

FULL TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW ON SOUTH DAKOTA CTE RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP December 12, 2019

As part of our ongoing blog series aimed at increasing state research on Career and Technical Education (CTE), [Austin Estes](#), Senior Policy Associate at Advance CTE, and [Corinne Alfeld](#), Research Analyst at the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), are conducting interviews with individuals who are part of successful CTE State Director research partnerships. The second interview was with Laura Scheibe of the [South Dakota Department of Education](#) and [Marc Brodersen](#) of [REL Central at Marzano Research](#).

Could you both talk about the project(s) that you have worked on and your research questions? How did the relationship start, and who approached whom?

Marc – As you know, I'm with REL Central at Marzano Research, so all the work we've been doing together is through the REL Central contract. We started near the beginning of the most recent contract cycle (2017), and we're about to enter year four, so almost four years ago. When we were doing needs sensing with the states in our region, particularly with South Dakota, looking at CTE emerged as a pretty high priority area. In fact, the governor at the time had career development as a priority area for the state. Laura, you can correct me on that if I'm wrong. And so we were approached by some of the leadership at the [South Dakota] Department [of Education] about wanting to look at some aspect of CTE, and ideally, at what types of outcomes or impacts it has on students after they leave high school. And, in fact, the same need or interest emerged with several of our states.

When this project originally started, we were working with four different states, with South Dakota actually being the one that initiated it from the very beginning. And so, through the RELs [Regional Education Laboratories] and having these initial conversations, the first thing we realized is that you can't just jump in and do a research project. We really needed to talk through and determine what the research questions were and what questions we could actually address. What it came down to across the states that we were working with was, before we could even think of doing a research project, we needed to know what data were even available that could be used in those research projects.

This work started off as a technical assistance project where we were working with South Dakota pretty closely and getting all of the relevant players around a table and going through and mapping their data. What are the different elements that are there as far as CTE coursetaking goes, what data elements are there, and in what venues would we be able to access data related to postsecondary enrollment and degree completion? Where might data exist, and can we access them regarding potential workforce outcomes?

It was quite a long process. Laura, I think we were working on that for well over a year, I think, right? [Laura – a long time!] It wasn't just us the researchers, and Laura and the Department of Education, but we had folks from the Department of Labor, the Board of Regents for Higher Ed, and the Board of Technical Education [for technical schools], and it took some time to identify who the right people were to have around the table. But eventually we had all these organizations going through, mapping what data are there, and going through a process and saying "now that we know what's possible, what are the research questions we'd be interested in addressing with these data?" From that, once

we'd established if we could connect these data and if we could access these data and actually know what variables we could include in the study, then we started working on research questions. That ended up evolving into the current REL research project. Laura, is there anything you want to add?

Laura – Yeah, I would just chime in from the state perspective and from the policy lens. There's huge support in South Dakota behind CTE. As Mark noted, that was really evident with our prior governor and it's been maintained through our current governor, who took office in January [of 2019], and so there is strong support for CTE—particularly at the postsecondary level. But there was sort of a question of “OK, but why? How do we know CTE works?” and a look at the evidence behind why CTE is such a good thing for students to have.

From a personal standpoint, I became [CTE] State Director in September, 2017, just as this project was getting to the kickoff stage. And I had never had experience with CTE prior to my assuming leadership of the entire state's CTE efforts. I wasn't able to take it in high school; it wasn't a focus of mine in my professional life. I knew generally, like everyone else, CTE is good for kids, but there's no South Dakota data to demonstrate “yep, this is the impact for South Dakota.” When I learned about the study and knew that the beginning pieces were underway, I was really interested in pursuing it, because it's a big question out there for me personally—and I think for a lot of policymakers in the state—but I really had no idea how to even begin answering that question. So, the value that Marzano provided to the project in helping us walk through “this is the data that can help you do it, this is the process that we are going to go through to help you get to the answer” has been incredibly helpful and not something that we, as a pretty small department of education, could ever have undertaken on our own.

That's similar to what we heard in the last conversation, being able to add capacity for mapping all of your data and then analyzing it. I want to get into specifics of the research project itself. Can you talk about what research questions you ultimately came to, and where you are in the process of answering those?

Marc – Once we were mapping the data and we got everyone in the room together, we were trying to decide what the research questions were. I think one of the things that we were really interested in is looking at longitudinal or long-term outcomes. Much of the CTE research that is available is not causal studies, very few of them are – that's why we have the new CTE Research Network. I think a lot of them went one year post-high school, and it was looking at graduation rates, attendance rates, and maybe continuous enrollment two years post high school. We were really interested in looking at what happens to these students after they graduate. We decided to focus on, not necessarily how many CTE courses did students take, but on the subset of students who are CTE concentrators (per the Perkins IV definition), and we'll identify a matched comparison sample of students who were not CTE concentrators.

We have [3 main questions](#): 1) What is the impact of being a CTE concentrator on high school graduation, and two- and five-year postsecondary enrollment and completion status? We'll be looking at not just graduation rates between these two groups, but at two years after their anticipated high school graduation and five years after their expected high school graduation, were they ever enrolled in a postsecondary institution, and did they complete one or more degrees, certificates or credentials? Similarly, the next one is 2) What is the impact of being a CTE concentrator on two-year and five-year

employment and quarterly wage status? We're still working through trying to get to the wage data. It's still fairly new, and as we know with the work on state longitudinal data systems, it's something that is a big focus in a lot of states. And then, finally, we have kind of a more exploratory question where we're getting data not just on if students are a concentrator or not, but what CTE Career Cluster® did they concentrate in? This isn't a causal question, but we're interested in 3) How did the two-year and five-year outcomes vary by the various CTE Career Clusters? So, those are the questions in a nutshell.

I think those are very important questions to ask. I'm really curious to hear what your findings are once you've completed your research. At this stage, is it too early to share any preliminary findings, or are there any trends you are starting to see in the data, even if it's not rigorous, any kind of descriptive trend data you're seeing about CTE in South Dakota?

Marc – Unfortunately, no. We're still in the process of gathering the data, particularly gathering longitudinal data across multiple organizations. It takes some time. We are hoping that we'll be in possession of the necessary data early in January [2020]. We haven't even begun to analyze the data so, unfortunately, we can't talk about any preliminary findings.

Laura – I think the trend is that the data is really hard to get! Especially when you're going back a number of years.

Marc – A report recently came out saying that connecting education to workforce data is really difficult, and a lot of states are struggling with that right now, especially with all the different privacy laws. So, that's one issue. Another issue is, and this has been a really good learning experience from just a research methodological perspective to do a really good, "What Works Clearinghouse" level of group design, requires baseline data. And if we're looking at potential five-year outcome of CTE coursetaking which is in high school, that means our baseline data is from students in the eighth grade, so we're talking about a five- to 10-year span for an individual student. The work on longitudinal data systems, many states don't go back that far, or data systems have changed, so it's difficult trying to identify one data system that has ten or more years of data for an individual student. We're making it work, but it takes some time and some finagling.

Laura – And I guess I'll chime in a little bit off the particular question, but to some of us at the department who have validated the decision to move forward with the longitudinal data system, because obviously now that we've gotten one in place—we're one of the recipients of a federal grant to put one in place—it's just evident how much easier it is to pull out data that was put into the [K-12] longitudinal data system versus, as Marc said, some of that older data that predates those systems. Even though I don't work with data every day as part of my normal routine, it just underscores how important those systems are in being able to have something that you can extract the data out of easily.

How long has that system been in place? How far back are you able to go in looking at longitudinal data?

Laura – Our longitudinal data system, called SD-STARS, started in 2012-13. It contains primarily K-12 data for 2010-11 to the current year.

In the same vein of talking about challenges, both on the data front as well as on the partnership front, what were some of the early roadblocks in building this relationship and starting to examine and compile some of the data?

Laura – I think, from my perspective, one of the roadblocks was just getting everyone around the table and bought into the idea. We're a fairly small state, so it wasn't hard to reach out to my counterparts at the other agencies who would need to be involved, but this project was, and continues to be, something that is on top of the day to day work that we do. It's not driven by any specific policy initiative but rather by everybody around the table acknowledging and recognizing that "yeah, this would be really useful for us." But, in that sense, it's hard to get everyone's commitments to the time it has taken and takes to pull this off and making sure that we've got the right people around the room as well.

Jumping ahead a little bit, that's been one of the benefits as well. I have relationships with the people I've been working with on the project and we realized quickly on, in particular with one of the other agencies, that we didn't have the right people around the table. We found out rather late in the process, and had we known earlier on it probably would have made it a bit easier, but just knowing what is it that everybody does and what is the data that they have has been really valuable. It took a long time to get to that piece.

And just as a follow up question, from a state-level perspective, who do you think needs to be around the table?

Laura – When you're looking at CTE, it really needs to be everybody who touches it. We're fortunate that our CTE is largely run out of our K-12 Department of Education, so myself. But then partnering with the data guru at the Department of Education who knows everything about what she's got. I've got the policy lens to know what's needed; she's got the data lens to know how to get it. But then you also need to look at your postsecondary partners. We've involved not just the Board of Regents but the technical college system as well. Then when you're looking at workforce, you need to have the people with the workforce data. And then, in an ideal situation, in undertaking a study like this it would have been helpful to have some sort of overarching buy-in, be that somebody from the governor's office or that policy level of leadership to keep things moving forward.

Marc – I would agree with all of that. For this project, we're also working closely with Nebraska and, as far as generalizability, across both of these states it's been the same. Like Laura said, having somebody at the policy level, the data level and the leadership level in the room at the same time is almost essential, particularly when you're at the brainstorming phase. You can have the leadership that's going to say "yes, this is important, and I want you to devote time to this," and then the data person is saying "well, that data just doesn't exist," and the policy person may not know about that piece. And having all three of those perspectives at the same time can save a lot of time and effort.

Can you talk more about how you're addressing the issue with connection to workforce data?

Laura – The connection to the workforce data is largely driven by the complication that K-12 isn't allowed to collect the pieces that would help us to connect to workforce. For example, and I think this is the case in many states, but we're not allowed to collect social security numbers. So, we have great student-level data on the names and demographics, but that's not what unemployment data has. Employment data has social security numbers and name as it appears on their Social Security card, even if the person's name has changed. There's no common piece connecting them. Now we're trying to figure out how to connect it, and it's resulted in trying to get a third person who hasn't been involved with the study from the get-go into the conversation and kind of starting from scratch again with what we're trying to do and why it's important. Getting another person's buy-in has just been a complicating factor. If we can overcome that hurdle, we all see value in being able to have those connections, but now knowing it's not just the two of us [Labor and Education] that can connect those pieces, that we need another entity involved, that's been a hurdle that we're still working on trying to overcome.

Marc – In South Dakota, those connections hadn't been made, and it wasn't until later in the game that we realized those connections needed to be made. It almost requires a policy change. That takes time and effort and will. It's a problem of longitudinal data systems across different departments, and really trying to frame it as wanting to make these connections to labor not just for this one study on CTE, but for the wide variety of other questions that could be addressed. Obviously, this study would be the catalyst for developing that, but it would be very unlikely for people to take the time and effort to establish these various connections if they thought it was just this one-off activity. I'm optimistic and hopeful that we will be successful, but a learning opportunity for us is also that if you're going to start establishing these new connections, you need to think more broadly to increase your likelihood of success.

Laura – I would just echo that, for me in particular, I see the benefit of doing this more broadly than the study. The study was what brought us together to ask if matching labor data is even possible, but we never even explored that connection before. So, if we're able to accomplish it because of this project, that's a huge win for us in the education world, particularly in terms of our federal reporting. Several of our federal laws require reporting on student placement outcomes. Are they employed? Well, right now we're doing that through self-reporting. The schools call the kids. The department in some cases tries to get ahold of kids. If we're able to establish that connection with labor as far as employment outcomes, then boom! We have valid, reliable data, and we're not relying on self-reporting anymore to fulfill our federal requirements. Then we've got even more valuable placement statistics which is incredibly important in order to be able to say yes, these kids are going on to do something, be it postsecondary, be it employment, etc. It just makes that data that much more reliable when we've got a source for it other than self-reporting.

Laura, I kind of want to follow that train of thought a little bit too. I know you don't have any findings yet from the research but how are you thinking about how you will use this research project to further policy in South Dakota?

Laura – First and foremost, this particular project is demonstrating the value that CTE has to the secondary students. This project pre-dated Perkins V, but as we're moving into implementation of Perkins V full force in the coming calendar year, with the new requirements that Perkins places on

states—and therefore on schools—to be an approved program, we’re seeing school districts question if it’s really worth it so much anymore. This project is really coming in at a good time where we will hopefully have some data where we can say, “yes, CTE is worth it.” We know that we’re asking you to do some additional requirements to make sure that you’re running high-quality CTE programs for the benefit of your kids. This is what kids who have gone through CTE programs in South Dakota, not just nationwide, have been able to accomplish. It is worth it for your students to continue down this road. Being able to message that is hugely valuable from the perspective of a CTE Director in a state where almost every single public school district runs an approved program – I’ve got some private, I’ve got some tribal. We’ve got huge buy in into CTE. With these additional requirements [stemming from Perkins V] I’m worried that we might start to see some people question the benefit of CTE. So, I assume this will directly say, yes, students who are involved in CTE have a leg up from their counterparts who are not.

I could see too how knowing whether outcomes differ based on the program students are enrolled in might also shape that messaging and efforts to strengthen programs that don’t have the strong outcomes.

Laura – Definitely, that was one of my priorities. I don’t remember how much of a consensus there was from others around the table, but that was definitely one thing I wanted to see. Not having come up through the CTE world in my professional life, I wanted to know, with 16 different Career Clusters, does it make a difference which cluster you’re in in terms of your outcomes? Now that we’ve got Perkins V and the [comprehensive local] needs assessment, it will be just one more bit of evidence for schools to be able to examine whether they’re providing the best opportunities for our kids.

The purpose of this blog series is to highlight some effective partnerships and to show other State Directors and other researchers how they could potentially partner with one another. I’m curious to hear from each of you, what advice you would give to other researcher/ State Director partners for conducting CTE research or establishing similar partnerships?

Marc – From my perspective, as far as establishing a partnership, I think that face-to-face interactions were invaluable. I’m located in Colorado, and they’re obviously in South Dakota. In establishing these partnerships, it takes a while to trust each other or establish a positive working relationship. We can do a lot of things virtually, but I think being there in person and being able to read body language and stuff like that and to have some dedicated time just takes time. After we were sitting in the room for the fourth or fifth time, it really felt like we were all on the same team.

Laura – My advice to State Directors would be to really plan for it and make it a priority. And don’t make it something that isn’t part of the day-to-day because then I think the thread can get lost. In terms of my being able to move my team forward, I probably could have done that more quickly earlier on if I made it more of a priority and really placed as much value on it as I do now. I would also say getting that higher-level buy-in is really important. In my position being a director and the state CTE lead, I’ve got quite a bit of buy-in to move people in my agency, but not necessarily in other agencies. It’s important to make sure that you’ve got that policy partner to keep things moving along. The benefits will be there in the end, it just has to be woven into the day-to-day of what you’re doing in order to make it all come together.

Is there anything else you wish we would have asked? Or anything that we didn't address that you think is really important to bring up in this conversation?

Laura – I'll start by saying I think going through this process has helped me form partnerships with my colleagues in other agencies even more strongly than I had before. So, for example, I noted that South Dakota is relatively small. I knew most of the people, I could shoot them an email, it wasn't a big deal. But just the process of going through this project has benefitted my relationship with those counterparts in other ways, and I think it has brought the entire CTE/ workforce "team" together in a stronger way. That has benefits for a whole host of policy outcomes, not specific to this project but more broadly. Just the exercise of having gone through all of that and understanding their work and their data and everything they do, having them understand my role and my constraints better, has just made us a more effective CTE/ workforce team in our state. And, as we move forward with Perkins V and WIOA [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act] state plans and all of this other stuff coming, it just benefits us and enables us to work more effectively and work faster now that we have those strong relationships. They were there before, but they're definitely stronger now as a result of this project.

Marc – As far as partnerships go, I obviously have the researcher/data perspective, but one of the things I thought was really neat – and again, this takes some time – was getting all these folks together and thinking deeply about data. It might not be the most exciting topic for a lot of folks, but going through the process, like Laura was saying, gave everyone a better understanding of what they can do and how they might be able to work with others. And I think in the day-to-day, not everyone spends that much time thinking at the data and variable level. But doing that will increase everyone's capacity to be able to do this kind of work moving forward.

Laura – I would definitely echo that, too.

This is now the second call that we've done and there are a couple themes that I'm starting to see form these conversations. I think that's one of them: thinking beyond the scope of the research project itself and looking at the lasting impact as a result of the relationships that have been formed or the better access to data and how that informs day to day decision making. That's really cool to see.

Marc – One other thing to add just as a side note. Throughout this process, we also collaborated with Nancy Copa at the [Common Education Data Standards \(CEDS\)](#) when we were doing the data mapping piece. We did not officially map the South Dakota data to that, but we used the CEDS as kind of a template to provide us with a common dictionary to have these conversations across departments. And that was really useful. In fact, all of us – the different departments in South Dakota and the CEDS folks –co-presented at the last STATS-DC conference, which I thought was a very positive experience.