



DOs and DON'Ts for Engaging Students and Parents around CTE

Career Technical Education (CTE) prepares learners for the real world. CTE provides opportunities for learners to explore careers, gain real-world skills, and find a path to a career they are passionate about. Families involved in CTE are more satisfied with their learner's overall education and are more confident about their learner achieving career and college success.

Two national surveys conducted by Advance CTE to test messages about CTE have revealed a great deal about what families are looking for in their secondary education experience, the messages about the value and benefits of CTE that families are most responsive to, and who is most trusted to deliver those messages. The latest findings also illuminate important nuances to consider when communicating with historically marginalized populations.

Based on current research, here are some do's and don'ts of communicating about CTE to families:

DO

DO use, repeat and reinforce these core messages about the value of CTE each and every time you engage with relevant audiences. This kind of message discipline is foundational in delivering accurate information that families can trust about the benefits and results of CTE. *CTE learners:*

- *Gain real-world skills;*
- *Explore careers to find their passion; and*
- *Have options for college and career success.*

DO emphasize CTE's value in "Making Connections" when communicating to historically marginalized learners. Black and Latinx learners and learners experiencing low income were more responsive to messages about how CTE helps learners build social capital by making connections with peers, instructors, and industry professionals with similar interests.

DO talk about how CTE learners and their parents/guardians are more satisfied across all aspects of their education experience — particularly those aspects that are unique to CTE. CTE families are much more satisfied with their education, including the quality of their classes and instructors and opportunities to take advanced classes. By 30 percentage points, CTE families were more satisfied with CTE's ability to provide opportunities for career exploration and gaining skills in a specific field than prospective families.

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DO explain how CTE works. Many parents/guardians and learners do not really know what CTE is or how it works in their community. Families need to be fully informed about how CTE programs work and what the offerings are both during and beyond high school.

DO tell stories about the successes CTE learners have had. It is more powerful when families can hear the testimonial directly from the learner. Make sure your audience sees themselves in your success stories.

DO consider the career preparation continuum. Families considering CTE are more attracted to opportunities for career exploration, while families already in CTE place greater emphasis on gaining skills. One important caveat: The findings indicate some Black and Latinx learners continue to prioritize career exploration throughout their participation in CTE.

DO emphasize that CTE prepares learners for college and career. Families overwhelmingly view college as an aspiration for learners' future, and the findings show that CTE increases confidence in postsecondary preparedness and completion for historically marginalized populations. Drive home that CTE is a unique option that provides multiple paths for both college and career success.

Do engage and inform those closest to learners. Instructors, school counselors and college representatives were among the sources most utilized by learners for information about participating in CTE. Make sure these sources are fully informed about CTE programs, their benefits, and the most effective messages for communicating about CTE.

DO equip learners to navigate their career preparation journey. In addition to informed, trusted sources close to the learner, online resources were a top choice for information about CTE, particularly for historically marginalized populations. Make sure online sources about CTE provide digestible information, reinforce effective recruitment messages and are easy to access to allow learners to make decisions with those they trust.

DO emphasize certain phrases to describe the benefits that CTE delivers to learners. These phrases are learner centered and align with aspects of CTE that parents/guardians and learners value

in their education experience: *(Bullet points)*

- Gain real-world skills;
- Explore career options;
- Find your career passion;
- Lead to fulfilling, rewarding careers;
- Get hands-on experience;
- Be prepared for college;
- Enhance your high school experience;
- Make valuable connections; and
- Be prepared for the real world.

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DON'T

DON'T position CTE and college as an “either/or.” Remember to talk about CTE as a pathway to college and about the variety of college preparation options and post-high school paths available through CTE. Don't frame CTE as the “non-college” option or simply for those learners “not going to college” because that directly conflicts with parent/guardian and learner aspirations.

DON'T push financial benefits over passion. Families value the ability of CTE to help learners find a meaningful career path. Finding a career passion was consistently ranked in the top two benefits and outcomes of CTE by both prospective and current families across race, ethnicity and income. Passion was picked above achieving a well-paying job, making connections, or even experiences that stand out on a college application.

DON'T do all the talking. What matters to you may not be what matters to learners and parents/guardians. Let them ask questions and answer them directly utilizing effective messages.

DON'T neglect message tailoring. While the major findings of this report held across participation, race and ethnicity and income, there are nuances that reflect important equity considerations including differences between parents/guardians and learners in responses about program quality, previous exposure to careers and trust levels. Tailor messages to consider your audience's stage of their career preparation journey as well as equity and access barriers.

DON'T forget to be specific about hands-on experiences. Families highly value the ability of CTE to provide hands-on experiences to explore careers and gain real-world skills. However, don't assume that families know how to access these experiences and the additional commitments that may be required. When talking about your programs, discuss specific internships, networking opportunities and the employers involved.

DON'T position CTE as a “different” high school experience. Having a traditional high school experience is important to parents/guardians and learners. Talk about how CTE enhances, not replaces, traditional high school and the experiences learners enjoy such as sports, the arts, and activities their friends are involved in.

DON'T be vague about postsecondary paths for CTE. Don't assume that families know how their secondary CTE program can continue in college; where those programs are located; and how learners can jumpstart their postsecondary experience through college credit, certifications and work-based learning. Providing specific information about CTE career pathways empowers families to have a more fulfilling CTE experience in high school and beyond.

DON'T forget about retention messages. Nuance your messages to current learners to emphasize CTE's value in gaining real-world skills; making connections with those with similar interests; and providing opportunities to prepare for and jumpstart their postsecondary education through dual enrollment, certifications and more.

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