

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

NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

“OVERSIGHT: CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION”

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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 career and technical education in New York City's public high schools.

Earlier this year, I authored a report titled “Schools to Work” that examined the performance and potential of CTE as a programming direction to help the city produce better outcomes in both education and workforce development. My research interest in this subject first arose from the realization that the subject areas in which CTE programs are most heavily concentrated—such as information technology, health care, and construction—are the same sectors of the economy in which New York City is projected to experience robust job growth over the next decade. Clearly, if these programs succeed, they can act as a strong pipeline into some of the city's most important jobs, replacing retiring Baby Boomers and assuring local employers access to a sizable pool of well

skilled workers.

Before CTE programs can serve a workforce development function, however, they must fulfill their core academic mission. Our research, like the “report card grades” issued by the city to the CTE high schools late last year, suggests mixed results in this regard. A number of CTE high schools are nationally recognized standouts, demonstrating sustained excellence on both the educational and career-preparatory fronts. Another handful produce among the lowest test scores and graduation rates in the city, and the bulk lie somewhere in between. The task of city policymakers now is to identify why some schools are succeeding while others have faltered, and to craft strategies to raise the performance of the lagging schools.

In its final report, the mayoral task force on CTE did an excellent job of diagnosing the challenges confronting CTE in New York City. The concerns they identified include the lingering negative perception of career-preparatory programs, inadequate integration of academic and vocational materials within curricula, the scattershot and ad hoc nature of CTE schools’ engagement with the private sector, and the resource challenges facing schools that must maintain “labs” in which the facilities bear some resemblance to state-of-the-art equipment—whether kitchens, desktop publishing, or automotive diagnostic tools—used in industry.

Unfortunately, the task force is not nearly as strong when it comes to prescriptive measures to take on these challenges. To give one example, the “Vision” section of the report includes strong language around “integrating classroom instruction” of academic and vocational content. I was very glad to see this, given my own belief, based on interviews conducted with school-level staff and national experts and a survey of the

research literature, that education outcomes within CTE programs could be raised across the board by greater integration of traditional subjects and career-preparatory material within each school's curriculum. But the report includes no action step to start schools down this road. A modest but useful first task would be to create an inventory of past and current efforts in each school to integrate curricula, simply to determine what foundation might exist to build upon.

The task force is similarly silent on specific answers to the question of how to ensure adequate funding for CTE programs. The final report calls upon policymakers to “plan capital investments for long-term CTE alignment,” but sets no guidelines in this area. Based on both the schools we visited and the industry-based officials we spoke with, this question ranks among the biggest concerns for both groups. Again, a worthwhile first step would be to ask each school to submit an inventory of their capital stock and self-assessment of their current and projected future needs.

The absence of specifics in these and other areas within the final report of the task force is frustrating because in certain instances, the report does achieve this high level of detail. Two examples of this are the call to compile “an inventory of existing partnerships [with industry] linked to CTE schools... to provide a baseline from which to gauge the effectiveness of new efforts,” and the recommendation to “define quantifiable annual targets for internship development across schools/programs to ensure alignment of students and internship opportunities.” Both are excellent ideas that will address important current gaps in information that complicate the relationship between CTE schools and industry partners.

Another overarching problem in the conversation around CTE is that information

about how participants in these programs fare after high school completion is strikingly limited. This in part reflects the system-wide want of data about high school graduates: the Department of Education does not track its former students, and at the school level information collection about graduates' post-high school plans is entirely anecdotal. Analyses suggest that CTE students in New York State attend college in at least slightly higher numbers than their academics-only counterparts, and might perform better once there, and national studies have found that CTE students might earn higher pay than non-CTE students. A stronger grasp of data around these questions would be of great value in shaping policy and resource investments within the education system.

My concern about the relative lack of specific action steps and imperatives toward more rigorous collection of information is related to the uncertainty around what will happen now that the task force has completed its report. Perhaps actions such as the ones I have suggested today and elsewhere will comprise part of the “defined implementation strategy” called for in the report. With less than sixteen months remaining for Mayor Bloomberg in office, however, time is of the essence, and as the larger questions around mayoral control and next year's city elections take center stage, there is risk that the good work of the task force and the Department of Education around the question of improving CTE programs will get drowned out or obscured. I am glad that the City Council has taken an interest in this vital area of our education system, and I urge you to remain closely engaged with the subject.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today. I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.