

Has CTE Evolved Away from Voc-Ed Students?



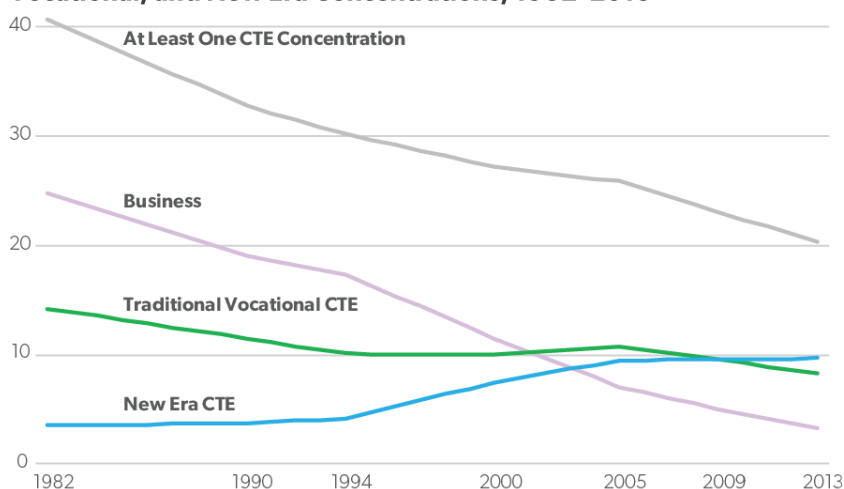
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Nearly a year after Congress reauthorized the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act, states are in the thick of developing the career and technical education (CTE) plans the law requires. Compared to the vocational education of the 1980s, the courses and students that make up today's CTE programs have shifted dramatically. By most accounts, it seems we've moved past the '80s stereotypes of "voc-ed" as an academic dead-end. Rigorous evidence has shown specific CTE programs are boosting student outcomes, and more generally, CTE concentrators are seeing increased graduation rates and higher earnings. However, the transformation from voc-ed to CTE may have hidden, rather than solved, the durable challenges in vocational education.

- Between 1982 and 2013, overall CTE course taking declined 27 percent, but the percentage of concentrators fell even more, about 50 percent.
- This decline came mostly from business courses, driven by a drop in typing courses since the '80s.
- CTE concentrations in "Traditional Vocational" occupational areas—such as manufacturing, agriculture, or transportation—declined by a third, while "New Era" areas—such as computer science, health care, or communications—increased by 238 percent.

Percentage of High School Graduates with Business, Traditional Vocational, and New Era Concentrations, 1982–2013



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, HSB, 1982; National Center for Education Statistics, HSTS, 1990, 1994, 2000, 2005, and 2009; and National Center for Education Statistics, HSLS, 2013.

New Era concentrations, which do not fit voc-ed stereotypes, differ from Traditional Vocational concentrations by not only their growth but also concentrators' average test scores.

- Overall CTE math scores rose from the 42nd to the 46th percentile between 1982 and 2013, but **Traditional Vocational** concentrators scored at the 38th percentile consistently since the '80s.
- Since 2000, **New Era** concentrators' scores showed no differences from all high school graduates' average scores, remaining one point above or below the 50th percentile.
- As New Era concentrators increased from 9 to 48 percent of all concentrators, their higher scores had a powerful influence on the average for all CTE concentrators—overshadowing Traditional Vocational concentrators' lower performance.

The latest data, from 2013, detail how the divide between Traditional Vocational and New Era concentrators goes well beyond test scores.

- On measures as diverse as school engagement, when students pass algebra I, expectations to earn a B.A., and college attendance, the split between Traditional Vocational and New Era concentrators extends from when graduates were in ninth grade, throughout high school, to after graduation.
- Across a range of measures, **Traditional Vocational concentrators look much less academically inclined than average**, while **New Era concentrators are indistinguishable from the average graduates**.

For CTE to be successful, leaders (especially those currently developing state plans) must ask themselves not just whether CTE programs are producing adequate outcomes but also **whether CTE systems target the students who need them the most**. Current accountability under Perkins monitors the *quality* of CTE programs but may overlook *whom* they serve. Building functional programs that put academically disinclined students into viable jobs without postsecondary education is an essential, albeit difficult, goal. CTE may be the last best chance for these students to find a promising career path, and CTE systems will ultimately be a failure if they cannot deliver opportunity specifically to these students.

For more details on this study, check out *The Evolution of Career and Technical Education: 1982–2013*.