



Strategic Messaging for Effective Communications

Using research insights
to connect to key
audiences

In a rapidly changing world, it is more important than ever for learners of all ages to develop the skills and experiences necessary to succeed in the high-wage, high-skilled and high-demand careers of their choosing. Career Technical Education (CTE) is working in every state to help learners succeed, while also providing employers with skilled and talented employees across a range of industries, from advanced manufacturing to media production. In total, around 12.5 million students are enrolled in CTE across the nation — but industry skill gaps and unfulfilled employee potential remains. To connect more students to CTE programs, Advance CTE compiled model programs to address the challenge of communicating effectively with students and families about CTE options.

Advance CTE has worked with states to pilot innovative and effective models to communicate the many benefits of CTE to key stakeholders, students and their families, to guarantee career success for each learner. This case study is one of three that highlights the exciting work being done across the country to reach local stakeholders, create communications strategies that emphasize digital mediums and develop messaging that resonates with specific audiences.

Introduction

In 2017, Advance CTE conducted a nationwide survey of families and students to understand the varying levels of identity and perception of what CTE is and what it can offer. [This research](#), in part, identified the key messages that would most resonate with students and families and encourage them to consider CTE as an option for their education. While these messages work with families and students generally, it is important to tailor messaging to individual states or communities to boost awareness and adoption of CTE through communications that will resonate with them. By constructing a framework of effective messaging as well as a comprehensive dissemination strategy, key audiences, ambassadors and stakeholders will talk about the benefits and values of CTE in the same dynamic way.



Research Results

CTE has come a long way in the last decade, but many challenges with limited awareness and outdated perceptions of CTE remain.

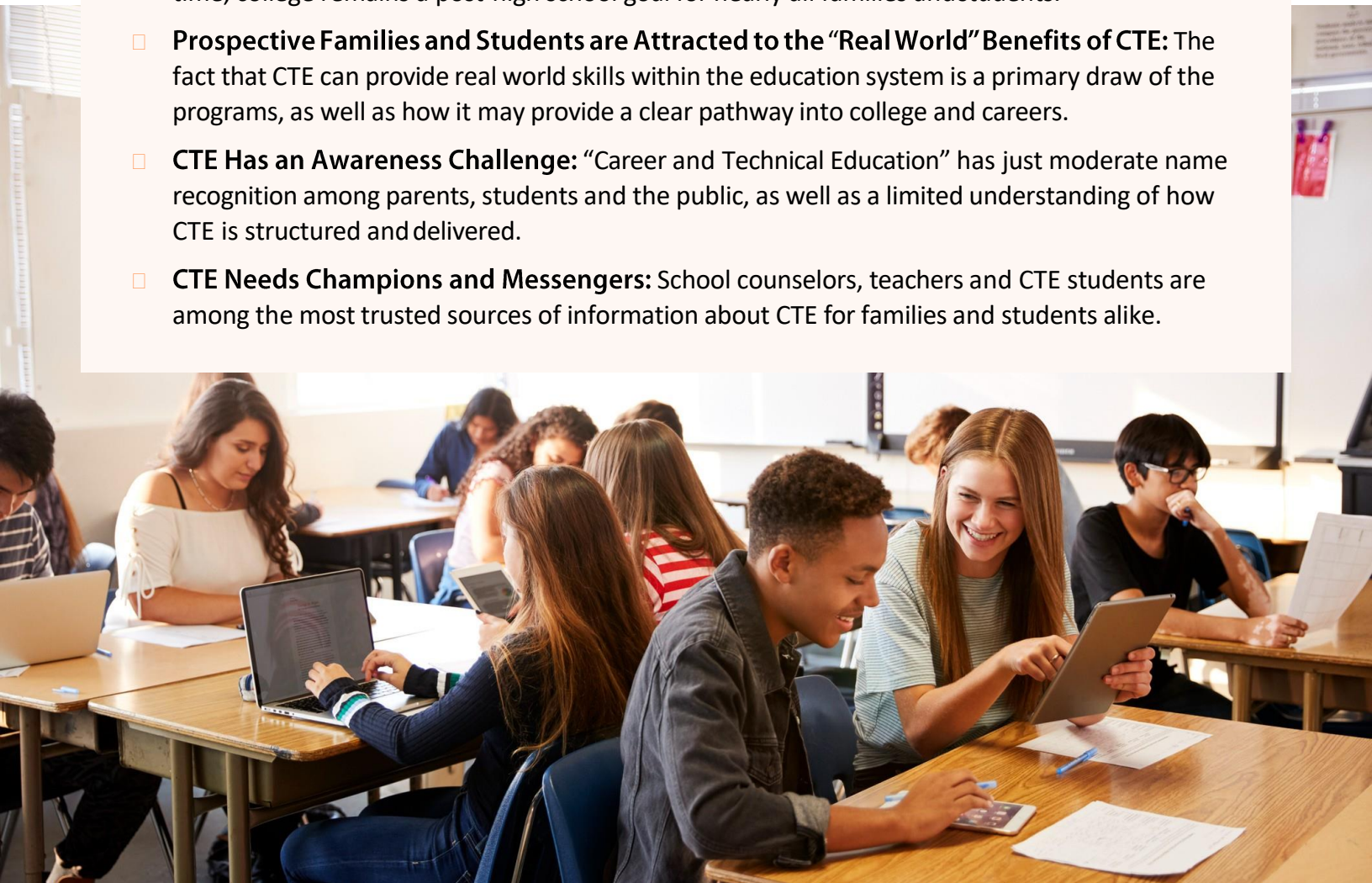
With that in mind, Advance CTE commissioned focus groups and a national survey to explore the attitudes of families and students of those currently enrolled in CTE and those who are prospective students. [This research](#) helped

Advance CTE, schools and partners better understand how to effectively communicate the promise and opportunity of CTE to a variety of audiences.

Below are key findings from that research that can be used as a guide for local and statewide communications strategies.

Key Findings

- ❑ **CTE Delivers for Families and Students:** CTE students and families are more satisfied with their education by nearly every measure compared to their non-CTE peers.
- ❑ **College and Career Success Are Both Important Goals for Families and Students:** Families and students are striving to find careers that they are passionate about. At the same time, college remains a post-high school goal for nearly all families and students.
- ❑ **Prospective Families and Students are Attracted to the “Real World” Benefits of CTE:** The fact that CTE can provide real world skills within the education system is a primary draw of the programs, as well as how it may provide a clear pathway into college and careers.
- ❑ **CTE Has an Awareness Challenge:** “Career and Technical Education” has just moderate name recognition among parents, students and the public, as well as a limited understanding of how CTE is structured and delivered.
- ❑ **CTE Needs Champions and Messengers:** School counselors, teachers and CTE students are among the most trusted sources of information about CTE for families and students alike.



Below are examples of how states used these key findings as the basis to develop their own unique messaging and communications strategy.

Developing Statewide Messaging

How the Georgia Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education and the North Dakota Department of Career and Technical Education used nationally tested messages to improve their communication strategies

As states around the country look to successfully connect with their key audiences, the Georgia Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE) decided to take new research and insights from partners and stakeholders to develop a new messaging strategy and dissemination plan.

Georgia CTAE identified changing the public perception of Career, Technical and Agricultural education as the number one priority within their five-year [strategic plan](#). After identifying a number of challenges impacting the effectiveness of CTE messaging locally, Georgia's CTAE office designed a strategic communications plan to share messages, map assets, identify key audiences and create supportive statements to inform the messaging that would take place throughout the state. CTAE then drew upon Advance CTE's national research and stakeholder collaboration to develop three key messages:

- CTAE delivers real opportunities for college and rewarding careers.
- CTAE delivers real world workforce-ready skills.
- CTAE delivers real high school experience with added value.



Building on these three primary messages and aligning with the Georgia Department of Education's statewide messaging, the staff created a tagline — **CTAE Delivers** —, words/phrases to use ("opportunities", "workforce ready", "real world") and supporting statements to use with a variety of audiences to communicate the value of CTAE effectively.

After identifying the messages that they would use across all digital, print and in-person communications, the Georgia CTAE staff recognized the importance of providing support and resources to districts and schools to help them incorporate and adapt the core messages with students and families.

To do this, they created buttons, posters and a step-and-repeat with the new messages for wide distribution. They made resources available to all attendees at their statewide conference of administrators and educators. And they held a series of sessions to discuss using and personalizing messaging for the local level — a key component of effective personalized communications strategies.

The North Dakota Career and Technical Education department similarly took the national research and key findings and used them to improve their own statewide messaging. The department identified marketing strategies to change the public perception of CTE as a priority within their state. They worked with Advance CTE staff to develop a statewide communications plan utilizing the messaging research combined with knowledge of how to effectively reach people in their own communities.

Since the development of the plan, staff have created a number of communications and marketing materials that reflect the core messaging. They launched a [website](#), which houses information for students and families that emphasizes career exploration, opportunities for scholarships, apprenticeships in the state, CTE course offerings and more.

North Dakota Career and Technical Education also develops a yearly magazine, [Career Outlook: North Dakota Career Resource Network](#), which outlines CTE options, educational and career pathways, financial supports and more — delivered to schools across the state. The magazine embeds the core messages throughout, ensuring students and families will understand CTE benefits in a way that resonates with their lived experiences and goals.

Telling compelling student stories with detailed accounts of positive experiences in CTE programs helps potential enrollees imagine how CTE can benefit their educational aspirations and career ambitions. Career Outlook includes these stories as a way to exemplify the core messages — gaining real world skills through opportunities like: internships; chances to explore both a college education and an exciting career after high school as well as a rewarding high school experience that goes beyond what they may expect is offered to them.

You've decided on your messages... What's next?

- Use your messages often — the average person needs to encounter a message 11 times before it resonates;
- Embed messages across all communications including websites, brochures, flyers, e-communications and other platforms;
- Educate your staff and ambassadors on new messaging and the importance of consistency;
- Designate staff roles for development of regular new communication materials; and
- Create a style guide to ensure all messages, designs and strategies are used across all communications and marketing materials.

Conclusion

Developing messages that will resonate with target audiences is the first step to effectively promoting the benefits of CTE to families, students and stakeholders. Clear, consistent and ubiquitous core messages will increase an audience’s awareness of the educational and career opportunities CTE can open up to them, and drive action that will help each state reach its goals.

Additional Resources Available

- [Making a Winning Case for CTE: How States Can Put this Research to Work](#)
- [Making a Winning Case for CTE: How Local Leaders Can Communicate the Value of CTE](#)
- [Core Messages for Attracting Learners to CTE](#)

Visit Advance CTE’s [“Promote CTE”](#) page for more helpful tips.

