Providing Access to CTE Through
Residential Programs

By Jenny Scala, Amy Peterson and Lindsay Poland

C areer and technical education (CTE) opportunities help high school students explore career options and learn valuable skills before graduation. In addition, CTE programs may help to increase students' perception of the relevance of high school and motivate them to stay in school (Kazis, 2005). Although all states provide CTE programs and opportunities for students, many have specialized approaches—some states offer programming mainly through traditional high schools or technical colleges, whereas others also have regional technical centers (Association for Career and Technical Education, 2014). In Alaska, residential CTE-focused programs equip rural students with hands-on, work-based experiences. These programs are designed to increase student engagement in school, furnish students with work-relevant skills and certificates, and potentially decrease student dropout rates.

Learning From Sites in Alaska and Other States

While Alaska has several established residential CTE programs, the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development was interested in learning from these programs, as well as other residential CTE programs serving rural communities. As part of a federally funded technical assistance project on rural dropout prevention, staff from American Institutes for Research (AIR) collected information on nine residential CTE programs serving rural students, five of which were located in Alaska (Table 1).

AIR staff reviewed publically available websites and conducted interviews and a focus group with directors and staff from these programs. From these conversations, AIR staff identified seven strategies sites used to address challenges that they face, as well as recommendations for others who might be interested in

Table 1. Selected Programs, Locations and Websites

Programs in Alaska	Location	Website
Nenana Living Center	Nenana	http://nenanalynx.org/nslc/
Northwestern Alaska Career and Technical Center	Nome	http://www.nacteconline.org/
Star of the Northwest Magnet School	Kotzebue	http://www.nwarctic.org/Domain/320
Galena Interior Learning Academy	Galena	http://gila.galenaalaska.org/
Voyage to Excellence	Anchorage	http://www.edline.net/pages/chugach_VTE_Program
Programs in Other States		
Job Corps—Trapper Creek	Darby, MT	http://trappercreek.jobcorps.gov/home.aspx
Job Corps—Boxelder	Nemo, SD	http://boxelder.jobcorps.gov
Job Corps—Mingo	Puxico, MO	http://mingo.jobcorps.gov/home.aspx
Health Careers Summer Camp	Wisconsin (six locations)	https://www.ahec.wisc.edu/health-careers-summer-camps
North County Trade Tech High	California	http://www.tradetechhigh.org/
Pathways to Science—ACE Camp	South Dakota	http://www.sdstate.edu/cs/undergraduate-programs/aviation/aerospace-career.cfm

> **"CTE and residential programs are expensive to run, and traditional education funding is insufficient. Funds are needed to purchase equipment; to recruit, hire and retain high-quality staff; and to house and feed students …"**

starting, partnering with or supporting such programs.

The summarized information in this article is intended to inform audiences about some of the common strategies reported by experienced program staff, rather than to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies or programs.

Strategies to Address Common Challenges

The following section addresses the seven strategies program staff cited as most useful.

Offer Real-world, Hands-on Learning Opportunities

Small school sizes and limited resources may result in limited opportunities for rural students to explore careers, gain experience and develop skills that will help them obtain productive jobs beyond high school. Students without these opportunities may disengage and drop out of school, or they might be underprepared for life after high school. All the program respondents mentioned that providing real-world, hands-on learning opportunities motivates students because of the clear relevance to later life and because active learning is often more engaging for academically disengaged students.

Respondents emphasized that students must be taught skills that are directly relevant to job opportunities in their local communities (e.g., the commercial fishing industry). According to respondents, this is particularly important in Alaska due to the close familial and cultural ties many Alaskans have with their communities.

Provide Structure, Safety and Clear Expectations for All

Directors unanimously spoke of the necessity for a stable environment and clear expectations. Many high school students have never lived independently and are not familiar with the norms of communal living, such as keeping their living space clean, showing up to school or events on time, or being respectful of other students' living and learning habits.

Furthermore, particularly in programs geared toward more at-risk youth, some students have to break negative habits like substance abuse, negative interactions with peers or supervising adults, or unhealthy eating and sleeping habits. Residential programs create a unique opportunity to structure students' environments much more rigorously than in a traditional school environment.

Give Students Multiple Opportunities and Encourage Engagement

Although many of the directors described strict structures and regulations, they noted that the students in these programs often needed more than one opportunity to be successful. In interviews and the focus group, program staff offered several examples of students who had experienced academic failures, were late to class or had substance abuse issues, but who turned themselves around and improved when given another chance. Program staff mentioned providing opportunities for students to be fully engaged and buy into the program as key to ensuring student success, despite earlier failures.

Additionally, some leaders cited student agency and authentic leadership opportunities as a necessary aspect of the resi-

dential model. For example, one program has a student leadership committee that rewrote the student handbook, helps make decisions about student life in the residential program and works with another group of students to manage student events.

Encourage Honest, Caring Relationships

A lack of mentors or other caring adults is often associated with negative student outcomes (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014). Program staff stated, "The number one thing schools can do for dropout recovery is to create personal connections [and] healthy adult relationships with students." Respondents reported that students often lacked adults who could help them navigate school and employment, and they emphasized the importance of hiring staff who cultivate honest, caring relationships with students.

Alaskan respondents described engaging local community members to act as role models and mentors. This strategy was reported as important for rural Alaska populations because of a perceived lack of native-Alaskan role models who can help students see the benefits of career pathways. One focus group participant noted that seeing friends or family members succeed in CTE programs and become employed locally could motivate other students to participate.

Write Grants and Build Community and Business Partnerships

Both CTE and residential programs are expensive to run, and traditional education funding is insufficient. Funds are needed to purchase equipment; to recruit, hire and retain high-quality staff; and to house and feed students for various lengths of time. Another significant cost is transportation to and from programs, particularly in Alaska where this often requires air travel. Keeping individual student costs down requires fundraising for most programs.

Respondents mentioned pursuing grants and developing partnerships with local and regional groups and businesses as ways to address their funding challenges. Directors sought grants from regional entities, foundations, and state and federal

sources. In addition to pursuing grants, respondents reported partnering with many different regional community and business groups, as well as institutes of higher education.

Provide Programming and Policies That Respect the Local Community (Unique to Alaska)
Many parents do not want to send their children to residential programs because of the historic cultural trauma they or other older adults in their communities experienced by being forced to attend Western-style boarding schools (often far from their families and communities). By acknowledging this damaging past and encouraging native languages and cultural values in schools and programs, program staff try to restore relationships and trust with the communities they serve. Strategies described by respondents included having flexible calendars and programming to avoid conflicts with traditional community activities and values, and providing programming based on local customs.

Additionally, students may feel particularly uncomfortable or homesick in the residential environment, where they are separated from their families and communities. To address this, one program adjusted its student–home communication policy to allow more flexibility after significant feedback from both students and parents. Staff hope this new flexibility will help parents feel more secure in allowing their children to participate.

Some programs also recruit native-Alaskan residential advisors, which may help students who are homesick feel safe and comfortable in a new environment.

Provide Staff With Leadership, Professional Learning and Networking Opportunities (Unique to Alaska)
Sites in Alaska emphasized the importance of staff support and growth opportunities due to high staff turnover in rural Alaska schools and programs. High staff turnover may relate to the remoteness, low enrollment, high rates of poverty, and high needs and low achieve-

ment among students (Hill & Hirshberg, 2006, 2013). In addition, respondents reported that program staff are often asked to take on multiple responsibilities and work long hours in support of student safety, engagement and learning.

Respondents from Alaska noted that program staff—much like their students—needs support and opportunities to help them remain motivated and engaged. This may be particularly true for program staff who are often not from Alaska and are from a different culture than the majority of their students. Respondents mentioned a few strategies designed to support teachers and staff: providing opportunities for leadership and teaming, helping staff connect with their students and the community, and offering professional development while compensating teachers for their time.

Recommendations to New Directors
Current residential CTE program directors proffered advice and recommendations to new directors. Some of the common themes are summarized here.

Learn From Others

Firsthand knowledge and experience of ground-level program operations are pivotal to the success of a new program. Many program directors described shadowing other directors before starting up their own program or hosting new directors at their program. They discussed the importance of observing what works, *how* it works in other centers and whether it might need to be adapted to serve a different student population.

One program director stated, "I can tell you whatever I want to tell you, but you probably won't believe it until you experience it or see it. That is important, to actually go see it in action and how it works." Speaking with other program directors and staff can also help to develop a network of relationships or community of practice that can give ongoing advice and guidance as issues arise.

Foster and Maintain Community Partnerships

All respondents emphasized the importance of forming strong relationships with partners, such as local businesses, student programs, school districts and other residential CTE programs across the state. One director noted, "Many people besides teachers enjoy teaching, and many are willing to volunteer their time to share their experience with the students."

Partners may have staff who can present to students about their jobs, teach workshops or allow students to shadow or intern with them. Partner organizations could donate equipment or other resources. In short, partnerships can help programs to efficiently leverage existing resources and help to ensure that students learn from professionals inside and outside their programs.

Keep Students Occupied and Always Have Alternative Programming Planned

Many program directors suggested having every minute of every day planned for students. According to respondents, keeping students busy throughout the day helps maintain student engagement and prevents boredom and troublemaking between activities. One director suggested starting and ending each day with engaging CTE activities to keep students motivated throughout the day.

Despite planning, unexpected events—bad weather (common in Alaska), presenter absences or delays, or student behavior issues—can always interrupt even well-planned programs. One way to handle breaks in the flow of programming is to have a backup plan. One director advised "always having something in your back pocket. What is my plan B if this person doesn't show up?"

Recommendations for Policymakers

Directors also had advice for policymakers at the state and local levels, which could influence their ability to successfully run and maintain rural residential CTE programs.

Streamline Information Sharing and Reporting Requirements

Center directors advised that state policymakers consider unifying regulations and requirements attached to state funding to reduce the amount of work that is replicated by reporting to multiple departments. Further, center directors advised aligning regulations among the education, labor, and health or social services departments.

One director shared, "One of the complications that we have is that an educational residence program lives in two worlds. Because we're funded by the Department of Education, they give us the money, but we're licensed through the Department of Health and Social Services, and we're kind of grouped in with all the other things for kids and youth and such. Duplication of effort costs us time and money, and if you think about it, it's costing the state, too."

Support Networking and Learning Opportunities

Finally, some center directors and staff noted that they would appreciate the state facilitating more opportunities for programs to network and learn from each other through conferences, online learning communities or opportunities to visit each other's sites. One center director also

Tips for Starting a Residential Program

Recommendations to New Directors

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- Foster and maintain community partnerships
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Recommendations for Policymakers

- Streamline information sharing and reporting requirements
- Support networking and learning opportunities
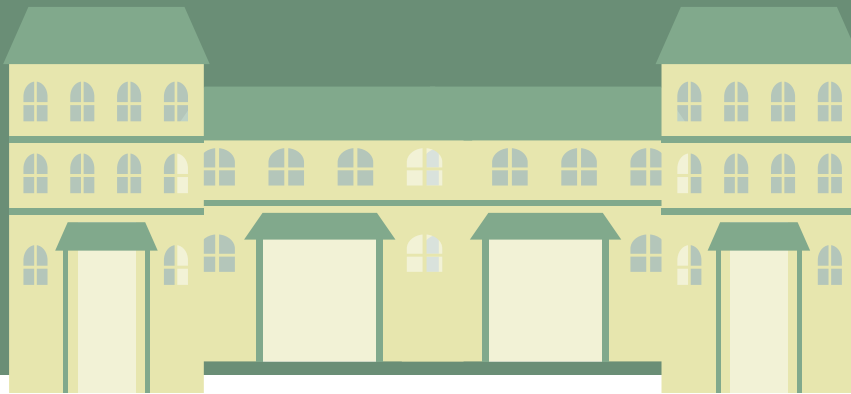
advised that state policymakers should themselves visit centers to learn about their work and purpose. A strong understanding of program needs and desired outcomes is necessary for pragmatic and effective regulations.

Continuing to Learn From Residential CTE Programs

The strategies and recommendations in this article are based on the lessons learned from experienced program directors whose goal is to provide rural students with opportunities for high-quality CTE programming. These opportunities are essential for students in rural areas to gain the skills and motivation to finish high school ready for careers or ongoing education.

States and districts interested in serving their rural students should continue to learn from those who have successfully implemented such programs. Tech

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