



Focus Group Discussion Guide

for students, parents and school counselors

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ADVANCE CTE
State Leaders Connecting Learning to Work

Moderator Guide

Agenda (90 minutes)

Welcome and Introductions

- a. Ice breaker

Unaided perceptions/experiences of CTE

- Introduction to CTE/aided perceptions (what resonates, what doesn't)
- Message testing (messages; proof points or statements that support the message)
- Exploration of the decision making process and communication channels
- Terminology and language

Objectives:

- Determine current perceptions of CTE
- Determine effective messages about CTE
- Explore effective communication channels
- Determine most effective terminology and language

Location	Audience	Group #
City, State Date		1
		2
		3
		4

**6-8 participants per group; up to 2 hours each*

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Welcome, Introductions and Ice Breaker (20 minutes)

Moderator: Thank you for participating in this focus group on student, counselor and parent perceptions of Career Technology Education or CTE.

Introduction

Provide logistics (e.g. food/drink allowed, how the focus group will run, bathroom breaks, how long it will take, etc.) As people are introducing themselves, ask them to respond the following questions:

Parents

- Who lives in your household
- How many kids reside there?
- How old are the children?
- What school do they attend?
- What is their CTE program of study or courses?
- What do you do during the day? (Probe on type of work if employed)
- Reminder to focus on your child in __-__th grade
- What social media platforms do you use? Which do you prefer or use the most?

Students

- How old are you?
- What is your current grade level?
- What school do you attend? (For current students: ask where they receive CTE coursework.)
- What is your favorite subject or class?
- What is your favorite TV show?
- What social media platforms do you use? Which do you use or like the most?

School Counselor

- How many students do you counsel? (counselor/student ratio)
- What made you decide to go into education as a career and did anyone influence your decision?
- What social media do you use? Which do you prefer or use the most?
- How do you help students identify the courses and programs that they take in high school?

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Ice Breaker (10 minutes)

Pre-Event Assignment for Participants:

Ask participants **beforehand** to collect up to three objects and/or images that describe what life after high school looks like for themselves (if a student), their child (if a parent) or their students (if a school counselor). These can be photographs, pictures torn out of magazines, newspaper clippings, images printed from the web, hand drawings, etc.

Moderator: Ask participants to share what they brought in and be sure the materials are visible for the entire room to view.

1. Tell me about one of your pictures.
2. Why did you select this image or item?
 - a. Probe on who, what, when, where, why
3. What does this picture mean to you? What is the feeling or idea it conveys to you?
4. How does this picture express your thoughts and feelings about life after high school for yourself/your child/student?
5. What experiences have you had/has your child/student had that make you feel that way?

Moderator: Recap and record the elements/themes so everyone can see them. Ask what are some of the common ideas we heard? Is there anything missing?

Students

1. How are the classes that you are taking now preparing you for what you want to do after high school?
2. What will help you achieve your goals and what additional training or further education do you need to reach them?
3. What have been the highlights/positives about your learning experience?
4. What elements have been challenging or frustrating?

School Counselors:

1. How are you helping students align the courses they are taking now to their post graduation plans?
2. What concerns do you have about helping students accomplish their future goals?
3. What additional supports and systems do you need?
4. In helping to guide students through their educational experience, what strategies have worked best and what are some challenges?

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Parents:

1. How are you helping your child select classes based on their post-graduation plans?
2. What will help them achieve their goals and what additional training or further education do they need to reach them?
3. What do you perceive as your child's most satisfying and frustrating learning experience(s)?

Moderator: Discuss the education experiences students have. (This was presented to both CTE students and non CTE students and parents.)

- Specifically, what skills/types of learning are valuable to you/your child/your student?
- What skills/types of learning are you/ is your student not getting/need(s)?

Note: Learn more information by asking about flexibility, "real world" skills, career readiness, college readiness. Learn more from students by asking about whether or not they feel any pressure to take certain courses over others.

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Unaided CTE Awareness and Perceptions (10 minutes)

Note: This section is created for school counselors and prospective parents/students only.

Moderator: I'd like to do a quick word association exercise. I'll say a word and you tell me what immediately comes to mind. After each word ask what connections or associations they make with this word/term.

- College
- Career
- CTE
- Vocational Education
- Career Pathway

CTE, Career Technical Education and Vocational Education

1. Have you heard this term before? Is this a term that you use? Who else do you hear using it?
2. Does this term generate a positive or a negative feeling? (Be sure to follow-up and clarify any negative associations.)
3. Have you heard, seen, or read anything about Career Technical Education?
 - a. What have you heard about programs or schools in this area?
 - b. Where have you heard/seen/read this information?
 - c. What stands out?
 - d. What worries you?
 - e. Are you looking at, or researching CTE as an option for yourself/your child? If so, what schools/programs are you considering? How likely are you to follow through with enrolling in the program?
4. Is CTE the same or different than vocational education? What makes you say that?

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CTE Decision Making and Experience (10 minutes)

This section is for CTE students and parents.

This section focuses on the decision making process and how parents and students make decisions for the students' future.

Moderator: The focus of our discussion will be on your experience and opinions about CTE.

1. Tell me about the decision to enroll in your/your child's CTE program/school. What led to your/your student's enrollment in the program/school?
2. How did you learn about the program/school? What kind of reputation does it have locally?
3. Was this your decision? Your parent's/student's? Who was involved in the decision-making process? Who had the final say?
4. What stood out to you/sounded good about the program/school? What did you see as the benefits? Were there specific career paths that you were interested in?
5. What concerned you? Were there any potential drawbacks you were concerned about?
6. What is the program called?

This section explores language and is created to discover what the program is actually called. Some participants may not know they are enrolled in CTE programs so this will help them explain what they think they're enrolled in.

1. I referred to it as Career Technical Education or CTE – is this what you call this type of program, or do you call it something else?
2. Describe your/your child's experience with the program.
 - Probe: access/application to program/school, delivery system, cost, course options and quality, career prep/skills, flexibility, time requirements, job opportunities, work-based learning, engagement.

This section explores satisfaction within CTE programs.

1. In your mind, what made this the right option for you/your student?
2. What have you/they enjoyed about the program/school?
3. What, if anything, has been frustrating?
4. What would make your/your child's program better? What do you know now that you wish you had known when first making the decision to enroll?
5. How do you think other students/parents perceive your program/school?
6. What would surprise others to learn about your program/school?

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This section focuses on the decision making process and how **school counselors** communicate information about CTE programs.

1. How does CTE fit into the overall school climate and culture?
2. How are you informed about the CTE programs in your school in order to describe them to students and parents?
3. How do you inform parents and students about CTE programs in your school?
4. How do you help students align their career interest to CTE programs? How is CTE valued in the school?

This section is for school counselors.

This section explores language and how school counselors explain or talk about CTE programs with parents and/or students.

1. When you talk to parents and students about CTE programs, do they understand that programs like the *Project Lead the Way Biomedical Sciences program* is a CTE program of study? Why or why not?
2. How is CTE perceived in your school?
3. Do you see CTE as a program of study or pathway, or do you view them as separate electives for students?
4. Do any of the CTE programs in your school have waiting lists or have entry criteria?
5. Do all students have access to CTE programs?
 - Probe: access/application to program/school, delivery system, cost, course options and quality, career prep/skills, flexibility, time requirements, job opportunities, work-based learning, engagement

This section explores satisfaction within CTE programs.

1. What would make more students enroll and complete a CTE program of study?
2. How do you know if students in CTE programs are doing equally or better than students who are not in CTE programs of study?
3. What would improve the CTE programs in your school?
4. How do you think other school counselors perceive CTE in your school?

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Aided Perceptions of CTE (15 minutes)

Moderator: Here is a short description of Career Technical Education or CTE. Take a moment to read it and then share your thoughts and reactions.

Note: This definition should be printed on a sheet of paper and given to each participant in the focus group.

Definition Handout

Career Technical Education (CTE) is an education pathway that provides students with the academic, technical and real world knowledge, skills and experience they need to be prepared for a variety of career options. CTE gives students training and skills in many different types of careers in high growth industries such as science and technology, healthcare, and business management, to name a few. CTE programs are personalized, hands-on, and let students explore different career fields. CTE is part of the high school experience, and prepares students for the full range of opportunities after high school, including college and careers. For example: *(Insert local program examples)*

1. CIRCLE words and ideas that you like, that stand out as positive
2. CROSS OUT words or ideas that you dislike, that prompt a negative feeling
3. "?" by words or ideas that confuse you

Moderator: Based just on this description, how interested are you in learning more about this program? (Get a rating from everyone)

Discuss as a Group

1. What are your reactions to this? Is this useful? Needed? Probe on interest/disinterest and why.
2. What stood out in a positive way?
3. What gave you a negative feeling or caused concern?
4. Was there anything that was confusing? What needs to be explained? What else do you need to know at this point?
5. How do you envision this program working?
6. What do you think about the different types of career opportunities and options mentioned?

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For current students/parents only

1. Does this sound like your program/school? How is it similar or different? What would you add/change based on your experience?
2. How does this description fit with what we talked about earlier in terms of your aspirations/goals after school (for your child)?

Messaging and Communication Channels (25 minutes)

Instructions: Each message is tested on its motivation and believability. Each message should be printed out on a **separate** sheet of paper. Parent and school counselor messages include proof points. Student messages do not include proof points.

Moderator: Now we're going to review statements that provide more information about messaging. Read through each statement and give it a rating on a 1 to 5 scale, 5 being the most believable; based on the following:

1. How believable is this statement?
2. Does this statement motivate you to enroll/enroll your child in a CTE program/school?

Discuss Each Statement

Note: Ask each question after presenting each message; rotate the order for each group.

1. What's the big idea? What are they trying to say here?
2. What stands out in a positive way?
3. What is motivating about this? What does it make you want to do?
4. Is it believable? What do you have doubts about?
5. What prompted a negative reaction?
 - a. Probe: Is there a reason this wouldn't be for you/your child?
6. Was anything confusing?
7. For Parents: Do the proof points below add to the statement? Are they helpful? Informative? What, if any, would you keep? What would you take out?
8. What is missing? What would make this better/what additional proof points would be helpful?

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Messages

Moderator: The messages on the next few pages were tested with parents and students through a national survey in 2017. The chart that follows the messages demonstrates what worked in each message including key language and pitfalls. The most successful message with parents and students was *Prepare for the Real-World*. However, there are themes in language in the remaining messages that are critical to use when speaking with parents and students.

Probe: Tailor the messages and proof points to your school system.

Student Messages

1. PREPARE FOR THE REAL WORLD

CTE gives purpose to learning by emphasizing real-world skills and practical knowledge. Students receive hands-on training, mentoring and internships from employers in their community. They also learn how to develop a resume and interview for a job. These additional tools and experiences make school more relevant and ensure students are ready for the real world.

2. GET MORE FROM HIGH SCHOOL

CTE gives learning a boost. It combines regular academic courses with career-focused courses, skill-building, mentoring and work opportunities to give students extra preparation for college and careers. CTE students also do better in class because the hands-on experience makes academic subjects more engaging and more interesting. CTE students have a significantly greater high school graduation rate (90 percent) than the national average (75 percent).

3. SMART INVESTMENT

CTE makes the future more affordable by helping families save money and invest their time wisely. CTE students can earn a paycheck, marketable certifications and even earn college credits while in high school, which can lead to better opportunities whether they pursue college or a career. And there are a growing number of scholarships designed to help CTE students.

4. EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES

CTE gives students opportunities to figure out what they are passionate about and want to do — and not do — after high school. Students explore a range of career options based on what they love to do and do well. CTE helps students build confidence and leadership skills to meet their goals in-and-out of the classroom.

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5. GIVING STUDENTS A LEG UP

CTE gives students an extra advantage for both college and careers through specialized classes, mentoring and work experience in fields where jobs are in demand — like health care, engineering and information technology. When young people develop valuable skills, make connections and build a network while they are in high school, they have an inside track on a successful career.

Parent and School Counselor Messages

1. PREPARE FOR THE REAL WORLD

CTE gives purpose to learning by emphasizing real-world skills and practical knowledge. Students receive hands-on training, mentoring and internships from employers in their community. They also learn how to develop a resume and interview for a job. These additional tools and experiences make school more relevant and ensure students are ready for the real world.

- CTE allows students to come out of high school with a “real world” skill. The promise of real life preparation and career experience is attractive, even among college-bound students. This includes resume development, interview prep, internships/real-world, hands-on experience (not just sitting in a classroom).
- CTE students also find that tying their learning to examples in the real world helps them better understand their academic classes. They feel they are building new skills and improving existing ones.

2. GET MORE FROM HIGH SCHOOL

CTE gives learning a boost. It combines regular academic courses with career-focused courses, skill-building, mentoring and work opportunities to give students extra preparation for college and careers. CTE students also do better in class because the hands-on experience makes academic subjects more engaging and more interesting. CTE students have a significantly greater high school graduation rate (90 percent) than the national average (75 percent).

- CTE students have a significantly greater high school graduation rate (90 percent) than the national average (75 percent).
- More than 86 percent of students who complete a CTE program go on to study in college full-time.

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3. A SMART INVESTMENT

CTE makes the future more affordable by helping families save money and invest their time wisely. CTE students can earn a paycheck, marketable certifications and even earn college credits while in high school, which can lead to better opportunities whether they pursue college or a career. And there are a growing number of scholarships designed to help CTE students on their way.

- Students can earn college credits or work toward a postsecondary degree while they are still in high school. On average, today's college students take six years to graduate from a four-year college. Earning credit in high school can help save time and money.
- Many high school CTE programs have partnerships with local colleges and universities, making it even easier to transfer credits.
 - There are a growing number of scholarships specifically designed to help CTE students pay for college.
 - Students who earn industry-recognized certifications in high school have opportunities to work and earn money while also attending postsecondary education.

4. EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES

CTE gives students opportunities to figure out what they are passionate about and want to do — and not do — after high school. Students explore a range of career options based on what they love to do and do well. CTE helps students build confidence and leadership skills to meet their goals in and out of the classroom.

- CTE programs offer students more flexibility. Students gain the skills they need, when they need them, without the limitation of place or time.
- CTE provides opportunities for all types of learners. CTE programs are constantly innovating in formats and teaching styles. Students with special needs, such as hearing impairment, a learning disability or emotional challenges, can thrive in a CTE setting. Mixing academic class work with hands-on training engages these students more fully and helps them excel.
- In a recent survey of 22,000 high school students, students report feeling bored 70 percent of the time that they are in school. CTE engages and inspires students by reinforcing traditional classroom teaching with more personalized, hands-on learning.

5. GIVING STUDENTS A LEG UP

CTE gives students an extra advantage for both college and careers through specialized classes, mentoring and work experience in fields where jobs are in demand — like health

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care, engineering and information technology. When young people develop valuable skills, make connections and build a network while they are in high school, they have an inside track on a successful career.

- Many CTE programs have partnerships with large employers in their community. These employers provide training, mentorship, opportunities for internships, apprenticeships, and entry-level jobs.
- Many employers say they prefer hiring CTE graduates for both entry and higher-level jobs.
- One evaluation showed that CTE students earned 11 percent more (about \$2,000 per year more) than their peers after finishing the program.

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Moderator: Each participant starts their most convincing message out of the ones presented. Then discuss which messages were the least and most convincing.

1. Which statement does the best job at making CTE sound like a good option for you/your student/your child?
 - Follow up questions for current students: What resonates most with your reasons for enrolling in CTE? Which did you like least? What about it doesn't work for you?
2. What do you need to know to feel confident about enrolling/enrolling your student in a CTE program?
3. What would you look for in a program that would indicate it is high-quality?
 - a. Follow-up for school counselors: What would you need to know to feel confident that the CTE programs in your school are high quality?
4. How might CTE come up in conversations you are having with your parents/child?
 - a. What types of conversations would this come up in?
 - b. Could you discuss CTE as an option with your parent/child?
 - c. What opinion do you think you'll have?
 - d. Who has the final decision on what types of courses you/your child is enrolling in?
 - e. What reaction to wanting to enroll in CTE would you expect?
 - f. What would win support for enrolling in CTE?

Follow-up for school counselors: How might CTE come up in conversations with other educators? What types of conversations would this come up in?

5. After discussing this topic further, how interested are you in this type of program for yourself/your child? (Get a rating from everyone).
6. Has your interest in this topic changed? How/what swayed you/changed your opinion?

Moderator: Do another check around the table of whether or not CTE was more or less desirable after reading the messages.

School Counselors: Did participating in this focus group give you a better understanding of CTE? What's the best way to communicate the benefits of CTE to students, parents and other educators?

For parents/students:

1. Where or from whom would you expect to hear about this topic/have you heard about this topic? Where would you go/what resources would you use/did you use?
2. What's the best way to get out the word to students/parents like you?
3. Whose opinion matters most to you? (Your parents/child, friends/other parents, guidance counselors, trusted teachers, principals)

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Terminology (5 minutes)

Moderator: We've been referring to this topic as Career Technical Education. Now that we've talked about this topic more in depth, do you have a word or a phrase you use when discussing this topic? Is "Career Technical Education" the right term to use? What about "CTE"?

If you had to name it, what would you call it? What language/terms come to mind? What would make it more understandable/clear?

Probe: Alternatives:

- Workforce training
- Career readiness
- College and career readiness
- Vocational education
- Career track
- Career Education
- Career-focused Education
- Career pathway

Wrap Up (5 mins)

1. **Prospective students/parents:** What, if anything, did you hear today that made you interested in considering Career Technical Education (or preferred term) for yourself/your child?
 - a. Alternatively, what questions do you still have or what do you still need to know about CTE? Write down your top three. *(If there is time, ask to share thoughts)*
2. **Current students/parents:** What three things do you value most about your/your child's CTE program/school? *(If there is time, ask to share thoughts)*
3. **School Counselors:** If you had to leave us with one thought about the CTE programs in your school, what would it be? *(If there is time, ask to share thoughts)*

Moderator: Thank you for your time and sharing your opinions! That concludes the focus group.

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The chart below highlights what works, key language and pitfalls of each message when tested with parents and students in a series of focus groups.

Concepts	What Works	Key Language	Pitfalls
Prepare for the Real World	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Real-world skills and hands-on trainings meet stated needs Prospects appreciate the specific program aspects, like mentoring, internships, resume building. Gives students a 'head start.' 	<i>Real-world; internships; hands-on; mentoring; gives a head start</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does not mention a college specifically Some felt that this put down high school or other experiences.
Get More from High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balances academics with career training, which appeals to both the college and career tracks. Having "extra preparation" for future is a value add. 	<i>career-focused courses, skill-building, mentoring, and work opportunities to give students extra preparation; greater high school graduation rate (90%)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some felt this was too focused on high school rather than the future benefits of CTE. Students worried this might be too much work.
A Smart Investment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Earning and saving money is popular, especially with lower income families. Important to talk about college and career. 	<i>affordable; save money; earn a paycheck; marketable certifications and even earn college credits; scholarships</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many felt this prioritized money over passion or education. Cost of the program is source of confusion.
Exploring Possibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connects with key aspiration of finding career passion. Exploration language resonates particularly among prospects. Appeals to students who are unsure of their career path. 	<i>opportunities to figure out what they are passionate about; career options; build confidence and leadership skills</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Missing many of the specific benefits that respondents liked from other messages: e.g. college credits, internships, scholarships, mentoring.
Giving Students a Leg Up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High demand fields listed, caught respondents' eyes. Important to include diverse list with "unexpected" fields. Networking, specialized classes, mentoring stand out. 	<i>extra advantage for both college and careers through specialized classes, mentoring, and work experience; valuable skills, successful career</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some take issue with phrase "a leg up." In-demand fields get mixed reviews.

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