



TESTIMONY OF DAVID J. FISCHER, CENTER FOR AN URBAN FUTURE

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PREPARING TODAY'S YOUTH FOR THE WORKPLACE

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I'm David Fischer, project director for workforce and social policy at the Center for an Urban Future, a Manhattan-based non-partisan public policy think tank that conducts research on important issues concerning economic development, workforce development and social policy for New York City. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the important subject of whether New York's public high schools are adequately preparing their students for the world of work.

This question is of great relevance for both the economic competitiveness and quality of life of communities in New York. As Baby Boomers begin to retire in large numbers, we face the prospect of serious worker shortages in high-impact economic sectors like health care and construction. Nursing is the best-known field at which economists project severe shortages—as many as 500,000 by 2025, according to one recent report. But in addition to raw numbers, there are widespread concerns that “rising workers” lack the basic skills and workplace competencies that employers seek. Groups such as the National Association of Manufacturers and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce have surveyed members and consistently found that employers are facing shortages of

skilled workers—and that growing majorities of them are convinced that high school completion does not mean a student has necessarily mastered even “the basics.”

Individuals differ on the question of how much schools should focus on career preparation. But one mode of high school education that does embrace the concepts of career exploration and preparation while maintaining high academic standards is career and technical education, or CTE. Earlier this month, my organization released a report titled “Schools That Work.” This study explores the performance of New York City’s CTE programs, with a particular focus on the city’s 21 designated CTE high schools. We found that even though CTE schools long have been one of the most overlooked and under-funded parts of the school system, CTE students in the five boroughs outperform their academics-only counterparts in several key respects. According to data collected by the New York State Board of Regents, they graduate from high school at sharply higher rates and are four times less likely than the city’s overall high school population to drop out before graduating. CTE programs in New York City are clustered in the very industries most at risk of facing shortages, and they have enormous potential to help fill a pipeline of skilled workers in job titles from health care professionals and airline mechanics to carpenters and opticians.

Unfortunately, a wide gulf remains between that potential and the reality. In the decades following World War II, CTE—known then as vocational education—came to be regarded as a second-tier educational track best suited for young people who could not handle college-preparatory coursework. As such, programs got little support or attention from administrators, and became increasingly irrelevant to business and careers. To give just one example, a New York City school in the mid-1990s that claimed to be preparing

students for culinary arts careers was using electric range stoves, of the type people have in their homes.

The reforms to CTE at the state and city level over the last ten years have begun to reconcile the sometimes-competing imperatives of academic mastery and career preparation. As you know, the State Education Department will confer approval and an endorsement to high school diplomas only upon programs that address local labor market needs and offer both articulation with college coursework and a nationally recognized technical certification. At its best, CTE offers participating students a wide range of options into work, higher education or both. In New York City, nearly 70 percent of CTE graduates do go on to college, and anecdotal data suggests that they outperform their academics-only counterparts when they get there.

But while every CTE school in New York City can proudly tout individual success stories, it's unclear whether we are truly building a pipeline of skilled workers in high-demand industries at scale—and there are reasons to believe we probably are not.

We don't know for sure, of course, because graduates from high schools are not tracked in terms of their educational or career outcomes. In New York City, schools survey their graduating seniors as to their future plans; that is the sole source of information as to what happens to students after they complete high school. Furnishing schools and policymakers better information about what happens to students after they finish high school—what works and what does not, in terms of preparing young New Yorkers for higher education and careers—is a long-overdue common-sense measure.

One clue is that schools themselves continue to struggle in efforts to forge meaningful connections with industry. Much of the friction arises from the differences in

culture and goals between the classroom and the workplace. Business leaders accustomed to quick resolution and outcome-oriented discussion often find when engaging the education bureaucracy that the process seems to represent an end unto itself, and that seemingly simple issues—such as a printing company wishing to donate equipment to a school offering graphic communications courses—can require months or even years to be resolved. Many from private industry throw up their hands in frustration; others minimize their involvement with the system and focus on what they can directly control—an approach that renders it difficult to replicate best practices.

So what is to be done? Government can take a number of steps to strengthen ties between schools and employers. The most important action is to ask more of both businesses and schools. The business advisory councils that now serve schools should have more influence on what is taught and how—and in exchange, participating private sector leaders should offer more support through in-kind donations and internships and other opportunities for students to gain work experience and acculturation. But linkages must be stronger at the system level as well as the school level: expediting processes such as equipment donation and career exploration requires that the business community be heard by superintendents and school boards as well as principals. Finally, communities should ensure that each local Workforce Investment Board, the body of stakeholders that provides oversight of programs funded through the federal Workforce Investment Act, include representation from the local school system to open up possibilities for coordinated programming in career exploration and preparation.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.