



ADVOCACY AGENDA

Career and Tech Ed Increase Rungs on Ladder of Opportunity

BY GLENN “GT” THOMPSON

Millions of Americans are out of work today and underemployed, yet millions of jobs are unfilled—it’s called the skills gap. This country needs carpenters, plumbers, manufacturers, electricians, programmers, and more. These are well-paying, family-sustaining jobs, but we don’t have enough qualified workers who are able or willing to fill them.

There is a way to close the skills gap, however, and it starts with education. On June 22, 2017, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously approved H.R. 2353, the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act. I helped author and introduce this bipartisan bill to increase access to high-quality career and technical education (CTE), opening the door for more Americans to achieve success in today’s workforce. It’s not every day that Republicans and Democrats agree on labor or education issues—in fact, some would call it a rare occasion. However, I am proud to say that lawmakers, educators, and industry leaders have agreed to come together to make our nation more competitive in this cutting-edge, global economy.

As co-chair of the House Career and Technical Education Caucus and senior member of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, I have heard from many employers who are currently facing a hiring crisis too serious to ignore. More than 1 million positions remain open in the trade, transportation, and utilities sectors—and 315,000 manufacturing positions are currently unfilled. If we are to embark upon a new era of American manufacturing and improved infrastructure, we must realize the importance of a qualified and well-trained workforce to fill these positions.

Removing Barriers

With 45 million Americans currently living below the poverty line and the average college graduate having \$37,000 or more in student loan debt, federal legislation aimed at strengthening and expanding CTE programs is a no-brainer. Not only will this legislation help meet the needs of 21st-century employers, but it will also empower students to make educated decisions about their future and provide them with the tools they need to be competitive in the 21st century.

This bill is crucial to removing barriers to technical education, including the stigma that young people have been subjected to for far too long. Students who feel uninspired in a traditional classroom but thrive in settings where hands-on learning is encouraged have been led to believe that if they do not pursue a four-year degree, they will face challenges in life. This narrative needs to change. We must remove this outdated notion from the national dialogue and recognize that the dynamics of our economy are changing—our workforce must change with them. There is no one-size-fits-all path for students when it comes to education. Obtaining a four-year college degree might not be the right path for everyone, but there are many paths that lead to successful careers.

Reauthorization Bill

With all of this in mind, my colleagues and I took a long look at the existing federal law governing career and technical education, which has not been updated since 2006. We worked in conjunction with dedicated stakeholders to produce a well-engineered

reauthorization bill that will help to ensure that the skills and knowledge taught in our high schools and community colleges result in real jobs.

H.R. 2353 will accomplish this by giving states and localities the flexibility to tailor career and technical education to their local economies and the jobs most in demand. To supplement these efforts, the bill authorizes more than \$7 billion from FY 2018 through 2023 for U.S. Department of Education (ED) grants to states. In return, states would develop programs of study and submit their plans to ED. These plans would include clear performance goals, such as a summary of workforce development activities, a strategic vision for preparing an educated and skilled workforce that meets the needs of employers, an outline of how the state will support the recruitment and preparation of teachers, and a description of how all the federal funds will be spent.

I was highly encouraged by the broad bipartisan support this legislation received on the

House floor and look forward to its consideration in the Senate. As college costs continue to rise and many young people remain at a loss regarding what to do upon graduation, CTE programs can and will serve as a viable path forward. Every student wants to be successful; we must arm them with the tools and knowledge necessary to achieve this success.

We must seize the opportunity to improve not only the lives of students, but also American workers and employers, by making CTE programs a priority. This bill is only the beginning. 🇺🇸

U.S. Rep. Glenn "GT" Thompson represents Pennsylvania's 5th Congressional District in the House of Representatives. He is a senior member of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, and the author of the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act. He is also co-chair of the House CTE Caucus.



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