

Four Key Themes in Perkins III Reauthorization: A Political Analysis

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Abstract

The Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act of 1998 (Perkins III) has been reauthorized in the first session of the 109th Congress, but not without strong opposition from the Bush Administration and allied neoconservative school reformers. This paper will detail four neoconservative rationales—modernization, competition, alignment, and accountability—that were used by the White House in shaping future career and technical education legislation to closely mirror the goals and objectives in the No Child Left Behind Act. Counter-arguments for each rationale will be provided in order to exhibit the contested terrain of policymaking as well as clarify the partisan politics and ideological convictions of stakeholders.

Introduction

Contemporary standards-based educational reform has been touted by a number of U.S. presidents in the past thirty years, particularly at a time when the nation first was awakened to the charge that schools were doing a mediocre job in preparing students for the global workforce. The federal role in educational policymaking over that time has been guided by a conservative sensibility among a centrist accord of Republican and Democratic legislators that focuses upon accountability through higher standards and testing, privatization efforts including vouchers and choice plans, and the reduction of funding governmental social services including education. Apple (1996) has described this trend in education as the *conservative restoration* formed by a right-leaning hegemonic alliance among two groups: neoliberals and neoconservatives. The former group, neoliberals, embraces market values maximizing individuals' choices and desire a weakened federal role in the funding and direction of educational affairs. The latter group, neoconservatives, view the moral authority of an idealized past and wish to maintain a strong federal presence in the control and management of public schooling. Although legislators in Washington DC exhibit an uneasy alliance of competing views on the role of the state in educational affairs, they are unified in the call for business-like managerialism: "a perspective that considers restructuring, accountability, performance or 'performativity,' and measurement of educational activities as solutions to both social and educational problems" (Stromquist, 2002, p. 40).

Under the leadership of President George W. Bush, the crowning legislative agenda for education, in 2001, was the neoconservative influenced No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), that established more uniform testing of pupils and greater evidence-based data collection, research and evaluations that measure student progress on academic achievement of core subjects such as reading and mathematics. The neoconservative

triumph of NCLB might be viewed as restoration from thirty years of so-called progressive fads and frills in public education toward much more rigorous measurement of academic standards and achievement outcomes of pupils. Educational reform along these lines draws attention to strengthening the role of graduation requirements writ large—not curriculum differentiation for special populations of students. Policy advice from a number of neoconservatives in the Fordham Foundation, a right-leaning think tank, informed the Bush administration’s plan to reframe the Elementary and Secondary Education Act into NCLB. Finn, Jr., Kanstoroom, and Petrilli (1999) wrote:

In our view, there is one and only one transcendent national education objective worthy of being enshrined in federal policy in 1999: higher academic achievement for all students and schools. Academics is what schools are best at.... Everything else, however worthy, is peripheral and secondary. (p. 10)

It should come as no surprise that the Bush administration attempted to deny federal funds to career and technical education (CTE) programs in the recent federal reauthorization process. Perhaps viewed by neoconservatives as the last gasp of an activity curriculum, one that benefited from a century of federal largesse, CTE never really lived up to the promise these past years of challenging and rigorous academically integrated curriculum.

Policymakers in our nation’s capitol recently reviewed legislative priorities for reauthorizing the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act of 1998 (Perkins III), a mainstay of vocational education programming that has been regularly funded since its inception but was set to expire in June of 2004. With an annual budget of over \$1.3 billion, Perkins III funded local and state-level CTE programs in areas of administration, curricular innovation, equipment purchases, career guidance services, disadvantaged populations of students, and the like. Yet the Bush administration would not support federal vocational programs, and indeed the proposed budget for the year 2003 (and each year thereafter) confirmed elimination of the Perkins Act (Cavanagh and Robelen, 2002). Funds were to be used for supporting Pell grants for college students and for a new high school initiative creating competitive grants to raise achievement standards in the ninth to twelfth grades. CTE reform modeled along the lines of NCLB-styled testing and accountability was upheld as the benchmark upon which all students’ transition from school to college—then on to jobs.

Despite the administration’s attempt to outright kill or reduce funds to Perkins III, bipartisan support in Congress, in 2005, approved the measure on March 9th and 10th in the House by a voted of 416 to 9 [as H.R. 366—The Vocational and Technical Education for the Future Act]; and in the Senate by a vote of 99 to 0 [as S. 250—The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act of 2005] (House Approves Perkins Bill, 2005). (The two bills subsequently were reconciled in congressional committee in the second session of the 109th Congress.) This does not mean that the President has abandoned his neoconservative agenda to remake public high schools. Just that a new settlement in Congress these days gives greater voice to neoliberal concerns of workforce readiness and business competitiveness under globalization. Many legislators’

right and left of the aisle still acknowledge the federal presence of public vocational education in human capital development. The rightist politics underpinning the Perkins reauthorization hearings are endemic of a wider effort to restore formalistic teaching and academic learning styles in schools and to dictate a traditional moral vision of merit into educational policy discourse. But grumblings over NCLB are widening as some state policymakers and parents, teachers and administrators question how high-stakes testing really improves student achievement and outcomes.

What follows is a political analysis of the reauthorization process that illuminates the neoconservative views on educational reform as promoted by the Bush administration. I have identified four key themes: *modernization*, *competition*, *alignment*, and *accountability*. While meaning-making in policy debates is difficult because of the “values and competing interests” that shape discourses, and the multiple ways educational issues are represented and constructed in language for political purposes (Bacchi, 2000, p. 50), I will provide a brief explanation of each theme and then counter-arguments to show the contested terrain over CTE policy.

Key Themes

Modernization

Driving the White House agenda for budget redirection was the need to discipline the CTE community for their perceived lack of change in new economic times. Underpinning the discourse of modernization is a long-standing assumption that vocational education was wedded to teaching outmoded trades using out-of-date technologies to at-risk students, most with non-college-bound destinies. The point here is that the rhetoric coming from the office of the Assistant Secretary for Vocational and Adult Education, first Carol D’Amico and then Susan Sclafani, both under the first Bush administration, served notice to CTE advocates who had settled for mediocrity in education. D’Amico (2003, ¶ 8) told a House committee during hearings for the 2004 educational budget: “Too frequently, vocational education is offered not as a supplement to a quality academic education, but as a less demanding alternative.”

Career-focused learning and applied technical knowledge and skills training represented an area of contestation for neoconservative school reform modernizers who privileged the traditional academic curriculum by treating all students as one—the college bound. This college-for-all policy orientation has become a social movement of late; with policy wonks and the mainstream press championing the idea that educators fail to foster the full potential of young people unless taking a rigorous college-prep curriculum evidenced by honors classes or advanced placements or International Baccalaureate certifications and the like. Similarly aligned with the administration’s viewpoint was The Education Trust, a school reform organization that wanted to modernize vocational education, and their policy director issued a press release saying: “Right now, the federal program [Perkins III] is at best ambiguous and ambivalent about the need to ensure that vocational education programs integrate strong academics along with more narrow technical and vocational skills” (Wiener, 2004, ¶ 3).

One could not disagree with a policy approach that upholds scholastic excellence, yet there are major flaws in the notion that further education is bestowed upon all

students equally. Rosenbaum (2001, p. 57) charged that “the college-for-all norm can inadvertently encourage a deception that hurts many youths” because students are set-up with vague offers of college success without really knowing the requirements for degree completion. Those disadvantaged by social class or race may have no idea what steps they need to take to be successful in college or how to remedy their past low grades and poor achievements or whether college planning is even a realistic and likely attainable scenario. Just because educators encourage students to have high expectations, Rosenbaum offered, does not mean that young people enrolled in high schools will act in their best interests at the time to prepare for these goals.

Competition

The policy perspectives in the Bush Administration clearly point to a weakened state of American workforce preparedness in the global marketplace. “A generation ago you could fare well in the workforce with a basic education and a good work ethic,” noted Assistant Secretary Sclafani (2004, ¶ 3) in congressional testimony on the 2005 education budget; but “this is no longer true.” And she goes on to argue that the U.S. educational system has been eclipsed by other countries in terms of international academic indicators. “Our competitors have been emulating our example and are closing the gap,” she remarked (2004, ¶ 4). In March of 2005, Sclafani (2005) presented *Preparing America’s Future*, before the National Association of Workforce Boards, a group responsible for policy direction and oversight of public/private partnerships in the federal job training arena. About half-a-dozen slides in her talk offered comparative academic data gathered from member countries in the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), among others. With indicators of mathematics literacy, for instance, the U.S. ranked a dismal 24th out of 29 countries listed, outperforming only Portugal, Greece, Turkey, and Mexico. Another slide showed post-secondary enrollment data from the developing nations of China and India greatly outdistancing the U.S. in the last decade of the 20th century. The idea here is that international comparisons will shock audiences into thinking about regaining the competitive edge in education by singling out one tactical goal for schools—raising academic outcomes.

Counter-arguments from a number of social scientists suggested comparative data was regularly misread and misused by neoconservative critics of public education without fully understanding contextual and cultural differences (Bracey, 2002). One needs to disaggregate the data because some countries in Europe and Asia require stiff national exams in earlier grades, devices that sort a much narrower and select group entering high status college preparatory schools. “Does it make any sense,” Berliner and Biddle (1995, p. 52) asked, “to compare the average, national achievements of high school students in mathematics, science, or literature from countries with such disparate systems of education?” One major difference between the U.S. and other countries is that American students can choose to work during their teenage years and combine part-time jobs with studies. OECD data is interpreted by conservative policymakers in order to make viable decisions on education and training. This is the human capital approach that measures pupils in country-by-country achievement against benchmarks of world-class

standards in reading, mathematics, and science (Spring, 1998). The problem lies in reliance upon economic assumptions that skills can be reduced to test scores, ones that accurately reflect an established knowledge base—“this image is just a fantasy,” Spring (1998, p. 173) contended. International indicators do not reveal opportunities for teaching key academic subjects that may or may not be present due to lack of resources in poorer school districts, places impacted by socio-cultural inequities due to racial and class-based origins.

Still, the neoconservative spin of excellence the past three decades has been used successfully by federal policymakers to advance educational reforms in Washington. Ironically their populist success masks a more serious flaw in rightist ideology: elitism. Neoconservatives use the ploy in discourses calculated to deceive; that there is a groundswell of public support for the restoration of traditional values, authoritarian truths, and religious faith, capturing a vocal majority (real or imagined) in civil society. In reality, neoconservatives are a new ruling class who “claim an aristocracy in the midst of American liberal democracy” (Drury, 1997, p. 16). Understandably elites use the bully pulpit to sound off on governmental control in education. Even the non-college bound will benefit by learning, Ravitch (2000, p. 16) contended; “that will enrich their lives as citizens, individuals, and members of a community.” The ideal of an educated citizen capable of deliberating and reasoning ennobles democracy. But neoconservatives have few answers for exactly how a rigorous curriculum lifts special populations with newfound symbolic and cultural capital.

Alignment

Unsettling to CTE advocates was the positioning of NCLB standards into Perkins reauthorization that would result in less opportunity for students to take vocational credits in order to graduate. Several policymakers voiced concern that “by design or by default” the new legislation may “squeeze career and technical education out of the high school curriculum” (Hoachlander, 2005, p. 38). “Does the magnitude of this academic task [standards-based reforms] leave any room for vocational education?” another wondered aloud (Weckstein, 2004, p. 3). Policy discourses from the Bush administration clearly targeted the removal of progressive CTE offerings, such as work-based internships and apprenticeships, cooperative education and field-based placements and the like, that are perceived to lack academic rigor and formal classroom respectability. Strengthening CTE at the federal level through NCLB standards, neoconservative legislators charged, would remove faddish curriculum offerings—considered to be applied pedagogy and activity learning—and introduce identifiable core academic indicators and industry performance standards as well as mandated model sequences of courses, this latter measure meant to facilitate the articulation of statewide secondary-level reforms within the transfer function to college.

Most telling was the vocal celebration within the Republican leadership in the House of Representatives over the sunset of President Clinton’s school-to-work (STW) legislation. John Boehner (R-Ohio), chair of the House Education and Workforce Committee sent out two GOP fact sheets—one in October of 2004 (GOP Vocational Education Bill, 2004) and again in January of 2005 (Supporting Local and State Efforts,

2005)—assuring neoconservatives that Perkins renewal was “putting another nail in the coffin of the so-called ‘school to work’ initiative” (2005, ¶ 3). The fact sheets publicized how “Republican plans for vocational education reform” not only rejected the former Democratic administration’s CTE model under President Bill Clinton, but aligned NCLB standards “as advocated by conservatives for years” that would “boost the focus on academic content” (2004, ¶ 4). Evidently STW legislation left a bad taste in the mouths of neoconservative reformers who viewed it in the late 1990s with disdain as “dubious experiential curricula” forced upon all students, and “altering the objectives” of public education along the way (Finn Jr., Kanstoroom, and Petrilli, 1999, p. 9; Steinberg, 1998). Yet Clinton’s \$1.6 billion federal investment in the School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA) of 1994, which ended in 2001, was never meant as a uniform template for the states. STWOA was an incentive for businesses to partner with students and educators in work-based learning schemes. The act offered seed-grant monies to modify or amend their existing career education and vocational programs into building systems for successful workforce development and school-to-work transitions. “One of the hallmarks of legislation, was the flexibility allowed the states in determining their own forms of School-to-Work,” wrote program evaluators Hughes, Bailey and Mechur (2001); “thus, the structure and specific activities of these partnerships vary from state to state” (p. 10). Contemporary policymakers failed to recognize that work-based learning and non-cognitive competencies offer alternative pathways to raising skills levels (Rosenbaum, 2001). Recent case study evidence from school-to-work program evaluations showed that vocational learning enriches secondary-level academics, even facilitating the transfer function to post-secondary institutions (Castellano, Stone, Stringfield, Farley, and Wayman, 2004; Orr, Bailey, Hughes, Karp, and Kienzl, 2004). CTE advocates maintained that beyond technical skills training all students benefit from experiential practices through career development (Bailey, Hughes, and Moore, 2004).

Accountability

The National Assessment of Vocational Education (NAVE), a congressionally-mandated evaluation under Perkins III, served as a kind of talisman for neoconservative ambitions to reform secondary-level vocational programs. Published in 2004, the report gave President Bush and his U.S. Department of Education staffers’ further cause to question the premise that CTE indeed was monitoring and improving academic achievement in the field (Hoachlander, 2005). NAVE data indicated secondary-level CTE had failed to show consistent evidence as to positive outcomes in the areas of student academic achievements, successful transfer functions to postsecondary education, and college completions. Aside from empirical data that showed significant short-term post-graduate earnings for CTE completers, Perkins III lacked clear goals and purposes which ushered forth “a conflicted picture of federal priorities for vocational education improvement” (Silverberg, Warner, Fong, and Goodwin, 2004, p. xviii). Additionally, the White House and its allies defended budget priorities based on findings from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) results on achievement test decline for all twelfth-graders in reading and mathematics; drop-out rates were on the rise as well. Vocational students fared the worst in the NAEP assessments, wrote Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings on March 9th, 2005, in a letter to chairs of both the House and Senate committees reviewing Perkins reauthorization (Spellings, 2005, ¶ 3): In the

year 2000, “less than 10 percent...scored at or above proficiency in mathematics and only 29 percent scored at or above proficiency in reading.” Additionally, Spellings produced evidence from a survey by Achieve, Inc.—a non-profit organization of state governors and business chief executives whose goal is to raise the academic rigor and standards in our schools—which said that employers’ claimed about 39 percent of recent graduates were unprepared for entry-level jobs.

Before the federal legislation in the 1990s, little regard was given to performance measures and standards for the states, but with Perkins II in 1990 and then its reauthorization in 1998 (as Perkins III), emphasis was placed upon several major goals including integration of academics into the secondary-level CTE curriculum, promotion of work-based learning, and seamless transitions from high school to college, using tech-prep as a model for articulation (Castellano, Stringfield, and Stone, 2003). Perkins III attempted to ratchet-up accountability measures but never centered upon academic performances alone (now tied to NCLB standards in Perkins IV)—vocational and technical skill proficiencies were equally important, and more so was the idea of career or occupational readiness for workforce employability. Additionally, since only 5% of federal funds reached school districts around the country, Perkins monies were used locally for program improvements such as equipment purchases and the like, “not a source for general education reform. It should therefore not come as a surprise if Perkins III has not brought about fundamental change on a large scale” (Castellano, Stringfield, and Stone, 2003, p. 250).

Another interpretation of the NAVE data—one that differs substantially in its conclusions from the official government document produced by the Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education—was the 2004 report by the NAVE independent advisory panel, written by a group of 22 employers, secondary and postsecondary school leaders, union representatives, and workforce development policy experts and researchers. These panelists were directed under Perkins III to provide the standalone report reviewing evaluation and assessment data of CTE programs from NAVE analyses. Their major findings were: CTE works well by increasing student earnings; Perkins III changes have aligned with school reform movements and raised academic standards for students; and CTE provides students with choices based upon differing learning styles and which occupational options to pursue (NAVE Independent Advisory Panel, 2004). In contrast to the Bush Administration document, policy analyst Lewis (2004, p. 179) noted, the NAVE advisory panel’s report “sees more positive trends” in the data, “and concludes with a strong vision for the future of CTE.” CTE students benefit from contextual learning in workplaces and engagement in real-world activities that complement academic learning. And CTE data shows positive trends in college attendance among vocational concentrators that have been encouraged in part by tech-prep initiatives. CTE teaching styles should not conform to the procrustean one-size-fits-all White House agenda “if we want to leave no child behind academically or economically” (NAVE Independent Advisory Panel, 2004, p. 13).

Conclusion

Historically the neoconservative policy offensive against public education was not confined solely to vocational education delivery systems. A repeated and well known assault by anti-school critics condemned all progressive curriculums which in their view deprived students of rigorous direct instruction over basic core academic knowledge. We have seen this argument before in Arthur Bestor's conservative attack on career education (termed life adjustment education) in the early 1950s. Along with radical right-wing critics who claimed that schools were infiltrated with Communists, the public cry over academic standards and control by professional educators reached a fevered pitch at mid-century. Interestingly, a recent neoconservative assault along these lines was targeted to education professionals in social studies. The Fordham Foundation's edited book *Where did social studies go wrong?* (Leming, Ellington, and Porter-Magee, 2003), published in 2003, declared the field on its last legs due to leftist-inspired politicizing of the curriculum through peace and environmental studies, gender equity and multiculturalism, and social and economic justice agendas. When Kornfeld (2005) analyzed the post-9/11, Bush-styled inflammatory nationalistic language embedded throughout these essays, he concluded that the public likely would mischaracterize the profession as antipatriotic and a treasonous threat to liberty. "What do people picture when they read about the 'intellectual elite' and 'social studies gurus'?" Kornfeld (2005, p. 114) asked about the hidden agenda of the authors; "Such labels conjure up images of a cabal of hippie/Commie eggheads," he continued, "who seek to hold hostage our children and college students with 'progressive groupthink' that is out of touch with mainstream America... a "neoconservative code for all that is wrong with today's schools."

What does the neoconservative sentiment mean for the future of CTE? Without a doubt the field is at a crossroads in history. "Change or die," charged Medrich (2005, p. 23) director of policy analysis at MPR Associates in Berkeley (CA) at a workshop on high school reform co-sponsored by the Aspen Institute and Jobs for the Future (JFF). "The road ahead will be rocky," he surmised; "between Perkins [federal reauthorization] and NCLB [No Child Left Behind Act], career-focused education has to face some challenges head on" (Medrich, 2005, p. 24). At the same forum JFF director Kazis (2005, p. 6) forewarned: "Academic rigor must come first. Without it, CTE cannot succeed—and should not be allowed to divert resources and students from more preferable options." What the field needs is a stronger research base, however, to promote its claims of student achievement and program efficacy. "There is little that can be said with certainty about the value of career-focused education," Kazis (2005, p. 11) noted; "just as there is much debate about effective high school improvement strategies. The research base is thin."

A recent position paper by the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE, 2006, p. 2), the largest lobbying group of CTE professionals, called for the creation of incentives—"resources and policies in place to support the development, implementation and review"—of what they termed *interest-based areas* in which students could pursue core courses while studying occupations. The ACTE position rejects a monolithic view of a one high school curriculum for all, instead reinforcing that CTE programs aide in "preparing every student for full participation in a spectrum of

postsecondary education opportunities, meaningful work, career advancement, and active citizenship” (p. 4). That being said, core courses have a place in schools as long as academic content is connected to an interest-based and relevant curriculum—and complement one another. Their nine recommendations for secondary-level reform certainly resonate with the neoconservative language of excellence, but are tailored for a CTE student who desires options that may—or may not—result in transition to further education. “In our view, there should no longer be an artificial split between academic coursework and CTE studies,” the Association contended, “nor should exposure to career- or interest-based coursework be delayed until late in high school or college” (p. 4). Interestingly, the ACTE nod to progressivism is clearly evident in the last recommendation about the instructional rigidity of seat-time type and the inflexibility of measuring success in knowledge and skills. They wisely question academic formalism here, and remind the reader that student subjectivity or situated learning matters: “particularly for the many students who are currently disengaged and leaving, or have already left the traditional high school” (p. 22). Time will tell how CTE fares in the policy machinations over rigorous and challenging curriculum in the high school.

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