

## Increasing Learner Enrollment in CTE Programs Parent/Guardian Engagement Tool

Despite considerable advances in the quality and equity of Career Technical Education (CTE) programs, recruitment into such programs has been stagnant over the last decade and lingering stigmas about the value of CTE remain. However, we know from [\*Communicating Career Technical Education: Learner-centered Messages for Effective Program Recruitment\*](#) that parents/guardians and learners involved in CTE are extremely satisfied with their education. We also know from this research, that parents/guardians are a critical audience to reach if you want to increase learner enrollment into CTE programs.

To successfully engage parents/guardians and encourage them to consider CTE as an option for their child requires a deliberate and strategic plan for your core team, and those communication ambassadors who will engage directly with parents/guardians.

It is necessary to use consistent messaging not only throughout your organization, but also among all communication ambassadors to be effective. This requires that you involve ambassadors across multiple groups, including: state agencies; employer groups that may not be used to contributing to education or CTE issues; and those on the ground, including administrators, educators, school counselors and community groups.

[Research](#) shows that parents/guardians rely on those closest to them for information regarding CTE programs. This includes other parents/guardians, teachers and school counselors. The research also reflects the importance of building trust and [tailoring messages](#) for communications about CTE to be effective, particularly among historically marginalized populations. It's necessary to not only coordinate engagement and communications efforts at the state and local levels, but also to encourage those trusted messengers to utilize effective messages with parents/guardians.

This guide will aid you and your team in creating a strategy to engage with parents/guardians, while also identifying and educating critical ambassadors that can successfully communicate your message.

**An ambassador is someone you can trust to effectively communicate your message directly with parents/guardians and learners.**

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## How to Use This Tool

To use this tool, designate one person on your team to coordinate your parent/guardian engagement strategy. This person will not necessarily be conducting all outreach, but they will be in charge of the overall strategy and plan. Then use the list below to choose an initial ambassador to engage and leverage. This ambassador will be someone you trust to communicate your messages effectively directly with parents/guardians.

Once you have chosen an ambassador, you can begin to think through how they should be prepared to carry out your messages. The lead can complete this worksheet on their own and then share with the broader team or facilitate a conversation with a few team members to complete the worksheet together. This worksheet is designed to inform your communications efforts but is not intended to serve as your entire strategic communications plan.

## Steps for Effectively Leveraging Ambassadors

- Step 1: Clarify your goals
- Step 2: Engage with parents/guardians
- Step 3: Use the right messages
- Step 4: Leverage multiple vehicles
- Step 5: Communicate often and in a timely manner
- Step 6: Make sure your ambassadors are on message
- Step 7: Keep your team informed

## Choosing an Ambassador

You will likely complete this exercise for multiple ambassadors, but you should focus on each one separately to be strategic with all of them. Additionally, you should think about which ambassadors take priority based on their influence, reach and willingness to help out.

Below is a list of potential ambassadors. This list is by no means exhaustive so do not feel limited by it. As you begin to determine how you and your ambassadors will best reach parents/guardians, it's important to consider the parents/guardians you are trying to engage. Parents/guardians will vary in their knowledge and attitudes about and of CTE, and it's necessary to tailor your messages and support your ambassadors accordingly. For example, consider utilizing parents/guardians of CTE learners as your potential ambassadors and champions of CTE to sway those parents/guardians who are not as knowledgeable about CTE.

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## Potential Ambassadors

### Parent and Learner Groups

- Career Technical Learner Organizations
- Current CTE Students and Their Parents/guardians
- PTA/PTO

### District and School Staff

- Local Education Agency Staff (LEAs)
- Teachers
- Principals and Administrators
- College representatives
- School Counselors
- CTE Administrators
- Charter School Leaders, If Applicable

### Community Partners

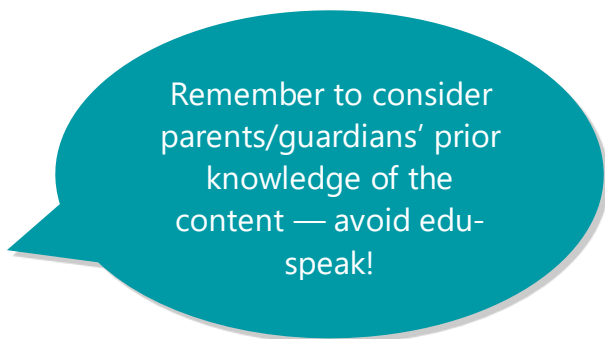
- Local Employers
- Civil Rights Organizations
- Community Centers
- Community Religious Organizations
- Afterschool Programs

## Choose Your Ambassador for Parents/Guardians: \_\_\_\_\_

### Step 1: Clarify your goals

Before you ask your ambassador to reach out to or engage parents/guardians and learners, you must be clear about your overall long-term goals for parent engagement and learner recruitment, and your objective for engaging those groups. The goals must be widely shared across the state for alignment between agencies.

The questions below will help clarify your state's overall strategy to engage parents/guardians.



Remember to consider parents/guardians' prior knowledge of the content — avoid edu-speak!

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Once the goals are clear, you must then consider your objectives for ambassador interactions to engage parents/guardians. What do you expect from them in the short term? Engagement with your ambassadors should not be done just for the sake of compliance or for appeasing certain groups; it should be designed to seek input, support and feedback.

### **Guiding Questions**

1. Why are you reaching out to parents/guardians? Do you just want to inform them of your efforts, do you need input and/or support or do you want them to change their behavior?
2. What are your short-term goals for parent/guardian engagement (e.g., increasing learner enrollment in CTE, helping parents/guardians become CTE advocates, instilling positive images of CTE)?

*If completing this exercise in a group setting, have each participant independently write what they believe the goals are and then compare answers. Does everyone largely agree?*

3. What are your long-term goals for parent engagement?  
*If completing this exercise in a group setting, have each participant independently write what they believe the goals are and then compare answers. Does everyone largely agree?*

4. Do other people within your agency understand and agree with these goals?  
*Try asking a sample group of colleagues what they believe the goals are and see how it matches with what you have written above.*

5. Do your ambassadors understand and agree with these goals? How do you know?  
*If you complete this part of the exercise and realize that your state goals are not widely shared, consider a separate effort to develop an internal communications strategy and raise awareness of or clarify your goals.*

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## Step 2: Engage with parents/guardians

Not everyone will come to the table with the same level of understanding of or interest in CTE programs. There is also evidence that parents/guardians don't necessarily go to state agencies for information, which is why it is so critical that you have knowledgeable ambassadors that carry forth your messages to parents/guardians. It's important that you have a strategy in place, and understand which parents/guardians you are trying to reach. The questions below will help you think through the types of parents/guardians you want to reach.

### Guiding Questions

1. How do you currently engage directly and indirectly with parents/guardians (e.g., staff presents to parents/guardians, social media, website, brochures, partnership with Parent Teacher Association(PTA), engagement through the comprehensive local needs assessment process)?
2. What is the interest level in CTE of the parents/guardians you are trying to engage with? (e.g., are they parents/guardians of current CTE students, or have they demonstrated low interest in CTE?)
3. How much do these parents/guardians understand about the CTE programs offered?
4. What are your current core messages to parents/guardians?

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### Step 3: Use the right messages with parents/guardians

Research shows that there are three core messages that resonate with parents/guardians when encouraging them to consider CTE as an option for their children. If this is your goal, consider using these three messages as part of all of your communications materials with parents/guardians.

All written, online or presentation materials should be concise, using easy to understand terms and developed with specific audiences in mind. The messages should be reviewed by ambassadors or stakeholders with a similar background.

Regardless of your goals, it is critical to be consistent in your messaging with parents/guardians, and ensure your ambassadors are remaining consistent and on message as well.

#### **Use the questions below to ensure that your materials are appropriate for parents/guardians:**

1. What messages will you use in your communication?
2. What types of supporting messages and data points might be most effective to convince parents/guardians and students to consider CTE? These could range from testimony from students to labor market data.
3. Are your messages tailored to address equity and access barriers as well as potential lingering stigmas towards CTE? Our [core messages](#) resource provides equity considerations for Black and Latinx families and families with low income.
4. How should your ambassador use these materials? Should they share them or craft their own messages based on them?

#### Core Messages

**CTE Learners** Gain Real-World Skills

**CTE Learners** Explore Careers to find their Passion

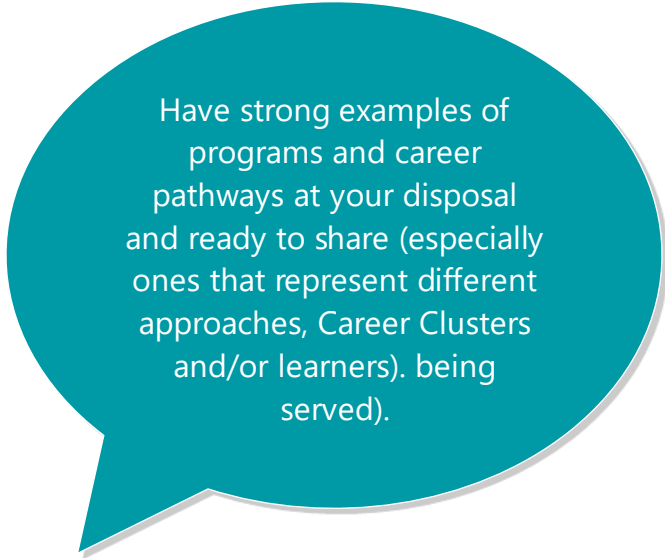
**CTE Learners** Have More Options for College and Career Success

#### Step 4: Leverage multiple vehicles

To effectively engage a wide variety of individuals and groups, you must use multiple methods of communication. On average, it takes 11 touches for impact – that is, an audience needs to hear a message at least 11 times before they start to absorb it. These methods can include town hall or other in-person meetings, virtual events, social media, blogs, webinars and emails.

Varying your approach is important as well; if you use the same channels each time, you will continue to engage the same people. More parents/guardians might be motivated to participate if you meet them where they are – leverage communication methods they already use and speak at meetings they are already scheduled to attend.

You should not simply put all of the information parents/guardians need on your website and consider the task completed. While having easily navigated websites with impactful information is critical, it is insufficient as an engagement strategy.



Have strong examples of programs and career pathways at your disposal and ready to share (especially ones that represent different approaches, Career Clusters and/or learners). being served).

#### Guiding Questions:

1. What method of communication will you use for your first interaction?  
*Consider any meetings already scheduled that you or your ambassador could be a part of, such as back to school events, parent teacher conferences, virtual career fairs, community health events, adult English language learner classes, PTA meetings, etc., or consider any popular blogs or social media/YouTube channels that are regularly used.*
2. What method of communication will you or your ambassador use for ongoing communications with parents/guardians?  
*Consider any existing channels that you could use, including newsletters and social media channels.*

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3. How will you track engagement with parents/guardians, particularly if that engagement is happening through an ambassador?  
*This tracking could include a log of conversations kept in a database or evidence of more passive interactions on your website or social media channels.*
4. If you publish information online, how will you know if parents/guardians have accessed and understood it?

### **Step 5: Communicate often and in a timely manner**

You must be proactive in letting parents/guardians know about CTE offerings. Many parents/guardians don't understand what CTE is, how it's delivered or how their child can experience it in their high school. Demonstrating the nuts and bolts of CTE programs, and the benefits students receive from participation, is critical.

You must also share information in a timely manner. For example, students and parents/guardians may need certain information before registering for classes or signing up for certain extracurriculars. It is helpful to have one point of contact assigned to create and execute your communications schedule. Use your ambassadors to help disseminate information broadly.

#### **Guiding Questions**


1. Communications with parents/guardians should not happen only on an ad hoc basis. How often will you engage parents/guardians? How often will ambassadors be involved in this engagement?
2. Are there key dates, deadlines or events that should be taken into consideration for your engagement of parents/guardians?
3. What channels can parents/guardians use to reach out to you directly for more information? Is the ambassador aware of these channels and how best to leverage them?

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## Step 6: Make sure your ambassadors are on message

Ambassadors should be chosen for their unique connection to parents/guardians. Whenever possible, involve ambassadors in the conversation early in your efforts to tap their expertise. Ask them what types of programs and initiatives make sense given their experiences. Approach them with draft versions of documents to get their input as to whether or not your materials will accomplish the objective.



Remember to ask ambassadors to review materials before you share them with other audiences.

Once you have received input and feedback from an ambassador, make sure that you have a system in place for following back up and letting them know the current status of the discussions in which he or she was involved. For example, assign one point of contact within your agency with whom your ambassador can interact. This contact will not be the only person who speaks with this ambassador, but he or she will be consistently available for questions and requests.

### Guiding Questions:

1. What background or experience does your identified ambassador have in CTE, and how familiar are they with its potential benefits? What background or experience does the ambassador have with parent engagement?
2. How will your ambassador's perspective differ from your own? What would that mean for the content of the message the ambassador delivers? Is there a specific way to frame your communications that will help the ambassador be effective in sharing your message?
3. Your ambassador must be prepared with a pitch that conveys your goals and message. How will you help your ambassador create this pitch, and do your communication materials help support this pitch?

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4. What processes do you plan to use to receive feedback from ambassadors on engagement outcomes to allow you to make mid-course adjustments to your overall strategy?

### **Step 7: Keep your team informed**

Members of your internal team are both critical messengers and potential ambassadors. Make sure they are included in any outreach you do with parents/guardians, and provide them with access to information about key themes, dates and decision points.

Provide your team with talking points so any time they are communicating with ambassadors or directly with parents/guardians, your team is coordinated and its messages are aligned.

### **Guiding Questions**

1. Who else on your team needs to know about interactions with your ambassador and with parents/guardians?
2. How and when will you inform your team more broadly about your parent engagement goals?
3. If staff from your agency or partner agencies communicate with parents/guardians, how will you inform them about key messages and ensure they are used consistently?
4. If other staff from your agency/organization/school or partner agencies/organizations/school communicate with parents/guardians, how will you know about it? How can you go about coordinating communications?

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