

Testimony of Shani Watkins
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Before the

Committee on Small Business
Subcommittee on Innovation and Workforce Development
U.S. House of Representatives

“Back to School, Back to Startups: Supporting Youth Apprenticeship, Entrepreneurship, and
Workforce Development”

September 15, 2022

Good morning Chairman Crow, Ranking Member Kim, and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss this important issue. My name is Shani Watkins, and I am the Director of West Sound Technical Skills Center in Bremerton, Washington. I also serve as the Region V vice president for the Association for Career and Technical Education, known as ACTE, and am the 2022 ACTE Administrator of the Year.

West Sound Technical Skills Center provides advanced career and technical education (CTE) programs to 10 school districts across the Kitsap Peninsula and serves students in their junior and senior year of high school. Students spend half their school day at West Sound Tech and the other half of their day at their sending school. We offer 13 programs, 12 at our main campus, and one at a satellite at the Northwest Maritime Center in Port Townsend. Our programs are: 3D Animation & Game Design, Automotive Tech, Collision Repair Tech, Construction Careers, Cosmetology, Criminal Justice, Culinary Arts, Esthetics, Fire Science, HVAC Tech, Maritime Academy, Professional Medical Careers, and Welding. Currently, we serve 555 students. Students graduating from West Sound Tech are prepared for careers, college, and all postsecondary possibilities.

Career and Technical Education

CTE engages students through hands-on, active learning and prepares them with the skills they need for further education and fulfilling careers in vital, in-demand industries and occupations. According to the Department of Education, 92%¹ of high school students and 69%² of college and adult students are engaged in CTE at comprehensive and CTE-dedicated high schools, magnet schools, area technical centers, community and technical colleges, and some four-year universities.

CTE learners have opportunities to learn on the job and earn valuable credentials such as industry certifications and licenses, postsecondary certificates, and degrees. Some of the benefits of CTE include:

¹ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HLS:09), Base-year, 2013 Update, and High School Transcript File

² U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015–16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16)

- CTE students are more likely to graduate from high school. The average high school graduation rate for CTE concentrators – students who take multiple courses in one CTE program area – is 94%³ compared to the national rate of 85%.⁴
- CTE students are just as likely as other students to enroll in college and earn a degree or postsecondary certificate.⁵
- CTE students build fulfilling careers. More than 75% of employers from in-demand industries report hiring an employee because of knowledge and skills gained through CTE.⁶
- CTE students are high earners. Workers with degrees in CTE fields can earn more than \$2 million over their lifetimes.⁷

Connecting Students to Small Business Opportunities

At West Sound Tech, we have a variety of partnerships with local small businesses, including Miller Sheet Metal, SafeBoats, Stafford Suites, Martha and Mary long-term care, Haselwood Group, and True Autobody. These businesses provide important, relevant learning for our students to better prepare for life after high school. In particular, Stafford Suites, Martha & Mary long-term care, Haselwood Group, and True Autobody provide paid work opportunities for students attending West Sound Tech. Further, these partners and more support a variety of engagement activities for students on campus so that they can learn more about postsecondary opportunities.

Each year, West Sound Tech holds a Try-A-Trade day, where our industry partners bring their tools and equipment to our local fairgrounds so that students from grades 9-12 can experience, first-hand, what different careers offer. We also hold an onsite event for students, similar to a conference, called West Sound Tech Works. This is a two-day event during which our local business and industry partners come to West Sound Tech and share their experiences and knowledge with students. Students attend two sessions each day and participate in 14 different workshops provided by our industry partners. In addition, West Sound Tech holds an evening

³ Perkins Collaborative Resource Network. (N.d.). Customized Consolidated Annual Report data.

⁴ National Center for Education Statistics. (N.d.). Common Core of Data: Table 1. Public high school 4-year adjusted cohort rate. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2017-18.asp

⁵ U.S. Department of Education. (2019, September). Bridging the skills gap: Career and technical education in high school. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/cte/index.html>

⁶ Advance CTE. (2021, October). Shifting the skills conversation. Retrieved from https://cte.careertech.org/sites/default/files/files/resources/EmployerResearchReport_100621_small.pdf

⁷ Carnevale, A. P., Cheah, B., & Wenzinger, E. (2021). The college payoff: More education doesn't always mean more earnings. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. Retrieved from <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/collegepayoff2021/#data>

event called Explore Your Future, in which community partners are invited to participate, including business and industry, local support services, two-year and four-year colleges, apprenticeship programs, and the military. In total, more than 65 different partners hold booths with information for families about opportunities after high school. Typically, we have more than 500 students and families in attendance. Each spring, West Sound Tech holds a practice interviewing event for students with two business/industry partners from the student's specific content area. For example, Miller Sheet Metal and the welding shop at Puget Naval Shipyard will interview students from the welding program, while Martha & Mary long-term care and Stafford Suites will interview students completing their CNA in the professional medical careers program. Every student enrolled at West Sound Tech completed this interview experience, which increased their likelihood of being hired upon graduation.

One-third of students attending West Sound Tech go directly into the workforce based on their work-based learning experiences at West Sound Tech, another one-third of our students go on to community and technical colleges and four-year universities, while many of the remaining students choose apprenticeships and military career options post-graduation. These work-based learning experiences are critical to preparing students for life and career.

Expanding Apprenticeship Opportunities to High School Juniors and Seniors

West Sound Tech has a long history of preparing students to enter into apprenticeship programs after high school. Both our Construction Careers and Welding courses have pre-apprenticeship articulations with the laborers and ironworker's unions, respectively. Students meet all the requirements for entry into the apprenticeship programs while they are at West Sound Tech. For example, students in the construction program learn all of the physical requirements for entry, complete the minimum math requirements, earn their First Aid/CPR card, and attain their Flagger certification to help control traffic safely in construction zones. It is critical that there be more opportunities for students to engage in pre-apprentice and apprenticeship programs during their junior and senior years of high school, better preparing them to meet the needs of business and industry. Expanding opportunities for students to engage in apprenticeship experiences through federal incentives for small businesses would increase student access to these vital and relevant experiences.

Replicating Successful Programs to Small Business

Puget Sound Naval Shipyard supports an annual work-study program, hiring up to 30 high school students during the summer between their junior and senior years. These students are provided an hourly wage (above minimum wage) and benefits during their summer experience.

Students spend their summer in work and training situations that provide the opportunity to rotate among 11 different shops located throughout the shipyard. Students learn safety requirements for each shop, review the various hand and power tools used, and acquire the fundamental knowledge and skills necessary to work in a large industrial environment. At the end of the summer, students return to school for the first semester of their senior year of high school. Then, during the second semester of their senior year, the students return to the shipyard and again work full time. Often, the work-study experience leads to a future career for many students. Once hired into the shipyard after high school, candidates qualify to enter the various apprenticeship programs offered at the shipyard. This model could be replicated with other small businesses to better support workforce needs and experiences for students to prepare for living wage careers.

Barriers to Access

Students face several challenges to accessing relevant experiences while in high school that prepare them for entry into the workforce. In particular, students in more rural areas have limited transportation options, thereby creating access issues. This limits students' opportunity to engage in CTE, pre-apprenticeship, and apprenticeship programs.

For example, many students that attend West Sound Tech travel by school bus. With the lack of bus drivers at this time, bus routes are limited and schools are eliminating routes to West Sound Tech, thus creating equity and access issues for students. In addition, we serve ten school districts across three different counties and some students travel up to an hour or more one way to attend classes daily. It can be a difficult choice for students to weigh the value of attending West Sound Tech versus the time lost daily in travel. Travel to participate in out-of-school activities like internships can be even more challenging.

In addition to transportation, many of our lower income students face challenges participating in work-based learning activities that are unpaid. Many of our students have to choose between a "volunteer" experience as an intern in a career area they are interested in and working at a local restaurant or grocery store to be able to support themselves or their families. However, many small businesses can not afford to pay students for internships.

Policy Solutions

We are very appreciative of the federal Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act funding that increases students' access to high-quality CTE and work-based learning experiences. However, industry preparation is expensive and the funding, while helpful, does

not fully fund the necessary equipment needed to run effective, rigorous, and relevant programming. We need increased funding through Perkins to better support the development of high quality, rigorous, and relevant career and technical education programming that meets the future needs of employers – especially small businesses that often do not have the capacity to provide their own training programs. This year, national CTE leaders are asking Congress to provide a \$200 million increase to the Perkins Basic State Grant program. In addition, there are several other policy actions that could help support small businesses and the education programs that prepare their workforce:

- Funding to support and incentivize small businesses to partner with educational institutions, including training for both the small business and the students on effective work-based learning experiences.
- Funding to support student pay during work-based learning experiences with small businesses - either through grants or tax credits for the business.
- Increasing access to and funding for apprenticeship programs, including youth and pre-apprenticeships.
- Funding to support student completion of certifications during high school so that they are more prepared for employment with small businesses.

In conclusion, stronger partnerships between small business and secondary schools will help to increase a segment of the economy that is currently experiencing significant challenges in finding a ready workforce. Students engaged in CTE programs are better prepared for the workforce, less likely to need significant student loans, and are more likely to have the skills and credentials that meet workplace needs.