

Testimony Before the Ohio Senate Higher Education Committee
May 6, 2025
Presented by Dee Smith
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Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Timken, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Higher Education Committee — thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding HB96, the State Operating Budget. My name is Dee Smith, and I serve as Executive Director of the Ohio Association for Career and Technical Education.

Let me begin with something I think we all know to be true: when students see the connection between their education and a future they can picture, they're more likely to stick with it. They're more likely to graduate, complete postsecondary programs, and find their place in Ohio's workforce.¹

Career Awareness and Exploration helps make that connection. It gives students the chance to explore real-world possibilities and discover what aligns with their skills and interests. When students have the chance to explore, **they don't just guess — they choose with clarity**. That early exposure builds confidence, **and confidence builds momentum**. And it gives educators and families the tools to support them with confidence.

But here's the key: this work can't start at age 18 or even 15 or 16. It has to begin earlier — in elementary school, in middle school — and grow from there. That early spark of interest can lead to a high school career-tech program, whether that's through a traditional CTE pathway or the OTC+ option created in the last budget. **Both pathways respond to what today's parents and students are asking for: real-world relevance, flexibility, and clear next steps.**

And those next steps? They often lead directly into Ohio's postsecondary system — our two- and four-year institutions, apprenticeships, and increasingly, our 50 Ohio Technical Centers.

Let me pause there for a moment, because we don't talk about OTCs nearly enough.

Ohio Technical Centers are the most adaptable, employer-connected parts of our higher education ecosystem. Whether it's launching short-term credentials in high-demand fields or working hand-in-hand with regional employers to fill talent gaps, they're intentionally built to respond quickly and effectively to real-world needs. That's not just good education policy — it's workforce strategy in action.²

They serve everyone. From recent high school graduates to adults changing careers to parents reentering the workforce — OTCs provide real opportunity. Through the TechCred program, they've

1. IPEDS Data, U.S. Department of Education, 2023.

2. Ohio Department of Higher Education, OTC Enrollment and Credential Reports, 2022–2024.

3. TechCred Program Overview, Ohio Department of Development, 2024.

4. Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, 2021.

5. Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, CTE Performance Data, 2023.

helped thousands of Ohioans earn valuable credentials in record time — giving employers what they need, and giving workers a leg up.³

And they're doing more than just preparing students for jobs. **They're helping Ohio grow its own talent.** In regions where companies are struggling to find skilled workers, OTCs are stepping in to fill the gap. They're lean, efficient, and fast-moving. **That's not just smart education policy — it's smart economics.**

And here's something else that deserves more attention: many OTCs also offer Ohio's Adult Diploma Program. This initiative serves nearly one million Ohio adults who don't yet have a high school diploma. Through this program, learners not only earn a state-issued diploma — they graduate with a workforce credential in hand. **That makes them a dual threat in today's economy: diploma-qualified and job-ready.** It's one of the most meaningful ways we can offer second chances and support lifelong learners who want to re-engage, re-skill, and re-enter the workforce with confidence.⁴

CTE students are leading the way — graduating at over 96% and earning industry credentials that translate to real jobs. **They leave high school next-ready, not just hopeful.**⁵

It's not just about diplomas. It's about giving people — families, communities — a chance to move forward. And when they do, so does our economy.

And for students who haven't grown up hearing college talked about at the dinner table — or who aren't sure what's next — career-connected learning can change everything. It opens doors, especially in communities where opportunity hasn't always been guaranteed.

The continued career awareness and exploration investments proposed in the Executive Budget give districts the flexibility to build programs that make a real difference. Some fund career exploration field trips. Others purchase hands-on lab kits or offer credentialing at younger ages. Some schools hire career specialists to guide students along the way. This isn't a one-size-fits-all approach. It's about giving schools the resources to respond to the needs of their students and their regions.

Ohio can't afford to lose the momentum we've built. Career Awareness and Exploration funding gives schools the tools to start early, build advising programs, and connect K–12 students with what comes next — including our OTCs.

Restoring this funding, along with the policy structure that supports it, isn't just good for students. It's a smart workforce and economic strategy. It ensures more Ohioans are pursuing paths that lead to real opportunity.

1. IPEDS Data, U.S. Department of Education, 2023.

2. Ohio Department of Higher Education, OTC Enrollment and Credential Reports, 2022–2024.

3. TechCred Program Overview, Ohio Department of Development, 2024.

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I respectfully urge you to restore the Executive Budget’s investment and policy initiatives for Career Awareness, Exploration, and Development. **You’ll see the return — in every classroom, every training center, every skilled graduate Ohio puts to work.**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I’d be happy to answer any questions.

1. *IPEDS Data, U.S. Department of Education, 2023.*
2. *Ohio Department of Higher Education, OTC Enrollment and Credential Reports, 2022–2024.*
3. *TechCred Program Overview, Ohio Department of Development, 2024.*
4. *Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, 2021.*
5. *Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, CTE Performance Data, 2023.*