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The most important role of our education system is to build a brighter future for our nation's students as professionals and as citizens, which hinges on its ability to providing students with the skills to obtain well-paying, valued careers. Career and technical education (CTE) programs play a crucial role in that preparation, yet Congress is not providing a strong enough investment through proven funding mechanisms, like the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, to fully support this effort.

Despite recent indications that the economic recovery is progressing, high unemployment, particularly among people ages 20-24, remains a persistent issue and a threat to growth. In stark contrast, however, there are a significant number of positions available in engaging careers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are more than 4 million jobs currently available in fields including healthcare, energy and advanced manufacturing, but employers are struggling to find professionals with the skills to fill them.

Skills obtained through CTE programs, including in project-based learning opportunities and STEM education, are filling the skills gap and meeting employer needs. With greater federal funding through the Perkins Act, CTE professionals will be able to further improve teaching and instruction, access the resources and technologies necessary to reach more students and advance CTE programs to their full potential.

Congressional investment in CTE is not and has not matched our student's needs. Perkins funding today is more than \$140 million lower than it was in FY 2010, and more than 20 states are currently receiving Perkins allocations at the same level as in 1998. This dearth of funding comes at a time when parents, students and working adults are seeking CTE courses in increasing numbers – in fact, 12 million students are currently enrolled in CTE programs at the secondary and postsecondary levels, and 62 percent of CTE leaders have reported that they anticipate growth next year.

Furthermore, postsecondary students are increasingly pursuing CTE programs to ensure they will be competitive candidates for employers. Data from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce indicates that by 2018 the U.S. will need 4.7 million new workers with postsecondary certificates, and it is crucial that these students have adequate access to robust CTE programs to obtain the necessary skills for success in those careers.

Our leaders in Congress have a responsibility to invest in programs preparing students with the skills necessary to keep our economy strong and our workforce competitive. In doing so, Congress will equip our nation's educators with the resources they need to serve this population and foster greater access to opportunity for all Americans. I encourage teachers, parents and students to contact their legislators and urge them to increase our investment in CTE today.

LeAnn Wilson is the Executive Director of the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE). Through her leadership role, she has gained a great appreciation for the work that America's career and technical education (CTE) professionals do every day by connecting their students nationwide with the skills they will need to keep our county strong.