

Creating CTE Programs that Benefit Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners

Background

In October 2014, the New York State Board of Regents announced new options for students to meet New York State high school graduation requirements, with the goal of improving graduation rates and making students better prepared for postsecondary opportunities. One of these options includes a pathway to graduation in Career and Technical Education (CTE). While providing a CTE pathway has the potential to improve student engagement and contribute to improved graduation outcomes and college or career readiness (Treschan & Mehrotra, A 2014),¹ there remain many barriers to access to quality CTE programs for students with disabilities and English Language Learners (ELLs). The Coalition for Multiple Pathways to a Diploma is concerned that the failure to remove these barriers will lead to a CTE pathway that is not accessible to all students.

Currently, four-year graduation rates for students with disabilities and ELLs are 50 percent and 34 percent, respectively—both far below the 78 percent graduation rate for the entire state (NYSED 2015).² Quality CTE programs have the potential to increase these rates and provide significant additional benefits to students with disabilities and ELLs. For example, research shows that students with disabilities in secondary CTE programs are less likely to drop out and more likely to be employed, to have paid competitive jobs, and to work full-time after high school (Cobb et al. 1999; Colley and Jamison 1998).^{3,4} Given the potential benefits CTE programs offer to students with disabilities and ELLs, it is important that a CTE pathway be made accessible to these student populations.

Below we identify current and potential barriers to CTE instruction for students with disabilities and ELLs, as identified by national experts and New York State (NYS) educators and advocates, followed by our recommendations for creating accessible CTE programs that will benefit these students. We also, where possible, provide examples of programs or policies that exemplify our recommendations with respect to students with disabilities and ELLs. Although we address barriers for students with disabilities and ELLs separately, we recognize that these groups are not mutually exclusive and that there are students who may face barriers to instruction based on both their disability and ELL status.

¹ Treschan, L. & Mehrotra, A. (2014). Challenging Traditional Expectations: How New York City's CTE High Schools Are Helping Students Graduate. Community Service Society. New York, N.Y.

² New York State Education Department (2015), Graduation Rates, Analysis by Advocates for Children.

³ Cobb, B. et al. (1999) MEETING THE NEEDS OF YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES: HANDBOOK FOR IMPLEMENTING COMMUNITY-BASED VOCATIONAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS ACCORDING TO THE FAIR LABOR STANDARDS ACT. 2D ED. Minneapolis: National Transition Network, Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota.

⁴ Colley, D. A., and Jamison, D. (1998) "Post School Results for Youth with Disabilities: Key Indicators and Policy Implications." CAREER DEVELOPMENT FOR EXCEPTIONAL INDIVIDUALS 21, no. 2: 145-160.

Barriers to CTE Instruction for Students with Disabilities and ELLs

Despite the potential benefits of CTE instruction for both students with disabilities and ELLs, we are concerned that historical barriers remain to effective CTE instruction for both groups, and that additional ones may emerge as NYS develops new CTE programming and introduces a CTE graduation pathway. A review of national CTE programs, policies, and research, as well as discussions with NYS CTE educators and advocates, has uncovered the following existing and potential challenges to CTE instruction for students with disabilities and ELLs:

Students with Disabilities

PROGRAM ACCESS

Students with disabilities have historically been isolated from quality CTE programs that are based on higher standards, supported by research, and promote college access.

Admissions:

Where students with disabilities have access to CTE programs, they remain largely concentrated in traditional vocational programs, in contrast to more contemporary CTE programs, which are more competitive and serve potentially college-bound students in high-tech and emerging fields (Silverberg et. al. 2002; Haber and Sutherland 2005).^{5,6} Students with disabilities select into or are steered toward vocational education as a default to traditional academic education, due to prior unsuccessful performance or low expectations. Thus, often, students with disabilities do not choose vocational education in order to prepare for a specific career. Instead, they, or the adults around them, have an internalized perception that removes college as an option based on poor educational experiences or performance (Lewis 2000).⁷

Access to Curriculum:

Based on the experiences of advocates serving students with disabilities in NYS, there is concern that students with disabilities have not received adequate exposure to the general education curriculum because these students have been concentrated in traditional vocational rather than the more rigorous CTE programs, which tend to be more integrated with the general education curriculum and assess students using college and career readiness standards.

Physical Access and Safety:

The diversity in physical infrastructure throughout the state may cause some districts to face difficulties in placing students with disabilities in certain types of CTE programs, potentially

⁵ Silverberg, M., E. Warner, D. Goodwin, and M. Fong. (2002). National Assessment of Vocational Education: Interim Report to Congress. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary.

⁶ Haber, G., and Sutherland, L. S. (2005) The four A's of managing the placement and. *The Journal for Vocational Special Needs*, 31 (1-3), (pp. 4-8).

⁷ Lewis, V. M. (2000). Vocational education and the dilemma of education. *Journal of Vocational Education Research*, 25(4), 575-584.

reducing access to CTE programs or compromising the safety of students with physical disabilities (Smith et al. 2003; Rubenstein, et. al. 2014).^{8,9}

Access for All Students:

Based on the experiences of advocates and educators serving students with disabilities, students in rural areas and specialized settings (e.g., approved non-public special education schools, such as the 853 schools, and public school programs for students on the autism spectrum or who are intellectually disabled) have historically had limited access to CTE programs.

IEP DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSITION PLANNING

Collaboration:

Based on the experiences of NYS CTE professionals and a review of the literature on CTE (Smith et al. 2003),¹⁰ gaps remain in information-sharing and collaboration between IEP development teams, CTE administrators, and CTE instructors, which can lead to a lack of understanding of how CTE instructors and special education staff can best integrate and accommodate students with disabilities in the classroom. According to advocates, there is also a lack of collaboration between the student's IEP team, the office of Adult Career and Continuing Education Services-Vocational Rehabilitation (ACCES-VR), and the NYS Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD). Improved and early coordination among these groups could ensure that students with disabilities receive the appropriate resources needed to be successful in quality CTE programs.

Accommodations:

Anecdotal evidence based on the experiences of educators and advocates in NYS suggests that inconsistencies remain in the provision of reasonable accommodations and modifications in CTE programs.

INEQUITIES IN THE WORKPLACE

Workplace discrimination (Draper et. al. 2011)¹¹ and inaccessibility (Gewurtz and Kirsh 2009)¹² continue to pose barriers for people with disabilities nationwide. Unless addressed, such inequities may hinder access to appropriate on-site employer training, an essential component of successful CTE programs.

⁸ Smith, M. L., Annexstein, L. T., Ordovery, E. L., Esters, L. T., Bowen, B. E., & Reeve, E. M. (2003). Equity issues in career and technical education. Information series. Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education.

⁹ Rubenstein E, Shendell D, Eggert, BC, & Marcella, SW (2014) ;Personal protective equipment use among students with special health care needs reporting injuries in school-sponsored vocational, career, and technical education programs in New Jersey. *Workplace Health Safety*. Jan;62(1):12-8.

¹⁰ Smith, M. L., Annexstein, L. T., Ordovery, E. L., Esters, L. T., Bowen, B. E., & Reeve, E. M. (2003). Equity issues in career and technical education. Information series. Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education.

¹¹ Draper, W.R., Reid, C.A., & McMahon, B.T. (2011). Workplace discrimination and the perception of disability. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 55(1), 29-37.

¹² Gewurtz, R., & Kirsh, B. (2009). Disruption, disbelief, and resistance: A meta-synthesis of disability in the workplace. *Work: A Journal of Prevention, Assessment & Rehabilitation*,34, 33-44.

English Language Learners

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT:

Many CTE programs fail to integrate opportunities for ELLs to develop English language skills (Smith et al. 2003).¹³ In addition, based on the experiences of educators serving ELLs in NYS, many CTE staff are not familiar with how to integrate language development into their curricula.

BILINGUAL CTE PROGRAMS:

CTE programs currently are not provided in the home languages of students in areas of linguistic concentration.

LANGUAGE ACCESS:

Based on the experiences of advocates and educators serving ELLs in NYS, many ELLs still lack interpretation and translation services in CTE instruction. In the absence of translation and interpretation services, ELLs risk being denied access to CTE programs. For those ELLs who are enrolled in CTE programs, but are not provided translation or interpretation services, their safety may be compromised, particularly in high-risk fields with extensive safety protocols. Furthermore, parents and students often lack information on CTE programs in their native language, thereby limiting their opportunity to make informed choices when selecting suitable programs.

COLLABORATION:

Based on the experiences of CTE professionals, large gaps remain in information-sharing and collaboration between staff serving ELLs and CTE instructors. Often, no structural opportunities exist for collaboration between academic staff and CTE staff serving ELLs. These gaps can lead to a lack of understanding of how CTE instructors and ELL staff can best integrate and accommodate ELLs in the classroom.

CULTURAL COMPETENCY:

Many CTE instructors are not aware of cultural differences and how those differences impact the way ELLs students view and engage with CTE instruction (Smith et al. 2003).¹⁴

¹³ Smith, M. L., Annexstein, L. T., Ordovery, E. L., Esters, L. T., Bowen, B. E., & Reeve, E. M. (2003). Equity issues in career and technical education. Information series. Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education.

¹⁴ Smith, M. L., Annexstein, L. T., Ordovery, E. L., Esters, L. T., Bowen, B. E., & Reeve, E. M. (2003). Equity issues in career and technical education. Information series. Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education.

Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners

ASSESSMENTS:

According to annual results released by the New York State Education Department, students with disabilities and ELLs continue to underperform their counterparts on Regents assessments (NYSED 2015).¹⁵ We are concerned that the 13 CTE Technical Assessments in the list of approved assessments for the CTE pathway, considered to be as rigorous as Regents assessments, will focus more on high-stakes, standardized testing, leaving students with disabilities and ELLs who struggle to express their aptitude through these types of assessments unable to show mastery of CTE standards. In addition, more than 13 assessments must be approved because that small number limits the number of pathways and careers students might have access to.

Recommendations

As the State examines ways to enhance the current offering of CTE programs and provide students with a CTE pathway to a high school diploma, we encourage the State to take the above identified barriers into consideration and further explore their salience. In addition, we suggest that any proposed policies take into account the following recommendations to ensure that CTE becomes a viable pathway towards a high school diploma for ALL students who choose that route:

General Recommendations

- Continue to address CTE as part of the broader conversation on multiple pathways to graduation.
- Ensure that CTE programs lead to a credential that is attractive to employers or indicates college-readiness.
- Provide multiple options for assessing students in CTE programs, including assessments that do not rely on high-stakes standardized testing. For example, the Agricultural Education Technical Assessment System in NYS allows for student projects to demonstrate technical competencies in agriculture-related subjects.
- Make sure that CTE curriculum aligns with Common Core State Standards in a meaningful way.
- Increase funding for CTE programs statewide and ensure that a reasonable share of those funds go toward recruiting, retaining, and accommodating students with disabilities and ELLs.
- Increase data transparency on CTE programs, specifically enrollment patterns of sub-populations and measures of achievement.
- Ensure that employer workplace training programs are also available to all students.

¹⁵ New York State Education Department (2015), Report Cards, Analysis by Advocates for Children.

Recommendations for Students with Disabilities

- Make sure that admission practices do not prevent or deter students with disabilities from accessing quality CTE programs.
Example: In Massachusetts, school districts that are selective in terms of admission to CTE programs are regularly monitored to ensure students who are members of special populations are provided with equal access to programs and activities.
- Ensure that all CTE spaces and activities are ADA, IDEA, and 504 compliant, and safe.
Example: Arkansas oversees a state fund that provides adaptive equipment for students enrolled in CTE programs. These state funds provide specialized equipment and software that enable students such as those with physical disabilities to succeed in CTE.
- Mandate and increase opportunities for the IEP development team, special education instructors, CTE instructors, and other relevant state agencies to communicate on IEP and transition issues.
Example: In Georgia, the Career Technical Instruction Program (CTI) is designed to support students with disabilities enrolled in career, technical and agricultural education programs. The CTI program designates a special education educator to collaborate with the CTE instructor on the curricular demands of the program, thus giving students with disabilities equal access to CTE programs in the least restrictive environment by using varied instructional strategies.
- Develop programs that take into account the workforce needs of people with disabilities and their strengths.
Example: Illinois developed a task force to determine the workforce needs of people with disabilities.
- Ensure that CTE programs provide the opportunity for students with disabilities to master the general education curriculum to the maximum extent appropriate.
- Ensure that CTE programming is accessible to all students, including students in special education schools (e.g. 853 schools) and rural settings.
- Provide professional development opportunities for CTE staff in two key areas: (1) understanding disabilities and differentiated instruction strategies for students with disabilities; and (2) the availability and use of adaptive technology in the CTE classroom.

Recommendations for English Language Learners

- Develop CTE programs that incorporate the learning of English language skills into the CTE curriculum.
Example: An instructional approach which integrates language and content instruction is a big tenet of CTE instruction in New Mexico and Texas. Techniques can include scaffolding, adapting texts, integrating language and content concepts, emphasizing key vocabulary, connecting new learning to prior knowledge, and providing opportunities for interaction.

- Make sure schools provide ELLs and their families with interpretation and translation services, as needed, with respect to available programs, CTE curriculum, and safety protocols.

Example: In Montana, CTE materials must be available to communities of non-English speakers in their languages, if applicable.

- Mandate and increase opportunities for ELLs and CTE staff to collaborate on ELL issues and instruction.
- Develop bilingual CTE programs in areas of linguistic concentration to broaden access.
- Provide professional development opportunities for CTE staff in two key areas: (1) how to integrate support for language development into CTE curriculum; and (2) cultural competency to improve communication with and understanding of ELL students and their families.