



# Confronting the CTE Stigma

## Perceptions of CTE Among Mississippi Public and Educators

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### CTE in Mississippi

Career and technical education (CTE) plays a vital role in preparing Mississippi's students for success in college and careers, and roughly one third of Mississippi students enroll in at least one CTE course during high school. CTE brings relevance to education, helping students connect what they learn in school with their career aspirations. In particular, CTE equips students with the skills and experience needed to enter middle-skill jobs, which typically require a certification or license but not a four-year degree and are projected to be a key area of growth for Mississippi's economy.

### CTE Stigma

Despite the essential role it plays in preparing students for college and careers, CTE carries an unfortunate stigma, a holdover from the days when CTE was no more than "vo-tech" or "shop class." Although CTE students go on to success in a wide variety of careers, and many pursue some form of higher education, a common perception of CTE is that it is a dumping ground for students who lack a promising future. Perceptions that CTE is outdated or lacking in rigor take a toll on enrollment, as parents and educators alike steer college-bound students away from CTE.

However, the reality of modern-day CTE stands in stark contrast to these negative perceptions. Students enrolled in CTE actually graduate from high school at higher rates than their peers. With courses in areas such as polymer science, engineering, and health sciences, modern-day CTE is preparing students to enter high-tech, high-demand fields. Students who complete coursework in a CTE pathway have the opportunity to graduate from high school with industry-recognized credentials and relevant real-world experience, providing a jump-start to their careers.

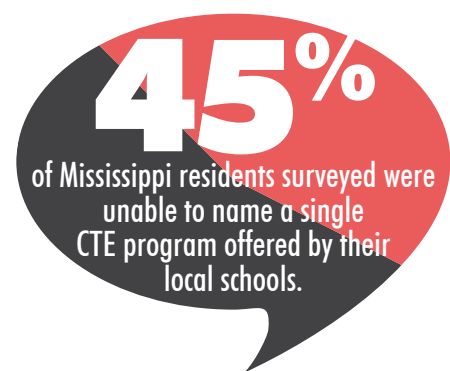
The general public's dated perspective does not match the reality of modern-day CTE, and more troublingly, neither does perspective of many Mississippi educators.

## Study of CTE Perceptions in Mississippi

Researchers from the Research and Curriculum Unit (RCU) at Mississippi State University examined key stakeholders' opinions of CTE. As part of a multiphase study, samples of Mississippi residents and educators were each surveyed to determine their perceptions of CTE. Although the surveys used with the two groups were not identical, they asked similar questions regarding respondents' opinions about CTE programs in Mississippi, the students who benefit most from CTE participation, and the ability of CTE to successfully prepare students for college and careers.

### What do Mississippi residents think of CTE?

In the first phase of the study, 403 adult residents of Mississippi were surveyed by telephone to determine their attitudes toward CTE. A dual-frame random-digit-dialing sampling methodology was employed in which both landline and cellular telephone numbers were used to contact eligible adults aged 18 or older. Among the respondents, 62% were White, and 35% were Black. Fifty-two percent were female and 48% were male. Forty-one percent of the participants were the parent or guardian of a school-age child; 27% said they have had a child participate in a CTE program at their school.



#### CTE PROGRAMS

Although Mississippi residents recognized the potential value of CTE, 45% were unable to name a single CTE program offered by their local schools. When asked to name examples of CTE programs in general, most respondents mentioned manual labor and trades fields, such as welding or automobile repair. The majority of respondents failed to link more cutting-edge fields, such as engineering, marketing, or graphic design, with CTE.

#### CTE STUDENTS

When asked which students would benefit most from participation in CTE, 44% of respondents described students who were disadvantaged in one way or another, such as students who are not college bound, students in poverty, or students with poor grades. There was little reference to the idea that students interested in pursuing a particular career might benefit from participation in a CTE program in their area of interest. When asked whether CTE would be beneficial for students who are college-bound, only 48% said yes, again indicating a limited view of who stands to benefit from CTE.

#### PREPARATION FOR COLLEGE AND CAREERS

A majority of respondents (55%) failed to recognize that CTE students can receive college-preparatory diplomas, indicating a lack of understanding of the postsecondary options CTE provides for students. On the other hand, respondents did seem to understand the value of educational collaboration with business and industry, and 98% said it was Very Important or Important for CTE instructors to work closely with local businesses.

### What do Mississippi teachers think of CTE?

For the second phase of the study, researchers distributed an online survey to every district in Mississippi and asked principals to forward the survey to the teachers on their campuses. The 28-item survey received 2,359 responses from Mississippi educators, 70% of whom were teachers. Other respondent categories included principals, counselors, librarians, and district administrators.

**2,359**  
Mississippi  
educators  
surveyed

**20%** of educators not sure if their district offered CTE

**83%** of those were teachers

**61%** of those were elementary school teachers

## CTE PROGRAMS

Nearly 20% of educators responding to the survey were Not Sure if their district offered CTE programming. The majority of these unsure respondents were teachers (83%), many of whom worked in elementary schools (61%). On the one hand, this lack of knowledge is to be expected because CTE programs are focused in the secondary grades. However, because CTE programs are often housed in their own building or campus, being unaware of CTE means teachers are unaware of the existence of a large-scale program that often functions as its own school.

When asked to rate the quality of CTE in Mississippi, half of respondents said Mississippi's CTE programs were either Excellent or Good. Notably, about one third of the educators who rated CTE in Mississippi as Poor also answered that they were not sure whether their district offered CTE programming. Educators rating the quality of Mississippi's CTE as Poor were also more likely to agree that CTE coursework carries a stigma and more likely to be Not Sure whether CTE participants can receive an advanced high school diploma (they can). A correlational relationship emerged between low knowledge of CTE programs and poor or incorrect perceptions of CTE.

## CTE STUDENTS

Twelve percent of educators responded that college-bound students were Slightly or Not at All Likely to benefit from participation in CTE. When asked which students were most likely to benefit from CTE, 91% selected "at-risk" students, and 97% singled out "students likely to enter the workforce after [high school] graduation." Similar to the findings from the general population survey, educators also viewed CTE programming as most appropriate for students with academic deficiencies or a low probability of pursuing higher education.

## PREPARATION FOR COLLEGE AND CAREERS

When asked how well Mississippi students are prepared for today's workforce, a majority of educators answered Average (51%), with Below Average (33%) the next most common choice. Once again, there was a correlational relationship between low knowledge and poor perception of CTE.

As in the community survey, participants in the educator survey strongly supported the idea that schools and businesses should collaborate more closely to prepare students for their future careers. A plurality of educators (47%) supported the idea that students should begin work-based learning opportunities (e.g., job shadowing or internships) in middle school.



**47%** of Mississippi  
educators  
support work-based learning  
opportunities beginning in  
middle school

## Key Takeaways

- Many misconceptions about CTE persist, even among educators. The perception that disadvantaged students receive the most benefit from CTE exists as strongly among educators as it does among the general public.

When asked to name CTE programs, most respondents' answers focused on only on trades, such as carpentry or welding, indicating a failure to understand modern-day CTE's broad range of offerings. Community members, as well as teachers, seem to believe students who lack academic capability and who are not college bound are most likely to benefit from CTE participation.

- The less educators know about their district's CTE programs, the more likely they are to hold negative perceptions about CTE. In the educator survey, researchers repeatedly noticed a correlation between uncertainty and poor perceptions. Participants who said they did not know much about specific CTE programs were more likely to assume that the quality of CTE in Mississippi was low, whereas respondents who were aware of CTE tended to have a much more favorable opinion of it. This discrepancy indicates a need to better inform educators about CTE and its benefits for all students.
- In both surveys, nearly all respondents agreed that schools and businesses should work closely together. This nearly universal recognition indicates a willingness among school and community stakeholders to forge partnerships that benefit students, especially partnerships that support career exploration and preparation.

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## Recommendations

- CTE educators should consider more active promotion of their CTE programs. The survey for the general public asked about the preferred media outlet for learning about CTE, and respondents favored newspapers, television, and social media. Parents, teachers, and students—the three main influencers in a student's educational choices—all need to be reached with messages about modern-day CTE offerings and their benefits for all students.
- Communicate the idea that students of all types benefit from CTE participation. Highlighting examples of college-bound students who benefitted from CTE might be a particularly effective way of getting this message across. Highlighting specific aspects of CTE, such as its flexibility, fast track to careers, and high-skill, high demand job opportunities, may be beneficial as well.
- When promoting CTE, don't forget about educating fellow teachers. Increasing the visibility of CTE within schools is essential to changing attitudes among educators. This is essential because educators are often the frontline of advising students about careers and college preparation. If educators do not think college-bound students benefit from CTE, they will be unlikely to steer these students toward participation in CTE courses.

## Resources

- The RCU has created a CTE promotional toolkit packed with helpful resources, including posters, a news release template, and tips for starting a social media account for a CTE center or class. Download the free toolkit at [rcu.msstate.edu/CTEpromo](http://rcu.msstate.edu/CTEpromo).
- The RCU also publishes a biannual magazine, *Connections*, that highlights innovative K-12 CTE programs and practices in Mississippi, and is distributed to CTE centers and educators across the state. Story ideas or announcements are always welcome and may be submitted at [msurcu.wufoo.com/forms/pt57tpv1uu1jvq](http://msurcu.wufoo.com/forms/pt57tpv1uu1jvq).



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