

**Evaluation of Career and
Technical Education
(CTE) Needs in
Midland County**

Prepared for
MITECH+,
Midland Chamber of Commerce,
and Midland County Educational
Services Agency

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Executive Summary

Overview

Goals of the Project

To determine the present and future needs for Career and Technical Education (CTE) in Midland County, a study was jointly commissioned by MITECH+, the Midland Area Chamber of Commerce, and Midland County Educational Service Agency (ESA). Public Policy Associates, Incorporated (PPA), was engaged to conduct the study. The study was designed as a feasibility assessment, i.e., to consider a possible expansion of career and technical education programs and to determine the appropriate level of CTE for regional economic growth and sustainability.

Despite an atmosphere of uncertainty and crisis in the international, national, and state economies, Midland County leaders are looking to the future. Midland County is, in effect, joining a national policy debate around economic competitiveness. The operation of solid, responsive CTE programs is a required component for developing a skilled workforce for an innovative and healthy economy. Responsive programming refers to a context in which secondary education systems form a foundation, and access to postsecondary education and workforce training systems permits additional training. CTE programs provide excellent opportunity to improve math, science, and literacy skills; increase student engagement; and meet employer needs for highly skilled workers.

The assessment was at the county level, aimed at the needs of County students, businesses, and the community at-large. Nonetheless, from the perspective of labor supply and demand, the County must be viewed in the context of its larger region, consisting of Midland, Saginaw, Bay, Arenac, Isabella, Gladwin, Clare, and Gratiot Counties, which act as a regional economy.

The findings from the study offer direction for CTE changes in Midland County. The study addressed these core issues:

- Is the current system of CTE meeting the needs of students, business, and the community at-large?
- Does career and technical education need to be expanded in Midland County?
- What level of CTE is essential for economic growth and sustainability of the region?
- What are the options for expanding CTE in Midland County?

The report presents a final path forward recommendation. A thorough understanding of findings and recommendations will be important to set the stage for further strategic planning for CTE and collaborative development of funding.

CTE Role in Economic Growth

Sustained economic growth, though difficult to achieve, is the key goal of virtually every community. One of the most basic requirements is access to an adequate supply of appropriately educated and trained labor. The ability to develop and sustain this over the course of decades is possibly the primary current determinant in the continuing viability of an economic region over

time. An appropriate labor pool must come from within the region and/or be imported. But to attract imported labor, or to keep the potential existing labor pool, the community must offer more than jobs; it needs to offer appropriate quality-of-life amenities, including a high-quality education system that is relevant to the current and projected needs of regional industry.

Currently there is a clear gap between the local workforce skills and the local industry needs, which cannot be quickly and easily bridged. Midland County excels at graduating students, and some of its students go on to complete college with a professional degree. But Midland County can deliver even more than this; with enhanced capacity it can excel at career guidance and practical career training for increasing numbers of students. It can leverage CTE to prepare students for continuing education, for the workforce, or for additional career training. By ensuring that CTE programming is understood and accessible, Midland County can prepare students for a variety of jobs that are relevant to County businesses, and jobs that provide good income and good quality of life. In this scenario, businesses, students, and the community all benefit.

Path Recommendation

The study illuminated some issues that impact how a direction for CTE in Midland County will be chosen. A series of alternate paths of action are provided in the report, which in broad strokes, encompass building a facility in the County to house a training location, developing further relationships with CTE providers in the economic region, or expanding relationships within the County to focus training and education within the community to build a more cohesive pipeline locally. Ultimately, each of these paths is actually a description of actions that are end products of a process. The recommended path forward is the process itself, which permits the optimal choice of actions to be decided in a collaborative fashion, with consideration of issues discussed previously.

The optimal path forward absolutely requires broad and deep collaboration. The anticipated steps include the following. Although described in step-wise fashion, tasks such as recruiting stakeholders are not isolated to the beginning stage of a collaborative initiative.

Step One: Identifying and recruiting stakeholders and resources

Stakeholders will need to be recruited from a range of sectors, such as secondary education, postsecondary education, major employers, employers who have set up their own training, financial partners, insurance agents, proprietary providers, economic development, business associations, education associations, and parents. This must include identifying and promoting benefits to the partners. At an early stage, a champion must be identified, which will be critical for recruiting the right partners and maintaining momentum. Finally, this would be an appropriate time to systematically identify all the resources in the community, through a process such as asset mapping. Much of this is already accomplished in the study report, but could be built out further with more systematic inclusion of postsecondary and proprietary resources.

Step Two: Defining the vision

The group must do this collaboratively, to promote ownership of and increasing commitment to the initiative. This is a time to test the initial premise and reveal the essence of the desired future. Does the stakeholder vision resonate with the preliminary research questions? That is, is

the mission truly and simply expansion? Or is it delivering education, promoting economic health, improving lives, finding the perfect career fit, or bolstering industry? Is this vision about the County or how the County fits within the economic region?

Step Three: Choosing strategies and actions

The vision is used as a framework to choose strategies, goals, actions, and timelines. This includes defining terms such as “expansion.” Is the expansion in the form of increasing enrollment, adding programs, or building facilities? Is it reaching out to students from other counties?

Step Four: Implementation and monitoring

Implementation and monitoring is where goals, actions, and timelines are put into motion and assessed. At this point it becomes clear that the series of steps is truly iterative rather than sequential. Because, here again, the champion will be essential in keeping momentum, the vision works to bolster ownership, and the outcomes of action viewed in terms of meeting goals. Actions in this initiative will require a marketing component. A repeated theme in the study was that it will be essential to increase awareness of CTE by all stakeholder groups, including business, parents, students, and school teachers and staff.

Methodology

The methodology for this feasibility study included use of both primary and secondary data. Secondary sources included data on supply and demand sides, including student supply, current CTE programs, occupational data, and demand projections for technical career pathways. For the primary data collection, the research targets were stakeholders of County CTE, including key community leaders, students, and parents. Interviews were conducted with key leaders in business, education, and governance that are knowledgeable about current CTE programming and the career skills required in the local workforce. Input from students in grades 8 through 12 in the County and from parents of students in grades 8 through 12 was gathered via hardcopy surveys and from focus group participation.

Parent survey content pertained to awareness of CTE and career pathways, barriers to CTE, perceptions of CTE value and in-demand jobs, student’s future plans for school and career or career pathway, and the support for a tax increase to expand CTE. Surveys were in the field November 2008 through January 2009. A total of 477 parent surveys were completed, allowing a $\pm 4.3\%$ margin of error. Two parent focus groups were conducted in February 2009. Guided discussion content was focused on children’s career options, perceptions of technical and skilled trade careers, perceived value of career and technical education, awareness of career and technical education in Midland County, and support of CTE.

Student survey content was similar to parent survey content and focused on awareness of CTE and career pathways, experience with and barriers to CTE, perceptions of CTE value and in-demand jobs, student’s future plans for school and career or career pathway, and whether their future includes work in Midland County. Surveys were fielded November 2008 through January 2009. A total of 340 student surveys were completed ($\pm 5.1\%$ standard error rate). Two student focus groups were conducted, one in December 2008 and another in February 2009. Discussion content was focused on career options, perceptions of technical and skilled trade careers,

perceived value of career and technical education, awareness of career and technical education in Midland County, and career preparation.

Interviews were conducted with key leaders in business, education, and local governance. A total of 22 interviews were conducted between November 2008 and January 2009, earning a 79% response rate. The interviews were geared toward leader perspectives on the skill readiness and workforce training or preparation needed to develop the local workforce, view of CTE in Midland County and in the region, need for expansion of CTE in the County and in the region, feasibility of expanding CTE within the County, factors relevant to such expansion, and the anticipated degree of community support for a tax increase for the purpose of expanding CTE.

Findings

Extant Data

Analyses of secondary, or extant, data provided insight into CTE in Midland County. While there are appropriate programs aimed at the growing occupations, there are some gaps that indicate areas for improvement.

Enrollment trend data indicated that high school enrollments will start to decrease in the near future. This suggests that a higher proportion of this labor pool in Midland County will need to have technical education to meet the local employer needs. Therefore, a higher percentage of students will need to be recruited into CTE, which may be difficult given that CTE programs are running under capacity.

In Midland County, most growing occupations do have related CTE programs. However, there is room for expansion in CTE offerings for the health care occupations related to the in-demand careers of ambulatory health care services, nursing, and residential care services. A barrier to this is the lack of equipment and facilities in a high school setting. Potential partnering opportunities with other organizations that already provide health care training are listed in the report.

CTE Recruitment efforts should highlight the role CTE plays in preparing students for postsecondary education. Many CTE courses already have some partnerships, and examples of dual-enrollment programs are provided in the report. Improved communication of the benefits of these partnership programs could increase enrollment and help orient parents to the idea of CTE as valuable in preparing students for continued education.

Recruitment of students into CTE programs is needed at this time. While participation has increased in terms of percentage of capacity over time, CTE programs only filled 74% of their available slots in 2007–2008. Efforts to maximize utilization is likely to require expanded partnerships with educational and proprietary institutions as well as improved communication to students and the community about CTE benefits.

Feasibility Assessment

In the study report, the findings from each stakeholder data stream are described in depth and summarized, and implications have been drawn. These findings were then pulled into the feasibility assessment, along with the extant, or secondary, data. The study report concludes with a recommended path forward. For the purposes of this Executive Summary, findings from each primary data stream are integrated in a concise manner in this feasibility section, rather than discussed separately. The section is organized according to research questions.

The stakeholder feedback taken as a whole suggested that the research question is less, “Should we expand CTE?” but more “How can it be made more accessible? How can it become more integrated, effective, and responsive to business and student needs? How can we get the right buy-in? How can we develop it with the right partners at the table?”

The discussion below reflects that the study was focused on the needs and experiences of County residents, potential changes at the county level, and consideration of regional activity due to Midland County being a part of a regional economy made up of Midland, Saginaw, Bay, Arenac, Isabella, Gladwin, Clare, and Gratiot Counties.

Perceptions of the Need for Expansion and the Capability of the Current CTE System

Although the CTE system seems to have capacity in a raw numeric sense, many key stakeholders questioned whether the County has the right kind of capacity. They suggested that improvements are needed in workforce readiness and career preparation for Midland County high school students. Key leader interviews explained that other counties in the greater region that have career centers are more able to give students hands-on, practical education.

As noted above, extant data indicate that the CTE programs operating in the County are an appropriate fit in terms of addressing some of the most in-demand occupations, which help bridge the skill gaps. While key leaders acknowledged this, they also noted that there are not currently enough workers, people in training, or training opportunities to fill the demand. For in-demand positions in Midland County, most of the training is conducted in other counties.

As for meeting student needs, multiple stakeholder groups reported that the County is limited in career counseling, availability of program information, and ability to promote awareness of and perceived relevance of CTE. In short, this is a system that is not well known or understood, which would understandably have difficulty meeting needs.

Indications of Support for CTE Expansion

Key leaders do see a need for CTE expansion in the County, but indicated that there are weaknesses that must first be addressed. Issues that need attention included ensuring that students benefit as well as ensuring that businesses benefit. Business leaders specifically expressed willingness to provide resources for expansion, but their interest was mostly limited to activities that would benefit their industry. Business leaders also saw the absolute need for collaboration and wanted to be a part of such a collaborative.

As for parent feedback, those in the focus groups were likely to support a millage, but need more specific information about benefits. Parents in the survey, however, were mixed about a millage: nearly four in ten were supportive, but more than four in ten said they did not know or were neutral. Like key leaders, parents in the focus groups expressed provisional support for expansion, and their specific needs are outlined in the report.

Parents and students understood that technical and skilled jobs are in high demand, and survey results suggest that many students are interested in pursuing health care jobs. Therefore, their support would be easier to gain if they were well-informed about how CTE provides a platform for moving toward these desirable opportunities.

Barriers to Implementing a Change

Key leader stakeholders reflected on both the perceived need for and the feasibility of CTE expansion. Several issues brought out by leaders are highlighted here regarding potential expansion. As highlighted in the report, CTE expansion in the County cannot be simply affirmed. Stakeholders supported CTE expansion provisionally, and these issues require exploration. Expansion must include: a champion, true collaboration among stakeholders, a long-term financial plan, and time to educate the public about CTE and to gain parent and student interest. A critical element is that buy-in be gained from multiple stakeholders, including parents, counselors, teachers, students, and business.

The stakeholder input revealed potential barriers to changing current CTE programs in the County, which include the following:

- Career counseling must be incorporated into planning because it has an important gatekeeping function, which should not be underestimated.
- A stock of high-quality, available CTE teachers is crucial to expansion of CTE, and raises the need to explore changes in alternative certification of CTE teachers.
- CTE must be effectively integrated with academic requirements, or else students will not enroll.
- The community culture in Midland County, which includes a focus on four-year degrees, has to be taken into account during planning and implementation of changes.
- Lack of awareness must be overcome; students must be able to define CTE, identify technical and skilled trades, understand the benefits of technical and skilled positions, and understand the skills needed for technical and skilled positions.

Implications for CTE Expansion Options

Common themes were revealed across the data streams, and the following implications emerged for development of a productive path toward CTE expansion. These are discussed in the report and presented briefly here.

Strengthen Communications

- Several specific recommendations for strengthening communications are presented in the report. Recommendations included attention to a variety of audiences, including students, employers, and the community at-large. Messages must be able to demonstrate that CTE is

compatible with college preparation, is relevant to a variety of high-demand technical and skilled positions, and is part of a career ladder.

Improve Counseling Capacity

- Study findings point to the importance of recognizing that parents, career counselors, and teachers serve as career advisors to students, and therefore it is critical that they are knowledgeable about the relevance, benefits, and availability of CTE. In addition there is a need to develop enhanced and creative modes of career counseling.

Improve CTE Alignment and Access

- Education and training need to address, in an integrated manner, skilled and technical trade training, soft skills, and basic academic skills. Programming must minimize fragmentation of programs and duplication of programs across secondary and postsecondary levels. CTE must be aligned with two-year degrees, certifications, and journeyman's licenses, and create greater opportunities for certifications. Curricula must be developed in collaboration with employers, training providers, and postsecondary institutions.

Develop Collaboration and Resources

- CTE expansion is not a one-time event or decision; it is an extended process of recruiting stakeholders and negotiating goals and strategies. Recruiting stakeholders is not a one-time event either, and stakeholders must be shown benefits to gain their interest. A "champion" is essential for the development and momentum of a collaborative process. Long-term financial planning must be integrated with program planning. This will require multiple sources of support.

Re-Assess CTE Expansion

- One issue that emerged from the study was a challenge to the premise that CTE expansion is needed. It evoked the question of whether the path forward is expansion, or is it doing business differently. Is the core premise, "Should we expand CTE?," or is it "How can our process be made more effective and responsive to business and student needs?" Re-conceptualizing the need for expansion also brings into question whether it is the County or the region that is the right geographic area for training and for partnerships.