

Subject: The Urgent Need to Expand Career & Technical Education Opportunities for our students:

As a superintendent for 13 years at Pequea Valley School District, I wish to discuss the current state of Career and Technical Education (CTE) in our region. As we continue to emphasize the importance of career readiness, it is critical that we expand access to CTE programs, ensuring that all students, especially those with a passion for the trades have viable pathways to high-demand, high-wage careers. Unfortunately, the current system is falling short, leaving too many students without opportunities to develop critical skills and prepare for the workforce.

The demand for CTE programs far exceeds our current capacity. In the 2024-2025 school year alone, there were 364 students on the Lancaster County CTC waitlist. For 2025-2026, that number will skyrocket to 1,001. These are students who have identified a strong interest in skilled trades but have nowhere to develop their talents. Without proper training, many of these students return to environments where they struggle to flourish, and some ultimately drop out of school altogether.

Key challenges that must be addressed include:

Minimal programming for 9th and 10th Graders: Many districts offer CTE options for underclassmen, yet our Lancaster County students have to wait until 11th grade, limiting early career exposure and engagement.

Barriers to CTE Teacher Certification: The process for obtaining a CTE teaching certificate is too cumbersome, discouraging qualified professionals from entering education.

Lack of Instructors and Space: Even if we wanted to expand CTE programs, we lack the physical space and cannot hire enough instructors to meet demand.

Internship Limitations: While we have started internship programs, students cannot receive essential hands-on training in certain trades due to power tool restrictions, further limiting their preparedness.

Regionalization Efforts: Some regionalized CTE programs (such as Chester County CTC and Octorara) have created successful models, yet similar collaborations have not been explored in our area.

Generational Poverty and Workforce Needs: The majority of trade industries are facing a worker shortage due to impending retirements. Our students want to train for these jobs, yet we do not have a facility capable of preparing them at scale. Without these opportunities, many students remain trapped in generational poverty, unable to access careers that provide financial stability.

We are at a critical crossroads. The decisions we make today will determine whether our students enter the workforce prepared for success or remain in a cycle where their potential goes unrealized. I welcome the opportunity to meet and further discuss how we can collectively prioritize and expand CTE offerings to meet the growing needs of our students and our economy. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to your thoughts and to working together to create lasting change for the students in our community.

Erik Orndorff, Ed.D

Superintendent

Pequea Valley School District

As a follow-up to Dr. Orndorff's statement, I wish to discuss what we have done at Pequea Valley School District to attempt to address the issue on our own.

Currently our Lancaster County Career & Technology Center (CTC) offers a progressive program structure where 11th-grade students participate in half-day programs, and 12th-grade students have the option of half-day or full-day programs. We have been able to, thanks to our geographic location, begin sending students to Chester County to take advantage of certain programs at earlier ages, and continue to expand opportunities that schools perhaps more landlocked in Lancaster County cannot.

However, in our district, and many like ours, a population of students at each grade level has historically struggled in traditional classroom settings during their 9th and 10th-grade years, leading to credit deficiencies, poor attendance, behavioral challenges, and difficulty meeting CTC acceptance or graduation requirements. Recognizing this issue, a data analysis of upcoming grade levels revealed a critical need for an in-house program tailored to approximately 10-15% of each class.

To address this need, the district collaborated with the Clark Foundation, which generously provided financial support, and ABC Construction, which contributed expertise in curriculum and certification development, to establish the C.O.R.E. (Career Occupational Relevant Education) program for 9th and 10th-grade learners at Pequea Valley High School. Students apply for the program through a process that includes data reviews and counselor or facilitator recommendations, along with individualized meetings to determine alignment with their First Choice goals. Each cohort is capped at 15 learners. This program targets students not only with attendance and behavioral challenges but also those demonstrating an interest in skilled trades. To clarify briefly, at Pequea Valley our goal is to prepare each student for their postsecondary First Choice – over a decade ago our school and staff were predominantly focused on preparing students for college, despite sending approximately 65% of each graduating class directly into the workforce. Thanks to the leadership of Dr. Orndorff, we have shifted our mindset as a team to preparing students for their First Choice, whatever it may be.

The CORE team consists of Pequea Valley faculty specializing in Technology/STEM, Math, Science, English and Language Arts, and Social Studies. These teachers collaborate to design project-based learning activities that integrate cross-curricular concepts. In 9th grade, students are introduced to skilled trades such as Graphic Design, Construction Basics, Plumbing, Electrical, and Masonry. In 10th grade, the focus shifts to trades like Architectural Drawing, 3D Design, CNC Router operation, Small Gas Engines, and Wind/Solar Power. Learners still take additional required courses such as physical education and personal finance, but predominantly their classes travel together almost like an in-house CTC or a "school within a school."

The program's goal is for learners to transition to full-day CTC programs, co-ops, or internships in their chosen trade during 11th grade. By 12th grade, they can continue in CTC, internships, or co-ops, or even pursue early enrollment at Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology. Since its inception in the 2019-2020 school year, the CORE program has achieved a 100% graduation rate among its participants. We have had two students gain acceptance into full-year enrollment at Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology, and our First Choice, or Work-Based Learning Coordinator, has helped place numerous learners into internships and co-ops fitting their postsecondary First Choice goals.

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