

Making a Winning Case for CTE

How Local Leaders Can Communicate the Value of CTE

As a local leader, you are on the front lines of encouraging more students and their parents to embrace Career Technical Education (CTE). You are uniquely positioned to serve as a powerful advocate for and leader in CTE.

This short guide provides you with ideas for how to utilize key messages and research from [*The Value and Promise of Career Technical Education: Results from a National Survey of Parents and Students*](#) to communicate the importance of CTE effectively, especially to the most important audiences – students and parents.

Understanding the Research

While CTE programs have improved greatly in the last decade in terms of quality, rigor and opportunities for work-based experiences, enrollment levels have remained stagnant. At the same time, demand continues to soar for employees who have the skills that CTE can provide.

CTE advocates and leaders recognize that one of the obstacles to engaging more students is the pervasive stigma that CTE is a lesser, tracked option. To overcome this misperception, Advance CTE, a national association that represents state leaders of CTE, commissioned a national survey of current and prospective CTE students and their parents to better understand how to talk about CTE and the great value it delivers. You can read more about the survey and its results in [*The Value and Promise of Career Technical Education: Results from a National Survey of Parents and Students*](#).

Your State CTE Leaders are Here to Help

As you work your way through this guide and familiarize yourself with the CTE messages and materials, please know that your State CTE Director and leaders in your state are an excellent resource for answering your questions and making sure you have what you need to start putting this great work into action. Get in touch with him or her early and often.

Key to Success 1: Review the research findings and ask your State Director and/or Advance CTE any questions you might have.

The Messages that Work with Parents and Students When Talking about CTE

A core set of messages for talking about the benefits of CTE emerged from this research:

- CTE Delivers Real Options for Students for College and Rewarding Careers
- CTE Delivers Real-World Skills for Students
- CTE Delivers a Real High School Experience with More Value for Students

As a whole, these are the messages about the value of CTE that you should repeat each and every time you engage with parents and students – or related groups or organizations – on the benefits of CTE. Message discipline is foundational to changing the narrative on what CTE is and the benefits it delivers for students.

Talking points that support these messages with more detail and evidence from the survey are available in [Core Messages for Attracting Students to Career Technical Education](#). You will find that these supportive statements translate the core messages into practical guidance for spokespersons. They provide support for the core message framework and can be used in whole or in part, depending on the audience, to advance your advocacy efforts.

Key to Success 2: Keep your message and materials simple and consistent.

How to Put the Messages into Action

Identify Your Audience

Your audience are the people around you who need to hear and believe the message for you to reach your goal of engaging more students in CTE. Make a list of who those people are, starting with the ones who are closest to you and should be your allies in championing CTE – for example, CTE educators, career counselors, administrators, career technical student organization advisors, after-school coordinators, etc.

Work from those closest to you to those further away from your inner circle or not yet on board with CTE. These people may include academic educators, guidance counselors, business and industry partners and community organizations. And then, of course, you want to include students and parents as an audience.

This practice of working from internal to external audiences is the backbone of “inside-out” communications, and is one of the most effective ways to build an effort to promote an issue like CTE. “Inside-out” communications means developing a plan for reaching out first to the audiences closest to you and then moving to audiences more external. The idea is to win supporters among the people who know you and your mission best so they can be activated to help carry your message forward. You can learn more about this technique in [Advocacy 101: Putting Strategy Into Action](#).

Key to Success 3: Start with the audiences closest to you to win allies who can help you reach out to external audiences.

Connect the Messages to Each Audience

A message has impact when it has meaning for a particular audience. While the audiences we are ultimately trying to persuade are students and parents, there are many other important stakeholders, such as your fellow local educator leaders, business and industry partners, community organizations, etc., who should be reinforcing your messages as you advance your efforts.

Once you identify the audiences you need to reach in order to surround parents and students with positive messages about CTE, you can make sure the core messages are tailored to resonate with each audience. This does not mean rewriting the messages; it means playing up some messages with some audiences and playing down some with others.

For example, you might find that, when trying to enlist the support of business leaders, they would be more interested in hearing about the real-world skills that CTE delivers to students, rather than about how CTE is a real high school experience. If they conclude that CTE is going to better prepare their future employees to thrive in a real-world setting, they are more likely to support your efforts to encourage greater CTE enrollment.

The [Advocacy 101: Putting Strategy Into Action](#) guide provides details on better understanding what your audiences will likely be most interested in knowing and how to tailor messages to gain their support.

Key to Success 4: Connecting with an audience means having the right message and the right channel of communication.

Develop an Engagement Plan

An engagement plan simply means thinking about the best ways to reach the audiences with the messages you have planned for them. Below are actions you can take to connect the CTE messages with audiences. You may use many of these in your efforts to reach your audiences:

- **One-on-one meetings** with colleagues and other potential CTE allies. Personal interaction is a very strong opportunity to discuss the value of CTE directly with key allies and share CTE guides or other marketing materials for students and parents that they can help you distribute.
- **Ask for time to speak at after-school programs and extracurricular activities** (i.e. science and math clubs) that are not focused on CTE but may align with your district's or school's CTE programs. You can reach a new audience of students in these already assembled groups.

Engagement 101: The 11-Touches Rule

The general rule of thumb is that an audience needs to hear a message at least 11 times before they start to absorb it – so if you are repeating yourself in multiple venues, you're engaging the right way.

- **Regularly work the messages into your school systems' communications and social media platforms**, including email updates to students, back-to-school messages and outreach when students are enrolling in classes. Keep it simple and avoid lengthy posts on the issue; use these opportunities to make the case for CTE on a routine basis.
- **Partner with elementary and middle schools** so that you are starting early to encourage students to sign up for CTE when they get to high school.
- **Empower your students to become ambassadors** by giving them the core set of messages and asking them to talk up the benefits of CTE to their friends, elementary and middle school students, other parents and industry and community partners.
- **Train your industry and postsecondary partners on the messages** so that they too are talking up the benefits of CTE in the right way.
- **Include CTE messaging in your media relations efforts** so that reporters include the messages in their stories today – and follow up to cover CTE in more detail in future coverage.
- **Use the messages in the classroom and school assemblies, as appropriate.** There is never a bad time for a good message about CTE. Make sure any outreach you are doing includes these new messages and related talking points. Utilize those key messengers, like CTE students and guidance counselors, to get the message across.

Amplify CTE Student Successes

Stories from students and parents about how CTE changed their lives in a positive way are some of the best advocacy materials. If you have a story, we encourage you to use it in your outreach...and please let your State Director know so that others can use it to promote CTE as well!

These are just examples, and you will certainly know more and better ways to reach fellow educators, parents, students and all the audiences who have a stake in CTE. Details on engagement planning can be found in [Advocacy 101: Putting Strategy Into Action](#).

To conduct these activities, you will most likely need materials like fact sheets, PowerPoint presentations, perhaps a page on your school's website, etc. As you are developing these resources, check out Advance CTE's [resources](#) for inspiration, remember to keep them simple and straightforward and consider testing them with supportive students and parents before making them live.

Last but not least, always remember that your State Director and Advance CTE are available to help you. Contact us anytime!

Key to Success 5: Communicate often and with purpose – and leverage the student voice whenever possible.