



Testimony Before Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee
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Good morning Senator Sarlo and Honorable Members of the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee. It is an honor to speak to you today about career and technical education as you begin your deliberations on the Fiscal Year 2019 budget.

Research studies, surveys, and ongoing conversations with employers all tell a similar story: There are many well-paying jobs in advanced manufacturing and other growth industries in New Jersey that require training beyond high school, but not necessarily a four-year degree.

But many New Jersey employers struggle to fill those jobs because they cannot find qualified candidates. As a state and as a nation, we have focused too much on preparing all students for college, at the expense of opportunities to pursue technical education that puts young people on a career pathway.

The Legislature's Manufacturing Caucus heard this message loud and clear from manufacturers who are unable to fill current openings and are very worried about their future workforce as longtime employees retire. Employers in other industry sectors have similar concerns.

Expanding career and technical education is a key to closing this skills gap. It is a critical investment in New Jersey's future workforce that is needed to support long-term economic growth.

NJ's 21 county vocational-technical school districts are already responding to these critical workforce demands. Our schools collaborate with employers, colleges, local high schools and others to prepare students for careers as well as college.

But additional capacity is needed to serve more students in new and upgraded career programs. County vocational school enrollment has increased by over 34% since 2000, yet thousands of students are still being turned away due to lack of capacity.

While the demand varies by county and by program, on a statewide average, there are almost 2.3 applicants for every available seat in a county vocational school. Nearly 30,000 students applied to county vocational-technical schools in 2017, and roughly 17,000 could not be accepted due to program capacity.

When you look at this overwhelming student and parent demand for more career-focused education -- along with the skills gap -- it is clear that we must expand CTE to prepare more young people for careers

The Bond Act proposed by Senate President Sweeney would address this critical need by asking New Jersey voters to invest in high-quality career and technical education facilities at the county level, where they can benefit secondary, college and adult students from communities throughout the region.

In the meantime, I am pleased to report that the Legislature's initial efforts to expand access to career programs continues to produce tremendous results. The County Vocational School Partnership Grants that the Legislature has funded since FY15 have created 23 new programs in 12 counties. When fully enrolled, these new programs will serve about 1600 additional students on an ongoing basis.

We urge you to once again include in the budget \$3 million for these partnership grants so that county vocational schools can continue to partner with employers, colleges and local school districts to provide more high-quality career and technical education programs for young people.

Equally important in this effort is adequate and predictable funding for public schools. We applaud the Governor's commitment to provide an increase in school aid, while acknowledging the challenge of achieving an equitable allocation that recognizes enrollment growth and provides for an inclusive review of the current funding law.

Because of their economic mission and county-based funding, vocational technical school districts have unique funding needs and challenges. Certainly, all of our districts appreciate the increases in the Governor's proposed budget, especially after so many years of stagnant state aid. Nevertheless, we agree that the existing SFRA formula needs to be updated.

After many years of flat state funding under the School Funding Reform Act, the Legislature made encouraging progress last year to begin restoring enrollment-driven funding, which is critical to help cover the cost of additional students.

County vocational students are funded with a combination of state, county, and local district funds. With limited increases in state and county support over recent years, we must avoid over-reliance on local district tuition, which can negatively affect local budgets and discourage districts from expanding student participation in county CTE programs.

Updating the SFRA to restore per pupil aid for the excess cost of county vocational school programs would reduce the local burden and support expansion under the proposed Bond Act.

The last issue I want to address today is the critical need for adult education. We greatly appreciate the funding that the Legislature inserted in the last three budget years to support adult high schools and county vocational school adult training programs. Unfortunately, Governor Murphy did not maintain this for FY 2019, and **we respectfully request that you restore adult education funding to the FY18 level of \$4 million.**

A one-size-fits-all college preparatory mindset does not meet the needs of all students, and our state must provide a safety net for students who do not succeed in a traditional academic setting. High school completion and career training programs are critical in providing multiple pathways to success for young adults and others who are struggling to support themselves and their families.

Adult career and technical education programs also serve a vital need in the community. Career training programs for adults at New Jersey county vocational-technical schools are in high demand because they are short (generally under one year), hands-on, affordable, close to home, and credential-driven.

Most importantly, these programs lead directly to employment in high-demand industries including health care, hospitality, construction, and automotive repair. Hundreds of New Jersey employers hired students from county vocational school adult programs this year.

County vocational-technical career programs focus on the essential skills that lead to industry-recognized credentials. Schools work closely with employers to ensure that they are training students for current needs to assure placement, so the programs benefit not only individuals, but also employers and New Jersey's overall economy.

Adults who need to support their families are looking for short-term training or retraining in a skilled trade that leads directly to employment. And an alternative to college degree programs is an essential option for young adults, who need to gain job skills that will take them out of the low-level, temporary-hire minimum wage cycle and put them on a positive career pathway.

These programs should be treated in the same manner as non-degree training programs at county colleges, with students eligible for both state and federal support for their career training. Even though county vocational school program costs are moderate when compared to college or private providers, keeping tuition costs low is essential.

The \$4 million the Legislature provided in FY18 (as well as FY 15 and 16) for adult education supported expanded enrollment and program improvements in adult career and technical education programs at our schools, and spurred a small increase in adult high school enrollment in county local school districts.

The goal is to restore permanent, predictable funding for adult high school and career programs to meet the needs of students and employers. We hope that the Legislature will consider this as part of the overall review of school funding, so that schools can provide a

safety net for students who do not succeed in traditional academic high school and college programs.

With the economy growing again, New Jersey should continue its commitment to career and technical education opportunities that meet workforce needs and offer all students a pathway to success. We thank you for your strong support and ask the Legislature to continue to invest in career and technical education. This will continue to pay positive economic dividends for New Jersey and its citizens.