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Pathways Policies That Work: *Practical Advice for Policymakers*

A Series of Policy Briefs about Career Pathways

The Next Perkins

Recommendations for future federal career pathways legislation and policies

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About This Series

This brief is part of a series of briefs titled *Pathways Policies That Work*. These briefs provide practical advice to state policymakers–especially governors and leaders of state education and workforce systems–about how to better connect K12 education, postsecondary education and workforce systems to create pathways to economic mobility.

These policy briefs are written by former policymakers, for current policymakers. The briefs highlight concrete steps policymakers could realistically take in their current political and fiscal environment to deliver policy changes that increase economic mobility for young people.

All briefs are available on Education First's website. The topics in this series are:

- Brief 1: Braiding funding for effective pathways
- Brief 2: Recommendations for reauthorizing Perkins and improving federal pathways policy
- Brief 3: Expanding effective career pathways models
- Brief 4: Pathways to high-wage, high-demand industries in the age of AI

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Executive Summary

Perkins V needs a refresh to meet growing demand in career pathways and integrate evidence on effective programs. This brief explains how.

Background

The primary federal law for career and technical education (CTE) is the Strengthening CTE for the 21st Century Act, more commonly known as Perkins V. The law was passed in 2018, and growth in the interest, participation and success of CTE programs has continued since. Perkins needs a refresh to support this level of ambition. Quality at both the system and program levels is inconsistent. A re-authorized Perkins can orient state systems towards high-value, evidence-based programs.

It is time for policymakers to have a serious conversation about what should be in the next Perkins: Perkins VI. This brief lays out five key policy recommendations for the new law.

Recommendations

#1: Raise the Bar for Career Pathways

Perkins V defines a "CTE concentrator" (i.e., its highest level of student participation) as taking two courses. That is far too low a bar. **High-quality CTE is about more than a couple of CTE classes.** Research shows that CTE is most effective when it is part of an integrated career pathway program. High-quality programs include structured course sequences, including CTE and dual enrollment, advising supports, work-based learning and opportunities to earn meaningful credentials connected to postsecondary education and employment. **Perkins VI should define this more comprehensive definition of a CTE program of study, and require state and local Perkins recipients to build them.**

#2: Anchor Pathways to Real Outcomes

Perkins V left key definitions of pathway quality to states, leading to significant variation across the country. Perkins VI needs to do better. Federal law needs to replace the "high-skill, high-wage, OR in-demand" standard with an "AND" standard that applies consistently across Perkins, WIOA, and Workforce Pell. Additionally, states must **define high-quality "credentials of value,"** based on labor market outcomes, not simply industry endorsement.This should be done through partnerships between industry associations and education and workforce policymakers.

#3: Connect Education and Workforce Data Systems

Perkins VI should improve the data and reporting systems for career pathways. First, this involves improving reporting by **aligning data definitions across Perkins VI and WIOA and by requiring reporting at the pathways level.** Second, the federal government should also play a larger role in building the required data infrastructure. It should provide **renewed funding for statewide longitudinal data systems** and **streamline FERPA guidance** to facilitate cross-agency data sharing in states. The federal

government should leverage its access to tax records to **produce regular national longitudinal reports on earnings trajectories across career fields** to inform policymakers' decisions.

#4: Make Cross-Sector Collaboration the Default

Perkins V was designed for a system in which CTE is primarily an education program, delivered by schools and colleges that find their own ways to collaborate with employers and workforce organizations. Perkins VI provides the opportunity to build a system that views cross-sector collaboration as the central organizing principle, rather than an add-on. This means **fully integrating state planning for Perkins and WIOA, combining metrics and goals and allowing funds to go to regional education and workforce intermediaries.**

#5: Fund What Works—and Build the Evidence to Know

In the years since Perkins V was passed, states have experimented with new models for CTE programs. Perkins' Innovation and Modernization grant program should be expanded to **encourage research and development (R&D) of innovations that strengthen the talent pipeline**. This could include new funding structures and program models, supporting skill-based hiring, novel uses of technology or effective strategies for managing an AI-impacted economy. Provide funding for innovations and pair it with research requirements.

Next Steps

It is unlikely any major new federal legislation would pass until the next Congress is sworn in in January 2027. However, even if the new Congress is under divided control, there is a real possibility for bipartisan Perkins legislation. Perkins V passed with bipartisan support in 2018; Perkins VI could similarly pass. And while there is currently more discussion about reauthorizing WIOA than Perkins, the reauthorization of the two bills should be coordinated to ensure they are more closely integrated.

CTE and career pathways policy experts and advocates should begin sharing ideas about the elements of Perkins VI. This includes adding to or critiquing the ideas shared in this policy brief.

Federal staffers should compile and solicit feedback from CTE policy groups–including representatives from K12 education, postsecondary education and workforce organizations–to develop a framework for future legislation.

Background

The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act is the primary federal law governing career and technical education (CTE). First authorized in 1984, the law has been reauthorized four times, most recently in 2018, when the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act—commonly known as Perkins V—was signed into law with near-unanimous bipartisan support.

Since it was first passed, Perkins has long provided a few key features to the CTE system:

- **State and Local Funding:** Perkins V provides approximately $1.4 billion annually in formula grants to states,[1] which distribute at least 85 percent of their allocations to local recipients, primarily school districts and community colleges. States may retain up to 15 percent for leadership activities and administration. Perkins also provides funding for some competitive grants, such as the Perkins Innovation & Modernization grants. (*Note:* Most CTE funding comes from state and local sources. For more on career pathways funding, see Brief 1 in this series.)
- **Data and accountability:** Perkins requires states to report annually on core performance indicators (e.g., graduation, credential attainment and postsecondary placement, disaggregated by student subgroup) through the Consolidated Annual Report (CAR) system.
- **State plans:** Perkins requires states to submit state plans on how they will use their Perkins funds, which can serve as a state CTE strategy.

Perkins V established important building blocks for modern career pathways. The law introduced Comprehensive Local Needs Assessments (CLNAs), requiring states to understand their communities' workforce needs.[2] It also required states to set performance targets on core accountability indicators,[3] and created expectations for "programs of study" that integrate academic and technical instruction. Perkins V also expanded provisions for dual enrollment and work-based learning, and it gave states greater flexibility to allocate funding between secondary and postsecondary recipients.

These changes have driven growth in interest, participation and success in CTE programs. In the eight years since Perkins V was enacted, bipartisan interest in career pathways has grown dramatically. States have passed hundreds of new CTE-related policies—on funding, industry partnerships, credentials, and data reporting. Enrollment continues to climb. Employers, governors, and families increasingly expect career pathways to deliver measurable results: credentials with real labor-market value, meaningful work experience and clear transitions to postsecondary education and good jobs.

Perkins needs a refresh to support this level of ambition. Quality at both the system and program levels is inconsistent. The law leaves substantial discretion to states in defining pathway structure, measuring quality and demonstrating accountability. The result is wide variation: Some states have built comprehensive pathway systems with clear expectations and strong data infrastructure, while others treat federal requirements as a compliance exercise. A re-authorized Perkins can orient state systems towards high-value, evidence-based programs.

It is time for a serious conversation about what comes next. Congress has the opportunity to reauthorize Perkins in a way that reflects how career pathways actually operate today, and that sets clearer expectations for quality, data and cross-sector collaboration. Perkins V passed with bipartisan support under President Trump's first term; Perkins VI could do the same. The recommendations that follow lay out the key elements of that legislation.

Implementation Consideration: Strengthening the CTE Educator Workforce

High-quality career pathways depend on educators and industry professionals who can deliver technically rigorous instruction connected to real workforce needs. Yet many states face persistent challenges recruiting and retaining CTE instructors in fields such as health care, advanced manufacturing and information technology.

As states expand career pathways aligned with economic priorities, ensuring a strong pipeline of CTE educators will be essential. Potential strategies include expanding pathways into teaching for industry professionals, strengthening professional development that integrates technical expertise with pedagogy and supporting partnerships between employers and CTE programs to develop future instructors.

Recommendations for Perkins VI

Reauthorizing Perkins presents an opportunity to modernize federal policy so it reflects how career pathways systems operate today. Over the past decade, expectations for career pathways have evolved significantly. Policymakers, employers and families increasingly expect pathways to deliver measurable results: credentials that carry labor-market value, meaningful work-based learning experiences and clear transitions to postsecondary education and good jobs.

The following recommendations outline priority areas for federal action. They are designed to strengthen the foundation established in Perkins V by clarifying pathway expectations, improving outcome measurement and supporting states in aligning CTE programs with economic opportunity.

Recommendation 1: Raise the Bar for Career Pathways

A high-quality career pathway is not a collection of CTE electives. It is a structured, multi-year sequence of experiences deliberately connected to one another and to a real destination in postsecondary education or the labor market. Yet under current federal law, the bar for what counts as a pathway is so low that programs of vastly different quality are treated as equivalent.

The table below illustrates what a strong pathway can look like. It is not a prescription—actual pathways will vary by sector, region and grade configuration—but the architecture should be familiar across all rigorous programs: a course sequence that builds in depth over time, work-based learning that grows from exploration to application and a credential or postsecondary connection at the end.

Year	Course Sequence	Work-Based Learning	Credentials & Milestones
9th Grade	Introduction to Health Science (foundational concepts, anatomy)	Job shadowing at local clinic or hospital	Student joins HOSA (Health Occupations Students of America); career exploration plan identifies radiologic technology pathway
10th Grade	Medical Terminology & Imaging Fundamentals *(Dual enrollment)*	Structured observation at healthcare facility	CPR/First Aid certification
11th Grade	Radiologic Science & Patient Care *(Dual enrollment)*	Employer site visit and skills assessment	First college credit earned; individual career and academic plan updated to target radiologic technology associate degree program
12th Grade	Capstone: Radiologic Technology Practicum *(Dual enrollment)*	Clinical placement; employer-evaluated competency assessment	College credit toward accredited associate degree program; pathway completer designation and transition to postsecondary program

Note. The above table was loosely adapted from the Texas Education Agency' Diagnostic and Therapeutic POS.

A student who completes a pathway like this leaves high school with college credit, verified clinical hours, a documented plan to enter an accredited radiologic technology program and a postsecondary destination that leads to a median wage of over $77,000.[4] Under current federal law, that student counts the same as a student who took "Introduction to Health Science" and "Medical Terminology" as electives with no employer connection and no credential. Federal reporting cannot tell the difference.

This is a problem Perkins VI must solve.

Define a High-Quality Pathway in Federal Law

Perkins V requires states to support "programs of study" that integrate academic and technical instruction and lead to recognized postsecondary credentials or employment. However, the law leaves significant discretion to states in defining pathway structure, course sequencing and completion expectations. The result is wide variation: In some states, pathways are clearly defined sequences with measurable completion expectations; in others, pathway participation may involve only a small number of loosely related CTE courses with no articulated sequence.[5]

The evidence regarding what makes pathways effective is consistent. Long-term evaluations of career academies found that young men from low-income families who participated earned approximately 17 percent more eight years after graduation than their peers who did not.[6] More recent causal evidence extends these findings to mainstream school settings: A 2025 study of Massachusetts' Chapter 74 program, which requires high-quality, state-approved CTE pathways with rigorous standards for course sequencing, employer partnerships and work-based learning, found that expanding access to these programs in comprehensive high schools increased students' earnings and employment, with the largest gains for students with disabilities and Black and Hispanic students.[7] This finding demonstrates that structured pathways drive outcomes in ordinary high schools: the setting where most CTE is delivered.

Perkins VI should establish a clear federal definition of a high-quality career pathway, built around four elements:

- A structured course sequence that builds in depth and integrates dual enrollment opportunities for postsecondary credit;
- A robust advising system that helps students explore interests, understand labor market options, and develop an individual career and academic plan;
- A continuum of work-based learning experiences (e.g., from exploration and job shadowing to internships and pre-apprenticeships) that grow alongside the course sequence; and
- An opportunity to earn a credential of value or postsecondary credit that meaningfully accelerates the student's trajectory after graduation.

Move from "Concentrator" to "Completer"

Federal law currently defines a CTE concentrator—the highest level of recognized participation—as a student who completes just two CTE courses within a single program of study. That bar cannot distinguish between a student who takes a pair of loosely related electives and one who completes a rigorous multi-year pathway.

National transcript data underscore the problem. Among high school students who took at least two CTE courses, fewer than one in three completed a sequence of three or more courses in a single subject area, the threshold most researchers associate with coherent pathway participation.[8] Research using nationally representative data finds that the wage benefits of CTE are driven entirely by upper-level coursework: courses beyond the introductory level, particularly in technical fields aligned with employer demand. Each additional year of upper-level CTE coursework is associated with roughly a 2 percent increase in early-career wages.[9] Students who complete deeper sequences consistently outperform those who take isolated electives.[10]

Perkins VI should shift the operative unit of federal accountability from the concentrator to the **completer**: a student who has finished a pathway's full required course sequence, including any associated dual enrollment, work-based learning and credentialing components. This is not a reporting tweak; it is a structural change. When completer status becomes the standard for accountability, states and districts have a direct incentive to build pathways worth completing rather than maximizing concentrator counts.

Congress could operationalize this by requiring states, as a condition of Perkins funding, to define programs of study with clearly articulated course sequences, completion expectations and associated credentials or postsecondary outcomes. It should also require states to report concentrator and completer counts separately, so policymakers can see how many students who enter a pathway actually finish it.

Summary

Recommendation 1: Raise the Bar for Career Pathways

- 1A: Define a high-quality career pathway in federal law as a structured, multi-year sequence integrating a coherent course progression (with dual enrollment where available), a robust advising system, a continuum of work-based learning, and an opportunity to earn a credential of value or postsecondary credit.
- 1B: Set pathway-specific quality standards — minimum course sequence depth, employer engagement, and work-based learning hours — as a condition of Perkins funding.
- 1C: Shift federal accountability from "concentrator" (two courses) to "completer" (full pathway). Require states to report both, separately.
- 1D: Fund the development of validated pathway maps in partnership with industry. Incentivize states to align local programs to these national models.

Recommendation 2: Anchor Pathways to Real Outcomes

A pathway is only as good as what it leads to. Two of the most important signals of pathway quality—whether it leads to a career that pays a family-sustaining wage, and whether it connects to a credential employers actually value—are currently left to states to define for themselves, often with minimal guidance and inconsistent rigor. Perkins VI should change that.

Strengthen Definitions of High-Wage, High-Demand Occupations

Perkins V encourages states to align CTE programs with "high-skill, high-wage, or in-demand industry sectors or occupations." WIOA uses similar terminology. Workforce Pell, launching in 2026, requires programs to meet these same standards. However, as New America has documented, there is no official federal definition of this phrase, and the multiple "or" clauses make it easy for states to satisfy the requirement using any single criterion, no matter how weak.[11]

The practical consequence is significant variation. Some states define high-wage as any job above the poverty line. Others use regional median wages but set the threshold low. Because the statute allows states to meet any one criterion independently, a pathway can qualify if it leads to an occupation that is high-demand alone, regardless of whether it pays a wage that supports a family. That is not the same goal, and policymakers should not treat it as one.

Perkins VI should establish clearer federal expectations for what counts as a qualifying occupation, anchored in economic self-sufficiency rather than poverty avoidance, and is applied consistently across the federal programs that share this language.[12]

Policy Consideration: Important but Lower-Wage Careers

A common objection to strict high-wage standards is that they would exclude fields with high social value but chronically low wages, early childhood education being the most frequently cited example. This is a genuine tension and deserves a direct answer. Early childhood educators provide essential work, yet nationally they earn a median wage of roughly $13 per hour, and approximately 13 percent earn below the federal poverty line.[13]

Those wages reflect a real policy failure, not an immutable feature of the work. That is a problem worth addressing through compensation and public funding reforms, not through CTE policy that treats low-wage destinations as acceptable for high school students. These fields can remain part of CTE programming at the exploratory or foundational level, but they should not be designated as approved pathway destinations that meet a strengthened high-wage standard.

Define Credentials of Value

Perkins V encourages states to integrate recognized postsecondary credentials into programs of study, but the statute provides no methodology for determining which credentials carry meaningful labor-market value and does not require pathway-level reporting of credential outcomes.

The result is a credentials landscape that researchers and policymakers have rightly called the "Wild West." States have approved thousands of credentials for use in CTE pathways, but the supply has far outpaced any systematic effort to assess their value. Widely used credentials, such as general safety certifications, may signal basic workplace readiness but do little to distinguish technical skill. Pathway-specific credentials tied to health science, manufacturing, transportation and public safety tend to show stronger labor market returns.

Recent research adds important nuance. A 2025 study of credentials in Texas found that industry-recognized credentials produced earnings benefits only when aligned to the student's field of study, and that the benefits were larger for advantaged students, raising equity concerns.[14] Longitudinal research in Ohio found that credential attainment alongside CTE completion increased future earnings, but that wage returns were strongest immediately after graduation and weakened over time, with positive effects concentrated among male graduates.[15] The takeaway: Credential quality and program alignment matter enormously, and not all credentials are created equal.

The federal government should identify rigorous methodologies for evaluating credentials of value and require states to adopt one. The Burning Glass Institute's Credential Value Index is a promising example of an outcomes-based approach.[16] The federal government could also fund this research directly, through a Perkins administrative set-aside or at the Bureau of Labor Statistics. States receiving Perkins funds should be required to demonstrate that their approved credential lists reflect actual labor market outcomes, not simply employer endorsement or industry association recognition.

Summary

Recommendation 2: Anchor Pathways to Real Outcomes

- 2A: Replace the "high-skill, high-wage, OR in-demand" standard with an "AND" standard. Set a minimum wage benchmark tied to regional economic self-sufficiency, not poverty-level wages.
- 2B: Create a common federal definition of high-wage, high-demand career fields that applies consistently across Perkins, WIOA, and Workforce Pell. Require states to publish their occupation lists and methodologies.
- 2C: Establish federal standards for identifying credentials of value based on labor market outcomes, not simply industry endorsement. Require states to adopt a validated methodology as a condition of Perkins funding.
- 2D: Require pathway-level reporting of credential attainment so that approved credential lists can be revised as evidence accumulates.

Recommendation 3: Connect Education and Workforce Data Systems

Sound policy requires sound data. For programs like Perkins that operate at the intersection of workforce and education systems, data systems that bridge that divide are essential. The recommendations above—including developing programs of study and defining credentials of value—are impossible without connected data systems. Yet most states currently lack that capacity: A recent national analysis found that only six states have comprehensive pathway-level data systems fully in place.[17] **Stronger data systems are not merely a technical improvement; they are the prerequisite for every other reform in this brief.**

Build State Data Capacity

Without comprehensive longitudinal data, states cannot answer some essential questions: Are pathway completers more likely to be employed? Do they earn more? Which pathways produce the strongest outcomes for which student populations?

Perkins VI can improve **state-level capacity** for education and workforce data systems by providing dedicated funding to improve statewide longitudinal data systems and by renewing and expanding the SLDS grant program and technical assistance center. A core limitation of all SLDS, however, is that states cannot track students when they cross state lines. One possible response is for Perkins to subsidize groups of states that voluntarily pool data into secure cross-state data systems. The Administrative Data Research Facility of the Coleridge Initiative is one mature model; Perkins should fund it to expand or seed similar efforts.[18]

Another, more radical yet more impactful approach is to **create a function for the federal government to generate anonymized, national longitudinal workforce reports by** leveraging IRS tax records. States that opt in could securely connect state education and wage records with federal tax records for adults to assess the long-term economic outcomes of programs. Independent researchers, most notably Raj Chetty and Opportunity Insights, have already demonstrated the value of this approach.[19] Real privacy and technical concerns would need to be addressed, but the potential to understand long-term pathway outcomes at the national scale merits serious development.

Align Definitions and Streamline Guidance

Perkins VI should align core data definitions with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). States can submit combined Perkins/WIOA plans, but practical alignment remains difficult, and recent DOL guidance has only modestly improved the incentives.[20] True alignment requires changes to the underlying statutes; Perkins VI provides an opportunity to make these changes.[21]

Perkins should also direct federal agencies to clarify and streamline FERPA guidance to enable appropriate cross-agency data sharing. FERPA is well-intentioned legislation to protect student privacy, but unclear rules frequently prevent important data sharing—not because sharing is actually prohibited, but because agencies are uncertain about what is allowed. Better guidance would reduce unnecessary barriers without compromising student protections.

Report for Performance and Accountability, Not Compliance

Perkins V requires annual reporting on core indicators—graduation rates, credential attainment, postsecondary placement and program-of-study participation—disaggregated by student subgroup and career cluster. However, the law does not require pathway-level reporting, limiting policymakers' ability to evaluate the quality and workforce alignment of specific programs.

Perkins VI should require pathway-level reporting as a standard condition of funding: participation, completion, credential attainment and work-based learning by specific pathway, not just by broad cluster. States should be required to post these data publicly in accessible formats so that families, researchers and advocates can use them. AI-powered tools increasingly make it possible for non-experts to analyze public data—but the data have to be there first.

Summary

Recommendation 3: Connect Education and Workforce Data Systems

- 3A. Provide dedicated funding to strengthen statewide longitudinal data systems and renew the SLDS grant program and technical assistance centers.
- 3B. Support voluntary cross-state data-sharing facilities modeled on the Coleridge Initiative's ADRF, so that states can track outcomes for students who cross state lines.
- 3C. Develop a federal capacity to generate anonymized national longitudinal workforce reports by linking opt-in state data with IRS earnings records, with appropriate privacy protections.
- 3D. Align core data definitions across Perkins and WIOA in the underlying statutes, not just through guidance, and direct federal agencies to clarify FERPA guidance to enable appropriate cross-agency data sharing.
- 3F. Require pathway-level reporting (not just career-cluster aggregates) of participation, completion, credential attainment, and work-based learning, posted publicly in accessible formats.

Recommendation 4: Make Cross-Sector Collaboration the Default

Perkins V was designed for a system in which CTE is primarily an education program delivered by schools and colleges that find their own ways to connect with employers and workforce agencies. That design made sense in 1984. It makes less sense in 2026, when the employers, institutions and intermediary organizations that need to build effective pathways are spread across multiple federal programs, each with its own definitions, metrics, planning timelines and funding rules.

Perkins VI provides the opportunity to make cross-sector collaboration the central organizing principle, not an add-on. That means deeper integration of state planning for Perkins and WIOA, a clear funding pathway for regional intermediary organizations and explicit alignment with other federal laws as they are reauthorized.

Integrate State Planning for Perkins and WIOA

States can submit a combined Perkins and WIOA plan, but in practice, it requires substantial coordination costs with limited concrete benefit.[22] Recent DOL guidance has improved incentives for joint planning, but the available flexibility is constrained by the underlying statutes—precisely what Perkins VI can change. Even in states that submit combined plans, coordination often remains superficial. The result is a patchwork: Some states have built genuine cross-system infrastructure, while others treat the requirement as a paperwork exercise. Learners moving between education and workforce programs fall through the gap.[23]

Perkins VI should make stronger integration the default by aligning core performance metrics across Perkins and WIOA, making combined planning more substantive (e.g., including expedited federal review and explicit blending, braiding or reporting flexibilities as incentives) and requiring states with combined plans to demonstrate actual program-level coordination, not just co-located documents.

Support Regional Intermediary Organizations

Perkins formula funding currently flows primarily to local education agencies and community colleges, a structure that reflects how CTE has historically been delivered. However, it leaves out a growing piece of the career pathways ecosystem: regional intermediary organizations. Intermediaries—nonprofits, workforce boards, chambers of commerce, community-based organizations—do the work no single institution can do alone: building employer relationships, aligning curriculum to industry needs, coordinating work-based learning placements and managing the data that allow partners to see whether pathways are working.

The evidence base for intermediaries is growing. A national landscape scan found that cross-sector programming coordinated by intermediaries is associated with more students accessing pathways with strong upward mobility prospects.[24] The Texas Regional Pathways Network—a statewide initiative connecting regional intermediaries to the state's Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative—reported more than doubling the number of students engaged in work-based learning activities.[25] Yet intermediaries currently sit almost entirely outside the Perkins funding framework, forcing them to piece together support from philanthropy, local agreements and other federal programs.

Perkins VI should add regional intermediaries as eligible subgrantees under formula funds, clarify that proven cross-sector roles (e.g., work-based learning coordinators, employer partnership managers, regional pathway conveners, etc.) are encouraged uses of Perkins dollars, and support the development of intermediary capacity through technical assistance and competitive grants in regions where this infrastructure does not yet exist.[26]

Align with Other Federal Laws

WIOA is the most immediate candidate for integration with Perkins, but a modernized Perkins law should also flag and encourage alignment with other federal programs as they come up for reauthorization, including ESSA, Workforce Pell, the Higher Education Act and Registered Apprenticeship. The goal is not to consolidate these programs but to reduce the friction that students and providers experience when moving between them.

Summary

Recommendation 4: Make Cross-Sector Collaboration the Default

- 4A: Integrate Perkins and WIOA planning more deeply in the underlying statutes — align core metrics, offer real incentives (including funding flexibilities) for combined plans, and require demonstration of actual program-level coordination.
- 4B: Add regional intermediary organizations as eligible Perkins subgrantees. Clarify that work-based learning coordination, employer partnership management, and regional pathway convening are encouraged uses of Perkins funds.
- 4C: Support the development of intermediary capacity in underserved regions through technical assistance and competitive grants.
- 4D: Flag alignment opportunities with ESSA, Workforce Pell, the Higher Education Act, and Registered Apprenticeship to reduce fragmentation across programs that serve the same students

Recommendation 5: Fund What Works—and Build the Evidence to Know

Perkins currently distributes over $1.4 billion a year through a formula built primarily around enrollment counts and per-capita income.[27] A state gets more money because it has more students, not because its pathways produce better outcomes. That is a reasonable way to ensure baseline access to CTE funding; it is not a reasonable way to drive quality.

Perkins VI has an opportunity to change that relationship, not by replacing the formula, but by building a performance layer on top of it that directs additional dollars toward states demonstrating results. At the same time, the federal government should strengthen its infrastructure for understanding what works: expanding the innovation grant program to rigorously test promising models and ensuring that evaluation is a condition of federal investment rather than an afterthought. A performance funding system needs a robust evidence base to function. The two must be built together.

Reward Results with Additional Funding

Perkins V's formula gives states little financial incentive to improve pathway quality beyond meeting minimum thresholds. States that set low targets and meet them receive the same allocation as states that set ambitious goals and exceed them.

Perkins VI should introduce a performance funding tier: supplemental federal dollars that states earn by demonstrating measurable improvements in pathway quality and student outcomes. Texas's House Bill 8 (2023) offers the clearest current model: The law directs additional per-student funding based on students' attainment of industry credentials and postsecondary outcomes, creating direct financial incentives for programs to improve quality and workforce alignment.[28] Perkins VI could replicate this logic at the federal level.

The metrics that unlock performance funding should come directly from the standards established in Recommendations 1 and 2: completer rates (not just concentrator counts), credential attainment from a validated list of credentials of value, work-based learning participation at the required depth and employment or postsecondary enrollment outcomes. Three design principles matter:

- **Growth, not just level.** Performance bonuses should reward states demonstrating meaningful year-over-year improvement, not just those with strong absolute numbers. A state that dramatically improves its completer rate from a low baseline should qualify, even if its absolute numbers still lag.
- **Equity-weighted outcomes.** Gains for students from low-income families, students with disabilities and students from historically underserved communities should count more heavily. This guards against a system that rewards states for sorting high-need students out of rigorous pathways.
- **Lag protection for early builders.** States in the early stages of building the data infrastructure required to measure these outcomes (see Recommendation 3) should have a defined runway to participate without being penalized for the absence of data they have not yet been funded to collect.

Expand the Innovation and Modernization Grant Program

The Perkins Innovation and Modernization grant program is currently underfunded, rarely paired with rigorous evaluation requirements and disconnected from any systematic effort to scale what works. The result is a field that generates promising pilots without the infrastructure to know which ones actually deliver better outcomes.

Perkins VI should significantly expand and restructure this program along the tiered-evidence approach used by the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program under ESSA. America Forward has made a parallel case for a Workforce Development Innovation Fund under WIOA reauthorization, arguing that a tiered structure would let federal investments scale evidence-based approaches while testing new practices to grow the evidence base over time.[29-30] The same logic applies directly to Perkins. A restructured program would operate in three tiers:

- **Early-phase grants.** Smaller awards to develop, pilot and begin evaluating innovative pathway models, including new approaches to work-based learning, employer partnership structures, credential integration and performance-based funding at the local level. Evaluation is required, but matched to the stage of development.
- **Validation grants.** Mid-tier awards for models that have shown initial promise and are ready for rigorous evaluation across multiple sites or states. Quasi-experimental or experimental designs are required as a condition of funding.
- **Scale grants.** Larger awards for models with strong evidence of effectiveness, supporting replication in new contexts. Evaluation focuses on implementation fidelity and cost-effectiveness rather than re-establishing impact.

This structure builds the evidence base over time rather than treating each grant cycle as an isolated experiment, and creates a clear pathway from innovation to policy. The current uncertainty around the Institute of Education Sciences, which has faced significant budget reductions and structural disruption, makes this provision more important, not less.[31] CTE research should not depend entirely on a federal research agency whose future is uncertain. Building evaluation requirements into Perkins grants themselves gives the field a more durable foundation for knowing what works.

To fund this expansion without a net appropriations increase, Perkins VI should redirect a portion of the state leadership set-aside (currently up to 10 percent of each state's allocation) toward evaluation-paired innovation grants. This is a reallocation of existing dollars toward higher-leverage uses, not a new spending line.

Summary

Recommendation 5: Leverage Funding to Encourage Innovation and Research

- 5A: Introduce a performance funding tier: supplemental federal dollars that states earn by demonstrating measurable improvements in pathway completer rates, credential attainment, work-based learning depth, and employment or postsecondary outcomes. Weight gains for high-need student populations more heavily. Provide a defined runway for states building the data infrastructure to participate.
- 5B: Restructure the Perkins Innovation and Modernization grant program using a three-tier evidence model — early-phase development, validation, and scale — that pairs federal investment with rigorous evaluation requirements at every stage. Fund the expansion by redirecting a portion of existing state leadership set-aside dollars.
- 5C: Build evaluation requirements directly into Perkins grants so that CTE's research infrastructure does not depend on a single federal agency

Conclusion & Next Steps

Perkins V established a foundation for modern career pathways, but evolving expectations from learners, employers and policymakers now require greater clarity, transparency and alignment. The recommendations outlined here would build on that foundation by ensuring that federally supported pathways are structured, measurable, connected to workforce demand and capable of delivering meaningful economic opportunity.

It is unlikely any major new federal legislation would pass until the next Congress is sworn in in January 2027. However, even if the new Congress is under divided control, there is a real possibility for bipartisan Perkins legislation. Perkins V passed with bipartisan support in 2018; Perkins VI could similarly pass. And while there is currently more discussion about reauthorizing WIOA than Perkins, the reauthorization of the two bills should be coordinated to ensure they are more closely integrated.

CTE and career pathways policy experts and advocates should begin sharing ideas about the elements of Perkins VI. This includes adding to or critiquing the ideas shared in this policy brief.

Federal staffers should compile and solicit feedback from CTE policy groups–including representatives from K12 education, postsecondary education and workforce organizations–to develop a framework for future legislation.

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