



**Written Testimony
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**Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, & Pensions
Subcommittee on Education & the American Family**

For Hearing Titled: “*Building Pathways: Advancing Workforce Development in the 21st Century*”

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Introduction

Chairman Tuberville, Ranking Member Blunt Rochester and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to be here today to discuss the vital role organizations like mine have in preparing America’s next generation of skilled talent. My name is Chelle Travis, and I serve as the Executive Director of SkillsUSA— the nation’s largest Career and Technical Student Organization (CTSO) solely focused on ensuring the United States has a skilled workforce across the full spectrum of skilled-trade pathways. As emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI), automation, cybersecurity, energy, and more reshape our shared economy, the need for robust workforce development has never been more urgent. This hearing’s focus on “building pathways” recognizes what we know works: early career exploration, age-appropriate work-based learning, and coherent systems that guide students toward a full range of high-skill, high-wage, and in-demand careers.

Our organization serves as a critical bridge connecting education and employment in meaningful ways, providing students with opportunities to engage in work-based learning, cultivating key workforce readiness skills, and facilitating direct connections with industry partners seeking skilled talent. We believe career preparation must begin early. Organizations like SkillsUSA serve an important function in helping learners of all ages navigate the rapidly changing needs of the economy by focusing on the technical,

academic, and career readiness skills needed to thrive in today's—and tomorrow's—economy while ensuring our workforce remains globally competitive.

Critically, research demonstrates that SkillsUSA members have significantly greater clarity about their career paths compared to their peers. This clarity translates directly into workforce readiness, as students with more defined career goals earlier in their educational journeys are far more likely to persist in their education, complete credentials of value, and successfully transition into rewarding employment.

Today's workforce challenges are not merely an economic problem; they are a national security issue. It is both a short-term crisis, with millions of skilled positions unfilled, and a long-term threat as America invests less in technical education than nearly every other industrialized nation.¹ Yet our systems remain disconnected in key ways. To maintain global competitiveness, we must build a true pipeline in which education and workforce systems complement, not compete with one another.

For too long, the national narrative has implied that a four-year degree is the only path to success. We must not stigmatize that pathway. Instead, we must illuminate the full spectrum of high-value postsecondary opportunities from certifications, non-degree credentials and apprenticeships, to community and technical college, as well as bachelor's degrees and beyond. Stackable credentials and lifelong learning help workers stay adaptable as AI, automation, and new technologies reshape industries. A future-ready workforce is one that embraces change, reskilling, and upskilling, not one that fears it.

About SkillsUSA: America's Number One Workforce Development Organization

SkillsUSA's mission is to empower students to become skilled professionals, career-ready leaders, and responsible community members. Founded in 1965, our organization has served students at the middle school, high school, and postsecondary levels to prepare for a broad array of rewarding careers. From manufacturing, construction, transportation and logistics, healthcare, information technology (IT), and beyond, SkillsUSA's work can be found in every career cluster representing the full breadth of the American economy. Our vision is to produce the most highly skilled workforce in the world, providing each of our student members the opportunity for career success. And as I will discuss, we take students from their hometowns to the world stage through our skills competitions which measure student success at every level—local and state competitions, national championships, and international competitions.

¹ <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/public-spending-on-labour-markets.html>

SkillsUSA serves over 420,000 student members and more than 23,000 professional members across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Our organization is chartered nationally, with state affiliates and local chapters located in every state across the nation. Our members participate through more than 5,000 schools and nearly 23,000 individual classrooms, spanning middle school, high school, and postsecondary institutions. We serve students in more than 130 occupational programs, covering critical sectors including advanced manufacturing, construction, healthcare, IT, transportation, public service and safety, and much more.

Skills Competitions

SkillsUSA provides unique work-based learning opportunities through our skills competitions. These competitions operate at the local, regional, state, and national levels. Our students even go on to compete internationally, pitting their skills and capabilities against their global peers in international skills competitions held around the world. The SkillsUSA Championships is the largest showcase of skilled talent in America, where more than 6,800 state champions compete in over 115 skilled and leadership events—all created and judged by industry professionals.² The SkillsUSA Championships at every level are based on technical standards created by industry and employer partners from across the nation. SkillsUSA is intentional about communicating the standard occupational classifications aligned with each competition and the competencies needed within.

This also provides CTE instructors, no matter the state, with a blueprint to teach skills needed by industry, in addition to the skills defined by their local workforce partners. These competitions represent a distinctive form of work-based learning that allows students to demonstrate their skills in realistic workplace scenarios while connecting directly with potential employers. Students in these competitions are evaluated on the skills needed by entry-level employees, meaning that they are foundational and transferable to many occupational areas. Perhaps most importantly, they support students in developing a sense of confidence and assuredness that often directly translates into improved achievement and employment outcomes.

² <https://www.skillsusa.org/competitions/skillsusa-championships/>

Our Drive to 65 Strategic Plan

Increasing our reach is central to our *Drive to 65* strategic plan, an ambitious initiative anchored in SkillsUSA's upcoming 65th anniversary in 2030.³ The *Drive to 65* sets a bold goal of growing our membership to one million students, transforming our national skills competitions to be the premier national workforce development event each year, and expanding our programming to ensure every member experiences tangible workforce connections through work-based learning, apprenticeships, and direct industry engagement. We are also actively working to build an integrated digital ecosystem that connects students directly with career opportunities and reimagining our programming around workforce development.

To support this work, we are strengthening our digital infrastructure through **SkillsUSA Pathful**, our comprehensive career-readiness platform that prepares learners for evolving workforce demands.⁴ SkillsUSA Pathful provides unmatched access to:

- Career exploration tools and real-time labor-market insights spanning AI, cybersecurity, advanced manufacturing, construction, transportation, healthcare, STEM fields and more;
- Virtual job shadows and live industry engagement experiences connecting students to professionals across high-demand sectors; and,
- Work-based learning opportunities that directly link classrooms with employers.

SkillsUSA Pathful breaks down geographic and socioeconomic barriers by bringing industry directly to students, ensuring that no matter where a student lives, they can explore careers, interact with professionals, and pursue opportunities that expand their sense of what is possible. This work aligns programs to industry needs while democratizing access to high-wage careers for all learners.

Additionally, SkillsUSA supports a continuum of age-appropriate work-based learning opportunities from guest speakers, career fairs, and virtual tours in middle school, to job shadowing, mentorship programs, micro-internships, extended placements, pre-apprenticeships, and registered apprenticeships in high school and beyond. This continuum ensures every learner can access meaningful experiences that grow in rigor and relevance over time.

³ <https://www.skillsusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/SkillsUSA-Drive-to-65-Strategic-Plan.pdf>

⁴ <https://skillsusa.pathful.com>

Through these goals, we are actively positioning SkillsUSA not just to scale what is already working for thousands of students nationwide, but to fundamentally strengthen the pipeline between education and employment on which America's economy depends.

The SkillsUSA Framework

Our organizational approach is premised on our *SkillsUSA Framework (Framework)* of Personal Skills, Workplace Skills, and Technical Skills Grounded in Academics.⁵ Created in collaboration with over 1,000 business and industry partners, the *Framework* is built upon 17 “Essential Elements” divided among these components, ensuring our students develop the skills and knowledge today’s employers need for success, but too many entry-level workers lack today. Put simply, our *Framework* serves as the blueprint for career readiness and is the foundation of everything we do.

The *Framework* is the blueprint for intentional skill building and the foundation for preparing students for rapidly evolving, technology-driven workplaces. Whether entering construction, healthcare, IT, advanced manufacturing, or AI-driven industries, students gain the employability skills and adaptability required to thrive AND provides them a common language to communicate their skills and competencies when speaking with their future employers. Through the *SkillsUSA Framework*, students develop critical career and life skills, including communication, teamwork, professionalism, technology literacy, integrity, work ethic, and many other essential skills that set them apart from their peers. We call this “the SkillsUSA difference.” We have recently quantified and measured this impact in several key ways through a research collaboration with the Student Research Foundation. These findings are discussed in further detail elsewhere in this testimony.

Understanding the Role of Career and Technical Student Organizations

SkillsUSA is a nationally recognized Career and Technical Student Organization (CTSO). CTSOs are co-curricular organizations that strengthen Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs by providing employability and career development skills through applied learning opportunities, leadership development, and related instruction. Put more plainly, CTSOs are where classroom learning transforms into workforce readiness. Students do not just learn skills, they apply them, compete with them, and prove they can deliver under pressure. Collectively, CTSOs serve over 2 million CTE learners nationally. This figure

⁵ <https://www.skillsusa.org/who-we-are/skillsusa-framework/>

represents approximately 17 percent of the roughly 12 million students who participate in CTE programs on an annual basis nationwide.⁶

Importantly, CTSOs are fundamentally different from other afterschool or extracurricular clubs and related activities. They are designed to be integral to CTE instruction, directly aligning with CTE programs and allowing learners to participate in activities—including conferences and competitive events—that complement and reinforce content learned in the classroom and in the workplace. This intra-curricular integration means CTSOs bring learning to life by giving students opportunities to lead, apply their skills, and gain real-world experience. Through hands-on projects, competitive events, and leadership roles, students develop the confidence, employability skills, and career readiness needed to thrive in education, careers, and life.

CTSOs are united by four common goals: leadership development, academic and career achievement, professional development, and community service. These organizations are recognized in the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006, as amended by the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V), as allowable uses of federal funds to strengthen CTE learner engagement and participation.⁷

Measuring the Impact of CTSOs and SkillsUSA

In November 2022, SkillsUSA published "The SkillsUSA Advantage," a comprehensive research study conducted in collaboration with the Student Research Foundation.⁸ Deriving data from a nationally representative sample of more than 20,000 CTE students across the nation, the report contributes to a growing and large body of research demonstrating that CTE is an effective educational and workforce development strategy for students and that it works even better when students actively participate in SkillsUSA.

Specifically, the study examines the difference in student performance and achievement for students participating in SkillsUSA compared to those that do not across eight key dimensions: feeling more excited about school; meeting potential employers; getting first-hand work experience; earning a license or certification; connecting school and the real world; understanding the work environment; feeling more excited about their chosen career; and achieving career clarity.

⁶ <https://cte.ed.gov/pcrn/explorer/enrollment/perkins-v>

⁷ <https://nmctso.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CTSO-Guide-to-Federal-Perkins-Funds.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.skillsusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/SkillsUSAAdvantage-Full-Report.pdf>

Across each of these key benchmarks, SkillsUSA students achieved these eight outcomes at higher rates than other students participating in CTSOs and significantly higher rates for students not participating in CTSOs at all. Given that only 17 percent of the 12 million CTE students nationwide currently participate in a CTSO, scaling access to these opportunities represents one of the highest-impact and most cost-effective interventions available to strengthen workforce development outcomes.

These outcomes translate into real lives and real career trajectories. Take Matt DiBara, a former SkillsUSA member, who went on to create his own successful masonry business after participating in SkillsUSA in high school. Reflecting on his experience, Matt described his SkillsUSA experience saying, *“I learned teamwork. I learned respect. I learned humility. The goal-setting process. External recognition from my peers.”* He adds, *“We need more people pushing wind in our sails and saying, ‘You Can.’ SkillsUSA was the breeding ground of ‘You Can’ for me.”* Today, Matt works to champion the skilled trades and advocates for CTE pathways to ensure every student hears ‘You Can’ just as he did through SkillsUSA.

Critically, these findings hold across all demographic groups examined. Regardless of gender, race, and school socioeconomic status, students are more likely to realize the many benefits of CTE if they participate in SkillsUSA than if they are not members of a CTSO. This finding further suggests that ensuring every CTE student has access to a CTSO may be one of the most effective—and most overlooked—levers for advancing workforce development opportunities for a greater number of students. Moreover, these findings also illustrate that access to CTSO membership has the potential to boost achievement of CTE benefits for all students, particularly those in underserved communities.

A Legacy of Leadership: Developing Tomorrow’s Workforce

To illustrate the transformative power of CTE and CTSO participation, I would like to share the story of Victoria Ingram, a SkillsUSA Virginia student who exemplifies the impact of our work.

Victoria currently serves as the National College/Postsecondary Parliamentarian and Chair of the Joint Executive Council. A student in the Engineering program at Northern Neck Technical Center, Victoria has developed and applied the *SkillsUSA Framework* skills of leadership, planning, organization, and responsibility throughout her educational journey.

Victoria credits CTE with equipping her not only with technical knowledge, but with real-world employability skills—communication, collaboration, project management, and the confidence to lead. As she describes it, *“CTE empowers students like me to give back to our communities and contribute to their growth. By connecting with business and industry*

partners, local legislators, and other stakeholders, we have the opportunity to directly influence CTE by shaping its funding, resources, and accessibility.”

One of Victoria’s most formative experiences came through her leadership role as copy editor for her high school yearbook. She helped manage the project timeline, organized staff assignments, created tracking systems to keep the team on pace, trained new team members, and often served as the bridge between the editor-in-chief’s vision and the staff’s daily work. She learned firsthand that strong planning, organization, and collaborative leadership are essential to turning a vision into reality—skills she continues to apply today as a national student leader representing thousands of SkillsUSA members across the country.

Victoria’s story is strengthened by a proud family legacy in CTE. Her father, Matt Ingram, has taught Collision Repair for 20 years and has served as a SkillsUSA advisor for the same length of time. With the exception of one year due to the pandemic, he has brought a student competitor to the National Leadership & Skills Conference every single year. A former SkillsUSA (then known as VICA) competitor himself, he has spent his career preparing students for meaningful careers in high-demand industries. His dedication reflects the profound, multigenerational impact that strong CTE and CTSO programs can have on students, families, and local economies.

Victoria’s journey demonstrates what is possible when students have access to high-quality CTE, committed educators, and the leadership and work-based learning experiences provided through SkillsUSA. Her story is just one of thousands, but it represents the power of what happens when policy, programming, and partnerships come together to support America’s future workforce.

Industry Recognition and Employer Demand

Employers across industries consistently recognize the value of SkillsUSA as well. Industry of all shapes and sizes recognizes student participation in SkillsUSA as a reliable signal of career readiness. Jim Lentz, Former CEO of Toyota Motor North America Inc., captured this sentiment directly recently remarking, *"SkillsUSA students are in demand, and they are better equipped than anyone out there. This organization improves lives and is indeed creating a better world."*⁹

⁹ <https://skillsusa.egnyte.com/fl/TFkrrg3GYTdY#folder-link/Fact%20Resource?p=528a3939-c436-4e8e-bc15-f4d15c123dca>

This recognition also translates into tangible hiring advantages for students as they seek to break into the job market. Nick Peterson of Miller Electric explains his company's perspective: *"SkillsUSA opened doors for me, both for my education and my career. SkillsUSA is an opportunity for our company to be associated with the best young welders and their instructors in the industry. If I see someone who has SkillsUSA experience on their resume, it tells me they went above and beyond in their CTE program, and they stand out from the crowd."*¹⁰

Directly supporting SkillsUSA has historically been a strategic workforce investment for employers. As Maureen Tholen of 3M notes, *"Supporting SkillsUSA is a good way for 3M—a science-based, materials-oriented company that engages people who make cars, airplanes, appliances, buildings—to connect with the youth coming into the workforce. These students are our future customers. They'll run businesses and make purchasing decisions, or they're going to be an employee and remember that they've used products made by 3M."*¹¹

It is rare to find many things today that students, educators, and Fortune 500 companies all agree on. SkillsUSA is that rare thing. CTSOs like SkillsUSA deliver exactly what all three need—students who are ready to work, businesses that can compete, and communities that have stable pathways to rewarding careers.

Meeting the Workforce Challenge Before Us

The need for organizations like SkillsUSA has never been greater. American businesses continue to face an acute shortage of skilled talent which is both an economic and national security threat. Gaps in labor supply undermine our ability to build infrastructure, secure and expand our digital systems, maintain supply chains, and compete technologically with global rivals.

Too often, there are not enough qualified workers to fill millions of available openings in key industries across the economy.¹² For instance, a recent survey by Associated General Contractors of America and the National Center for Construction Education and Research found 92% of construction firms are having difficulty filling positions with employers citing applicants lacking the skills and qualifications as their top challenge.¹³ According to the same survey, 45% of all construction companies report project delays due to worker

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² <https://www.uschamber.com/workforce/understanding-americas-labor-shortage>

¹³ <https://news.agc.org/workforce-development/workforce-shortages-delay-projects/>

shortages.¹⁴ At a time of acute housing shortages, these issues have an estimated cost to the economy of \$10.8 billion annually, resulting in 19,000 fewer homes being built last year.¹⁵

We are also facing future challenges securing the skilled talent needed for the future. Current estimates project that the total number of high school graduates will peak this year and steadily decline through 2041.¹⁶ At the same time, we have a rapidly aging population which is increasingly outpacing the growth of working-age adults.¹⁷ This means it is critical that every student is able to pursue pathways that leave them career-ready and lead to further opportunity. It is economically imperative that every student is prepared for career success.

In manufacturing, this challenge has not only been recently quantified but will become even more urgent. Research from Deloitte and the Manufacturing Institute projects that between 2024 and 2033, the manufacturing sector will require 3.8 million new workers simply to keep pace with current and future needs.¹⁸ Yet, up to 1.9 million of these positions may remain vacant without robust talent development strategies to support firms identifying new skilled talent.¹⁹

These challenges pose a significant threat to continued economic prosperity. CTE presents an opportunity to close skills gaps while improving students' postsecondary and career readiness. However, as the research increasingly demonstrates, CTE can be even more effective when combined with meaningful CTSO participation. This is why SkillsUSA has set ambitious goals through our *Drive to 65* strategic plan as noted earlier.

Put simply, expanding CTSO access must be a core component to the nation's wider workforce development strategy—it represents an economic imperative for a nation facing critical skills shortages that are forecasted to grow in key industries well into the future.

To meet the demands of evolving careers in AI, energy, cybersecurity, and more, there must be an intentional focus, and funding to support, recruit, retain, and train our CTE instructors to best prepare students to meet these challenges.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ <https://hbi.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Fall-2025-Final-Construction-Labor-Market-Report-Update.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.wiche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2024-Knocking-at-the-College-Door-final.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2025/older-adults-outnumber-children.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/manufacturing-industrial-products/supporting-us-manufacturing-growth-amid-workforce-challenges.html>

¹⁹ Ibid.

CTE, when combined with CTSO participation, is a proven solution. SkillsUSA's *Drive to 65* will help meet this national imperative by strengthening pipelines into critical industries—including manufacturing, construction, transportation, healthcare, energy, AI, cybersecurity, and STEM.

To meet the full spectrum of talent needs, we must provide multiple pathways to postsecondary and career opportunities. No one approach will be sufficient to meet the needs of the future. Guided, structured pathways with stackable credentials allow learners to accelerate, pause, re-enter, and reskill throughout their lives.

Policy Considerations

As this subcommittee considers how to strengthen the nation's workforce development efforts, I respectfully offer the following ideas and suggestions for consideration:

1. Strengthen the Federal Investment in Career and Technical Education

Perkins V is the sole federal investment in CTE and the only federal legislation that explicitly recognizes CTSOs as an integral part of CTE programming. I urge Congress to significantly increase funding for Perkins V's formula grant program to ensure states, school districts, and postsecondary institutions have the resources necessary to deliver high-quality CTE programming that meets the evolving needs of students and employers. This critical funding stream has not been meaningfully strengthened in two decades, having not kept up with inflation and growing learner demand that has emerged during this critical period in CTE's modernization. Strengthened federal investments in Perkins V can also enable the further integration of CTSOs into CTE programs, expanding access to the proven benefits of CTSO membership for more students.

2. Expand Youth Work-Based Learning Opportunities

Research consistently demonstrates that work-based learning experiences have powerful effects on student outcomes. Congress should support policies and funding that expand work-based learning opportunities for all youth, including skills competitions. Federal investments should recognize the full spectrum of work-based learning modalities, from career awareness activities in middle school through career preparation experiences like internships, apprenticeships, and industry-validated competitive events in high school and beyond. As states increasingly leverage CTE infrastructure to meet broader career readiness needs for all learners, existing federal and state resources can be spread too thinly. Future policy should therefore provide dedicated support for scaling work-based learning and developing wider statewide pathways systems that connect CTE programs

with complementary workforce development initiatives, ensuring adequate capacity to serve the growing population of learners pursuing career-focused educational experiences.

3. Reauthorize the National Apprenticeship Act

SkillsUSA urges Congress to reauthorize and modernize the National Apprenticeship Act to formalize a predictable and sustained federal investment in youth, pre-apprenticeship, and registered apprenticeship programs. Updated legislation should recognize the continuum of career preparation experiences and create clear pathways that connect secondary and postsecondary CTE with apprenticeship opportunities. Organizations like SkillsUSA serve as critical bridges in this continuum, preparing students with the foundational skills, industry exposure, and career clarity that position them for success in apprenticeship and other postsecondary pathways.

4. Grow the Pipeline of Skilled CTE Instructors

To meet the nation's workforce and economic demands, it is essential to strengthen and expand the pipeline of skilled CTE instructors. We urge Congress to support policies that make teaching a competitive and compelling career path for experienced tradespeople and industry professionals. This includes offering salary incentives, earned debt relief opportunities, and streamlined transition-to-teaching programs that help skilled experts bring their real-world experience into the classroom.

Additionally, expanding access to high-quality, CTE-specific teacher preparation and ongoing professional development is critical, particularly in fast-changing segments of the economy. Ensuring that instructors can continually update their skills and stay aligned with industry advancements will directly strengthen student learning and workforce readiness. These efforts should also include policies that facilitate licensure reciprocity, enabling qualified instructors to move more easily across state lines and fill high-need teaching positions where they are most urgently required.

Without a strong and sustainable pipeline of CTE instructors, there can be no strong pipeline of skilled workers. This challenge is both a national workforce priority and a national security imperative.

Conclusion

SkillsUSA has spent over 60 years championing America's skilled workforce. The evidence is abundantly clear—our program and approach work for students and employers. Students who participate in SkillsUSA are more likely to earn industry certifications, meet potential employers, gain work experience, connect classroom learning to real-world

applications, and achieve clarity about their career path. These outcomes are not just good for individual students—they are essential for closing our nation's skills gap and ensuring American economic competitiveness.

At SkillsUSA, the future is in good hands because it's in skilled hands. With continued and strengthened federal support for CTE via Perkins V, expanded and strengthened infrastructure for work-based learning opportunities, modernized apprenticeship legislation, and intentional support for CTE instructors, we can ensure that every student has access to the pathways they need to build successful careers and strengthen our nation's workforce.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify. I welcome any questions from the subcommittee.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Chelle Travis".

Chelle Travis
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SkillsUSA