

**Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the German Federal  
Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF)  
“Skilling the Future: VET and Workplace Learning for Economic Success”  
Keynote Remarks by Dr. Brenda Dann-Messier, U.S. Assistant Secretary for  
Vocational & Adult Education  
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### **Acknowledgements and Opening**

Thank you, for the kind introduction, and for your leadership.

It is an honor to address this distinguished gathering, and to exchange ideas with global leaders in education policy, practice, and research, as well as colleagues from industry, labor, finance, and the fields of workforce and economic development.

On behalf of the United States, I join this assembly in thanking the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, for convening this important conference.

I especially appreciate the OECD’s vital role in strengthening vocational education and training, for learners around the globe. One aspect of this role involves analyzing international and national practices, outcomes, and innovations, and developing recommendations that can propel us forward – as individual nations, and as a world community. Learning from other countries is a key objective of the Department of Education’s strategic initiative, “Succeeding Globally Through International Education and Engagement.”

We look forward to the release next week of the OECD’s “Skills Beyond School Review of the United States.” The findings of that study – and complementary efforts like the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies – will provide invaluable information for policymakers and practitioners. The OECD’s contributions help member nations to address the skill development needs of their citizens, and keep pace with accelerating change.

President Barack Obama, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and all the members of our Administration believe it is an economic imperative, and a moral obligation, to provide a world-class education for every student. We believe that “*skilling* the future” is the way for America to “*win* the future.” And, our reform agenda includes a strong emphasis on international collaboration. As all nations navigate the new realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’s hyper-connected, technology-rich, global marketplace, we have common questions. We share common goals. And, we have a crucial stake in each other’s success.

As Secretary Duncan has said, “In today’s knowledge economy, education is a public good unconstrained by national boundaries. Innovation, manufacturing, and research and development are now borderless – to the mutual benefit of all.”

Now, I should note that, in America, we refer to vocational education and training as “career and technical education”, or CTE, and I’ll use this designation in describing our national efforts. This new term represents the shift *away from* more narrow vocational training, often separated from the college preparatory curriculum, and designed to meet the needs of industrial-age America, and *toward* more systemic and rigorous *pathways*, designed to prepare students for equal success in college *and* careers, and responsive to the needs and opportunities of today’s digital age.

I’ll devote my remarks to some of the steps we are taking – in collaboration with partners at the state and local level – to link CTE, and the learners and workers it serves, with the demands and trends of today’s dynamic labor markets. I’ll also trace our progress in advancing President Obama’s vision for reform, from his first term to his second, and CTE’s expanding role in that vision.

## **National Needs and Trends**

Right now, many U.S. employers struggle to find the highly-skilled workers they need to compete in the global marketplace. They also cite inadequate basic employability skills like attendance, timeliness and work ethic, as well as insufficient work experience, as key hurdles in filling vacancies.

At the same time, we know that highly-skilled employees can improve their companies’ ability to access new markets and increase exports. Employees adept at new technologies can boost efficiency and productivity, respond quickly to changing needs for products and services – particularly those in demand globally – and more readily meet consumer demand. And, we’ll always need skilled workers in jobs that must be performed domestically – jobs that are integral to local and regional economies.

There is also a growing trend of so-called “middle jobs” – jobs that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree; provide a secure middle-class salary; and encourage continued education and career mobility, enabling workers to “learn as they earn.” The Obama Administration is committed to leveraging these jobs to provide gateways to opportunity for more Americans.

Perhaps most importantly, we must realize education’s potential to be “the great equalizer” in our increasingly diverse and multicultural society. For instance, in cutting-edge sectors like the science, technology, engineering and math – or “STEM” – fields, we’ll need a great infusion of female and minority professionals, if we’re to preserve our great traditions of innovation and entrepreneurship.

We are also concerned about our current high school drop-out rate, and the reasons our youth disengage from school. Researchers find that students list “uninteresting classes that are disconnected from the real world” among their top reasons for falling behind and leaving school.

And today, many high school students lack the academic and social service support they need to stay engaged and on track to graduate. They also lack opportunities that allow for career exploration, adult mentorship, and sound advice on the postsecondary options that match their career interests.

Furthermore, of the students who *do* graduate and go on to college, many are unprepared for the rigor of college-level work. Many students enter college and accrue substantial debt, only to leave before obtaining the market-valued degree or credential that would help them find fulfilling work and repay those loans. What's more, in the United States, we must do more to lower our young adult unemployment rate, which is double that of the general population. This is just one area in which we can learn from OECD colleagues – in this case our German hosts, who have developed strong systems to ease youth transitions to the working world, and keep the rate of youth employment high.

High-quality CTE systems can help address all of these factors, by actively engaging students in learning; giving them an opportunity to demonstrate their skills in real-world contexts; and connecting them with the right menu of postsecondary options and high-demand occupations. The best CTE programs allow students to master three types of skills: academic skills; technical skills in a given field; and the transferable career skills that characterize today's knowledge worker, like critical thinking, problem-solving, effective communication, and solid teamwork.

What's more, CTE promotes strong partnerships between our education and workforce sectors. Business and labor leaders know the skills required for a competitive workforce, and they are invested in the success of America's public schools, as a primary means for providing these skills. And, postsecondary partners can have a tremendous impact by helping high schools to align curriculum pathways and ease transitions for students.

### **The Cradle-to-Career Agenda and the 2020 Goal**

In the United States, our education reform efforts are focused on achieving a goal President Obama set soon after taking office: increase the nation's proportion of postsecondary graduates from 40% to 60%, and build a more competitive workforce. The President has called on every American to attain at least one year of higher education or career training, whether through a two-year or four-year college, vocational training, apprenticeship, or some other means of skill development.

To that end, the U.S. Department of Education is working closely with partners at the national, state and local levels, to implement a comprehensive cradle-to-college-and-career agenda.

Our country has a strong tradition of state and local control in education, yet there is a role for the federal government: bringing together stakeholders to shape common definitions of success, aligning laws and policies to support common goals, and providing resources for reform. Bringing about change of this scope and scale – in these complex times, and this tough financial climate – will require unprecedented collaboration and innovation.

To reach our postsecondary completion goal, we must reduce our high school dropout rate, narrow persistent achievement gaps, and reengage adults in learning. . We must also focus relentlessly on increasing access to – and affordability and quality of – postsecondary education.

In short, our challenge is to create a new culture of learning in our country – one that extends far beyond high school, for learners of every background and every age. To build for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we need seamless systems that offer clear and customizable paths to the skills, credentials and degrees that employers want – and that learners need – to achieve their goals, and keep advancing throughout their careers.

### **A Starting Point for Stronger CTE: Our Nation’s Community Colleges**

In launching our effort to build more seamless CTE systems for youth and adults, the Obama Administration sought from the first to build on an existing strength: our community college system. Community colleges are among our greatest assets for responding to changing market demands; partnering with employers; and addressing local, State, regional and sector-based workforce needs.

The mission of these agile institutions encompasses general education, basic-skills programs, and CTE. For some students, community college is a place to get a certificate or a two-year associate degree in a technical field; for others, it is the first step toward a bachelor’s degree from a four-year university.

Early in his first term, the President convened the first-ever Community College Summit at the White House, marking our resolve to deliver high-quality CTE to more students than ever before. Since then, my agency has conducted widespread professional development and technical assistance for community college leaders, in order to: deepen employer partnerships; ensure academic alignment with high schools; build CTE programs geared for adult learners; improve developmental education; and use evidence-based strategies to increase retention, graduation and employment rates.

We’re also working more collaboratively across federal agencies, providing joint policy guidance and building State and local capacity through partnerships among the Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services. We want to help State and local providers to develop stronger college-and-career pathways and coordinate resources for more coherent service delivery.

In addition, the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor jointly administer the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College Career Training initiative, which funds competitive grants to help community colleges increase their capacity and enhance their partnerships with industry and local workforce boards. The funds also help build programs that meet industry needs, including career pathways for high-wage, high-skill industries, like those in STEM fields. This program aims to improve student retention and achievement rates; reduce time-to-completion; accelerate progress for low-skilled workers; and expand online and technology-enabled learning.

It's worth noting that all new intellectual property produced through these grants will be released as open education resources – with a license permitting their free use and adaptation by others, including students, teachers, and schools around the world.

And, this strategic investment in community colleges as a vehicle to delivery world-class CTE will continue throughout the President's second term. In our budget for fiscal year 2014, the Obama Administration has proposed a new Community College-to-Career Fund. This Fund would further our goal of building a high-skilled national workforce, through State and community college partnerships with business, including targeted assistance for small business owners and entrepreneurs. Through this program, we aim to address the skills mismatches that cause millions of unfilled jobs, and to connect some 2 million more workers with high-demand industries like manufacturing, healthcare, information technology and biotechnology.

The Fund would also support on-the-job training, like registered apprenticeships and paid student internships, provide students with postsecondary credit for work-based learning, and support efforts by regional or national industry groups to craft worker certification standards.

### **The Blueprint for Career and Technical Education**

Now, we took that first strategic step – to strengthen CTE through investments in community colleges – early in the President's first term. By 2012, we'd taken our next step: releasing the Administration's new Blueprint for Career and Technical Education. The Blueprint was based on extensive, multi-year conversations with providers and partners throughout the country, and spurred by a legislative opportunity – the reauthorization, slated for this year, of the law governing federal secondary and postsecondary CTE funds and activities.

Our Blueprint outlines four core reforms – reforms which complement and reinforce priorities in our community college grants. They are: more effective alignment between CTE and labor market needs; stronger collaboration among partners; clearer accountability for improving academic outcomes and building technical and employability skills; and greater innovation in state and local policies and practice.

Specifically, we're promoting CTE models that are well-aligned with college- and career-readiness standards, and with the needs of employers, industry, and labor. These models provide students with a curriculum that combines integrated academic and technical content and strong employability skills, along with work-based learning opportunities. Most importantly, these models enable students to earn certifications, licenses, and degrees—at both the secondary and postsecondary levels—that prepare them for in-demand careers, in high growth industry sectors.

In addition, these models are designed to serve students at every age and stage of the cradle-to-career continuum, including low-skilled adult students, disconnected youth, immigrants and English

language learners, students re-entering society from the criminal justice system, and current workers seeking to upgrade their skills or make a career change.

We intend to devote a billion dollars a year to implementing the Blueprint, along with several related efforts, and we are already working with several States to pilot these more systemic approaches.

### **High School Redesign**

With these steps, by the end of the President's first term, we'd sparked momentum in the sector of the postsecondary system – community colleges – best suited to serve as a bridge between secondary schools and four-year institutions on one hand, and the employer and labor community on the other. We'd developed a framework to define the gold standard of CTE for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and to spur innovation and reform nationwide. To build further on this framework, our latest step – announced by the President just a few months ago – is a plan to redesign America's high schools.

With this new effort, we will support partnerships of school districts, employers, and postsecondary institutions – including community colleges – to reinvent high schools and ensure that all students graduate with college credit and career-related experience, as well as a diploma.

Common features of these redesigned high schools include a strong academic foundation, career-related learning opportunities, and intensive college and career guidance. As part of their reform plans, districts and their partners may draw on successful models from career academies, to dual enrollment (which enables high school students to enroll in college courses), to early college programs (which allow students to graduate with a high school diploma and an Associate degree or up to two years of college credit.)

We also want to blend rigorous academics with career and technical content, including career-related experiences or competencies obtained through organized internships and mentorships, structured work-based learning, and other related experiences. In short, we want to ensure that all students graduate prepared to succeed in college and careers, in a way that's unprecedented in the United States.

### **Closing**

I've spoken a good deal about federal policy today, and let me say again how much I appreciate the opportunity to share our ideas with you – and to learn from your experiences and insights. But, I want to close with the recollection that all our efforts help to unlock individual potential, forward national progress, and improve the human condition.

I know it's more than happy coincidence that our meeting takes place during WorldSkills Leipzig, in which a thousand students are competing for the title of WorldSkills Champion in 45 occupational areas. In this very city, as we speak, students from more than 60 regions and nations are putting the

best of their skills to the test. It's a vivid reminder of what high-quality vocational education and training can do, and what it can mean for learners of all ages.

I'm convinced that by giving our all as individual nations, and by collaborating together through organizations like the OECD, we *can* create more seamless, systemic pathways – pathways that support unlimited career mobility and lifelong learning for our people. Their talents, in turn, will power our economies, elevate our societies, and ensure a bright future for the world.

Thank you.