

Career and Technical Education Stymied by Chronic Underfunding and Agency Delays, Board Says

Efforts to attract youth and adults to CTE programs stalled by lack of funding and information flow from the V.I. Department of Education

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The Board of Career and Technical Education is being hindered in the execution of its duties due to chronic underfunding and a debilitating lack of urgency from partner agencies. This was the testimony of CTE Chair Joane Murphy when she appeared before Thursday's meeting of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development.

According to Ms. Murphy, the board's primary responsibility involves the establishment, maintenance, and supervision of vocational schools." However, she says that while the law grants them this authority, "the board currently lacks the power to enforce this provision effectively."

A major issue is the board's dependency on other agencies to fulfill key aspects of this mandate. Ms. Murphy noted that the Department of Education is responsible for writing curricula, however the CTE board has not been kept up to speed on curriculum development for subjects in their wheelhouse. “It is important to note that the board has not yet received those documents for further scrutiny and ultimate approval,” she explained, saying that the delay has now reached the two-year mark. According to Ms. Murphy, this is only one example of the entity being unable to “insist on or enforce mandated responsibilities.”

Hamstrung by the lack of information flowing from the Education Department, Ms. Murphy argues that the CTE board is unable to pursue key priorities, including attracting more youth and adults to CTE programs to expand their career prospects. To do this, the board would have to restructure CTE school hours to “allow students to be integrated into the workforce in the morning hours and attend academic classes in the afternoon.” The board also believes that “current two-year programs may have to be cut into smaller achievable segments.” However, Ms. Murphy stressed that “if the board cannot perform as mandated by law, all those recommendations unfortunately will stay just that.”

Compounding the information deficit was a pressing need for additional funding, Ms. Murphy said. Because the federal government no longer allows Perkins Act funds to be used for travel expenses, students are finding it extremely difficult to attend conferences that are “so important for scholarships, for certifications, [and] for networking.”

Ms. Murphy also implicated the V.I. Legislature in the lack of progress on CTE initiatives. Former Senator Genevieve Whitaker’s Bill 34-0378, which sought to establish the Career and Technical Education Training Fund, was a “potential source of income that could directly benefit the board” that “did not progress beyond its initial committee hearing in November of 2022,” Ms. Murphy noted. The bill would have required a portion of the fund to be directed to the Board, but an attempt at bringing the bill to a vote via special order failed. During Thursday’s hearing, committee chair Marise James promised to look into the two-year-old proposal.

Despite the myriad challenges, Ms. Murphy affirmed that the CTE Board remains “steadfast in maximizing the resources available to us and collaborating with stakeholders to ensure that our efforts have a positive impact on the CTE landscape.”