

## **Testimony for Dr. Keith E. Gunuskey, Superintendent, Wallenpaupack Area School District**

*Before the United States House Small Business Committee Hearing: "Career and Technical Education: Developing the Future of Main Street Success"*

### **Current State of Career and Technical Education (CTE)**

The topic of this hearing is near and dear to my heart and one that is incredibly impactful for the future of the United States. In education, there is a myth that I often share with families called "The 4-year lie." This principle surrounds the notion that for decades it was thought that the only way to achieve the American Dream was for students to attend a minimum of a 4-year college/university and then joining the workforce. Sadly, this belief has led to over 1.7 trillion dollars in student loans. Furthermore, there remains seven million jobs in the US that are vacant that do not require a college degree and are considered life sustaining wage occupations. Often times graduating college students have no other choice but to assume jobs that are not aligned with their degree, or jobs that didn't require a degree in the first place.

Fortunately, families are beginning to see the light and ask "is there a better way?" The answer is "yes" and the answer is Career and Technical Education (CTE). How about zero debt and being highly skilled and trained allowing students to jump into the workforce after they graduate high school? Doesn't it make sense to test students' interests and passions early in a student's high school years and align them with a career pathway that is focused on their desires? Again, the answer is clear. Our high school is a perfect example of this change in thought as over 40% of our high school students attend a CTE program.

### **The Problem**

Interest in CTE is growing throughout Pennsylvania and across the country! I had the opportunity to attend a CTE inservice this past summer in Pittsburgh. Speaking with my colleagues in the field, the stories were all the same: everyone has a waiting list. The majority of Career and Technology Centers (CTCs) were built in the late 60's and early 70's, and mainly for students who were considered "non academic" and not going to college. For decades, these schools were highly successful and supplied our workforce with mechanics, plumbers, builders, etc. Yet, the model that CTC's had mastered of skill building, apprenticeship, school-to-work, etc. was kept secret and success stories were seldom shared and celebrated. As CTE programs have expanded and opened the doors for more opportunities, programs like engineering, aviation, and exercise science and sports medicine have become a real option for students. By implementing the same tenets of the old vocational education, of a laser-like focus on skills and certifications, CTE has grown significantly among today's youth.

The problem lies in that CTC's are now victims of their own success, as these older CTC's were built for "the few" and not "the many." There are safety restrictions (and rightfully so) for student enrollment in workspace. Simply put, CTC's cannot accommodate the student demand for many of their programs. The demand for Career and Technical Education in rural Pennsylvania far exceeds current capacity. Regional technical centers operate at maximum

enrollment, with hundreds of students waiting for placement. For example, the Monroe County Technical Institute reports a waiting list of more than 600 students. This represents lost opportunity—not only for students, but for the small businesses that depend on skilled local talent.

In addition, the cost of running a CTC can become rather expensive. Whereas a traditional school purchases textbooks, CTC's must purchase textbooks along with equipment and machinery that reflects industry standards. A final problem is that CTCs are not a taxing entity, like public school districts. Therefore, they rely solely on the tuition paid by member school districts. As school district budgets tighten, there is often less money made available to CTCs. Purchasing new, industry-aligned becomes extremely challenging.

### **The Economic Impact**

Over the years, I've had multiple meetings with our Economic Development Authorities in Wayne and Pike Counties. I have heard consistently over the years that one of the first questions prospective companies ask when they are considering moving into our area is "do you have a CTC?" Sadly, Wayne and Pike Counties are the only two counties in the entire state of Pennsylvania that do not have a CTC. Although we are working to fix this, the message to these prospective companies is clear- our area must not value a skilled, highly trained workforce. Unfortunately, economic growth in our area has been stifled because we lack a CTC. The conversation with prospective company has been simple in that they believe a workforce is one of the most parts of infrastructure that must be in place for an area to be a desirable landing spot for a business. Sadly, many people of infrastructure to only mean central sewer, sustainable water, city gas, etc. But the fact remains without the workforce to support an organization all the other infrastructure pieces are worthless.

### **Our solution**

Wallenpaupack Area School District, along with Wayne Highlands, Western Wayne, and Delaware Valley are looking to bring meaningful change to Wayne and Pike Counties through the creation a new Wayne Pike CTC- a \$52 million dollar, 72,000 sq. ft. building that completes the CTE puzzle in Pennsylvania and brings meaningful CTE programs to every corner of the state. Fortunately, Representative Bresnahan visited our school and area and witnessed the potential for growth first hand. Through his leadership and the support of Senators McCormick and Fetterman, the Wayne Pike CTC was awarded \$3 million in federal funding to launch this project. In addition, Wallenpaupack Area School District has borrowed the first \$10 million dollars to finalize the building development phase, with the hopes of breaking ground late summer, early fall 2026. The new, larger building will allow for new program creation, and increased enrollment in current programs.

Another focus of our district has been to continually incorporate small business partners and post-secondary institutions into our discussions. Business partners, in general, know what they need and they don't. Collaborating with them about program development, course curriculum equipment purchases, and industry standards creates an environment where we can graduate students who are ready to jump into the workforce if they desire. To ensure students are not

pigeonholed into the workforce alone, we align with post-secondary institutions, to ensure that students are gaining college credits while in school. If students choose to continue their education, all students in our CTE programs have the opportunity to bank college credits, while in high school. For those who continue to college, the credit savings and less time spent in college has incredible benefits.

In our region, approximately 60 percent of students come from economically disadvantaged households. For many of these families, Career and Technical Education is not simply an option—it is a gateway to financial security. CTE provides access to stable careers, reduces student debt, and supports upward mobility.

Equally important, it helps retain talent in rural communities. When young people can build meaningful careers locally, they are more likely to remain, invest, and contribute to community life. This strengthens small businesses, stabilizes local economies, and supports generational growth.

### **Recommendations for action (solutions)**

Based on my experience, I respectfully offer several recommendations for how this Committee can further strengthen the connection between CTE and small business success:

1. **Increase Targeted Infrastructure Funding**  
Prioritize rural and underserved regions for facility modernization and expansion.
2. **Support Employer-Based Training**  
Provide financial incentives for small businesses that host apprentices, interns, and trainees.
3. **Encourage Public–Private Partnerships**  
Develop grant programs that promote collaboration between schools, employers, and workforce agencies.
4. **Modernize Training Equipment**  
Establish dedicated funding streams for industry-standard tools and technology.
5. **Simplify Participation Requirements**  
Reduce administrative burdens that discourage small business involvement.
6. **Promote Entrepreneurship Pathways**  
Expand funding for student business development, mentoring, and startup support.
7. **Address Transportation Barriers**  
Support access to training sites and work-based learning locations in rural areas.
8. **Create Flexible Microgrants**  
Enable small employers to participate through low-barrier funding options.

## **Closing**

Career and Technical Education represents one of the most effective investments our nation can make in economic resilience. It prepares workers. It supports entrepreneurs. It strengthens communities. When CTE systems are well-funded and well-aligned with local industry, small businesses thrive and families prosper.

The progress underway in Wayne and Pike Counties demonstrates what can be achieved through thoughtful policy and strategic investment. With continued leadership from this Committee, similar success can be realized in rural communities across the country.

Thank you for your time, your service, and your commitment to America's workforce. I look forward to our discussion.