

Crisis in Vocational Education



The Massachusetts Vocational Education program (sometimes called “Career/Technical Education” or CTE) is inadequate for our students and our economy. Every year, thousands of students are left on wait lists for seats in the state’s vocational schools while employers desperately seek the skilled workers the vocational schools could provide. Almost all regional vocational schools use selective admissions policies that deny access to untold numbers of students of color, those with disabilities or economic disadvantage, and students with limited English language skills.

The best current research suggests that high quality CTE programs have a range of benefits for young people including greater engagement in and graduation from public secondary schools, acquisition of enhanced career skills, and the ability to earn levels of income that will satisfy their needs in the future. CTE schools are in great demand to prepare students for jobs in the trades, industry, and productive services.

For 2020 – 2021, there were 1.75 completed student applications for every vocational program seat. In some communities, there were twice as many applications as available seats. Approximately 8000 students who apply are currently on wait lists to attend a CTE program; most of them live in gateway cities and other low-income communities. At least 2000 more students want to attend but are not served by any vocational school in their geographic area.

The limited supply of seats in CTE programs has led to serious civil rights and social justice inequities. CTE programs often use discriminatory admissions policies that rank applicants based on middle school grades, discipline, attendance records, counselor recommendations, and sometimes student interviews. These elements are not applied to students entering other public high schools.

PDM is a member of the Vocational Education Justice Coalition, which has been pressing the state education department to eliminate the use of these irrational and discriminatory admissions criteria. The Coalition recently filed a civil rights complaint about these policies with the federal Department of Education.

PDM’s education working group has identified two necessary state-level actions to enable our CTE programs to serve their vital functions:

- Invest in the infrastructure to expand CTE capacity and increase operating budgets to cover associated higher costs.
- Require admissions policies that will provide equal access to all students that want to take advantage of these opportunities.

1. Creating and funding more seats for students is the best long-term way to meet existing and future demand for CTE programs. As a member of the Alliance for Vocational and Technical Education

(AVTE), PDM has helped craft proposed legislation to meet these needs. **S. 274/H. 538, An Act to improve access, opportunity, and capacity in Massachusetts vocational-technical education.** Key provisions of this bill would:

- Authorize \$3 billion of capital funding for new and expanded CTE program space
- Increase the share of CTE construction project costs covered by state funding
- Authorize local-option debt exclusions of local share of CTE construction costs
- Authorize state expansion grants for initial-year operating costs of significant CTE enrollment growth

2. Until capacity expands to meet demand for CTE seats, we also need to **ensure a more equitable admissions method** for deciding who gets the available seats; a lottery among all applicants in the district who successfully complete 8th grade is the best option. PDM and the Vocational Education Justice Coalition will continue to lobby the Governor, Secretary of Education, and Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to achieve this change administratively.

But, meanwhile, we are also asking the legislature to pass **S. 257, An Act to end discriminatory outcomes in vocational school admissions.** This bill would require the use of a lottery for any vocational program where applications exceed available seats.

We ask all PDM members and allies to contact their legislators asking them to cosponsor and support these two important vocational education bills:

- **S. 274/H. 538, “An Act to improve access, opportunity, and capacity in Massachusetts vocational-technical education” and**
- **S. 257, “An Act to end discriminatory outcomes in vocational school admissions”.**

You can find contact information for your legislators at [this link](#).

If you have any questions or are interested in being part of PDM’s Education Working Group, please contact us at pdm-info@progressivedemsofmass.org.