The Center to
ADVANCE ›› CTE
State Leaders Connecting Learning to Work

Maryland's Focus Group Discussion Guide

For
Students, Parents, and Counselors

Sample Discussion Guide
Moderator Guide

Agenda (90 minutes)
- Welcome and Introductions
  - Ice breaker
- Unaided perceptions/experiences of CTE
- Introduction to CTE/aided perceptions (what resonates, what doesn't)
- Message testing (messages; proof points or statements that support the message)
- Exploration of the decision making process and communication channels
- Terminology and language

Objectives:
- Determine current perceptions of CTE
- Determine effective messages about CTE
- Explore effective communication channels
- Determine most effective terminology and language

Location	Audience	Grp #
City, State Date		1
		2
		3
		4

*6-8 participants per group; up to 90 minutes each
*Focus groups can run simultaneously
*For best results, have a facilitator and recorder for each group

Welcome, Introductions & Ice Breaker (20 minutes)

1. Participant and Moderator Introductions

    "Thank for participating on this focus group on Student, Counselor, and Parent perceptions on Career and Technology Education – also called CTE."

    → Provide logistics (e.g. food/drink allowed, how the focus group will run, bathroom breaks, how long it will take, etc.)

    → As people are introducing themselves, ask them to respond the following questions:

    Parent Group:
    a. About your family - who lives in your household, # of kids, ages, school (for parents of students who are currently in a CTE program, ask type of CTE program)
    b. What do you do during the day? (Probe on type of work if employed)
    c. Reminder: for tonight please focus on your child in __-__the grade
    d. What social media do you use?

    Student Group:
    a. Age and grade level
    b. What school do you attend (for current students, ask where they receive CTE coursework)
    c. Favorite subject, if have one (and/or favorite TV show)
    d. What social media do you use?

    Counselor Group:
    a. At what school do you work?
    b. How many students do you counsel? (counselor to student ratio)
    c. What made you decide to go into education as a career, and did anyone influence your decision?
    d. What are 3 characteristics that make you great at what you do?
    e. How do you help students identify the courses and programs that they take in high school?
    f. Alternative Ice-breaker question: Please share your proudest moment as a guidance counselor.
    g. What social media do you use?

Ice Breaker (10 minutes)

Homeward Assignment:

Ask participants beforehand to collect up to 3 objects and/or images that describe their picture of what life after high school looks like/what they hope life will look like for themselves, student or child. These can be photographs, pictures torn out of magazines, newspaper clippings, images printed from the web, hand drawings, etc.]

HOLD PICTURE UP SO THOSE IN THE BACK OF THE ROOM CAN SEE

1. First, tell me about one of your pictures: Why did you select this image or item? Describe it to me
   → Probe on who, what, when, where, why
2. What does this picture mean to you? What is the feeling or idea it conveys to you?
3. How does this picture express your thoughts and feelings about life after high school for yourself/your student?
4. What experiences have you had/has your child had that make you feel that way?

   → Moderator will re-cap and record the elements/themes so everyone can see them

5. What are some of the common ideas we heard? Is there anything missing?

6. Education:
   For Students: How are the classes that you are taking now preparing you what you want to do after high school? What will help you achieve your goals and what additional training or further education do you need to reach them?

   For Counselors: How are you helping students align the courses they are taking now to their post graduation plans? What concerns do you have about helping student to get there? What else do you think is needed (e.g. programs, guidance, exposure, etc…). How do students and parents most often define what "a successful future" looks like?

   For Parents: How are you helping your child select classes based on their post graduation plans?   What will help them achieve their goals and what additional training or further education do they need to reach them?

7. Education Experience:
   For Students: What have been the highlights/positives about your learning experience? What elements have been challenging or frustrating?

   For Counselors: In helping to guide students through their educational experience, what strategies have worked best, and what are some of your challenges? What does an engaged student look like to you?

   For Parents: What do you perceive as your child's most satisfying and frustrating learning experience?

8. Specifically, what skills/types of learning are valuable to you/your child/your student? What skills/types of learning are you/ is your student not getting/need(s)?

   → Probe: flexibility, "real world" skills, career readiness, college readiness

   → Probe students: Do you feel any pressure to take certain courses over others? What kinds of courses do you feel you have to take?

Unaided CTE Awareness and Perceptions (10 minutes)

Now, I'd like to do a quick word association exercise. Some people have an easier time with this than others, but bear with me. I'll throw out a word and you tell me what immediately comes to mind.
- College
- Career
- Career and Technology Education
- Vocational Education
- Career Pathway

FOR each probe, ask:

1. What's the first thing that comes to mind?
2. What connections or associations do you make with this word/term?

For CTE, Career Technology Education, and Vocational Education:

3. Have you heard this term before? Is this a term that you use? Who else do you hear using it?
4. Does this term generate a positive or a negative feeling? (Be sure to follow-up and clarify any negative associations)
5. Have you heard, seen, or read anything about Career Technology Education?
   a. What have you heard about programs or schools in this area?
   b. Where have you heard/seen/read this information?
   c. What stands out?
   d. What worries you?
   e. Are you looking at, or researching, this as an option for yourself/your child? If so, what schools/programs have you looked at? How seriously are you considering this as an option?
6. Is CTE the same or different than vocational education? What makes you say that?

CTE Decision Making and Experience (10 minutes)

<mark>[FOR CURRENT CTE STUDENTS AND PARENTS ONLY]</mark>

[This section focuses on the decision making process and how parents and students make decisions for the students' future]

"The focus of our discussion tonight will be on your experience and opinions with CTE"

1. Tell me about the decision to enroll in your/your child's CTE program/school. What led to your/your student's enrollment in the program/school?
2. How did you learn about the program/school? What kind of reputation does it have locally?
3. Was this your decision? Your parent's/student's? Who was involved in the decision-making process? Who had the final say?
4. What stood out to you/sounded good about the program/school? What did you see as the benefits?
   → Probe: were there specific career paths that you were interested in?

5. What concerned you? Were they any potential drawbacks you were worried about?

[This section explores satisfaction within CTE programs]

1. Describe your/your child's experience with the program?
   → Probe: access/application to program/school, delivery system, cost, course options and quality, career prep/skills, flexibility, time requirements, job opportunities, work-based learning, engagement
2. In your mind, what made this the right option for you/your student?
3. What have you/they enjoyed about the program/school?
4. What, if anything, has been frustrating?
5. What would make your/your child's program better? What do you know now that you wish you had known when first making the decision to enroll?
6. How do you think other students/parents perceive your program/school?
7. What would surprise others to learn about your program/school?

[This section focuses on the decision making process and how counselors communicate information about CTE programs]

1. How does CTE fit into the overall school climate and culture?
2. How are you informed about the CTE programs in your school in order to describe them to students and parents?
3. How do you inform parents and students about CTE programs in your school?
4. How do help students align their career interest to CTE programs?
   → Probe: how is CTE valued in the school?

[This section explores language and what the program is actually called. Some participants may not know they are enrolled in CTE programs so this may get at what they think they're enrolled in]

1. When you talk to parents and students about CTE programs, do they understand that programs like the *Project Lead The Way Biomedical Sciences program* is a CTE program of study?) Why or why not?
2. How is CTE perceived in your school?
3. Do you see CTE programs or a bunch of electives for students?
4. Do any of the CTE programs in your school have waiting lists, receive waited credit, or have entry criteria? Do all students have access to CTE programs?
   → Probe: access/application to program/school, delivery system, cost, course options and quality, career prep/skills, flexibility, time requirements, job opportunities, work-based learning, engagement

[This section explores satisfaction within CTE programs]

1. What would make more students enroll and complete a CTE program of study?
2. How do you know if students in CTE programs are doing equally or better than students who are not in CTE programs of study?
3. What would make the CTE programs in your school better?
4. How do you think other counselors perceive CTE in your school?

Aided Perceptions of CTE (15 minutes)
"Here is a short description of Career and Technology Education or CTE. Take a moment to read it through, and then I want to get your reactions."

[Here we explore a definition for CTE. This definition should be printed on a sheet of paper and given to each participant in the focus group]

DEFINITION HANDOUT
Career and Technology Education (CTE) is an education pathway that provides students with the academic, technical and real world knowledge, skills and experience they need to be prepared for a variety of career options. CTE gives students training and skills in many different types of careers in high growth industries such as science and technology, healthcare, and business management, to name a few. CTE programs are personalized, hands-on, and let students explore different career fields. CTE is part of the high school experience, and prepares students for the full range of opportunities after high school, including college and careers. For example: *[Insert local program examples]*

1. CIRCLE words and ideas that you like, that stand out as positive
2. CROSS OUT words or ideas that you dislike, that prompt a negative feeling
3. "?" by any words or ideas that confuse you, please don't feel self-conscious about not knowing any of these words

DISCUSS AS A GROUP
1. GUT CHECK: "Before we discuss, I want to get a quick read: Based just on this description, how interested are you in learning more about this program? Thumbs up/down/in between? (Get a rating from everyone)"
2. What are your reactions to this? Is this useful? Needed? Probe on interest/disinterest and why.
3. What stood out in a positive way?
4. What gave you a negative feeling or caused concern?
5. Was there anything that was confusing? What needs to be explained? What else do you need to know at this point?
6. How do you envision this program working? What does it look like?
7. What do you think of the different types of career opportunities and options mentioned?

[FOR CURRENT STUDENTS/PARENTS ONLY]
8. Does this sound like your program/school? How is it similar or different? What would you add/change based on your experience?
9. How does this description fit with what we talked about earlier in terms of your aspirations/goals after school (for your child)?

[FOR COUNSELORS ONLY]
8. Is Career Technical Education, aka CTE, how you refer to this type of program, or is it called something else at your school?

9. Pretend I'm a student or parent in your office. How would you describe this program to me?
10. Does your school incorporate/offer CTE?
    a. If so: How would you say the program sets your school apart from other high school curricula? How has it made a difference in your students' lives? Positive/negative implications?
    b. If not: How does this impact your ability to service the needs of your students? What do you consider to be viable alternatives? Are there any circumstances under which you would you recommend a parent seek an outside CTE program in which to enroll their child? Why or why not?

Messaging and Communication Channels (25 minutes)

"Now we're going to review some different statements that provide more information about messaging."

[Each message is tested on its motivation and believability. <u>Each message should be printed out on a separate sheet of paper</u>. Parent and counselor messages include proof points. Student messages do not include proof points]

Read through each statement and give it a rating based on the following:

1. How believable is this statement? (Rating 1-5 scale, 5 is most believable)
2. Does this statement motivate you to enroll/enroll your child in a CTE program/school? (Rating 1-5 scale, 5 is high score)
3. How well do you think this applies to the local school system? (Rating 1-5 scale, 5 is high score)

DISCUSS EACH STATEMENT
[Ask each question after presenting each message; rotate the order for each group]

1. What's the big idea? What are they trying to say here?
2. What stands out in a positive way?
3. What is motivating about this? What does it make you want to do?
4. Is it believable? What do you have doubts about?
5. What prompted a negative reaction? PROBE: Is there a reason this wouldn't be for you/your child?
6. Was anything confusing?
7. [PARENTS]: Do the proof points below add to the statement? Are they helpful? Informative? What, if any, would you keep? What would you take out?
8. What is missing? What would make this better/what additional proof points would be helpful?

MESSAGES

The messages on the next few pages were tested with parents and students through a national survey in 2017. The chart that follows the messages demonstrates what worked in each message, key language, and pitfalls. The most successful messages with parents and students were "Prepare for the Real World" and "Get More From High School." However, there are themes in language in the remaining three messages that are critical to use when speaking with parents and students.

→ Probe: Tailor the messages and proof points to your school system.

Student Messages

Message 1
PREPARE FOR THE REAL WORLD
CTE gives purpose to learning by emphasizing real-world skills and practical knowledge. Students receive hands-on training, mentoring, and internships from employers in their community. They also learn how to develop a resume and interview for a job. These additional tools and experiences make school more relevant, and ensure students are ready for the real world.

Message 2
GET MORE FROM HIGH SCHOOL
CTE gives learning a boost. It combines regular academic courses with career-focused courses, skill-building, mentoring, and work opportunities to give students extra preparation for college and careers. CTE students also do better in class because the hands-on experience makes academic subjects more engaging and more interesting. CTE students have a significantly greater high school graduation rate (90%) than the national average (75%).

Message 3
A SMART INVESTMENT
CTE makes the future more affordable by helping families save money and invest their time wisely. CTE students can earn a paycheck, marketable certifications and even earn college credits while in high school, which can lead to better opportunities whether they pursue college or a career. And there are a growing number of scholarships designed to help CTE students on their way.

Message 4
EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES
CTE gives students opportunities to figure out what they are passionate about and want to do — and not do —after high school. Students explore a range of career options based on what they love to do and do well. CTE helps students build confidence and leadership skills to meet their goals in and out of the classroom.

Message 5
GIVING STUDENTS A LEG UP
CTE gives students an extra advantage for both college and careers through specialized classes, mentoring, and work experience in fields where jobs are in demand — like health care, engineering and information technology. When young people develop valuable skills, make connections and build a network while they are in high school, they have an inside track on a successful career.

Parent and Counselor Messages

Message 1
PREPARE FOR THE REAL WORLD

CTE gives purpose to learning by emphasizing real-world skills and practical knowledge. Students receive hands-on training, mentoring, and internships from employers in their community. They also learn how to develop a resume and interview for a job. These additional tools and experiences make school more relevant, and ensure students are ready for the real world.

- CTE allows students to come out of high school with a "real world" skill. The promise of real life preparation and career experience is attractive, even among college-bound students. This includes resume development, interview prep, internships/real-world, hands-on experience (not just sitting in a classroom).
- CTE students also find that tying their learning to examples in the real world helps them better understand their academic classes. They feel they are building new skills and improving existing ones.

Message 2
GET MORE FROM HIGH SCHOOL

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- CTE students have a significantly greater high school graduation rate (90%) than the national average (75%).
- More than 3 out of 4 CTE students go on to study in college full-time.

Message 3
A SMART INVESTMENT

CTE makes the future more affordable by helping families save money and invest their time wisely. CTE students can earn a paycheck, marketable certifications and even earn college credits while in high school, which can lead to better opportunities whether they pursue college or a career. And there are a growing number of scholarships designed to help CTE students on their way.

- Students can earn college credits or work toward a postsecondary degree while they are still in high school. On average, today's college students take six years to graduate from a four-year college. Earning credit in high school can help save time and money.
- Many high school CTE programs have partnerships with local colleges and universities, making it even easier to transfer credits.
- There are a growing number of scholarships specifically designed to help CTE students pay for college.

- Students who earn industry-recognized certifications in high school have opportunities to work and earn money while also attending postsecondary education.

Message 4
EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES

CTE gives students opportunities to figure out what they are passionate about and want to do — and not do —after high school. Students explore a range of career options based on what they love to do and do well. CTE helps students build confidence and leadership skills to meet their goals in and out of the classroom.

- CTE programs offer students more flexibility. Students gain the skills they need, when they need them, without the limitation of place or time.
- CTE provides opportunities for all types of learners. CTE programs are constantly innovating in formats and teaching styles. Students with special needs, such as hearing impairment, a learning disability or emotional challenges, can thrive in a CTE setting. Mixing academic class work with hands-on training engages these students more fully and helps them excel.
- In a recent survey of 22,000 high school students, students report feeling bored 70% of the time that they are in school. CTE engages and inspires students by reinforcing traditional classroom teaching with more personalized, hands-on learning.

Message 5
GIVING STUDENTS A LEG UP

CTE gives students an extra advantage for both college and careers through specialized classes, mentoring, and work experience in fields where jobs are in demand — like health care, engineering and information technology. When young people develop valuable skills, make connections and build a network while they are in high school, they have an inside track on a successful career.

- Many CTE programs have partnerships with large employers in their community. These employers provide training, mentorship, opportunities for internships, apprenticeships, and entry-level jobs.
- Many employers say they prefer hiring CTE graduates for both entry and higher-level jobs.
- One evaluation showed that CTE students earned 11% more (about $2,000 per year more) than their peers after finishing the program.

Concepts	What Works	Key Language	Pitfalls
Prepare for the Real World	• Real-world skills and hands-on trainings meet stated needs • Prospects appreciate the specific program aspects, like mentoring, internships, resume building. • Gives students a 'head start.'	*Real-world; internships; hands-on; mentoring; gives a head start*	• Does not mention a college specifically • Some felt that this put down high school or other experiences.
Get More from High School	• Balances academics with career training, which appeals to both the college and career tracks. • Having "extra preparation" for future is a value add.	*career-focused courses, skill-building, mentoring, and work opportunities to give students extra preparation; greater high school graduation rate (90%)*	• Some felt this was too focused on high school rather than the future benefits of CTE. • Students worried this might be too much work.
A Smart Investment	• Earning and saving money is popular, especially with lower income families. • Important to talk about college and career.	*affordable; save money; earn a paycheck; marketable certifications and even earn college credits; scholarships*	• Many felt this prioritized money over passion or education. • Cost of the program is source of confusion.
Exploring Possibilities	• Connects with key aspiration of finding career passion. • Exploration language resonates particularly among prospects. • Appeals to students who are unsure of their career path.	*opportunities to figure out what they are passionate about; career options; build confidence and leadership skills*	• Missing many of the specific benefits that respondents liked from other messages: e.g. college credits, internships, scholarships, mentoring.
Giving Students a Leg Up	• High demand fields listed, caught respondents' eyes. • Important to include diverse list with "unexpected" fields. • Networking, specialized classes, mentoring stand out.	*extra advantage for both college and careers through specialized classes, mentoring, and work experience; valuable skills, successful career*	• Some take issue with phrase "a leg up." • In-demand fields get mixed reviews.

AFTER ALL MESSAGES ARE PRESENTED – STAR THE MOST CONVINCING
[Each participant stars their most convincing message out of the ones presented. Then discuss which messages were the least and most convincing]

1. Which statement does the best job at making CTE sounds like a good option for you/your student/your child?
   → Probe: [FOR CURRENT STUDENTS/PARENTS, ask: What resonates most with your reasons for enrolling in CTE?]Which did you like least? What about it doesn't work for you?

2. [PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS/PARENTS]: Overall, what would it take/what do you need to know to feel confident about enrolling/enrolling your student in a CTE program?

   [PROBE PARENTS]: How concerned are you about the quality of the program? What would you look for in a program that would indicate it is high-quality?]

   [PROBE COUNSELORS]: What would you need to know to feel confident that the CTE programs in your school are high quality? Which statement motivates you to raise this option with students/parents?

3. [PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS/PARENTS]: How might CTE come up in conversations you are having with your parents/child? What types of conversations would this come up in? Could you raise this option to your parents/child? What say do you think you'll have? Who has final say? What reaction would you expect? What would win support?

   [COUNSELORS]: Have you raised this option with students/parents? If so, how did it come up in discussion? What has the response been like? What, if any, concerns were brought up? What factors ultimately drove the final decision? Do you see this type of program going hand-in-hand with your students' academic and higher education goals?

4. [GUT CHECK] After discussing this topic further, how interested are you in this type of program for yourself/your child? Thumbs up/down/in between? (Get a rating from everyone). Has your interest in this topic changed? How/what swayed you/changed your opinion? (Did another check around the table of whether or not CTE was more or less desirable after reading the messages.)

   [COUNSELORS GUT CHECK]: Did participating in this focus group give you a better understanding of CTE? After discussing this topic further, how comfortable are you with recommending this type of program to your students? Thumbs up/down/in between?

5. Where or from whom would you expect to hear about this topic/have you heard about this topic? Where would you go/what resources would you use/did you use? What's the best way to get out the word to students/parents like you? (In this section we explored the best messengers e.g. students, teachers, counselors, social media websites, etc.)

[COUNSELORS]: What's the best way to communicate the benefits of CTE to students, parents, and other educators? : Are there additional resources you'd like to have on this type of program that would aid you in reviewing the option with students/parents? Which disciplines of focus do you think the majority of your students would be interested in pursuing?

6. Whose opinion matters most to you? PROBE: your parents/child, friends/other parents, guidance counselors, trusted teachers, principals

Terminology (5 minutes)

"We've been referring to this topic as "Career and Technology Education." Now that we've talked about this topic more in depth, do you have a word or a phrase you use when discussing this topic? Is "Career and Technology Education" the right term to use? What about "CTE"?"

If you had to name it, what would you call it? What language/terms come into your mind? What would make it more understandable/clear?

→ Probe Alternatives:
- Workforce training
- Career readiness
- College and career readiness
- Vocational education
- Career track
- Career Education
- Career-focused Education
- Career pathway
- Career and Technology Education

Wrap Up (5 mins)

1. **[PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS/PARENTS:]** Bottom line – what, if anything, did you hear today that made you interested in considering Career and Technology Education (or preferred term) for yourself/your child?

   Alternatively, what questions do you still have or what do you still need to know about CTE? Write down your top three.

   [If time, ask to share thoughts]

2. **[CURRENT STUDENTS/PARENTS]:** What three things do you value most about your/your child's CTE program/school?

   [If time, ask to share thoughts]

3. **[COUNSELORS]:** What are the top three reasons you'd use to recommend CTE to a student? What are the top three reasons you'd use to recommend CTE to a student? Alternatively, what questions do you still have or what do you still need to know about CTE? Write down your top three.

   [If time, ask to share thoughts]

**Thank you for your time and sharing your opinions!
That concludes the focus group.**