

Perkins: Key Quality and Equity Victories for High School Reform

Some of the most important quality and equity principles of federal policy in vocational education and high school reform were preserved and extended when Congress completed negotiations on the final version of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational-Technical Education Amendments of 1998. (Public Law No. 105-332, signed into law on October 31, 1998.) In a number of these areas, differences between House and Senate bills were resolved in favor of the stronger bill. In some others, problems that appeared in both bills were actually fixed.

Program quality and “all aspects of an industry.” In a major victory for program quality, Congress added, in the provisions for local uses of funds, a requirement that the programs must provide students with strong experience in and understanding of “all aspects of an industry” (AAI). It also now requires that both the local plan and the State plan spell out how students will be provided with strong AAI experience and understanding. In addition, local professional development programs must ensure that teachers and other school personnel themselves stay current with all aspects of an industry. AAI is central to ensuring that programs provide real education for a life time, not just narrow, and quickly outmoded, training for specific jobs. It provides the rich context for integrating academic and vocational education at a deep level without dumbing-down the academic side. Most importantly, it is a key safeguard against sorting and tracking kids to fit into unequal futures. For example, instead of asking some high school students to train to become hospital aides in the vocational wing of the school, while others with an interest in medicine prepare for college and medical school, the focus becomes the health industry as a whole, with students actively exploring its management, finances, technology, etc.

Other handles in the Act for addressing quality include: State and local requirements for integrating academic and vocational/technical education to improve both components, for ensuring that participating students are taught the same challenging academic proficiencies expected for all students, and for comprehensive professional development; assurances that programs be of sufficient size, scope, and quality to be effective; and the State’s criteria (in the State plan) for approving local applications. Finally, there is a system of performance indicators and levels to be included in the State plan, performance reports, and improvement plans for poor performance. (There are some holes in these latter provisions on performance measures and improvement plans, which advocates will need to address through the opportunities for involvement, discussed below, in the State plan and State improvement activities. Also, remember that the system of program accountability based on student performance in no way diminishes the separate local, State, and federal responsibilities to ensure compliance with the program requirements of the Act, such as the AAI requirements.)

Special populations. The needs of special populations – individuals with disabilities, those from economically disadvantaged families, those preparing for fields where their gender is underrepresented, single parents and single pregnant women, displaced homemakers, and individuals with other barriers to educational achievement, including

those with limited English proficiency – are addressed in several ways. They must be provided with equal access, protected against discrimination on the basis of their special population status, and assisted in meeting or exceeding performance levels and preparing for further education and for high-skill, high-wage careers. State and local program assessments must include assessment of how the needs of special populations are being met and how the programs are designed to enable those populations to meet State performance levels and prepare them for further learning or high-skill, high-wage careers. Annual performance reports must include data on performance of special populations. In addition, recipients must review programs and identify and adopt strategies to overcome barriers resulting in lower rates of access or lower rates of success in the programs for special populations. How these various obligations will be met must be spelled out in the State and local plans.

While the bill eliminates both the 10.5% State set-aside for programs for single parents, displaced home-makers, and sex-equity, and the explicit requirement for a full-time employee to administer that program, it does require the State to spend at least \$60,000, and no more than \$150,000, of its leadership funds on services for preparing students for nontraditional fields. Also, the final bill largely rejected House provisions to reduce (1) targeting of local-level funds by poverty and (2) weighting for States with lower per-capita income. [Seventy percent of the local funds must still be based on poverty population, but in increasing the amount of State funds that must be distributed to the local level (from 75% to 85%), it does permit the State to target some or all of this extra 10% to rural areas or to areas with high percentages or numbers of vocational/technical students.]

Involvement and participation. The local plan must spell out how parents, students, teachers, representatives of special populations, representatives of business and industry, and other interested individuals are involved in program development, implementation, and evaluation, and how they are effectively informed about, and assisted in understanding, the requirements of the Act. Parents, students, interested community members, and representatives of special populations, among others, must be involved in development of the State plan, and the State must develop effective activities and procedures, including access to information need to use the procedures, to allow them to do so. (Parent involvement must also be addressed in the State plan itself.) State and local professional development programs for teachers, administrators, and counselors must include effective practices to improve parental and community involvement. For poor-performing programs, the State and local recipients must carry out local program assessments and improvement plans in consultation with parents, teachers, and others.

What You Can Do: *USE IT!!* Get involved at the State, district, and school level to make sure that the important quality and equity provisions of this law get well implemented, so that high- school reform works for all students. (The Center for Law and Education can provide information, training, and assistance on implementation.)