



# WITH LEARNERS, NOT FOR LEARNERS:

A TOOLKIT FOR ELEVATING  
LEARNER VOICE IN CTE



**ADVANCE**  **CTE**  
*State Leaders Connecting Learning to Work*



ASSOCIATION FOR  
CAREER & TECHNICAL  
EDUCATION®





# WITH LEARNERS, NOT FOR LEARNERS:

## A TOOLKIT FOR ELEVATING LEARNER VOICE IN CTE

### ABOUT

This toolkit will provide state and local Career Technical Education (CTE) leaders with actionable resources, guidance and tools to help them develop and engage learners for the improvement of CTE policies and practices.

The toolkit and its resources will focus on opportunities and strategies for engaging current CTE learners, including learners in middle and high school CTE programs as well as adult learners in postsecondary CTE programs, in the development, assessment and improvement of CTE programs, practices and policies. While engaging the voices of prospective CTE learners, engaging learners for more general relationship-building purposes, and learner engagement and student choice in the classroom are critically important topics, this toolkit will not focus on them. However, several of the principles, ideas and resources shared in this publication could also benefit these efforts.

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# THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNER VOICE IN CTE



## WHAT IS LEARNER VOICE?

CTE programs must be designed with learners, not simply for learners, to be responsive to their diverse needs at every stage of the CTE continuum. Being responsive to diverse learner needs can occur only if learners have direct and ongoing input into the design and delivery of CTE programs and experiences.

Learner voice is often neglected even though learners themselves are affected directly by decisions made about CTE programs and have invaluable first-hand experiences. It is therefore critical that learners be engaged as key stakeholders in the decision making process within CTE programs. By empowering learners to share feedback regarding their CTE experiences through intentional and ongoing feedback loops, CTE programs can better address

learner needs, break down barriers — particularly for historically marginalized populations — and improve quality. Engaging learners in a meaningful way in CTE program design and delivery can also increase learners' engagement in their education and sense of agency over their own lives, while developing their communication and collaboration skills.

**LEARNER VOICE AND LEARNER ENGAGEMENT** have been defined in numerous ways:

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**"[A]uthentic student input or leadership in instruction, school structures, or education policies that can promote meaningful change in education systems, practice, and/or policy by empowering students as change agents, often working in partnership with adult educators."**<sup>1</sup>

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**"[G]iving students the ability to influence learning to include policies, programs, contexts and principles."**<sup>2</sup>

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**"[A] broad term describing a range of activities that can occur in and out of school. It can be understood as expression, performance, and creativity and as**

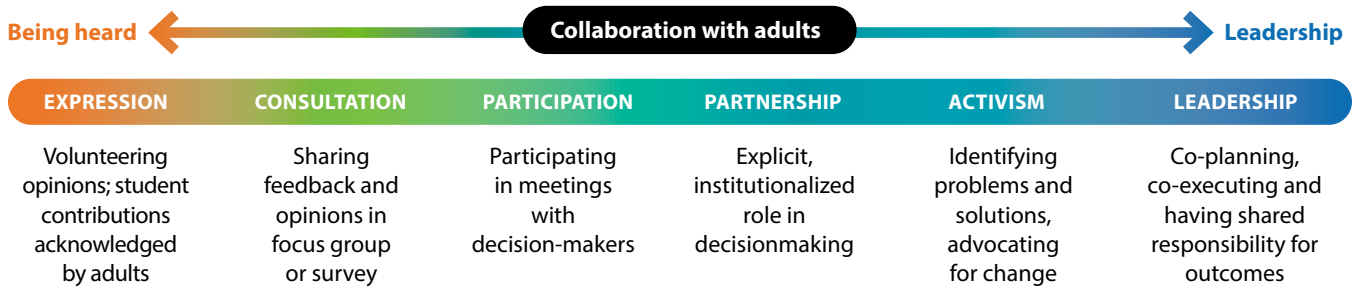
**co-constructing the teaching/learning dynamic. It can also be understood as self-determined goal-setting or simply as agency."**<sup>3</sup>

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**"[C]an range from the most basic level of youth sharing their opinions of problems and potential solutions, to allowing young people to collaborate with adults to address the problems in their schools, to youth taking the lead on seeking change."**<sup>4</sup>

**LEARNER VOICE** can best be conceptualized as occurring on a spectrum from learners giving their feedback and opinions to learners taking on leadership roles and driving systemic change.

## TYPES OF STUDENT VOICE



*Adapted version of Toshalis and Nakkula's "The Spectrum of Student Voice Oriented Activity" and Mitra and Gross' "Pyramid of student voice" as published in Elevating Student Voice in Education by Meg Benner, Catherine Brown and Ashley Jeffrey.*

Sources: This graph is adapted from Eric Toshalis and Michael J. Nakkula, "Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice" (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2012), Dana L. Mitra and Steven Jay Gross, "Increasing Student Voice in High School Reform: Building Partnerships, Improving Outcomes," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 37 (4) (2009): 522-543.

Each level of learner engagement has its opportunities and limitations.<sup>5</sup> For instance, a broad set of learners can be engaged on the expressive end of the spectrum through such methods as surveys, but that engagement may be more surface level and less authentic. On the other end of the spectrum, learners in leadership roles can foster systemic change, but this level of engagement requires a small group of learners investing a great deal of time and energy.

## WHY IS LEARNER VOICE IMPORTANT?

*Without Limits: A Shared Vision for the Future of Career Technical Education*, developed by Advance CTE and supported by the Association for Career and Technical Education and another 40-plus national organizations, puts forth a bold vision for a cohesive, flexible and responsive career preparation ecosystem.<sup>6</sup> The second principle in *CTE Without Limits* focuses specifically on ensuring that each learner feels welcome in, is supported by and has the means to succeed in the career preparation ecosystem. This principle calls on states and institutions to leverage existing and design new opportunities to engage learners, families and key community partners to share their unique experiences with the CTE system to inform and improve upon programs and supports.

CTE learners are the most important stakeholders in any CTE program. They are the experts in their own education and career pathways, and they are the ones who must live with the impacts of decisions that are all too frequently made without their input.

The consequences of the education system's failure to elevate learner voice are particularly apparent when looking at the access and performance gaps for special and historically marginalized populations, both within CTE and in education more generally. In addition, research has documented that students' engagement in their education declines over time,

from an enthusiastic majority of elementary school learners to only one-third of high school learners self-reporting that they are engaged in learning.<sup>7</sup>

This failure to engage learners is holistic, spanning classroom practices; a welcoming campus environment; and decisions about the policies, programs and services available to support learners. For example, only 42 percent of states report having clear feedback loops in place to gather ongoing input about their CTE systems and programs from learners, families and community members.<sup>8</sup> This situation must change for CTE to truly reflect learners' needs.



## Equity and Inclusion

One of the most important reasons to elevate learner voice is so that policymakers and practitioners can hear from learners about their varying challenges, needs and priorities, particularly learners who encounter the most barriers to access and success in high-quality CTE programs and related experiences such as work-based learning. These learners include those with special population status (as further described below), historically marginalized populations, and learners in rural and urban areas that may lack access to a breadth of high-quality CTE experiences.

Engaging CTE learners across different populations is also a moral imperative, recognizing the serious, often lifelong impact that education programs and policies have on learners. The consequences of decisions made by education leaders and policymakers about policies, programs and practices often fall inequitably on different learner groups, maintaining power structures and reproducing inequities.

As part of the work to elevate learner voice, leaders and educators must reckon with CTE's history and current inequities. This reckoning includes CTE's history as an alternative education option for learners who were considered non-college bound and "tracking" of learners from low-income families, learners of color, learners with disabilities, female learners and other historically marginalized populations into terminal vocational programs that denied their full potential and left them with limited opportunity. As a result, inequities still exist for learners from these populations in accessing high-quality CTE programs. Seeking out the voices of learners from these populations is an important step for CTE leaders to take to ensure that the CTE programs of today are helping these populations reach their full potential, removing barriers to access and success, providing critical supports and services, and not further perpetuating historical inequities.<sup>9</sup>

## Perkins V

In addition to the equity imperative, stakeholder engagement is a major theme and required component of the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V). The law requires states to develop four-year state plans in consultation with representatives of secondary and postsecondary CTE programs such as teachers, instructors and counselors; state workforce development board representatives; business and industry representatives; and members and representatives of special population groups as well as families/caregivers, students and community organizations. School districts and colleges must engage a similar list of stakeholders — including learners — for the Comprehensive Local Needs Assessment (CLNA) that occurs, in most states, every two years and must also consult these stakeholders on an ongoing basis. Aligned with this focus on stakeholder input is an expanded list of special populations.

**States and local leaders must provide disaggregated data about and engage with and enhance their efforts to serve the following special populations:**

- **Individuals with disabilities**
- **Individuals from economically disadvantaged families, including low-income youth and adults**
- **Individuals preparing for non-traditional fields**
- **Single parents, including single pregnant women**
- **Out-of-workforce individuals**
- **English learners**
- **Individuals experiencing homelessness**
- **Youth who are in, or have aged out of, the foster care system**
- **Youth with a parent who is a member of the armed forces and is on active duty**



State agencies and local CTE programs also are required to provide disaggregated data by gender, race/ethnicity and — at the secondary level — migrant status. Once the data is disaggregated, provisions throughout the law require an examination of gaps among learner groups on measures of access and performance. To address these gaps, many state

and local CTE leaders are investing in better serving groups that have been historically marginalized because of their gender, race or ethnicity as well as Tribal learners, justice-involved individuals, LGBTQ+ learners and undocumented or migrant students.

## Learner and Organizational Outcomes

With most learner engagement efforts in their infancy, both in CTE and throughout education more generally, the research base on outcomes from learner engagement and voice activities is small but growing. The emerging research points to benefits for learners and organizations seeking to improve service delivery:

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More agency — choice, control and collaborative opportunities — has been linked to better outcomes for historically marginalized populations as well as greater classroom participation and fewer behavioral problems.<sup>10</sup>

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Student voices opportunities lead to increased agency, belonging and competence in learners.<sup>11</sup>

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Young people who participate in research and evaluation in their classrooms and communities gain confidence; social capital; social and civic competencies; and research, critical thinking and problem-solving skills.<sup>12</sup>

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Involving youth in decisionmaking helps organizations create optimal learning environments for all, contributing substantially to improved services, more service utilization and improved youth-adult interactions.<sup>13</sup>

**AS MORE EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND LEARNER-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS ELEVATE LEARNER VOICE**, the research will likely continue to show benefits for learners and state and local education systems, including the development of higher quality and more equitable CTE systems at the state and local levels.





# WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM CTE LEARNERS?

We can learn many things from CTE learners that can improve program quality and equity and enhance learners' experiences in CTE programs by getting answers to questions such as:

- How did you learn about this CTE program? Why did you decide to enroll?
- How should we enhance our outreach efforts to reach more prospective CTE learners?
- What opportunities do you have to continue your learning in your CTE program?
- What has made you feel uncomfortable, marginalized or discriminated against in your CTE program?
- What has made you feel welcome, supported or valued in your CTE program?
- What aspect of your CTE education has helped you the most? What has felt like the largest stumbling block?
- In what ways does your CTE program feel connected or relevant to your long-term goals?
- Does the content you learn in your CTE program feel relevant to you personally?
- In what ways do you see yourself as a driver of your own career exploration and planning?
- What types of work-based learning have been or would be the most valuable to you?
- Which individuals or organizations do you turn to for career-related support?
- How has CTE positioned you for your future?
- If you could change one thing about your CTE program, what would it be?
- What supports or services would make participating and being successful in CTE easier for you?
- How could I, as an educator or administrator, improve your CTE experience?



A FULL SET OF SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS FOR LEARNERS CAN BE FOUND ON PAGE 45.

## REFLECTIONS

Use the [Reflections on Elevating Learner Voice in CTE Worksheet](#) to capture any reflections taken from *The Importance of Learner Voice in CTE* section.

- How can engaging learners improve CTE programs and policies in your state, district or institution?
- How can engaging CTE learners help close equity gaps in your state, district or institution?
- What do you most want or need to learn from learners to improve CTE programs and policies?



# COMMITMENTS FOR ENGAGING CTE LEARNERS



Learner engagement efforts should be grounded in a set of commitments for authentically, equitably and sustainably elevating CTE learner voice. These commitments undergird the overall strategy and the actions CTE leaders take to develop and grow learner voice opportunities for CTE program, policy and practice development and improvement.

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## 1. CTE LEARNERS ARE ENGAGED MEANINGFULLY.

Learner engagement elevates CTE learner voice for the purpose of program improvement, not as a box-checking exercise. Learners contribute to state and local CTE development, assessment and improvement activities; to toolkits, professional development and other resources for CTE programs and educators; and to new state and local CTE initiatives and student support efforts.

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## 2. CTE LEARNERS ARE TREATED AS VALUED AND TRUSTED STAKEHOLDERS.

Learner engagement is built on trust among participants and a recognition of the value of each voice around the table. Educators welcome the participation of CTE learners and are eager to learn from their knowledge and perspectives about CTE program quality, access and equity, while acknowledging that listening to honest input from learners may not always feel comfortable. Community agreements define the ground rules that support CTE learners to engage with each other and with other stakeholders respectfully and encourage brave spaces in which participants can talk honestly and openly, without fear of retribution.

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## 3. ENGAGEMENT IS INCLUSIVE OF ALL CTE LEARNER VOICES.

CTE leaders actively seek representation across the variety of CTE learners: learners with special population status; learners from across different gender identities, sexual orientations, races and ethnicities, including students of color; other key learner groups, such as justice-involved, migrant and undocumented individuals; learners from a variety of CTE program areas; learners from the secondary and postsecondary levels; and learners from different geographies, as appropriate. Leaders move beyond engaging a small set of the most committed learners, such as Career Technical Student Organization (CTSO) officers, to incorporate a diversity of CTE voices.

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## 4. CTE LEARNERS ARE PREPARED TO ENGAGE EFFECTIVELY THROUGH TRAINING, RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS.

CTE learners are empowered to engage productively through preparation and supports. Empowering learners includes conveying clear expectations about roles and responsibilities; providing training on effective communication; and eliminating barriers such as scheduling, transportation, technology access and other challenges that can be differentially encountered by CTE learners from various populations, learner levels and geographies.



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## 5. CTE LEARNERS HAVE MULTIPLE AVENUES FOR ENGAGEMENT.

Learners can contribute their voices through a variety of venues and methods, from expressing their opinions in focus groups of CTE learners and CLNA meetings to participating on program advisory boards to organizing learner-focused events. Engagement activities are conducted in person and virtually.

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## 6. CTE LEARNER ENGAGEMENT IS SUSTAINED THROUGH REGULAR, INSTITUTIONALIZED PROCESSES.

Learner engagement is institutionalized through advisory board requirements, CLNA requirements and guidance and other ongoing means to enable regular opportunities for elevating CTE learner voice. Institutionalizing this engagement ensures that successive generations of CTE learners are engaged after individuals graduate or complete programs. Metrics and feedback loops are also in place so learners, families, community partners, instructors and the public understand how learner contributions have been used and incorporated into policy or programmatic changes.

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## 7. CTE LEARNERS ARE RECOGNIZED FOR THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS.

CTE learners are recognized for investing their time and expertise in engagement activities. This recognition may include having their names and contributions shared publicly as well as appropriate compensation, such as cash or gift card stipends, scholarships, academic credit, independent study opportunities, awards or other types of compensation. Compensation is determined in collaboration with learners.

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# REFLECTIONS

Complete the **Assessing Your Commitments for Engaging CTE Learners Rubric**.

Use the **Reflections on Elevating Learner Voice in CTE Worksheet** to capture any reflections taken from the *Commitments for Engaging CTE Learners* section.

- Which of the seven commitments are already in place in your state, district or institution?
- Where do you most need to build capacity, skill or will to fully meet the commitments?



# ACTIONS FOR ELEVATING CTE LEARNER VOICE



To develop and implement an effective strategy for engaging learners that fully meets the commitments laid out in the previous section, CTE leaders can begin by taking actions to:

- Assess organizational readiness
- Explore methods for learner engagement
- Harness CTE-specific engagement opportunities and levers
- Ensure equitable CTE learner engagement
- Expand capacity for CTE learner engagement

## **THESE STEPS ARE NOT SEQUENTIAL BUT RATHER A SERIES OF ACTIONS**

that will be revisited and refined as leaders develop and expand efforts to elevate learner voice.

## **ASSESS ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS**

To effectively engage learners in developing, assessing and improving CTE programs and policies, state and local CTE leaders should assess the culture at their agencies, districts or institutions and, if necessary, build a culture that values and supports engaging stakeholders, including learners and families/caregivers, and is committed to elevating learner voice, even when this work is difficult or uncomfortable. An organizational culture that is dedicated to elevating learner voice will strive to meet the commitments defined previously.

Part of assessing organizational readiness is identifying where relationships with learners already exist and investing in building relationships with learners where needed. The closest relationships between learners and educators will likely be in the classroom, where instructors directly engage with CTE learners daily. Relationships are likely to be more distant between learners and local

administrators and even more so between learners and state leaders. Therefore, part of preparing to do this work includes looking for ways to increase interaction between learners and leaders and for opportunities to recruit classroom instructors, current learners, alumni, and other stakeholders with experience in elevating learner voice to support and facilitate engagement activities.



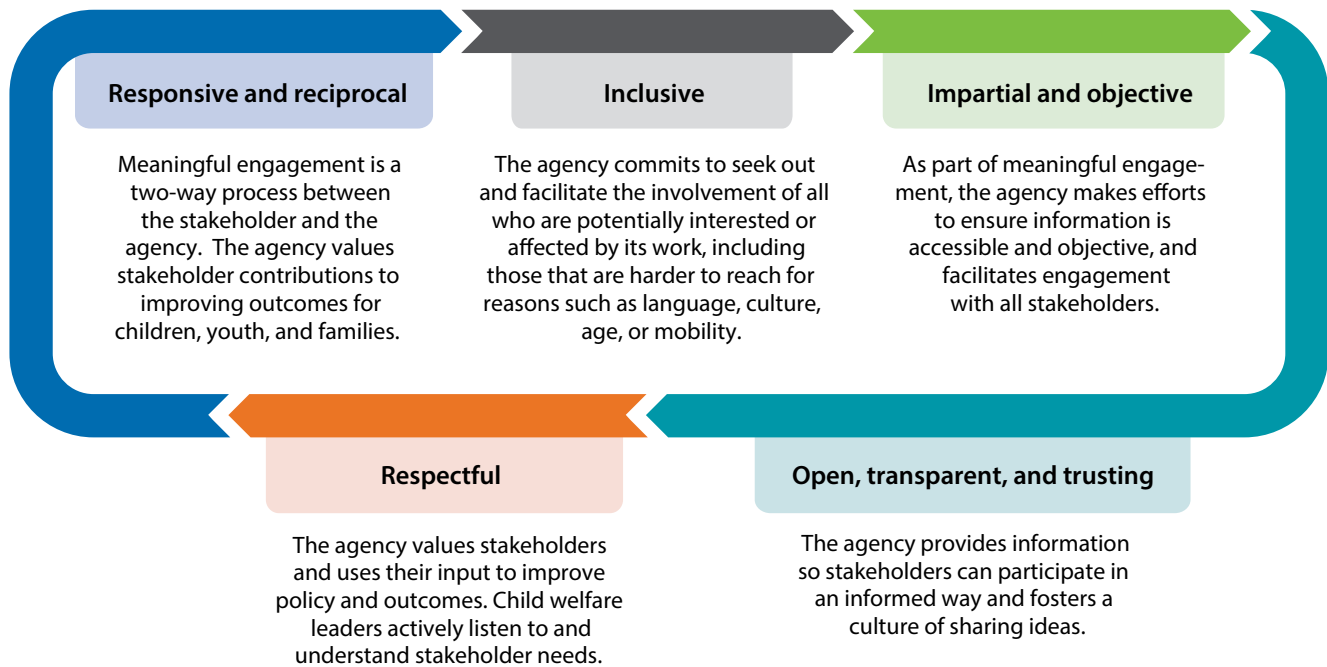
To assess organizational readiness for this work, consider the following questions:

1. What are your state's, district's or institution's goals for elevating CTE learner voice? What are the short-, mid- and long-term objectives?
2. How well do CTE leaders understand the benefits of elevating CTE learner voice? How prepared is your state, district, institution or community to receive and act upon learner input, even when the dialogue is uncomfortable or feedback is negative? From whom do you have buy-in or need buy-in?
3. What knowledge and skills do CTE leaders have to effectively elevate CTE learner voice? What knowledge and skills do you need to develop?
4. What capacity do CTE leaders have for elevating CTE learner voice? Is there a position or department in your agency, district or institution where you could locate learner voice activities? What funding streams can you use to support learner voice activities?
5. What existing activities can your state, district or institution leverage to elevate CTE learner voice? What existing policy or program development, review or improvement processes can you leverage?
6. What relationships already exist with CTE learners? How can you build relationships? What educators, learners, alumni, and partners with a history of effective learner engagement can you tap to help you build relationships?
7. What other stakeholders or partners can support CTE leaders in this work? What other agencies, institutions or organizations can you turn to for assistance?

State and local CTE leaders should not worry if they cannot answer these questions yet. This toolkit will help leaders consider opportunities and capacity for building relationships and engaging CTE learners. Additional tools for reflecting on organizational readiness for this work include [\*Being Y-AP Savvy: A Primer on Creating and Sustaining Youth-Adult Partnerships\*](#) from the ACT for Youth Center of Excellence at Cornell University.<sup>14</sup>



## The Qualities of an Agency Culture That Supports Stakeholder Engagement<sup>15</sup>



(Adapted from State Government of Victoria (AU) Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2011.)

## REFLECTIONS

Complete the **Assessing Organizational Readiness to Elevate Learner Voice in CTE Worksheet**.

Use the **Reflections on Elevating Learner Voice in CTE Worksheet** to capture any reflections taken from the *Assess Organizational Readiness* section.

- What strengths within your state, district or institution support efforts to engage CTE learners around the improvement of policies and programs?
- What gaps in your state, district or institution are most critical to address to build a strategy to elevate CTE learner voice?



# EXPLORE METHODS FOR LEARNER ENGAGEMENT

Learners can use their voices in many ways across the spectrum of student voice described previously to affect the education system. These roles can range from providing input to serving as evaluators, researchers or advisers to being creators and leaders.

This section will focus on methods and learner roles that are the most pertinent to CTE program and policy development, assessment and improvement rather than learner engagement in the classroom; prospective learner engagement; or other methods and roles such as student government, student journalism and student activism. In general, the following methods can be used at both the local and state levels, although some are more relevant to a particular setting than others.

Whatever methods are selected, multiple learners should be engaged to ensure that diverse perspectives are heard. These perspectives include secondary and postsecondary/adult CTE learners, learners from different special and historically marginalized populations, and learners from different parts of the state or different programs within an institution. One or two learners cannot and should not be tasked with representing all CTE learner voices. More information on equitably engaging learners can be found in other sections of this toolkit.

**METHOD:**  
Social Media

**LEARNER ROLE:**  
Informal Input

## One tool for seeking learner input is social media.

While less rigorous than some research methods for gaining learner feedback, social media has the benefit of being a place where learners are already engaged among themselves in authentic conversations. CTE agencies, institutions and programs can use their social media networks to seek informal learner input through polls, open-ended questions,

or challenges that ask learners to share their thoughts in writing or video. However, it is important to remember that not all learners have access to social media; participation on different platforms varies, particularly by age; and not all learners may feel comfortable providing direct feedback in such a public setting.



**METHOD:**  
Surveys

**LEARNER ROLE:**  
Formal input

**CTE leaders can engage in more rigorous data collection and research opportunities with learners through surveys.**

Surveys are a well-known and widely used tool that can quickly and easily gather reactions and feedback across a broad swath of learner groups while protecting learner anonymity. However, learners report that surveys can be full of jargon they do not understand and frequently include response options that are not nuanced enough to capture what learners really think. In addition, learners are adept at reading between the lines to identify the responses that educators want to hear and will sometimes respond that way. Surveys are also fairly impersonal, and learners are not always clear about how — and if — the information will be used, which can affect the motivation of learners to complete them fully and honestly.

To make surveys more impactful, learners and student voice experts recommend minimizing jargon, being explicit and transparent about the purpose of the survey, reporting findings back to learners and other stakeholders, and providing additional opportunities to provide more in-depth input. Further tips on survey design can be found at the [University of California-Berkeley \(UC-Berkeley\) YPAR Hub, Collecting Student Voices for Guided Pathways Inquiry and Design](#) from the California Community Colleges, and the [Improving CTE Programs with Data and Evidence Guide](#) from The RP Group.<sup>16</sup>

**METHOD:**  
Focus Groups/Discussion Sessions

**LEARNER ROLE:**  
Formal Input, Facilitation

**Learners who contributed to this toolkit favor approaches that enable them to share their thoughts in a more nuanced, open dialogue through focus groups, discussion sessions and similar qualitative research methods.**

This strategy is also useful for engaging learners who may benefit from hearing others speak first before feeling empowered to contribute.

Learners who contributed to this toolkit recommended that focus groups engage learners from a particular CTE program area to allow for more in-depth conversations in which they know the decisions made will directly affect them. Discussions can also target specific learner groups to better understand those learners' barriers and challenges or focus on specific program elements such as work-based learning or industry-recognized credentials. In addition, focus groups can be exclusively for and led by learners, giving them a space for candid conversation among themselves, or they can be a mixed group of learners and educators.

When using the focus group methodology, state and local leaders should provide multiple opportunities to engage a wide variety of learner groups and allow for in-depth discussion of particular topics. Additional strategies for

increasing access for learners include using virtual focus groups to limit the burden of transportation, as well as choosing times that work for learners' schedules. To ensure that facilitators are positioned to make participants feel valued and to promote brave conversations, state CTE agencies and local leaders can tap learners themselves to act as facilitators of the discussion, with appropriate training on how to lead a focus group, or other individuals who are trusted by the learners.

Further resources on conducting focus groups can be found at the [UC-Berkeley YPAR Hub, Collecting Student Voices for Guided Pathways Inquiry and Design](#) from the California Community Colleges, the [Improving CTE Programs with Data and Evidence Guide](#) from The RP Group, and the [Student Focus Group Resource Guide](#) from WestEd-Public Agenda.<sup>17</sup>

For a sample list of focus group questions developed with input from CTE learners, see **page 45**.



**METHOD:**

Participatory Action Research

**LEARNER ROLE:**

Research

**Another research methodology that can more deeply engage learners is participatory action research (PAR).**

PAR is a grassroots style of research in which members of a community themselves investigate a question or problem that is important to that community. Individuals with more research experience may provide support, but the research question itself and much of the research is conducted by community members — in this case, learners — who best understand their community and are most invested in the findings.

In this methodology, learners themselves act as researchers, developing a research question or problem statement about

their CTE programs, creating materials such as surveys and focus group protocols, conducting research, analyzing data and presenting findings. While this methodology is possible to use at the state level, it is more likely to be used at the local level, both for logistical reasons and because local communities across a state differ in their needs and priorities.

Additional resources on PAR and engaging learners in analyzing data include the [UC-Berkeley YPAR Hub](#) and [Speak Out, Listen Up!](#) from REL West.<sup>18</sup>

**METHOD:**

Program Review/Needs Assessment

**LEARNER ROLE:**

Formal Input, Evaluation

**While PAR is a grassroots approach, there are additional opportunities for learners to be involved in more top-down evaluation activities such as program review and monitoring or needs assessments.**

In these cases, learners can serve as research participants who can speak directly to the realities of the program under review or share their perspective on learner needs and priorities. They can also act as co-evaluators who

work with district and college-level administrators and other education representatives to develop review and assessment materials, analyze data and report findings.

**METHOD:**

Conferences/Events

**LEARNER ROLE:**

Presenting, Organizing

**Conferences, summits and other events that either incorporate content on elevating learner voice or are wholly dedicated to this topic are opportunities for engaging learners.**

Learners can present to instructors, administrators and/or state-level leaders about their challenges, needs and priorities during these events, or they can even help to organize and coordinate events through

activities ranging from planning logistics to developing and choosing content and presenters to creating promotional materials.





**METHOD:**

Advisory Board/Committee/Workgroup

**LEARNER ROLE:**

Advising, Creating, Leading

**Students can also play a variety of roles by participating in local, regional or statewide education advisory boards or committees, workgroups and similar bodies.**

While the purview and activities of these groups vary, they typically review existing education initiatives and data, provide feedback to educators and leaders, help determine future priorities and activities, and possibly develop new resources or serve as spokespeople. These groups can be permanent entities that meet on a semi-regular basis or short-term workgroups that are formed around a specific goal or activity.

Learners can play multiple roles in an advisory board or workgroup: They can serve as advisers who provide input from the student perspective; as creators who help to develop resources, such as a toolkit, professional development course or recruitment materials; and as leaders with responsibility for coordinating and facilitating events or other group activities.

The number of learners who are participating and their roles will vary based on whether an advisory group is composed entirely of learners or learners are one of many stakeholders. Each of these approaches has pros and cons: The former brings many learners together and is more likely to elevate some to a leadership role; the latter enables learners to collaborate with and inform other stakeholders such as education and business leaders but likely includes fewer learners and less of a leadership role for learners. Tiered advisory boards can combine these approaches; for instance, a larger committee of learners engaged in program improvement activities could elect learner representatives to serve on a board with instructors and other stakeholders.





## Prepare for engagement

Learners should be well prepared and supported to succeed in what will likely be a new and potentially intimidating experience. In addition, state and local leaders must understand their roles and responsibilities and be prepared to collaborate effectively with learners.

**THESE PREPARATION ACTIVITIES** for learners, instructors and other stakeholders should include:

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Thoroughly explaining why learners are being engaged; the process for engagement; and how the feedback will be used, including a timeline for next steps.

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Clearly defining roles and responsibilities for each participant.

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Explaining the relationship between stakeholders — for instance, describing how what happens in a learner’s classroom is related to the role of the state CTE agency.

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Defining key CTE terms and minimizing acronyms and jargon wherever possible.

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Providing training on effective communication techniques for in-person and virtual engagement and collaboration, including how to make space for different voices and how to disagree respectfully.

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Providing training on the technology or processes involved, such as how to use virtual meeting software or how to read a spreadsheet for data analysis.

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Additional resources on preparation and team-building can be found through the [UC-Berkeley YPAR Hub](#); [SoundOut](#) lesson plans; and [Youth-Adult Partnerships: A Training Manual](#) from the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, National 4-H Council, National Network for Youth and Youth Leadership Institute.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to preparation for engagement, CTE leaders must strive to eliminate barriers to engagement such as scheduling, transportation, technology access, and other challenges that can be differentially encountered by CTE learners from various populations, learner levels and geographies, as described in other sections of this toolkit.

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## REFLECTIONS

Use the [Reflections on Elevating Learner Voice in CTE Worksheet](#) to capture any reflections taken from the *Explore Methods for Learner Engagement* section.

- Which methods (e.g., surveys, focus groups, PAR) is your state, district or institution currently using to engage learners? How effective are those methods for getting authentic input from CTE learners?
- Which methods are the most interesting or hold the most promise for effectively engaging CTE learners?
- What supports are in place to prepare learners when they are asked to provide input into CTE policies or programs?

# HARNESS CTE-SPECIFIC ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND LEVERS

The general methods and roles for learner engagement described previously can be realized through a number of CTE-specific opportunities and activities at both the state and local levels.

## Engage Learners at the State Level

While state CTE agencies do not typically have daily interaction with learners, state CTE leaders can still create opportunities to engage learners regularly or periodically through a number of program development, review and assessment mechanisms. These activities not only will help improve programs, but they can also establish relationships between state leaders and learners. CTE instructors, current learners, alumni, and other industry and community partners with experience in elevating learner voice can help facilitate these activities and bridge the divide between the state and learners.

Whichever of the following opportunities are pursued, state leaders should create transparent reporting and feedback loops that share with learners, families, instructors and the public how learner contributions have been used and explain how learners can continue to be involved.

### **PROGRAM APPROVAL AND DEVELOPMENT:**

State CTE agencies often approve new or redesigned local CTE programs that submit applications to the state describing the program and how it will be implemented. In this application, local programs could be required to show that learners were engaged in program development, such as by providing evidence of learner interest or evidence that learners were consulted in the design of programs and wraparound supports, and that learners will be informed and engaged in an ongoing collaborative process. Learners can also be engaged in the design of statewide programs of study for adoption at the local level.

**PROGRAM EVALUATION AND MONITORING:** State CTE agencies evaluate or monitor local programs on a rotating basis or as needed, including sub-grant recipients that have struggled in the past to meet Perkins performance indicator levels or to ensure equitable access or outcomes for all learners. This monitoring process can include CTE learners who can speak directly to the challenges and opportunities at a particular site under review or even serve as co-evaluators in reviewing data and analyzing findings. Post-program exit interviews, including at the completion of a work-based learning experience, may be another mechanism to get direct

input into how well programs are serving learners' needs. Such requirements for learner engagement could be codified within program review or evaluation policies. For instance, **HAWAII'S** *criteria for quality CTE programs now include a requirement that the state annually convenes stakeholder groups — including community-based organizations, families and learners — to review outcomes and give feedback on program design and delivery.*

### **METHODS OF ADMINISTRATION (MOA)/CIVIL RIGHTS MONITORING:**

Similarly, states are responsible for monitoring programs to ensure that all students, regardless of race, color, national origin, sex or disability, have equal access to high-quality CTE. In some states, civil rights monitoring occurs on a parallel track with the monitoring of Perkins sub-grant recipients described in the previous paragraph, while other states are merging MOA and Perkins monitoring. Regardless of the approach taken, civil rights monitoring offers another opportunity for learners to share their perspectives. For example, **MARYLAND** *has started including interviews with learners in its consolidated MOA and Perkins monitoring process, which the state has found to be a very useful source of information and feedback.*

**STATE ADVISORY BOARDS:** Many states have state CTE advisory boards, committees or workgroups that review existing state CTE initiatives and data, provide feedback to state agency staff, and map out future state CTE activities. Learner participants can provide input and may also take on responsibilities such as connecting state CTE staff with new stakeholders, contributing to new toolkits or professional development experiences, or serving as CTE ambassadors. States can consider if they want to launch a stand-alone advisory board composed of learners or have them join boards with diverse stakeholders — the opportunities and challenges of each approach are discussed in the Explore Methods for Learner Engagement section on **page 11**.

**DELAWARE** recently led an effort to develop tools that integrate work-based learning and social-emotional learning as part of its involvement in the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Collaborating States Initiative. The state convened a workgroup that brought together learners, community-based organizations, state education leaders, district leaders and work-based learning coordinators. The coordinators of the workgroup met with the student group monthly, and learners were invited to participate in the larger workgroup meetings. The deliverables of this workgroup include an [integrated crosswalk](#) and an integrated toolkit for work-based learning coordinators.<sup>20</sup> Moving forward, Delaware will be piloting the tools and resources with three districts and three community-based organizations in fall 2021 and is requiring student participation in each pilot site.

**STATEWIDE CONFERENCES:** Many state CTE agencies host annual professional development for instructors across the state and other events targeted at topics of interest for CTE in that state, which could include elevating CTE learner voice. Learners can attend these events, serve as presenters about learner needs, or even help to organize in-person or virtual events targeted at improving learner engagement. For instance, **OKLAHOMA'S** statewide summer professional development event, [EngageOK](#), historically has included a popular session called *What Students Wish Their Teachers Knew*, during which a regional student panel discusses topics

such as what makes an effective teacher, advice for a first-year teacher, and the importance of genuine connections between teachers and students.<sup>21</sup>

**COLLABORATION WITH OTHER STATE ENTITIES:**

State CTE agencies also frequently collaborate with other state agencies responsible for economic and workforce development or services for youth and with statewide advocacy organizations to review programs and interventions and to improve offerings targeted at particular learner groups. These collaborations can include communicating with learners who have been engaged by other state agencies that are attentive to the voice of young people as well as advocacy organizations that have a strong learner presence. For instance, [Oregon Student Voice](#) is a youth-led non-profit organization empowering all students to be active agents in shaping their K-12 education.<sup>22</sup> The group frequently works with the Oregon Department of Education and Education Service Districts across the state on topics of interest to learners, including student voice and equity. **KENTUCKY** has a similar organization, the [Kentucky Student Voice Team](#).<sup>23</sup>

**GRANT PLANNING:** In addition to more regular opportunities for learner engagement, the development of the four-year Perkins plan offers a forcing moment for engaging a variety of stakeholders, including learners. Bringing CTE learners into Perkins state plan development can occur through the mechanisms described in this section. This process will begin again in 2023 (with state plans due 2024).

When engaging CTE learners in state planning, it is important to reach out to them before developing the plan to understand their needs, barriers and priorities. Later, CTE learners can also be asked to provide feedback on specific initiatives or sections of the draft plan. However, engaging them early before putting pen to paper will help ensure that the plan is built from the ground up with learner voice and learner needs incorporated.



## Facilitate Local Learner Engagement

In addition to engagement activities at the state level, state CTE leaders can require, incentivize or encourage districts and colleges to engage learners for the improvement of local programs. Engagement at the local level both benefits local programs and builds a pipeline that can feed into state and regional learner engagement efforts. Even in the absence of state requirements or incentives, local leaders can choose to prioritize elevating learner voice using the strategies described in this section. Any of these levers should include transparent reporting and feedback loops that ensure that learners and other stakeholders are informed about next steps and see how their contributions have been incorporated into systemic change.

**COMPREHENSIVE LOCAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT:** One of the best levers for elevating learner voice is through the CLNA, which local recipients are required to complete at least once every two years to be eligible for Perkins funding. The legislation lists students as one of the many required stakeholder groups to engage during the assessment, and states can further incentivize or require their participation.

For instance, states can require that local recipients identify several learners who were engaged in the CLNA process. States can also add questions to the CLNA templates they develop for local recipients to complete — questions about how learner voice is and will continue to be elevated and which special populations and historically marginalized learner groups have been engaged. Finally, states can offer grants to local recipients that require them to engage learners as part of the CLNA process. Funds could be used to host learner-centric CLNA activities such as focus groups.

**PROGRAM APPROVAL AND REVIEW:** Another option is to incentivize or require learner participation in local program development, approval and review processes. This option can be written into procedures that require evidence of learner interest in and consultation during program development, learner participation in program review, and learner exit interviews after completion of a CTE program or work-based learning experience.

**LOCAL ADVISORY BOARDS:** State CTE agencies can similarly incentivize or require learner participation on district, school or college cross-stakeholder advisory boards or the creation of learner-led advisory boards. For instance, **PITTSBURGH Public Schools' *Student Advisory Council*** is a district-wide leadership opportunity for elected learners to share the interests and concerns of learners at their schools with district administration and provide input on school and district initiatives.<sup>24</sup> In response to learner survey results, the council has been working on expanding learner input into scheduling. And as a result of its participation in **OHIO'S *Equity Labs***, the Delaware Career Center is undertaking a number of actions to better diagnose and address inequities within its CTE programs.<sup>25</sup> After identifying equity gaps from a gender identity perspective, the center has launched a non-traditional student advisory committee, charged with advising the institution on how to better attract learners into programs that are non-traditional for their genders.

**COMPETITIVE GRANTS:** In addition to CLNA-focused grants for learner engagement, states can award competitive grants that prioritize learner engagement through the Perkins Reserve Fund or State Leadership funds that have been designated for equity purposes or through other statewide funding. For instance, grant applicants could be required to incorporate learners or receive additional points on their application score if their proposed activity incorporates learners in a meaningful way, as with the Delaware work-based learning and social-emotional learning pilot projects described in the previous section.

### TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND PROFESSIONAL

**DEVELOPMENT:** State CTE agencies can also develop local capacity for learner engagement by providing districts and colleges technical assistance and professional development that incorporate learners and evidence-based practices for elevating learner voice. The state could host local workshops that bring together learners and CTE educators, designate a state staff member to support

locals with learner engagement strategies (possibly the same staff member who supports equity initiatives), or develop a learner engagement toolkit with resources such as those featured in this document. For instance, the **TEXAS NETWORK OF YOUTH SERVICES** has developed a [Youth Engagement Toolkit](#), while JFF has developed a [professional development module on student voice](#) that can be integrated into CTE professional learning activities.<sup>26</sup>

## QUICK TIPS

Navigating and leveraging these different opportunities may seem challenging amid the many competing priorities that CTE leaders face.

### HERE ARE A FEW TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED:



Look for opportunities to incorporate learners into existing activities, such as program approval and monitoring, advisory boards, and professional development events such as statewide conferences.



Leverage the state's role as a convener for local CTE educators and as a collaborator with other state entities to elevate the benefits of learner engagement through professional development events, meetings and resources such as toolkits.



Explore funding streams to incentivize or require learner engagement through grants and other mechanisms.



Remember that learner engagement activities should be more than one-off experiences — they should be part of a broader strategy that institutionalizes the elevation of learner voice.

## REFLECTIONS

Use the [Reflections on Elevating Learner Voice in CTE Worksheet](#) to capture any reflections taken from the *Harness CTE-Specific Engagement Opportunities and Levers* section.

- Which levers (e.g., program monitoring, state or local advisory boards, CLNA) currently require, incentivize or encourage authentic learner engagement?
- Which levers would be the easiest to amend or adjust going forward to ensure that they require, incentivize or encourage authentic learner engagement?
- Which levers are the most important to amend or adjust going forward to ensure that they require, incentivize or encourage authentic learner engagement?

# ENSURE EQUITABLE CTE LEARNER ENGAGEMENT

The methods and opportunities described in the previous section can effectively and equitably lead to improved decisionmaking about CTE programs and policies only when they are inclusive of all CTE learners. Reaching a wide variety of learner groups includes identifying and recruiting learners from across the extensive breadth of CTE as well as breaking down barriers that prevent learners, particularly those with special population status and historically marginalized learners, from participating in engagement opportunities.

## Include Many Voices

CTE programs reach and affect an incredibly diverse range of learners across populations, CTE program areas, education levels and geographies. This variety is an immense benefit to CTE programs but also poses a challenge to leaders seeking to engage and elevate all voices to improve CTE programs and policies. Learner engagement activities should seek, as much as possible, to engage a breadth of learners across the following domains, bearing in mind that not every learner needs to be engaged in every activity. By offering different types of learner voice experiences at different times and through different media, CTE leaders can reach a wider group of learners.

**SPECIAL POPULATIONS AND HISTORICALLY MARGINALIZED GROUPS:** Under Perkins V, state and local CTE educators must be attentive to the nine special population groups defined on **page 3** as well as sub-groups for gender, race/ethnicity and migrant status when analyzing data and providing services. Any engagement activities should actively recruit learner representatives from as many of these populations as possible, as well as other learners such as Tribal learners, justice-involved individuals, undocumented and migrant learners and LGBTQ+ learners. Remember that learners often have intersectional identities (e.g., a CTE learner who is Black and LGBTQ+ or a learner who is a foster youth in a non-traditional field of study) and that different learner groups may have different barriers to participation, such as child care needs, transportation or accessibility. These barriers are further described in the next section.

**CTE PROGRAM AREAS:** In addition to inclusiveness across populations, learner engagement efforts should aim to cover a diversity of CTE program areas that are available in a state or local area, from high-wage, high-skill career pathways such as information technology and advanced manufacturing

to vitally important program areas such as early childhood education and health sciences.

**EDUCATION LEVELS:** CTE programs of study feature alignment of courses and competencies across secondary and postsecondary education, and state and local CTE leaders would benefit from engaging learners at both these levels to understand their differing needs, challenges and priorities. In addition, the middle grades are an increasingly common time to begin CTE, and nearly all states allow or encourage Perkins funding to be spent in these grades. Depending on state or local policy, engaging middle grades CTE learners may make sense. When engaging learners of different ages and life stages, remember that these learner groups will have different barriers to participation and may need targeted supports to engage authentically.

**GEOGRAPHIES:** Across many states, CTE learners have differing access to programs generally as well as to technology and equipment, instructors, and experiences such as work-based learning based on their geographic location. Engaging learners across rural, small town, suburban and urban environments will uncover disparate challenges and barriers.



## ENGAGING LEARNERS THROUGH CTSOS

CTSOS develop learners' technical, employability and leadership skills through service projects, competitive events and chapter officer roles at the local, state and national levels. These co-curricular organizations are ideal venues for building relationships among learners and between learners and educators. They are also fertile ground for recruiting learners for engagement activities. State CTE agencies hoping to reach learners have historically tapped CTSO officers — who are typically highly committed to CTE and have developed communication, collaboration and leadership skills through their CTE programs and CTSO service — for their participation and feedback.

However, using CTSOs as an exclusive or primary source for learner engagement also has disadvantages. CTSO officers are likely not representative of the breadth of CTE learners. They may be more passionate about CTE than most CTE learners. More importantly, they may face fewer barriers to engaging in CTE and CTSOs at a more intensive level. For instance, learners with disabilities and English learners may have scheduling conflicts with other courses that affect their ability to participate in the CTSO or become an officer. Other learners may have financial or family conflicts that preclude them from participating in competitive events and conferences. And some learners may see that CTSO officers do not reflect their identities and think “being an officer is not for people like me.”

While CTSOs should be one spoke in the wheel of any learner engagement efforts, focusing too much on these learners — particularly at the state officer level — may prevent CTE leaders from engaging with the learners it is most essential to reach: individuals with special population status and those from historically marginalized groups.





## Break Down Barriers

To effectively engage learners across different learner groups, program areas, education levels and geographies, CTE leaders must strive to break down barriers that learners face to participating in engagement activities, acknowledging that these barriers affect some learners more than others.

**RECRUITMENT:** A common pitfall when recruiting learners is failing to leverage all the communication methods available or returning again and again to the same group of learners whom educators and leaders already know are responsive. Instead, opportunities to share their perspectives or participate in engagement activities should be communicated to learners multiple times and through multiple channels — in class, by counselors, during CTSO events, on websites, over email and through social media. Recruit learners for engagement activities using methods proven effective for program promotion, including evidence-based messaging, social media and video, and leveraging older learners or alumni to serve as ambassadors to involve current learners more deeply in engagement opportunities.<sup>27</sup>

**SCHEDULING:** Engagement activities should be scheduled with learner input about the dates, times and meeting lengths that work best for their schedules and needs. Whenever possible, offer multiple engagement opportunities at different times to reach more learners. Thoughtful scheduling takes into consideration adult CTE learners, who may be at work during the traditional school hours; learners of all ages who have caregiving obligations; and populations such as learners with disabilities or English learners who may take additional courses or have tutoring sessions that affect their ability to participate.


**TECHNOLOGY ACCESS:** The digital disparities that affect CTE learner access to remote education can also make connecting to virtual meetings or focus groups or responding to surveys difficult for learners. Check with learners one on one to ensure that they have appropriate technology, and if not, provide them temporary or permanent access to broadband; laptops; or devices such as computers,

headphones or microphones that can facilitate participation in learner voice activities.

**TRANSPORTATION:** When engagement activities occur in person, CTE learners may struggle to access transportation, especially if meetings or focus groups are located off campus. This situation particularly affects young learners who cannot drive themselves, as well as low-income learners who must rely on public transit and rural learners who would have to commute great distances to engage. For in-person engagement, host events in easy-to-reach places such as on campus, and check with learners one on one to see if they need a way to get there or a transportation stipend.

**ACCESSIBILITY:** CTE learners with disabilities and English learners may be deterred from participating in engagement opportunities if materials and resources are not accessible. Ensure that written resources incorporate alternative text for screen readers and are translated into different languages. For events, check with learners to find out their needs for captioning, bilingual facilitators and/or sign language interpretation.

**FINANCIAL NEEDS:** CTE learners may be unable or unwilling to participate in engagement activities without compensation for their time, effort and, especially for adult learners, possible loss of income. Compensation is a direct benefit to learners and also lets them know that their contributions are valued. Collaborate with learners to decide on compensation that has the most value to them, considering a range of possible options such as cash or gift card stipends, scholarships, academic credit, independent study opportunities and/or awards. More information on possible funding sources for compensation is described in a later section.



**PURPOSE:** Learners are unlikely to deeply engage in activities that lack a clear purpose, that they perceive as mere box-checking, or that seem to be guiding them to say what education leaders want to hear. Be clear with learners about the purpose of the engagement, how it will benefit CTE, and how learner contributions will be used to make change — then actually do so!

**FURTHER RESOURCES FOR UNDERSTANDING INEQUITIES AND BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS INCLUDE** Advance CTE’s [Making Good on the Promise](#) series and guide on [Engaging Representatives of Learners with Special Population Status through Perkins V](#) as well as the National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity’s resources on [Strategies for Special Population Success](#) and [Equity in CTE and STEM Root Causes and Strategies](#).<sup>28</sup>

## Create Brave Spaces

Beyond these more practical and logistical barriers to engagement are a host of barriers founded in the bias and discrimination that CTE learners with special population status and from historically marginalized groups have faced from educators and their peers.

As described in a previous section, inequities persist in these learners’ access to high-quality CTE programs. Seeking out the voices of learners from historically marginalized populations is an important step for state and local leaders to ensure that the CTE programs of today are helping learners reach their full potential. But recruitment is only the first step.

Once a diverse set of learners is engaged, creating brave spaces for sharing is important. At the foundation of brave spaces is a community agreement that defines the ground rules that support the safety of participants while also enabling CTE learners to engage with each other and with educators and other stakeholders about controversial issues with “honesty, sensitivity and respect.”<sup>29</sup> Brave spaces encourage participants to take risks in dialogues and to show courage and vulnerability.<sup>30</sup>

Brave spaces have ground rules that are similar to safe spaces, such as rejecting violence and denouncing negative consequences for participation. But brave spaces also acknowledge that discussions about power and inequity can lead to discomfort and distress. Potential brave space ground rules encourage participants to approach controversy with civility, own their intentions and their impact, and recognize that challenges to others’ statements are not necessarily attacks.<sup>31</sup> Other potential ground rules include striving to use asset-based and people-first language.<sup>32</sup>

Additional ideas on how to build brave spaces can be found through the [Global Online Academy](#).<sup>33</sup>

## QUICK TIPS

Reaching out to the diversity of CTE learner voices and navigating their different barriers and challenges may seem like a daunting task for state and local CTE leaders.

### HERE ARE A FEW TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED:



Remember that each learner has multiple identities that encompass their own personal characteristics as well as their status as a secondary or postsecondary/adult learner in a particular CTE program area in a particular community.



Bring in fellow learners, alumni, and instructors with experience in learner engagement to serve as facilitators of focus groups and other activities and help build relationships.



Provide engagement opportunities targeted at small groups of learners in specific populations or program areas, such as focus groups for each CTE program area or focus groups for each special population group.



Develop multiple opportunities and venues for engagement, offered at different times and through different media — in person and virtual — to maximize access for learners with different challenges and barriers.



Work with stakeholders to create community agreements that encourage brave spaces.

## REFLECTIONS

Use the [Reflections on Elevating Learner Voice in CTE Worksheet](#) to capture any reflections taken from the *Ensure Equitable CTE Learner Engagement* section.

- Which groups of learners are most commonly engaged to provide input into CTE policies and programs?
- Which groups of learners are least likely to be engaged to provide input into CTE policies and programs?
- Which learners do you most need to engage to design and improve high-quality, equitable CTE programs and policies?
- What are the most common barriers to engaging a wide and representative breadth of CTE learners when seeking input? How can these barriers be mitigated?

# EXPAND CAPACITY FOR CTE LEARNER ENGAGEMENT

State and local CTE leaders are juggling many responsibilities, and adding learner engagement on top of other activities may feel like too much to take on. But learner voice can be the missing piece to help improve the quality and equity of CTE programs, leading to improved — and more equitable — learner outcomes. To build capacity for learner voice at the state and local levels and among learners themselves, consider the following actions.

**BUILD ON EXISTING ACTIVITIES:** One way to make learner engagement manageable is to build on existing activities, such as an advisory board or the CLNA, and existing relationships with learner-focused organizations, agencies or groups, such as CTSOs. However, CTE leaders will likely need to add targeted activities so that engagement activities are inclusive of many different CTE learner voices.

**DESIGNATE A STAFF MEMBER FOR LEARNER VOICE ACTIVITIES:** To support existing and new learner voice efforts, state and local CTE leaders should consider designating a staff person to foster learner engagement. This role could be a new position on its own or, more likely, could be included as part of the job tasks of an equity coordinator or student support services coordinator. Designating this role is critical for building not only capacity but also trust with learners by identifying an individual to lead engagement opportunities and advocate on behalf of learners. Pittsburgh Public Schools has a designated project manager for student voice, who is part of the district's [Family, Youth and Community Engagement](#) team and is responsible for initiatives such as the Superintendent's Student Advisory Council described previously, the Students & Government Council, and other student leadership and student voice initiatives.<sup>34</sup>

**PROVIDE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:** Another way to build capacity across the CTE workforce is by offering professional development for educators and administrators on best practices for incorporating learner voice and providing resources such as guides and templates.

**PREPARE LEARNERS TO ENGAGE:** To help learners develop skills to participate productively in engagement activities, state CTE agencies, districts and institutions can develop curriculum or provide training opportunities that teach learners how to communicate and collaborate effectively and act as self-advocates. This training could be delivered as part of statewide events, through CTSOs or in a state curriculum repository. Existing tools such as [lesson plans from SoundOut](#) can be harnessed for this purpose.<sup>35</sup>

**INSTITUTE POLICIES THAT INCENTIVIZE OR REQUIRE LEARNER VOICE:** States and local leaders can build policies and procedures that require or incentivize the engagement of learners in the CLNA, grants, program review and other activities, as described earlier in this toolkit.

**USE CURRENT LEARNERS AND ALUMNI AS "LEARNER VOICE" AMBASSADORS:** To sustain engagement activities as learners complete programs and move on, states and local CTE leaders can enlist current learners and alumni to communicate about engagement opportunities with other students and encourage them to participate. These alumni could also be tapped to facilitate certain learner engagement activities to help create brave spaces where learners can share their perspectives. Learner voice ambassadors could be an extension of existing CTE ambassador programs, such as the [WISCONSIN Technical College System ambassador program](#), through which current learners and alumni promote CTE to prospective learners.<sup>36</sup>



## DEVELOP METRICS AND REPORTING AND FEEDBACK

**LOOPS:** To evaluate the effectiveness of learner engagement activities, CTE leaders should build reporting and feedback loops including short- and long-term success metrics, mechanisms for reporting outcomes to learners and other stakeholders, and continuous

improvement processes that use lessons learned to better elevate learner voice. Building these loops is also important for holding CTE leaders accountable to the commitments they have made to elevating learner voice.

## Explore Funding Sources

Several funding streams exist that can support the capacity-building ideas described in the previous section, as well as provide compensation to learners. These potential funding sources include Perkins V, which offers a great deal of flexibility to states and local recipients for activities wholly or partially dedicated to learner voice in program delivery and quality, as well as other federal, state and local sources, including private funding options.

**STATE PERKINS FUNDING:** As noted earlier, the Reserve Fund and State Leadership funds can be harnessed to encourage, incentivize or require learner engagement. This includes required uses of State Leadership funds for professional development, technical assistance and support for special populations, such as:

- “Supporting technical assistance for local recipients”;
- “Supporting recruiting, preparing or retaining CTE teachers, faculty, specialized instructional support personnel or paraprofessionals, such as preservice, professional development or leadership development programs”; and
- “Supporting preparation for non-traditional fields in current and emerging professions, programs for special populations, and other activities that expose students, including special populations, to high-skill, high-wage, and in-demand occupations.”<sup>37</sup>

In addition, several permissible uses can facilitate learner engagement, including “supporting local recipients in eliminating inequities in student access to high-quality programs of study” as well as permissible uses for professional development, the development of partnerships and improvements to career guidance.

**LOCAL PERKINS FUNDING:** Perkins V legislation also permits local funds to support learner engagement through a number of allowable uses, including uses related to career exploration and development, professional development, and the implementation of programs and programs of study. This last category can support activities that incorporate learners as part of relationship building and providing improved services to special populations through:

- “Sustainable relationships ... including community-based and youth-serving organizations”;
- “Coordination with other education and workforce development programs and initiatives”;
- “Supporting programs and activities that increase access, student engagement and success in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields (including computer science and architecture) for students who are members of groups underrepresented in such subject fields”;
- “Providing CTE, in a school or other educational setting, for adults or out-of-school youth to complete secondary school education or upgrade technical skills”; and
- “Support to reduce or eliminate out-of-pocket expenses for special populations participating in CTE.”



**OTHER FEDERAL, STATE AND LOCAL FUNDING:** Other sources of federal funding also can be tapped to support learner voice. For instance, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) funds are already used in some states for surveys of school climate or engagement.<sup>38</sup> Results may be publicly reported or even factored into ESSA accountability. State CTE agencies could collaborate with their ESSA counterparts to build on this work.

**IN ADDITION, STATE OR LOCAL SOURCES OF FUNDING CAN BE HARNESSSED TO SUPPORT LEARNER ENGAGEMENT.** For instance, a number of postsecondary institutions such as [Rock Valley College](#) in **ILLINOIS** offer grants for events and programs that enhance student engagement and enrich student life.<sup>39</sup> Private grants are another option. The [Center for Community College Student Engagement](#) leverages sponsorships from such organizations as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, The PEW Charitable Trusts and others to assist partnering colleges in making data-informed decisions that will positively affect student experiences and outcomes.<sup>40</sup>

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## REFLECTIONS

Use the **Reflections on Elevating Learner Voice in CTE Worksheet** to capture any reflections taken from the *Expand Capacity for CTE Learner Engagement* section.

- What can you do now to begin building more capacity within your state, district or institution to engage CTE learners in the improvement of policies and programs?
- What funding sources are you currently leveraging to support CTE learner engagement? What additional funding streams could be leveraged going forward?





## Reflections on Elevating Learner Voice in CTE

**With Learners, Not for Learners: A Toolkit for Elevating Learner Voice in CTE** includes reflection questions embedded at the end of each section. These questions aim to help you process new information and ideas gleaned from the toolkit, identify the most important next steps, and highlight areas where action is most needed. The reflection questions from the toolkit are also laid out here, with space to make notes and capture ideas.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNER VOICE IN CTE

[< CLICK HERE TO RETURN TO THIS SECTION](#)

How can engaging learners improve CTE programs and policies in your state, district or institution?

How can engaging CTE learners help close equity gaps in your state, district or institution?

What do you most want or need to learn from learners to improve CTE programs and policies?



**COMMITMENTS FOR ENGAGING CTE LEARNERS**

[< CLICK HERE TO RETURN TO THIS SECTION](#)

**NOTE:** You may want to complete the [Assessing Your Commitments for Engaging CTE Learners Rubric](#) before documenting your reflections.

Which of the seven commitments are already in place in your state, district or institution?

Where do you most need to build capacity, skill or will to fully meet the commitments?



**ACTIONS FOR ELEVATING CTE LEARNER VOICE**

[< CLICK HERE TO RETURN TO THIS SECTION](#)

**NOTE:** You may want to complete the **Assessing Organizational Readiness to Elevate Learner Voice in CTE Worksheet** before documenting your reflections.

**ASSESS ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS**

What strengths within your state, district or institution support efforts to engage CTE learners around the improvement of policies and programs?

What gaps in your state, district or institution are most critical to address to build a strategy to elevate CTE learner voice?

**ACTIONS FOR ELEVATING CTE LEARNER VOICE**

[< CLICK HERE TO RETURN TO THIS SECTION](#)

**EXPLORE METHODS FOR LEARNER ENGAGEMENT**

Which methods (e.g., surveys, focus groups, PAR) is your state, district or institution currently using to engage learners? How effective are those methods for getting authentic input from CTE learners?

Which methods are the most interesting or hold the most promise for effectively engaging CTE learners?

What supports are in place to prepare learners when they are asked to provide input into CTE policies or programs?

**ACTIONS FOR ELEVATING CTE LEARNER VOICE**

[< CLICK HERE TO RETURN TO THIS SECTION](#)

**HARNESS CTE-SPECIFIC ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND LEVERS**

Which levers (e.g., program monitoring, state or local advisory boards, CLNA) currently require, incentivize or encourage authentic learner engagement?

Which levers would be the easiest to amend or adjust going forward to ensure that they require, incentivize or encourage authentic learner engagement?

Which levers are the most important to amend or adjust going forward to ensure that they require, incentivize or encourage authentic learner engagement?

**ACTIONS FOR ELEVATING CTE LEARNER VOICE**

[< CLICK HERE TO RETURN TO THIS SECTION](#)

**ENSURE EQUITABLE CTE LEARNER ENGAGEMENT**

Which groups of learners are most commonly engaged to provide input into CTE policies and programs?

Which groups of learners are least likely to be engaged to provide input into CTE policies and programs?

Which learners do you most need to engage to design and improve high-quality, equitable CTE programs and policies?

**ACTIONS FOR ELEVATING CTE LEARNER VOICE**

[< CLICK HERE TO RETURN TO THIS SECTION](#)

What are the most common barriers to engaging a wide and representative breadth of CTE learners when seeking input? How can these barriers be mitigated?

**EXPAND CAPACITY FOR CTE LEARNER ENGAGEMENT**

What can you do now to begin building more capacity within your state, district or institution to engage CTE learners in the improvement of policies and programs?

What funding sources are you currently leveraging to support CTE learner engagement? What additional funding streams could be leveraged going forward?



## Assessing Your Commitments for Engaging CTE Learners

### INSTRUCTIONS:

This self-assessment breaks down each commitment from the [Commitments for Engaging CTE Learners](#) section of the toolkit so that state and local leaders can fully analyze an existing or planned CTE learner voice strategy. To use this rubric, examine each commitment, assign it a rating of 1, 2, 3 or 4 based on how current efforts compare to the examples in the chart, and provide written evidence for that rating. Below is a general description of each rating, and more commitment-specific descriptions are provided under “1 = Emerging” and “4 = Strong” in the chart.

### RATINGS DEFINITIONS:

- 1 = Emerging** This commitment is not yet represented in your current or proposed efforts.
- 2 = Building** This commitment is somewhat attended to in your current or proposed efforts, but many improvements still need to be made.
- 3 = Promising** This commitment is fairly well represented in your current or proposed efforts, although some improvements still need to be made.
- 4 = Strong** This commitment is fully represented in your current or proposed efforts, with clear evidence of its impact, even if minor adjustments still need to be made.

**IMPORTANTLY,** the sample evidence provided in the self-assessment is simply that — samples. The samples are by no means exhaustive but are meant to serve as illustrative examples of how a less-developed or well-developed CTE learner engagement strategy would play out at the state or local level.



To what degree is your state or local CTE leadership:

## Meaningfully engaging CTE learners in CTE program development, assessment and improvement?

RATING <i>(click one)</i>	1 = Emerging	2 = Building	3 = Promising	4 = Strong
<i>Sample evidence</i>	<p><b>1 = Emerging</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CTE learners are invited to provide input infrequently through methods that rarely allow detailed feedback, such as surveys.</li> <li>• CTE learners are not told why their participation is important or how their input will be used.</li> <li>• CTE learner input is not reported back to learners and other stakeholders.</li> <li>• CTE learner input is not used for systemic change.</li> </ul>	<p><b>4 = Strong</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CTE learner input is regularly sought through focus groups; advisory boards; and similar methods that enable nuanced, real-time input.</li> <li>• CTE learners are engaged to provide input into a variety of CTE policies, programs and resources.</li> <li>• CTE learners are aware of the purpose of engagement, how it will benefit CTE, and how their contributions effect change.</li> <li>• CTE learner involvement is incentivized or required in activities such as needs assessments and competitive grants.</li> </ul>		
<b>EVIDENCE</b>				
<i>Areas for improvement and/or action steps</i>				



To what degree is your state or local CTE leadership:

**Ensuring that CTE learners are treated as valued and trusted stakeholders?**

<b>RATING</b> <i>(click one)</i>	<b>1 = Emerging</b>	<b>2 = Building</b>	<b>3 = Promising</b>	<b>4 = Strong</b>
<i>Sample evidence</i>	<p><b>1 = Emerging</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitators of CTE learner voice activities have no experience with engaging learners.</li> <li>No training is provided to staff and other facilitators on meaningfully engaging CTE learners in culturally responsive ways.</li> <li>CTE learners feel like token or symbolic participants rather than full and equal contributors.</li> <li>There are no formal policies that prevent retribution directed at CTE learners for using their voices.</li> <li>Opportunities for learner voice often default to staff doing most of the talking.</li> </ul>			<p><b>4 = Strong</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leaders identify facilitators — staff, classroom instructors, current learners, alumni and other stakeholders — who have relationships with learners and experience in elevating learner voice.</li> <li>Staff and other facilitators have taken part in training on meaningfully engaging CTE learners in culturally responsive ways.</li> <li>At least some staff and other facilitators reflect learners’ diverse identities.</li> <li>Community agreements or group contracts support full participation by learners and prevent and punish retribution directed at CTE learners for using their voices.</li> </ul>
<b>EVIDENCE</b>				
<i>Areas for improvement and/or action steps</i>				





To what degree is your state or local CTE leadership:

### Inclusively engaging all learner voices?

RATING <i>(click one)</i>	1 = Emerging	2 = Building	3 = Promising	4 = Strong
<i>Sample evidence</i>	<p><b>1 = Emerging</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only one or two CTE learners are called on to engage.</li> <li>• Only highly involved CTE learners, such as CTSO officers, are recruited for engagement activities.</li> </ul>	<p><b>4 = Strong</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple CTE learners who can speak to different learner identities and experiences are engaged.</li> <li>• Engagement opportunities are communicated to CTE learners multiple times and through multiple channels.</li> <li>• CTE learners currently participating in engagement activities serve as “learner voice” ambassadors to recruit others, particularly learners with special and historically marginalized population status.</li> </ul>		
<b>EVIDENCE</b>				
<i>Areas for improvement and/or action steps</i>				



To what degree is your state or local CTE leadership:

### Preparing learners to engage effectively through training, resources and supports?

RATING <i>(click one)</i>	1 = Emerging	2 = Building	3 = Promising	4 = Strong
<i>Sample evidence</i>	<p><b>1 = Emerging</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CTE learners do not receive any training on their roles and responsibilities, relevant CTE-specific terminology or effective communication and collaboration.</li> <li>• Meetings are planned without reference to CTE learner schedules.</li> <li>• CTE learners must arrange their own transportation and (if applicable) child care to participate in in-person engagement activities.</li> <li>• CTE learners who lack broadband, computers and/or other tools to support virtual engagement are not provided with access to this technology.</li> <li>• Engagement activities and resources are not accessible for CTE learners with disabilities and English learners.</li> </ul>			<p><b>4 = Strong</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CTE learners have participated in training on their roles, responsibilities, relevant terminology and effective communication and collaboration.</li> <li>• Barriers such as scheduling, transportation, child care and technology access are minimized or eliminated through thoughtful scheduling and providing or subsidizing transportation, technology access and child care (if applicable).</li> <li>• Accessibility tools such as alternative text, captioning, translation and interpretation support the engagement of CTE learners with different needs and abilities.</li> </ul>
<b>EVIDENCE</b>				
<i>Areas for improvement and/or action steps</i>				



To what degree is your state or local CTE leadership:

### Providing multiple avenues for learner engagement?

RATING <i>(click one)</i>	1 = Emerging	2 = Building	3 = Promising	4 = Strong
<i>Sample evidence</i>	<p><b>1 = Emerging</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CTE learner engagement is limited to input only, with no other roles or responsibilities available.</li> <li>• Each CTE learner engagement opportunity typically involves only one way to provide input (e.g., a single survey, one round of focus groups).</li> <li>• Each CTE learner engagement opportunity is either virtual or in person, not both.</li> <li>• Learners are engaged around only one specific policy or program (e.g., CLNA).</li> </ul>		<p><b>4 = Strong</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A variety of roles are available for CTE learners, including providing informal and formal input as well as acting as advisers, creators and leaders.</li> <li>• Each CTE learner engagement opportunity provides multiple avenues for input (e.g., join in person or virtually, provide written or verbal comments).</li> <li>• CTE learner input is sought consistently in the development, assessment and improvement of CTE programs (e.g., program approval, program monitoring, CLNA).</li> </ul>	
<b>EVIDENCE</b>				
<i>Areas for improvement and/or action steps</i>				



To what degree is your state or local CTE leadership:

**Sustaining learner engagement through regular, institutionalized processes?**

RATING <i>(click one)</i>	1 = Emerging	2 = Building	3 = Promising	4 = Strong
<i>Sample evidence</i>	<p><b>1 = Emerging</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No staff members have designated responsibility for CTE learner voice activities or learner engagement.</li> <li>There is no follow-up to communicate with CTE learners and other stakeholders whether and how learner contributions have been used.</li> <li>There are no metrics to track progress in CTE learner engagement.</li> <li>No processes are in place to create a sustainable pipeline of engaged CTE learners.</li> </ul>	<p><b>4 = Strong</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One or more staff members are designated to foster CTE learner engagement.</li> <li>Information about how CTE learner contributions have been incorporated into policy or programmatic changes is shared with learners, families, community partners, educators and the public.</li> <li>Measures of success in CTE learner voice, such as number of and demographic information about learners engaged, are tracked and reported.</li> <li>Continuous improvement processes are used to improve CTE learner voice activities.</li> <li>Learner voice ambassadors recruit new CTE learners to sustain engagement activities.</li> </ul>		
<b>EVIDENCE</b>				
<i>Areas for improvement and/or action steps</i>				



To what degree is your state or local CTE leadership:

## Recognizing learners for their contributions?

RATING <i>(click one)</i>	1 = Emerging	2 = Building	3 = Promising	4 = Strong
<i>Sample evidence</i>	<p><b>1 = Emerging</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CTE learners are not recognized for their contributions or are not recognized in ways they value.</li> <li>• CTE learners are expected to provide input on their own time.</li> </ul>		<p><b>4 = Strong</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriate, equitable compensation such as cash or gift card stipends, scholarships, academic credit, independent study opportunities and/or awards is determined in collaboration with CTE learners.</li> <li>• CTE learner names and contributions are shared publicly, with learners' permission.</li> </ul>	
<b>EVIDENCE</b>				
<i>Areas for improvement and/or action steps</i>				



## Assessing Organizational Readiness to Elevate Learner Voice in CTE

**To effectively engage learners in developing, reviewing and improving CTE programs and policies, state and local CTE leaders** should begin by assessing their current organizational knowledge, skills, capacity and culture for elevating learner voice and, if necessary, build their readiness to meet the commitments to learner voice defined in this toolkit. To assess organizational readiness for this work, teams of state or local CTE leaders, educators and other staff should consider the following questions. The organizational readiness questions from **page 9** of the toolkit are laid out here, with space to make notes and capture ideas.

<p><b><u>GOALS:</u></b> What are your state's, district's or institution's goals for elevating CTE learner voice? What are the short-, mid- and long-term objectives?</p>	
<p><b><u>WILL:</u></b> How well do CTE leaders understand the benefits of elevating CTE learner voice? How well is your state, district or institution prepared to receive and act upon learner input, even when the dialogue is uncomfortable or the feedback is negative? From whom do you have or need buy-in?</p>	
<p><b><u>KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS:</u></b> What knowledge and skills do CTE leaders have to effectively elevate CTE learner voice? What knowledge and skills do you need to develop?</p>	
<p><b><u>CAPACITY:</u></b> What capacity do CTE leaders have for elevating CTE learner voice? Is there a position or department in your state, district or institution where you could locate learner voice activities? What funding streams can you use to support learner voice activities?</p>	



*Assessing Organizational Readiness to Elevate Learner Voice in CTE continued*

<p><b>ACTIVITIES:</b>                  What existing activities can your state, district or institution leverage to elevate CTE learner voice?                  What existing policy or program development, review or improvement processes can you leverage?</p>	
<p><b>RELATIONSHIPS:</b>                  What relationships already exist with CTE learners? How can you build relationships? What educators, learners and alumni, and partners with a history of effective learner engagement can you tap to help you build relationships?</p>	
<p><b>PARTNERS:</b>                  What other stakeholders or partners can support CTE leaders in this work? What other agencies, institutions or organizations can you turn to for assistance?</p>	



## Sample Focus Group Questions for Current CTE Learners

Below are two sets of sample focus group questions, based on the intent and goals of the learner focus groups.

### ONE

**The first set of focus group questions** is meant to give current CTE learners the opportunity to describe their experiences in CTE, with an emphasis on questions that draw out information about barriers, challenges and inequities as well as information about supports, services and relationships that can help counter inequities. State and local leaders should pick one or two categories of questions to ask at any given time as it would be overwhelming to attempt all of the questions.

### TWO

**The second set of questions** addresses learners' perspectives on CTE learner voice and engagement activities. Within this set, the first group of questions is more appropriate for state CTE agencies, institutions, districts or programs that are just getting started with learner voice activities, while the second group is intended for those who have already implemented learner engagement activities and are seeking to evaluate their effectiveness from the learner perspective.

Probing questions are only one part of a focus group experience. In addition, focus groups require sensitive, experienced facilitation; thoughtful scheduling; logistical considerations about recording and note-taking; and follow-up communications to let learners know if and how their input will be used. Tips for how to conduct learner focus groups can be found through the [UC-Berkeley YPAR Hub, \*Collecting Student Voices for Guided Pathways Inquiry and Design\*](#) from the California Community Colleges, the [Improving CTE Programs with Data and Evidence Guide](#) from The RP Group, and the [Student Focus Group Resource Guide](#) from WestEd-Public Agenda.<sup>41</sup>





## QUESTIONS ABOUT CTE EXPERIENCES, SUPPORTS AND RELATIONSHIPS

### FOCUS GROUP OBJECTIVE:

To get input into how effectively and equitably CTE programs and related supports are serving learners to inform programmatic and policy decisions going forward.

### CTE DECISION MAKING

1. Tell me about your decision to enroll in this CTE program. What led to you choosing to enroll in this program?
2. How did you find out about this CTE program? What kind of reputation does it have locally?
3. Who was involved in your decisionmaking process for enrolling in this CTE program? Who helped you make this decision?
4. What, if any, roadblocks did you encounter when enrolling in this CTE program? How could we make enrolling easier?
5. What, if any, potential concerns did you have before enrolling?
6. In your mind, what made this program the right option for you?
7. If you were giving advice to a friend or sibling who is thinking of enrolling in this program, what advice would you give?
8. What is the best way to attract learners like you to CTE who are not already participating in CTE?

when first making the decision to enroll?

6. What would this program look like at its best? What could this program do more of? Less of?
7. How can I, as an instructor/counselor/administrator/state leader, improve your CTE experience?
8. Imagine you could change the way that growth and success is measured in CTE. What would growth or improvement look like for you as a CTE learner? What would success look like for you?

*(Specific topics to probe may include access/application to program/school/college, cost, instructors, course options and quality, work-based learning, CTSOs, career prep/skills, flexibility, time requirements, job opportunities, engagement)*

### CAREER PLANNING AND TRANSITION

1. Where do you go for guidance or advice on how to meet your career and education goals?
2. How supportive are the people in your life of your education and career goals?
3. How are the classes you are taking now preparing you for what you want to do next? In what way does your CTE program feel connected or relevant to your long-term goals?
4. What kind of further education, training or credentials do you need to meet your goals?
5. What opportunities are you aware of for further education, training or credentials in the CTE field you are studying, either at the school/college you attend now or somewhere else? What opportunities do you wish were available?

### CTE EXPERIENCE

1. What have you enjoyed about this CTE program? What have you gained from this CTE program?
2. What has made you feel welcome, supported or valued in your CTE program?
3. What has been challenging or frustrating in your CTE program?
4. What has made you feel uncomfortable, marginalized or discriminated against in your CTE program?
5. What do you know now that you wish you had known



## CTE SUPPORTS AND SERVICES

1. What challenges or barriers do you face to participating and being successful in CTE?
2. What supports or services does your CTE program provide now to help you participate and be successful in CTE?
3. Which of these supports or services have you used? What was your experience using these supports or services? Were they helpful to you or not?
4. What supports or services that are not yet offered would make participating and being successful in CTE easier for you?
5. What supports or services would help you move successfully along your education and career pathway and reach your goals?

*(Specific topics to probe may include tutoring, guidance/ advising, financial aid, access to transportation, access to child care, access to technology, mentorship, flexible scheduling, accessibility such as translation/interpretation/ alternative text)*

6. What individuals or organizations do you turn to for support if you face a challenge or barrier in your education? In your career? In your personal life?  
*(Specific individuals or organizations to probe on may include instructors, counselors/advisers, family members, faith leaders, community groups, former/current employers)*

## RELATIONSHIP BUILDING IN CTE

1. Consider the person you are in your CTE program compared to the person you are at home or with friends. How similar or different are these two versions of yourself?
2. How well do your CTE instructors understand your interests, hopes, worries, challenges and barriers? How well would you say your instructors “get” what it is like to be you?
3. Whom in this CTE program do you have a relationship with? How has this relationship affected you? This relationship could be positive, such as with a friend or mentor, or it could be negative.
4. Thinking about your closest relationships in this CTE program, are there any defining moments or steps that developed these bonds? *(Specific individuals to probe on may include other learners, instructors, counselors/advisers, administrators)*

Several of the focus group questions in the previous sections were suggested by members of this workgroup and learners who contributed to this toolkit. Others are adapted from existing focus group resources:

- [Advance CTE Focus Group Discussion Guide](#)
- [Equitable Futures Designing Pathways With Young People Toolkit — Activity: Mapping Young People’s Pathways](#)
- [Center for Community College Student Engagement Focus Group Discussion Guides](#)



## QUESTIONS ABOUT LEARNER VOICE IN CTE

### **FOCUS GROUP OBJECTIVE:**

To get input into how the CTE system has leveraged and can effectively leverage learner voice in the design, assessment and improvement of CTE programs and policies. While the questions below focus on CTE programs, they can be adapted to ask about input into CTE policy.

### INTRODUCTORY

1. How would you prefer to provide feedback or input about your CTE program? *(Specific topics to probe may include filling out surveys, participating in focus groups, participating in the CLNA, giving input about program development and review)*
2. What is the best way to let you know about opportunities to provide input about your CTE program?
3. What could we do to make you feel welcome, supported or valued when providing input?
4. How would you prefer to contribute outside of the classroom to improve your CTE program or to represent your CTE program? *(Specific topics to probe may include serving on or leading advisory boards/committees, coordinating events, speaking up as a CTE ambassador)*
5. What is the best way to let you know about opportunities to help improve or represent your CTE program?
6. What could we do to make you feel welcome, supported or valued when helping to improve or represent your CTE program?
7. What supports or services would make participating and being successful in these activities easier for you? *(Specific topics to probe may include access to transportation, access to child care, access to technology, flexible scheduling, compensation, accessibility such as translation/interpretation/alternative text)*
8. About how much time would you be willing to invest in providing input? In helping to improve or represent your CTE program?
9. What type of compensation or recognition for participating in these activities would be most valuable to you? *(Specific topics to probe may include cash stipend, gift card stipend, scholarships, academic credit, independent study opportunities, awards, publishing your name)*



## INTERMEDIATE/EXPERIENCED

1. In what ways has your CTE program asked for your feedback or input? How did you find out about opportunities to give feedback or input?
2. What has made you feel welcome, supported or valued when providing input?
3. What has been challenging or frustrating when providing input?
4. What has made you feel uncomfortable, marginalized or discriminated against when providing input?
5. What changes were made to your CTE program as a result of your input? Were you satisfied with the changes made and the timeline of change?
6. What would improve these opportunities to give input?
7. In what ways has your CTE program asked you to contribute outside of the classroom to improve your CTE program or to represent your CTE program? How did you find out about opportunities to help improve or represent your CTE program?
8. What has made you feel welcome, supported or valued when helping to improve or represent your CTE program?
9. What has been challenging or frustrating when helping to improve or represent your CTE program?
10. What has made you feel uncomfortable, marginalized or discriminated against when helping to improve or represent your CTE program?
11. What changes were made to your CTE program as a result of your contributions to improving or representing your CTE program?
12. What supports or services were provided to help you participate and be successful in the activities you just described?
13. Which of these supports or services did you use? What was your experience using these supports or services? Were they helpful to you or not?
14. What supports or services would make participating and being successful in these activities easier for you? (*Specific topics to probe may include access to transportation, access to child care, access to technology, flexible scheduling, compensation, accessibility such as translation/interpretation/alternative text*)
15. About how much time have you invested in the activities you just described? Was that too much time, not enough time, or just the right amount of time?
16. What type of compensation or recognition have you been offered for these activities?
17. If you received any compensation or recognition, was it valuable to you? Why or why not?
18. What type of compensation or recognition would be most valuable to you? (*Specific topics to probe may include cash stipend, gift card stipend, scholarships, academic credit, independent study opportunities, awards, publishing your name*)



## Developing a Strategy to Elevate Learner Voice in CTE

**Drawing on major takeaways and reflections from throughout *With Learners, Not for Learners: A Toolkit for Elevating Learner Voice in CTE***, state and local leaders can complete this worksheet to develop a CTE learner voice strategy for their state, district or institution by:

- Setting goals
- Mapping assets
- Prioritizing actions
- Putting your plan into action
- Measuring success

### **SETTING GOALS**

What are your top three to five goals for engaging CTE learners to develop and improve CTE policies and programs? Or what would success look like if you had an effective strategy in place for elevating learner voice in CTE?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

**MAPPING ASSETS**

What existing capacity, resources, policies, relationships, structures, etc. are already in place that you can leverage or build on to develop or expand a strategy for elevating learner voice in CTE?

**PRIORITIZING ACTIONS**

Drawing on the worksheets, rubrics and other resources in this toolkit, identify the three to five actions that will drive your strategy for elevating learner voice in CTE and ensure that you accomplish the goals identified previously. Actions can range from single activities (e.g., adding learners to statewide advisory committees) to more extensive policy changes (e.g., updating program approval requirements).

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_



## PUTTING YOUR PLAN INTO ACTION

For each of your identified actions, break down immediate, short-term and long-term steps that need to be taken to accomplish those actions and your overall objectives.

### ACTION 1

**What steps will your state, district or institution take **immediately** to advance this action?**

ACTION STEPS	OWNER	DESIRED OUTCOMES
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.

**What steps will your state, district or institution take **in the next six months** to advance this action?**

ACTION STEPS	OWNER	DESIRED OUTCOMES
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.

**What steps will your state, district or institution take **in the next year** to advance this action?**

ACTION STEPS	OWNER	DESIRED OUTCOMES
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.



ACTION 2

What steps will your state, district or institution take **immediately** to advance this action?

ACTION STEPS	OWNER	DESIRED OUTCOMES
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.

What steps will your state, district or institution take **in the next six months** to advance this action?

ACTION STEPS	OWNER	DESIRED OUTCOMES
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.

What steps will your state, district or institution take **in the next year** to advance this action?

ACTION STEPS	OWNER	DESIRED OUTCOMES
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.





ACTION 3

What steps will your state, district or institution take **immediately** to advance this action?

ACTION STEPS	OWNER	DESIRED OUTCOMES
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.

What steps will your state, district or institution take **in the next six months** to advance this action?

ACTION STEPS	OWNER	DESIRED OUTCOMES
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.

What steps will your state, district or institution take **in the next year** to advance this action?

ACTION STEPS	OWNER	DESIRED OUTCOMES
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.



## ACTION 4

What steps will your state, district or institution take **immediately** to advance this action?

ACTION STEPS	OWNER	DESIRED OUTCOMES
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.

What steps will your state, district or institution take **in the next six months** to advance this action?

ACTION STEPS	OWNER	DESIRED OUTCOMES
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.

What steps will your state, district or institution take **in the next year** to advance this action?

ACTION STEPS	OWNER	DESIRED OUTCOMES
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.



ACTION 5

**What steps will your state, district or institution take **immediately** to advance this action?**

ACTION STEPS	OWNER	DESIRED OUTCOMES
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.

**What steps will your state, district or institution take **in the next six months** to advance this action?**

ACTION STEPS	OWNER	DESIRED OUTCOMES
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.

**What steps will your state, district or institution take **in the next year** to advance this action?**

ACTION STEPS	OWNER	DESIRED OUTCOMES
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.

**MEASURING SUCCESS**

Looking back on your goals, how will you measure the success and impact of your CTE learner engagement strategy? These can be reach measures (e.g., how many — and which — learners were engaged), impact measures (e.g., change in policy), satisfaction measures (e.g., satisfaction of learners engaged), or other measures that will best drive your strategy.

1.

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2.

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3.

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4.

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## Annotated Bibliography

This annotated list of learner voice resources served as a starting point to inform the work of Advance CTE's Elevating & Leveraging the Learner Voice in CTE Shared Solutions Workgroup and can further support learner voice activities in your state, district or institution.

**Advance CTE. (2021).** *Engaging representatives of learners with special population status through Perkins V.* <https://careertech.org/resource/engaging-representatives-learners-special-population-status-perkins-v>

This resource is designed to help states establish processes and routines for systematically engaging representatives of learners with special population status at the state level.

**Advance CTE. (2018).** *Making good on the promise.* <https://careertech.org/resource/series/making-good-promise>

This series examines how states can leverage data to identify and address equity gaps, rebuild trust with historically under-served communities, expand access to high-quality CTE for each and every learner, and build systems to ensure learner success.

**Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2019).** *A framework for effectively partnering with young people.* <https://www.aecf.org/resources/a-framework-for-effectively-partnering-with-young-people> This guide explores authentic youth engagement, including how it benefits young people, why it works, and what it looks like in real life. A list at the end of the guide provides more resources on the topic of youth engagement from Annie E. Casey.

**Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2014).** *Realizing the power of youth and young adult voice through youth leadership boards.* <https://www.aecf.org/resources/realizing-the-power-of-youth-and-young-adult-voice> This issue brief explores the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative's experience in developing and implementing youth leadership boards.

**Arao, B., & Clemens, K. (2013).** *From safe spaces to brave spaces: A new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice.* <https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/asset/843249C9-B1E5-BD47-A25EDBC68363B726/from-safe-spaces-to-brave-spaces.pdf> In L. M. Landreman (Ed.), *The art of effective facilitation: Reflections from social justice educators.*

This article discusses the practice of establishing rules or guidelines to facilitate brave spaces that enable authentic, sometimes difficult, dialogue.

**Benner, M., Brown, C., & Jeffrey, A. (2019).** *Elevating student voice in education.* <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2019/08/14/473197/elevating-student-voice-education/>

A few studies show that students are more engaged in their education when they are able to directly participate in decisions about it. This report defines "student voice" and discusses strategies and policy recommendations at the state, district and school levels that can help engage students in their education.

**California Community Colleges. (2018).** *Collecting student voices for guided pathways inquiry and design.* [https://www.avc.edu/sites/default/files/academics/GPS/CCCGP\\_Documents/StudentVoicesInquiryGuide\\_Full\\_May14.pdf](https://www.avc.edu/sites/default/files/academics/GPS/CCCGP_Documents/StudentVoicesInquiryGuide_Full_May14.pdf)

This guide is designed to provide college stakeholders an introduction to engaging students in early guided pathways development efforts and includes tips on how to collect learner feedback about guided pathways.

**Cataldo, B., & Karandjeff, K. (2012).** *Improving CTE programs with data and evidence guide.* <https://rpgroup.org/BRIC/InquiryGuide/CTE> This inquiry guide and related resources aim to support CTE faculty in using and generating data, dialoguing with their colleagues about findings, implementing changes based on student success challenges, and engaging in ongoing assessment of those innovations. It offers a sample student survey and sample student focus group protocol.

**Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2017).** *Focus group toolkit.* <https://cccse.org/publications-resources/focus-group-toolkit> This toolkit provides an approach to organizing focus group discussions with community college students, faculty and staff. The toolkit also includes discussion guides, which are based on topics relevant to the community college field.

**Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (n.d.).** *Elevate student voice.* <https://schoolguide.casel.org/focus-area-3/school/elevate-student-voice/> This resource features a rubric for staff to identify areas for continuous improvement in elevating student voice. It also includes a ladder of student participation for adults to examine the power dynamics between adults and young people and be more intentional about how to elevate student voice while supporting their social-emotional learning.

**Equitable Futures. (n.d.).** *Explore the research and find tools for action.* <https://www.equitablefutures.org/research-and-tools/> This site features studies, analyses and research-informed tools about how racial, ethnic and cultural identity shapes the occupational choices and lives of young people.

**Harris, J., et al. (2014).** *Speak out, listen up! Tools for using student perspectives and local data for school improvement* [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/pdf/REL\\_2014035.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/pdf/REL_2014035.pdf) This guide offers three tools that educators can use to gather and analyze local data and listen to students on school-related topics or problems, including Analyzing Surveys with Kids, Inside-Outside Fishbowl and Students Studying Students' Stories.

**Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, National Network for Youth, & Youth Leadership Institute. (2003).** *Youth-adult partnerships: A training manual.* <https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/youthadultpartnership/files/2015/03/Youth-AdultPartnershipsTrainingManual.pdf> This manual offers training exercises, tools and support materials to develop the capacity of youth and adults working in partnership. Facilitators of and participants in this curriculum will develop the tools to successfully recognize the assets of all members of their communities.

**JFF Students at the Center. (2015).** *Motivation, engagement, and student voice: Professional development series: Student-voice module.* <https://studentsatthecenterhub.org/wp-content/uploads/l.c-Student-Voice-Professional-Development-Module.pdf> This professional development series was created through a partnership between Students at the Center, a JFF initiative, and the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents in a learner-centered development process. In the student-voice module, participants assess how much student voice is cultivated in their school or district, identify ways to support and encourage student voice within the class and school, and define potential barriers to student voice.

**Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. (2014).** *Achieving authentic youth engagement: Core values & guiding principles.* <https://www.aecf.org/resources/achieving-authentic-youth-engagement-core-values-guiding-principles-2> This two-page fact sheet presents the three core values and related guiding principles that the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative believes young people in foster care need to truly have a say in planning their own futures.

**National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity. (n.d.).** *Equity in CTE and STEM root causes and strategies.*

<https://napequity.org/root/> This publication includes a literature summary and an infographic framework describing an ecosystem for equity in CTE and science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). It examines how individual learners are affected by the dynamics within education, careers and community as well as overlapping root causes of inequities.

**National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity. (n.d.).** *Equity Leadership Academy for States.* <https://napequity.org/special-programs/equity-leader-academy/> The National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity's Equity Leadership Academy for States helps member education agencies guide postsecondary systems in their states to make Perkins V more effective and sustainable — with equity at the core — to ensure that all students are prepared for 21st-century careers. This webpage features more details about the academy, which includes learner participants.

**National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity. (n.d.).** *Strategies for special population success: Practical tips and tools for educators.* <https://napequity.org/public-policy/frontline-legislation/strengthening-career-and-technical-education-for-the-21st-century-act/#specialpops> This resource features evidence-based practices to address equity gaps for special populations identified through the Perkins V CLNA.

**School-Based Health Alliance. (n.d.).** *Recruiting and retaining young leaders.* <https://www.sbh4all.org/what-we-do/services/training/youth-development/youth-engagement-toolkit/recruiting-and-retaining-young-leaders/> This resource details strategies for recruiting youth leaders, questions to consider during the process, and tips for how to retain youth leaders.

**SoundOut. (n.d.).** *Lesson plan to introduce student/adult partnerships.* <https://soundout.org/2015/06/22/intro-to-studentadult-partnerships-workshop-outline/> This hands-on, interactive session featuring reflection and critical thinking skill development is designed for mixed groups of students and adults, with no more than 40 participants. The goal of the session is for participants to define student-adult partnerships in a variety of settings throughout schools and identify currently existing student-adult partnerships.

**Student Voice. (2016).** *A roadmap to authentically engage youth voice in the U.S. Department of Education.* <https://www.stuvoice.org/resources/youth-voice-in-ed-report> This report outlines five key mechanisms to engage young people as meaningful partners with the Department of Education.

**Texas Network of Youth Services. (n.d.).** *Youth engagement toolkit.* <http://tnoys.org/youth-engagement-toolkit/> This webpage links to many resources to help organizations and institutions begin to actively engage youth, including a ladder of youth engagement, a readiness worksheet and best practices.

**UC-Berkeley. (n.d.).** *YPAR hub.* <http://yparhub.berkeley.edu> YPAR (Youth-led Participatory Action Research) is an innovative approach to positive youth and community development based in social justice principles. Through this approach, young people are trained to conduct systematic research to improve their lives, their communities, and the institutions intended to serve them.



**YouthForce NOLA. (2019).** *Family engagement toolkit.* <https://www.youthforcenola.org/yfn-produced-resources/familyengagement> This resource was created by the Urban League of Louisiana and YouthForce NOLA to assist schools in their efforts to engage families/caregivers as partners in career pathways programs of study. It includes background on the value of family/caregiver engagement, strategies for family/caregiver engagement and communication, and links to several tools and templates.

**Youth.gov. (n.d.).** *Eight successful youth engagement approaches.* <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/TAG/game-plan/approaches> This webpage features exemplary organizations working to actively engage youth and related resources for each of the eight youth engagement approaches mentioned.

**Zeldin, S., & Collura, J. (2010).** *Being Y-AP savvy: A primer on creating and sustaining youth-adult partnerships.* [http://www.actforyouth.net/resources/n/n\\_y-ap-savvy.pdf](http://www.actforyouth.net/resources/n/n_y-ap-savvy.pdf) Youth and adult partnerships (Y-AP) are about youth and adults working together as colleagues. This guide helps users acquire core knowledge about Y-AP, establish one's own point of view about Y-AP and develop the ability to communicate it to others, and build consensus on key issues regarding Y-AP.

**Zeldin, S., Gurtner, J., & Chapa, B. (2018).** *ACT for youth: Preparing for youth engagement: Youth voice, youth-adult partnership, youth organizing.* [http://actforyouth.net/resources/pm/pm\\_preparing-youth-engagement\\_0818.pdf](http://actforyouth.net/resources/pm/pm_preparing-youth-engagement_0818.pdf) This resource explores how organizations should prepare to engage with youth and features a checklist for selecting goals for youth-adult partnerships.

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