

Five Years Closer to CTE Success + A Farewell

Mark Schneider, Director of IES | March 26, 2024

Before I came to Washington, DC in 2003, I had spent a good part of my career helping students from middle school through graduate programs learn concrete skills that would help them find good jobs and launch strong careers. I had no idea that these activities would eventually all be labeled career and technical education (CTE). When I became commissioner of NCES in 2004, I discovered that like Monsieur Jourdain in Moliere's *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, I had been speaking prose for all those years without knowing it.

One of the other things I discovered about CTE was that it was then an under-researched field, with little evidence about what works. From the very first time I inquired about IES's work in CTE, I was told something like "give us 5 years and we'll figure it out." Every year, I was told that we needed another 5 years. As recently as 2021, when the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) released its *Designing and Delivering Career Pathways at Community Colleges* practice guide, only 21 of the nearly 360 studies it reviewed met WWC standards. So, it was a pleasure to attend the final convening of the CTE Research Network, entitled "Expanding the Evidence Base for Career and Technical Education." This successful effort is going to be followed by a new five-year IES-supported network.

Clearly, there is still lots of work to be done to make CTE as powerful as it can be. We need, for example, to broaden the geographic areas that IES's CTE work covers. We need to expand the types of CTE work that IES supports. And we need to take better advantage of the increasingly powerful analytic tools that we now have at our disposal to analyze the more comprehensive data sets that are now available—especially longitudinal data, such as the State Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) IES has been supporting since the early 2000s.

But there are other aspects of the meeting that struck me as lessons that IES could build on.

First, the audience was filled with strong partnerships. IES has been supporting "research to practice partnerships" for many years and we recognize that so much of our work requires strong partnerships. But many partnerships feel like shotgun weddings. In contrast, the partnerships on display at the CTE convening were organic. And the researchers were wedded to helping improve the outcomes of the learners their practitioner partners were focused on.

IES has often had to straddle the fence between basic and applied research. And the incentives of researchers to publish and win the respect of other scientists often leads to fad-driven, jargon-loaded publications in obscure journals. But every research presentation I saw emphasized plain English and was committed to the translation of research findings into presentations and publications that were far more accessible and usable. I think a shared commitment to increasing learner's upward mobility and employment opportunities made the "feel" of this conference so much different than other conferences that I have attended over my career.

This focus also leads to great interest in longitudinal data. While I may be looking at all this through my historical involvement in tracking student wages over time (mostly through College Measures),

the shared commitment to finding out what happens to CTE completers in the labor market was invigorating. There was also a strong commitment to disaggregating data to find out better what works for whom and under what conditions. And there was recognition of the importance of SLDS in and of itself—and a growing recognition of just how powerful SLDS is when merged with other data, especially wage data.

IES's Regional Education Labs have also worked with states to leverage their SLDS data to help better document the impact of CTE programs on student success. A recent REL Central study, *The Impact of Career and Technical Education on Postsecondary Outcomes in Nebraska and South Dakota*, found that students who completed a sequence of CTE courses were 7 percentage points more likely to graduate high school on time—and 10 percentage points more likely to enroll in postsecondary education within two years of high school graduation—than their peers who didn't.

It's too bad that just as we are developing a more expansive vision of how SLDS could serve so many purposes, especially regarding CTE and labor market outcomes, Congress has cut the program's funding by \$10 million. The RELs have suffered a similar fate, losing \$5 million in Fiscal Year 2024. The proposed FY 25 budget is also bad for these two programs.

I understand that having an overarching motivating goal, and one that is as important as helping Americans get the training needed to secure good jobs paying family sustaining wages, can lead to the cohesion and enthusiasm I saw at the March 20 convening. I wonder what lessons we can take away from this that could affect other grant programs IES runs?

Please feel free to share any thoughts with me: mark.schneider@ed.gov

BTW: as many of you may know, I am approaching the end of my term as director of IES. As I myself was surprised to learn last week, my last day is March 28, and my government email will only be active until then.

Although I am not sure exactly what the next step in my "journey" will be, I want to take the opportunity to thank everyone who took the time to read and comment on my blogs and for the generous support I have received over these past 6 years as I tried to prod IES into a more modern vision of education R&D.