodologies have a place in the high school environment, and that there should not be an artificial split between academic coursework and vocational studies, nor should exposure to CTE-type coursework be delayed until late in high school or college. Rather, we believe that all coursework, with clearly articulated standards and expectations, can help build within students the mix of skills, aptitudes and attitudes they will need for success after high school.

Designing American high schools around the needs of students in the present and the future requires honesty, courage, and a willingness to change familiar structures and practices in the best interests of our young people. Real change, made for the right reasons and toward the right mission, will yield dramatically better results and a more hopeful future for America's young people and for our national economic and cultural well-being.