

**Testimony before the Senate Education Committee**  
**Subject: The Impact of Unfunded Mandates on Career and Technical Education (CTE) in Pennsylvania**  
**Presented by Dr. Michael Herrera, Executive Director, UBCTS**

**Introduction**

Honorable Senator Coleman, Chairman Argall, and esteemed members of the Senate Education Committee, I am Michael Herrera, the Executive Director of Upper Bucks County Technical School (UBCTS). My testimony today focuses on unfunded mandates and their impact on Career and Technical Education (CTE) in Pennsylvania. I'm very grateful for your support in securing additional equipment grant funds, which are instrumental to our mission. I would also like to thank you for your unwavering commitment to CTE and our students' future in Pennsylvania.

**Overview of Upper Bucks Technical School**

UBCTS is a proud leader in career and technical education within our region. Over the years, our school has demonstrated remarkable growth, with enrollment surging from 658 students in 2012 to a current count of 915, with an additional 90 students eagerly awaiting admission from a waitlist. This growth is a testament to UBCTS's dedication to equipping students with essential skills for various technical fields, thus contributing directly to Pennsylvania's workforce and economic prosperity.

We have consistently produced graduates in high demand, seamlessly transitioning them into high-skill roles in the workforce. In 2022, 81% of cooperative education graduates received job offers even before graduation, with an average starting salary of \$14.94 per hour. As a result, UBCTS has gained national recognition as a semi-finalist in the U.S. Department of Education's Career Z Challenge. Envision the positive impact on Pennsylvania's economy if we extend these opportunities to every student on our waitlist.

**Innovation Thrives at UBCTS, Despite the Weight of Mandates**

UBCTS is a shining example of innovation, even in the face of stifling mandates. For instance, UBCTS has forged a groundbreaking partnership with NASA through the HUNCH (High Schools United with NASA to Create Hardware) program. The collaboration has seen our students manufacturing precision hardware for the International Space Station, including components for the NanoRack CubeSat Deployer. These students contribute to small satellites that contain experiments for universities and businesses, with NASA providing drawings and students manufacturing parts that must meet exacting standards. The quality of their work has earned them recognition from NASA.

representatives, highlighting the exceptional dedication and talent cultivated within the UBCTS community.

### **The Burden of Unfunded Mandates**

Unfunded mandates severely hamper our ability to provide dynamic, relevant CTE programs. They deplete resources, stifle innovation, and create a dissonance between our curriculum and industry requirements, directly undermining our mission to equip students for the workforce.

### **Compliance Mandates and Lack of Resources**

- 1) **Right-to-Know requests** have grown substantially in frequency and complexity at UBCTS in recent years. For instance, between 2009 and 2011, we handled only eight such requests. However, from 2012 to the present, this number has grown exponentially to 64. The challenge is the sheer volume and the intricate nature of these inquiries. One notable case involved an individual submitting six distinct requests simultaneously while another requester sought the same information every four months. Each of these demands places a significant administrative burden on our institution, necessitating exhaustive navigation, research, and the meticulous preparation of information. Compounded by our limited administrative staff, these requests siphon vital resources and precious time away from our core educational mission. This dual impact strains our operational efficiency and imposes an unwarranted financial burden, often compelling us to extend work hours to manage these requests alongside our regular responsibilities.
- 2) **Lack of Special Education Funding** - To adequately support special education students at the technical school in Pennsylvania, it's crucial that special education funding accompanies part-time CTE students. This approach is essential as more than 40 percent of our student population falls under the special education category. By ensuring that funding follows students to CTCs, we can effectively address these students' needs and equip them for successful careers. Considering the constraints of our local school districts' resources is vital.
- 3) **Recruiting and Retaining Teachers** - In the current climate, recruiting and retaining qualified CTE educators is difficult and often impossible. This is primarily because of the overwhelming requirements to earn CTE teacher certification. The Subject Matter Experts hired as CTE teachers face an eleven-year pathway to earn CTE certification. This pathway does not necessarily make them better teachers. For example, an AWS Master Welder who must take a history elective for certification is inconsistent with

the Skills First model and will not make this individual a better Welding Instructor. These requirements cause CTCs to need help securing teachers. For example, a Diesel Program in Allegheny County with 60 children enrolled closed this year since they could not hire a teacher willing to ascend the 11-year process.

- 4) **Balancing High School Curriculum with Post-Secondary Opportunities in CTE** - it's essential to maintain a balance between high school curriculum needs and post-secondary opportunities within each career major. While ensuring that students have access to the broad educational spectrum necessary for high school completion, each program is designed to provide a clear pathway to further education and career advancement, supported by articulation agreements for seamless transition into higher education. This approach ensures that students have immediate, practical skills and the foundation for future academic and professional growth.

### **Shifting Focus from Compliance to Quality Education**

Our current focus on compliance and inadequate funding diverts our attention from our primary goal: delivering high-quality education. This situation forces educators to prioritize financial management over innovative teaching and learning.

### **The Critical Role of CTE**

Career and Technical Education prepares students for a competitive workforce and supports the state's economic health. CTE provides students with the practical skills necessary for immediate employment and ensures a substantial return on investment for our state's businesses. CTE should be a top priority for every public school, ensuring all students are ready to contribute meaningfully to our economy upon graduation.

During my recent presentation titled "Career & Technical Education: A Pathway to Opportunity" at the PA House Republican Policy Committee Hearing, I emphasized the significance of top-tier Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, such as those provided by UBCTS. These programs are crucial in bridging the skills gap between education and the workforce, resulting in national competency certifications, increased degree attainment, higher lifetime earnings, and motivated and engaged CTE graduates with many career prospects. In the 21st-century U.S. economy context, high-quality CTE programs serve as the critical entry point to various employment sectors. The primary objective of Career and Technical Education Schools is to fulfill the workforce requirements of

local businesses and industries within Pennsylvania, consistently producing skilled graduates.

### **The State of CTE Enrollment and Funding in Pennsylvania**

Unfortunately, Pennsylvania's statewide enrollment and fiscal support do not match our success, nor are they comparable to the investments made by other states in CTE. According to a recent report by Children First and Keystone Research Center, Pennsylvania ranks 36th out of the 50 states in enrollment of high school students in career-related learning in intensive CTE programs, with only 7% of high schoolers enrolled in CTE. Our neighboring states register an average of three times the Pennsylvania share in CTE (19.3%). In Delaware, 36.7% of students are enrolled in CTE programs, and in West Virginia, the number is 33%.

### **Local Districts Under Financial Strain**

The current funding model used to finance these critical CTE programs places an unsustainable burden on local school districts, which are already stretched thin. This financial strain undermines CTE's sustainability and impacts our districts' overall quality of education. School districts still have to pay 90 percent of the cost at UBCTS. Special Education funding provided to the school districts needs to follow the student to their CTE placement. At UBCTS, forty-two percent of our student population is considered exceptional, having an IEP or 504 plan. Since we serve such a large population of exceptional learners, funding designated towards delivering accommodations and support to these students needs to follow them from the sending school district to our CTE. This system needs improvement.

### **CTE Funding Comparisons: Maximizing State Funds**

Examining leading states' practices in leveraging state funds for CTE reveals valuable insights:

1. Delaware's Model: Delaware relies heavily on state funding, with 36.7% of high school students in CTE. They use state funds for grants, equipment, and program growth, supporting CTE expansion and quality.
2. West Virginia's Investment: West Virginia allocates state funds for CTE equipment, facilities, and educator development, fostering program excellence with 33% CTE enrollment.
3. Equitable State Funding: Leading states prioritize equitable distribution of state funds, ensuring that CTE programs receive substantial state support reducing reliance on local taxes. OpenAI. (2023). *ChatGPT* [Large language model]. <https://chat.openai.com>.

## **The Ask - Dedicated Funding For CTE**

Today, I stand before you to request your assistance in relieving the financial pressures that hinder our students and parents from realizing their aspirational dreams. There is no justification for underfunding in-demand, relevant CTE programs. The present deficiency effectively turns CTE into an unfunded mandate, causing financial strain and restricting our ability to support these essential programs fully.

## **Proposals for Change: Funding and Mandate Reforms.**

1. Restructure the funding model to alleviate the financial burden on local districts, ensuring equitable support for Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs.
2. Increase funding for broader access and quality enhancement in CTE.
3. Streamline or eliminate mandates that do not directly contribute to student learning and workforce readiness.
4. Empower local educators and administrators with greater decision-making authority, allowing us to tailor our programs to meet the specific needs of our students and community.
5. Advocate for mandates accompanied by sustainable funding sources to guarantee long-term viability and effectiveness.
6. Establish a systematic review process to assess the impact of mandates on educational outcomes and financial sustainability, ensuring their ongoing relevance.
7. Reinstate the Capital Improvement/Renovation (PlanCon) subsidy for expansion projects, facilitating the growth of the CTE program.
8. Dedicate funds for career counselors and career pathways.
9. Have CTCs serve on local Workforce Development Boards.
10. Simplify teacher certification requirements and incentivize prospective educators through reciprocity, testing adjustments, tax incentives, and loan forgiveness programs.
11. Reduce the number of right-to-know requests an individual or group can submit to one per entity per calendar year, alleviating the workload of preparing requested documents. Allow for billing based on the time spent on document preparation, enabling staff to focus on their core responsibilities.

## **Closing Remarks:**

CTE is instrumental in developing a skilled, adaptable workforce. We must urgently address the funding and mandate relief issue to enable our students to succeed and bolster Pennsylvania's economy. Your support in reforming our educational system will not only be an investment in education but a foundational investment in the future of our state. Once again, thank you for supporting Career and Technical Education and considering this crucial issue.