

The Next Perkins:

Recommendations for future federal career pathways legislation and policies

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Perkins V needs a refresh to meet growing demand in career pathways and integrate evidence on effective programs. This brief explains how. [Read the full brief here.](#)

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.

To learn more, read the [full brief](#) and find other policy briefs in this series: [Pathways Policies that Work: Practical Advice for Policymakers](#).