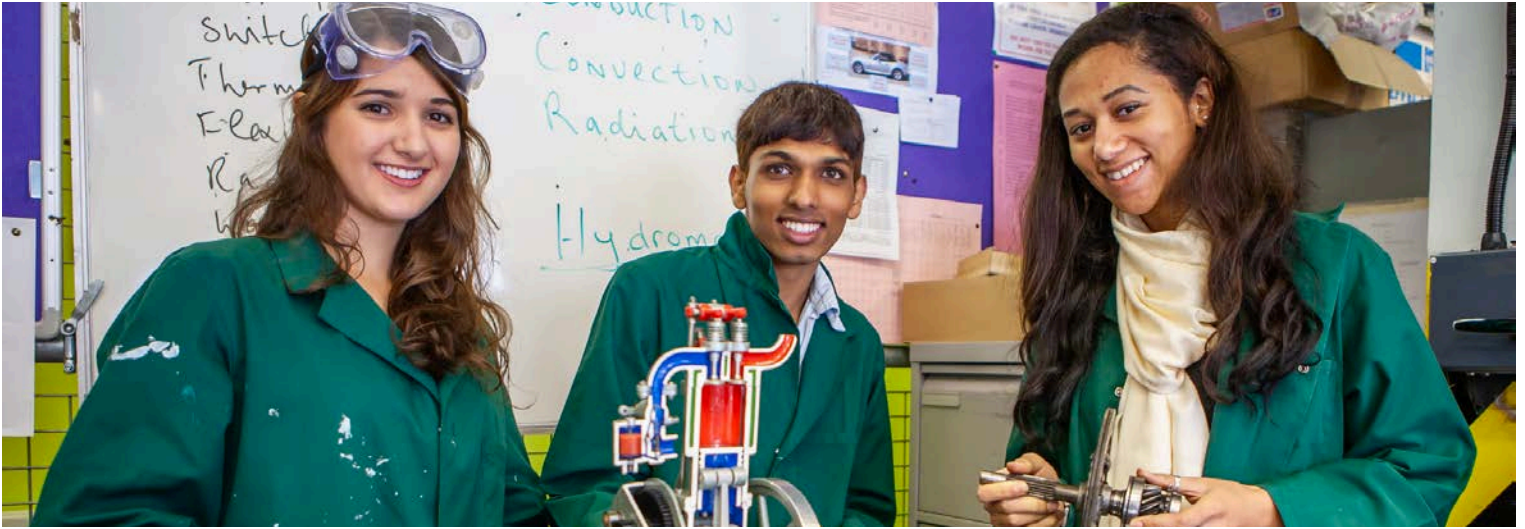


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BUILDING COHESION TO SUPPORT STUDENT SUCCESS – A BLOG SERIES: A FOCUS ON CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION FOR ALL

This article will focus on what Career and Technical Education (CTE) is and what it looks like in practice. We end by highlighting opportunities to apply an equity lens to CTE and ensure all students have access to high-quality programs that can lead to family-sustaining incomes and offer much-needed career mobility.

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DEFINING CTE IN PRACTICE

CTE is defined by the [California Department of Education](#) as a program of study that combines core academic knowledge with technical and occupational skills to provide a path for students into postsecondary education, training, and/or career. CTE programs are offered by most high schools across the state and feed into degree programs at local community colleges and four-year universities. CTE provides a vital link between educational and career pathways in a way that can profoundly impact students' life trajectories by providing them with space to explore potential career interests.

In practice, CTE builds the infrastructure for high school students to take classes in order to explore and refine their career interests and better facilitate their transition into working adults with access to high-wage, in-demand jobs. For example, a student who takes a fire technology CTE pathway class decides that he is no longer interested in becoming a firefighter. With guidance from his school counselor, he then explores a different pathway within the same industry sector (Health Science and Medical Technology), still centered on helping others in need – the patient care pathway. After taking his first class, the student confidently commits to and goes on to successfully complete the pathway offered through his high school. By the time he graduates, he has become a medical assistant and has a job lined up. While working in the healthcare field as a medical assistant, he is able to enroll in a four-year university and complete his bachelor's degree as a Registered Nurse. The clarity that came from exploring a career choice within the same industry sector that leveraged his initial training during high school allowed the student to move into a high-skill, in-demand career faster and more efficiently than more traditional options would have allowed.

INFUSING EQUITY IN CTE

Applying an equity lens to CTE is critical to ensuring all students, particularly racially minoritized students, have access to the benefits of these high-quality programs, regardless of where they live or the size of their personal networks. Based on the components of what makes a high quality CTE program, and in line with the [California State Plan for CTE](#), here are three approaches to creating equitable access to the skills needed for rewarding, gainful employment:

FOSTERING PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN SECONDARY AND POSTSECONDARY SYSTEMS AND FRAMEWORKS.

CTE programs are designed to integrate with core academic curricula, offering students a comprehensive education that combines technical skills with core academic knowledge. A crucial component is establishing clear pathways that offer students a way to learn technical skills while earning transfer-level units. This can ensure a smoother transition into postsecondary, and reduce the risk of making CTE programs into a secondary, less-emphasized pathway. Leveraging efforts such as [Linked Learning](#), [Guided Pathways](#), [K12 Strong Workforce Program](#), the recent [K16 Education Collaborative Grant Program](#), [Vision 2030](#), and cultivating strategic dual enrollment opportunities, can aid in scaling and streamlining pathways that advance regional needs and intentionally support students' trajectories.

ALIGNMENT OF PATHWAYS TO FAMILY-SUSTAINING OPPORTUNITIES.

Time and again, the data show that [taking CTE courses in high school really goes hand-in-hand with positive results, particularly in attaining better employment and higher earnings](#). The need for local implementation works in synergy with building relationships with industry partnerships to provide successful work-based learning opportunities. CTE classes are able to focus on critical skills identified by industry partners and prepare students for long-term skill implementation. Other classes, such as advanced placement (AP) classes, merely focus on preparing students to complete short-term goals, like being able to successfully pass their AP exams.

Clarifying the relationship between educational pathways, skills, and jobs, while using region-specific labor market data, can help educators and students explore [which pathways are likely to lead to family-sustaining jobs](#) in their region. Practitioners can use this information to explore opportunities for further study and employment and to support conversations with faculty and counselors about how institutions' academic options align with family-sustaining wages within their region.



INCREASE ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY CTE PROGRAMS FOR EVERY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

Expanding high-quality CTE opportunities to all students, [particularly those pathways that lead to family-sustaining wages and offer much-needed career mobility](#), can expose students to a variety of career options regardless of gender, where they live, their social economic status, or the size of their personal networks. High quality CTE programs can provide a space for students to gain employability skills, technical knowledge, and the training necessary to thrive in today's – and tomorrow's – workforce. Research has shown that some [high-demand CTE clusters](#), like [early childhood education](#), tend to attract more women of color yet offer wages that are below family sustaining, and are much lower than in other clusters like IT. Exploring what is driving these inequities and the potential for higher wages can illuminate opportunities to ensure racially minoritized students have access to high quality pathways. Additionally, we encourage district leaders and researchers to [regularly monitor CTE enrollment levels to ensure equitable access to indemand CTE programs and avoid replicated social stratification](#). The upcoming [Cradle-to-Career Pathway Diagram](#) can also help to clarify the educational pathways for various student populations and highlight the interconnection between education, employment, and living wages. These data can help identify equity gaps and inform targeted strategies to address them.

CTE provides a vital link between education and career in a way that can profoundly impact students' life trajectories. If our goal as educators and practitioners is to prepare students to be opportunity-ready, how can we provide equitable and student-centered CTE pathways to all students? A generation ago, CTE classes were viewed by many students and families as an alternative pathway only necessary for those not going to college. Since then, we have reframed the narrative and understand that CTE is relevant for all students as a way to gain both technical and critical life skills while in high school, and as an avenue that leads to social and economic mobility, particularly for youth from underserved backgrounds.



Laura Lara-Brady, Ph.D., WestEd

Dr Lara-Brady leads a number of projects at the Center for Economic Mobility at WestEd. One of her most exciting projects includes the evaluation and scalability of the PUENTE program across all community colleges in the state. Previously her work at the state level includes, developing a regional model to support the implementation of Guided Pathways, in partnership with the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, currently being replicated by 18 coordinators across all 116 community colleges. Beyond California, her work extends to connecting secondary and postsecondary systems in Utah, and more recently nationwide as a CO-PI on an National Science Foundation-funded INCLUDES Coordination Hub project focused on using a systems change approach to broadening participation of underrepresented populations in STEM. Dr Lara-Brady obtained her doctorate degree from the University of Northern Colorado on Educational Psychology with two minors; research & statistics, and special education. To strike up a conversation just ask her about running or her experience as an immigrant.



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Nancy is a credentialed school counselor with a deep commitment to provide academic guidance and support to students and families. In her current role as a Program Specialist in the William S. Hart Union High School District, she works to provide college and career programs to support 22,000 students across 13 school sites in the district. She has been instrumental in funding these programs by writing and administering three major grants which include the California Technical Education Incentive Grant (CTEIG), Strong Workforce Grant (SWP), and the Perkins Grant. These grants have an annual combined award of \$4.5 million. In addition to these responsibilities, Nancy facilitates 13 industry advisory meetings to support 26 CTE career pathways across the district. These meetings connect teachers, parents, higher education partners, and business leaders to provide program improvement guidance for each industry sector. Nancy holds a B.A. in History from Mount Holyoke College, a master's degree in School Counseling from the University of La Verne, and a master's degree in Public Policy from the University of Southern California Sol Price School of Public Policy.