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Career Tech Ed Gets a Boost in U.S. Senate Committee

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(<http://www.insidesources.com/author/jessicatowhey/>).

Closing the skills gap is the number one priority of businesses in the United States. Traci Tapani, who owns a manufacturing company with her sister, hopes that Congress feels equally as strong to overcome any opposition the Trump Administration may put up against prioritizing funding for Career Technical Education. “It’s not a partisan issue,” Tapani said.

A year ago, the U.S. House passed its version of the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act. Members of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pension Committee have been working at the direction of Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN) to find a bipartisan agreement that includes limiting the role of the Secretary of Education.

The HELP Committee’s bill, passed on a voice-vote, will send up a bill to the full Senate that lets states set their own goals for career tech education (CTE) without needing approval from the secretary. However, programs must show they are making “meaningful” progress toward goals, which will focus on “core indicators” like high school graduation rates and CTE enrollment numbers in post-secondary programs. The Senate’s bill will require schools to meet goals in two years instead of the three they have now or face losing federal dollars. Federal dollars and making it less complicated to comply with federal regulations could make a big difference in some states for career tech education. Sen. Mike Enzi (R-WY), appointed by Alexander to hash out the committee’s agreement with Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA), notes on his website that “one sixth of school districts [in Wyoming] have chosen not to participate in this program because the compliance and reporting burdens have been too heavy to justify the funds they would receive.”

According to the Association for Career and Technical Education, the average high school graduate rate for CTE programs in 2012 was 93 percent, and 80 percent of CTE students in college prep programs met career and readiness goals. The association notes that half of STEM jobs call for workers with less than a bachelor’s degree, 3 million workers will be needed to meet infrastructure industry needs, and an explosion in the rate of growth for healthcare workers will put demands on qualified employees. More than 80 percent of manufacturing companies struggling to find skilled workers.

“When we first entered the industry, there were a lot more manufacturing workers who had skills who were generally available in the market,” said Tapani, co-president of Wyoming Machine in Minnesota.

Tapani is not referring to skills that employers develop after decades on the job. She said that many people don’t have a grasp on math skills such as working in fractions, they can’t manage calculations necessary for using tape measures or calipers.

Sen. Tina Smith (D-MN) visited Wyoming Machine and mentioned the company during her remarks during the Senate HELP markup. Tapani was reached by phone following the hearing.

“The fundamentals aren’t being taught the way they were in the past,” Tapani said. “For us, we’ve been working on this for more than a decade, making ourselves aware of (the growing skills gap). The point is, those things that we’ve always taken for grant – what kids are learning and what they think they need to know ... We see fewer and fewer people who are available who have manufacturing skills.”

She remains concerned, though, that the necessary focus on strengthening CTE may slide, considering that the first budget from the White House this year proposed cutting CTE funding by \$168 million. Tapani also said that the federal government is considering making cuts to the workforce systems in states that support training for dislocated workers and others looking for resources to learn skills to gain employment.

White House Senior Advisor Ivanka Trump has pushed for reauthorizing the Perkins Act, tweeting a link to a World Economic Forum report indicating that 57 percent of the jobs most at-risk from automation are held by women. She also met with Senators to discuss the legislation.

For their part, Members of Congress appear committed to setting aside the partisan rancor that has swept up Washington over the last two years in favor of reauthorizing the Perkins Act, which was last done in 2012.

Senate HELP Committee members offered praise for colleagues across the aisle as they spoke of the importance of CTE in their communities.

“When you live in the bush, a career means you are the small engine mechanic who can fix the engine that’s broken down or fix a four-wheeler,” said Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-AK). “We need to make sure young people can run and repair water and wastewater systems. This is where they get that training. What comes from this program cannot be stated more strongly. This is not just about a career. This is about putting food on your table, money in your pocket.”

The bill also has broad backing from the business community and governors, and a number of groups submitted letters in support of the reauthorization.



About the Author

Jessica R. Towhey

(<http://www.insidesources.com/author/jessicatowhey/>)

Jessica Towhey writes on education policy for InsideSources.

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