



Empowering Learners:

Kentucky's Learner-Led CTE Program Improvement Pilot

Introduction

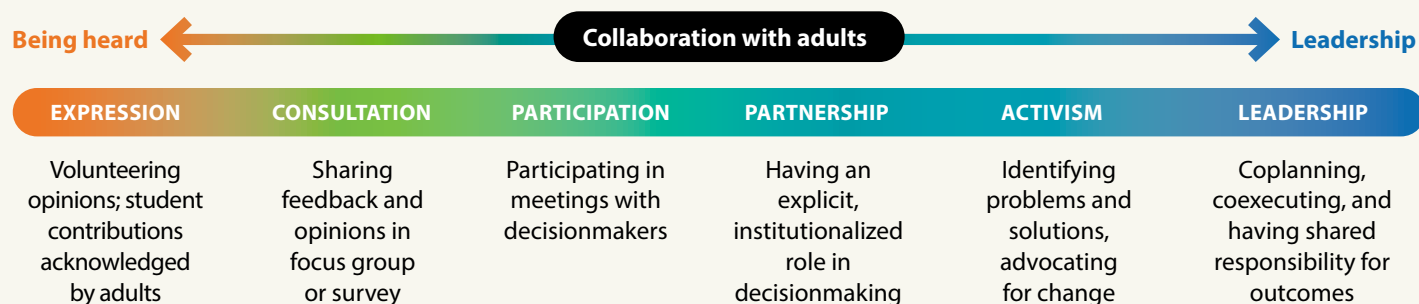
Advance CTE's shared vision for Career Technical Education (CTE), *Without Limits*, articulates guiding principles to ensure the elevation of high-quality, accessible CTE programs, policies, and opportunities for learners. **Principle 2: Each Learner Feels Welcome in, Is Supported by, and Has the Means to Succeed in the Career Preparation Ecosystem** frames CTE program improvement with learner-centered design. Leveraging the feedback and input of learners is critical, and this resource exemplifies how engaging learners directly in the design and evaluation of CTE programs and policies can lead to more meaningful, inclusive career preparation opportunities.

Supporting Learner-Led CTE Program Improvement

Advance CTE releases various resources to encourage states to engage learners' feedback and input more meaningfully in designing, implementing, delivering, and improving CTE programs and policies. Resources such as [*With Learners, Not for Learners: A Toolkit for Elevating Learner Voice in CTE*](#), [*Leveraging Learner Voice in CTE: Empowering Learners, Enhancing CTE*](#), and [*Elevating Family Voice in Career Pathways*](#) help leaders across secondary and postsecondary levels explore effective strategies for meaningfully engaging learners and understanding their diverse needs, fostering a supportive learning environment. Advance CTE also provides technical assistance such as the [*Leveraging Learner Voice to Strengthen CTE technical assistance cohort*](#), which was offered jointly with the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE) to support states in meaningful CTE learner engagement, as well as learner-informed communications and recruitment activities

Additionally, on the continuum of types of learner voice shown in *With Learners, Not for Learners*, the provided supports aim to pilot and advance learner voice engagements toward the leadership component. The ultimate goal is for learners to become coplanners, coleaders, and coexecutors of their educational experiences.

Learner voice can best be conceptualized as occurring on a spectrum from learners giving their feedback and opinions to learners taking on leadership roles and driving systemic change.



Adapted version of Toshalis and Nakkula's "The Spectrum of Student Voice Oriented Activity" and Mitra and Gross' "Pyramid of student voice" as published in Elevating Student Voice in Education by Meg Benner, Catherine Brown, and Ashley Jeffery.

Sources: This graph is adapted from Eric Toshalis and Michael J. Nakkula's "Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice" (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2012), Dana L. Mitra and Steven Jay Gross' "Increasing Student Voice in High School Reform: Building Partnerships, Improving Outcomes," Educational Management Administration & Leadership 37 (4) (2009): 522-543.

Kentucky's Learner-Led Research Pilot



In September 2023, Advance CTE launched a pioneering initiative to engage Kentucky state leaders in Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) to inform and improve CTE programs and policy in partnership with the Kentucky Student Voice Team (KSVT). YPAR empowers learners by placing them at the center of the research process to influence policy and practice decisions directly. This approach has shown promising results in increasing learner agency and building social capital. By piloting this work in Kentucky, Advance CTE sought to understand how to adapt learner-driven research models to CTE contexts without relying heavily on high-capacity intermediaries such as KSVT. This effort aimed to identify scalable approaches to learner engagement that could be adapted and replicated in other states and communities, ensuring a broader reach and sustainable implementation strategies.

What is Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)?

YPAR is an approach that empowers young people to lead research projects that focus on issues affecting them and often within their communities, schools, and/or educational systems. In YPAR, learners are not just participants—they are the researchers. They identify the key questions, design the research methods, gather and analyze data, and use their findings to advocate for change.

YPAR aims to give learners agency in shaping the educational policies, practices, and programs that affect their lives. It fosters critical thinking, problem-solving, and civic engagement while helping learners develop valuable research, leadership, and collaboration skills. By centering youth perspectives, YPAR ensures that learners' voices are integral in driving the decisions that shape their education.¹

¹University of California Berkeley. (2025). YPAR hub. <https://yparhub.berkeley.edu/why-ypar>

Critical Leaders and Partners

Kentucky's project, which included partners such as the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE), KSVT, the University of Kentucky (UK), and Fayette County Public Schools (FCPS), marked an exciting opportunity to test this model in the context of CTE. Each partner served a critical role in supporting and elevating learner voice to improve CTE programs and policies throughout the pilot:

- ▶ **Advance CTE:** Managed and coordinated the project, offered CTE expertise, and elevated the lessons learned from the work to a national audience.
- ▶ **Kentucky Department of Education:** Provided strategic input, ensured alignment with state CTE policies and priorities, and offered opportunities to elevate the work at the state level.
- ▶ **Kentucky Student Voice Team:** Brought extensive experience in learner-driven research, adapted existing tools for CTE, and facilitated trainings and mentoring. The team was guided by an adult YPAR research partner, Dr. Daniela DiGiacomo, associate professor at UK.
- ▶ **Fayette County Public Schools:** Piloted the initiative within three schools, recruited learners, and offered a testing ground for the YPAR model in a CTE context.



Learner-Led Training, Activities, and Research

The pilot with KSVT evolved from years of experimenting with integrating learners into the codesign of program and climate evaluations in schools. Since 2016, KSVT has refined models for involving learners in the research process—as subjects, analysts, and researchers. This work has long demonstrated learners’ authentic capacity to gather, analyze, and share insights within their schools and communities. Recognizing its alignment with CTE’s goals, Kentucky and KSVT sought to test this model in a CTE-specific context.

Kentucky’s initiative began with FCPS in Lexington, chosen for its ongoing CTE work and readiness to support learner-driven research. The pilot aimed to adapt KSVT’s school climate process to the CTE environment. Three FCPS schools participated in this pilot, with learners leading the charge in conducting research within their CTE environments. These learners served as researchers, designing surveys and gathering qualitative and quantitative data to share with the school community. A critical component of the pilot was the learners’ role in guiding their peers through the research process, demonstrating how learner-driven approaches could align with broader state goals for CTE program improvement.





Key Components



Learner-Led Research:

Kentucky learners led all aspects of the research process. Each school team designed surveys based on their CTE programs' specific needs and goals. In one school, learners distributed a survey, gathering 99 responses, which they used to inform their share-back session with administrators and peers.



Training and Capacity Building:

The learner research teams received training on research methods, data analysis, and the power of learner voice in decisionmaking. KSVT leveraged an innovative internal practice of near peers leading the training and meetings for learners on the research team. The near peers and adult research partner provided guidance but focused on empowering learners to conduct their research.



Collaborative Structure:

Each week, learners from the three participating schools came together via Zoom to share insights, refine their questions, and consolidate their findings. While this structure offered an opportunity for cross-school collaboration, feedback from participants indicated mixed levels of engagement, particularly across schools. Some learners struggled to connect with peers from other schools, and gauging who was fully engaged in the online discussions was sometimes challenging. Moving forward, ensuring more targeted support for fostering interaction and engagement across schools will be essential to strengthen the collaborative aspect of the project.



Ownership of Findings:

A share-back session allowed learners to present their findings to a broader audience, including school leaders and peers. These events at the school and state level reinforced the importance of learners taking ownership of the data and using the information to advocate for program improvements.

Goals, Methodology, and Design

The learner-researchers in the Kentucky YPAR pilot pursued four key goals:

1. **Pilot a Youth-Centered Research Design:** Collect feedback on learners' experiences in CTE programs to inform state and district decisionmaking.
2. **Test Strategies for Recruitment and Partnership:** Explore effective methods for recruiting and engaging learners and schools as research collaborators.
3. **Evaluate Learner-Driven Data Collection:** Develop and test surveys and interviews designed by learners to gather meaningful insights.
4. **Examine Intergenerational Dynamics:** Assess how youth-adult partnerships could support research efforts and promote continuous improvement in CTE programs.

While taking action to achieve their goals, the pilot was structured as a research-practice partnership involving FCPS, Advance CTE, and KSVT. For 1 semester, learners participated in eight structured sessions led by two near-peer youth facilitators from KSVT, with the support of their adult research partner. Together, they codesigned a survey, and youth researcher roundtables were conducted to reflect on the research process and its implications for CTE programs.

The learner-designed survey questions included the following:

- ▶ *How well do you feel the CTE programs have prepared you for a further career in that field?*
- ▶ *Do you feel like you have grown academically while in a CTE class?*
- ▶ *Have you experienced a new excitement about attending school after being in/a part of the CTE program?*
- ▶ *Do you understand the opportunities CTE provides outside of high school?*
- ▶ *On a scale from 1 to 4, how satisfied are you with the variety of CTE programs offered?*

Each of the survey questions was codesigned and informed by learners' lived experiences, as well as guidance from KDE and KSVT. The survey questions were identified as the most pressing issues for the learners and their peers.

Results and Findings from the Pilot

One school successfully administered a survey with 99 responses, quickly gathering insights from their CTE peers. While the project fostered strong relationships among CTE learners and instructors, further aligning programs across career pathways and academies, both learners and adults expressed a desire for even greater impact and broader engagement. Learners reported a sense of pride in their collected data and gained a deeper understanding of how CTE can be improved to meet their needs. This effort strengthened learner-adult dynamics, recognizing learners as critical partners in shaping CTE, while also highlighting opportunities to enhance the reach and influence of such initiatives.



Learners' Perceived Relevance of CTE in the Future

51% of the learners indicated they did not feel adequately prepared for a career by CTE.

How well do you feel the CTE programs have prepared you for a career in that field? (total)



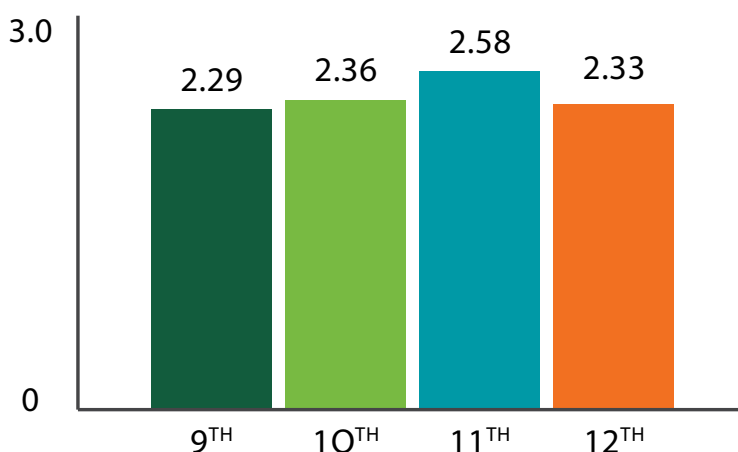
3% OVERPREPARED

7.1% NOT PREPARED

45.5% ADEQUATELY PREPARED

44.4% SOMEWHAT PREPARED

How well do you feel the CTE programs have prepared you for a further career in that field? (by grade)



"I get where they are coming from because they haven't really gotten the chance to work in those fields and feel the future yet."

Learners' Academic Growth in CTE Classes

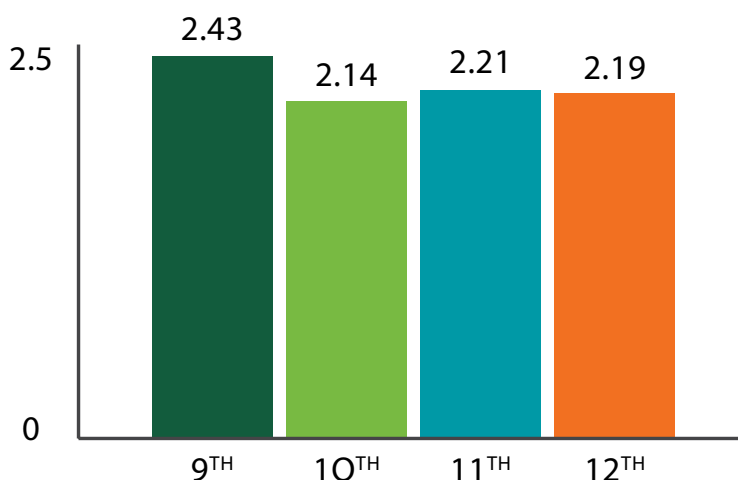
92% of the learners indicated some academic growth while taking CTE classes.

Do you feel like you have grown academically while being in a CTE class? (total)



8.1% NO GROWTH 28.3% A LOT OF GROWTH 63.6% SOME GROWTH

Do you feel like you have grown academically while being in a CTE class? (by grade)



"These are the results we needed to kind of back up the hypothesis that CTE does help students actually in school"

Learners' New Excitement for CTE Learning

78% of the learners indicated added excitement when coming to school due to CTE.

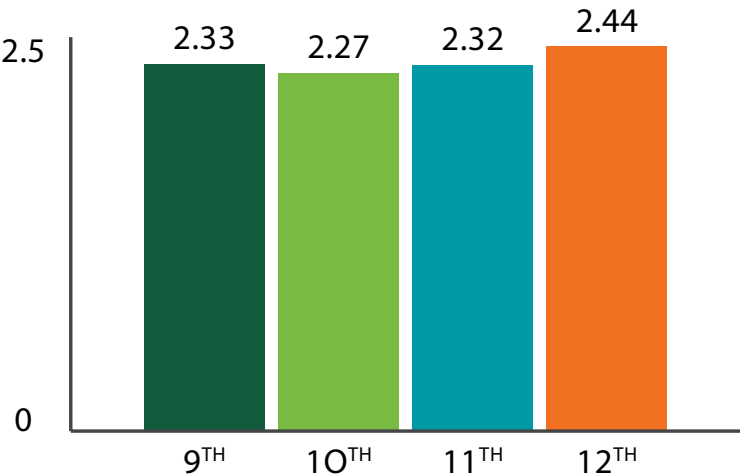
Have you experienced a new excitement about coming to school after being in/a part of the CTE program? (total)

- 9.1% VERY EXCITED
- 37.4% EXCITED



- 22.2% NO NEW EXCITEMENT
- 31.2% SOME EXCITEMENT

Have you experienced a new excitement about coming to school after being in/a part of the CTE program? (by grade)

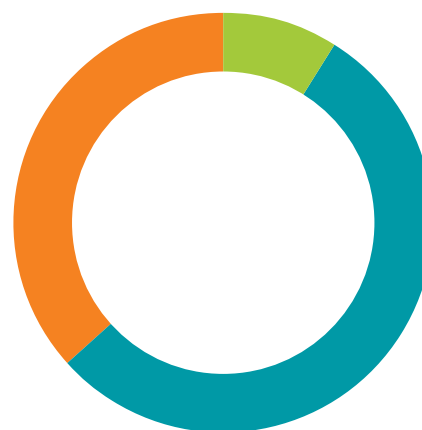


"I loved going to my CTE classes. It was just so different, but it was so rewarding at the same time"

Learners' Understanding of Post-High School Opportunity

63% of the learners did not fully see the connection between CTE & opportunities outside of school.

Do you feel like you understand the opportunities CTE provides outside of high school? (total)

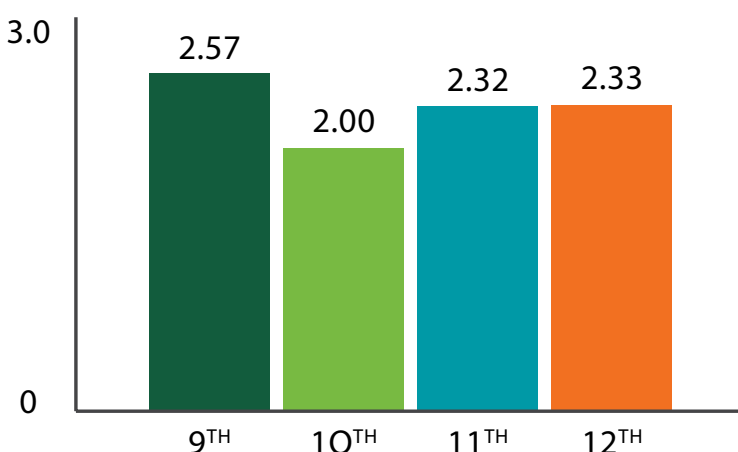


9.1% NO UNDERSTANDING

54.5% SOME UNDERSTANDING

36.4% GOOD UNDERSTANDING

Do you feel like you understand the opportunities CTE provides outside of high school? (by grade)



"People just haven't had those opportunities ... where they're managing or helping out or taking those opportunities to do that 'cause they're still in high school."

Learners' Overall Satisfaction With CTE

62% of the learners were mostly or completely satisfied with their CTE program.

On a scale from 1 to 4, how satisfied are you with the variety of CTE programs offered? (total)



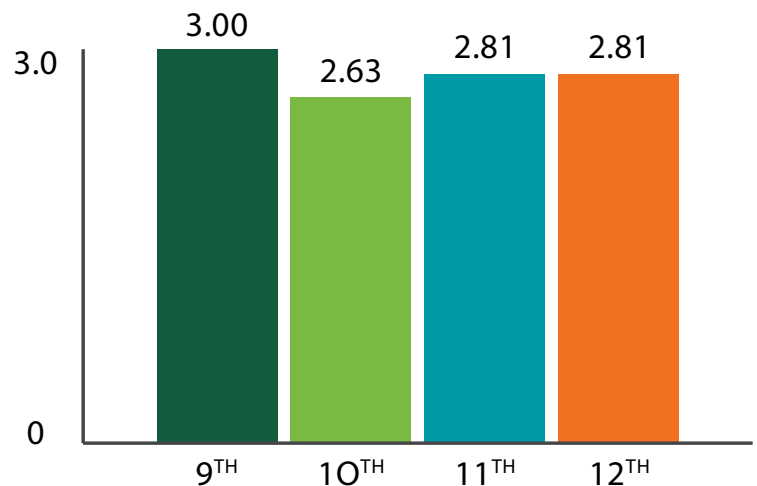
3% NOT SATISFIED

41.4% COMPLETELY SATISFIED

35.4% SOMEWHAT SATISFIED

20.2% MOSTLY SATISFIED

On a scale from 1 - 4, how satisfied are you with the variety of CTE programs offered? (by grade)



"I think [CTE] not only builds a better student, but it also builds a better person after you graduate"

Based on the data collected, the learners articulated the following recommendations for a school context like the Academies of Tates Creek, where learners need to declare career pathways at the end of their freshman year, based on some managed choices:

1. **Allow learners more time** to explore different career pathways before committing to one.
2. **Bring CTE learners into regular conversations** about improving programming as partners with teachers.

The survey findings provided a wealth of qualitative and quantitative data that informed the recommendations. For example, one respondent emphasized the need for greater exploration opportunities within career pathways, stating, “[Freshmen need] more chances to go and explore the pathways. You really only get to see them one time before you have to make your decision for the rest of your high school. I think they should bring more people with different opinions on the pathways rather than just bringing in people like me who have a positive view on it.”

Another participant highlighted the critical role of involving learners in research and decisionmaking processes, observing that “there’s no way you can know what CTE does for students if you were never a student in CTE, and so I think it is why students need to be in research. Also, I think it gives students a voice. It gives them an ability to become leaders [and] learn how to be professional.” These insights underscore the importance of centering learner perspectives to enhance CTE programs and practices.

A particularly tangible postproject outcome was shared by a respondent who reflected on how incorporating learner voices into faculty meetings had immediate and measurable benefits: “Our teachers have started bringing one student to every faculty meeting in their academy and hearing their opinion and their voice. And it’s already helped just the academy in general. I feel like that’s going to help not only the students but also the teachers, when they hear more and more people voicing their opinions on CTE on how they could [improve] it. If it’s helping on a small scale, it can help on a bigger scale.” This finding illustrates the transformative impact of embedding learner voices into institutional decisionmaking and highlights the broader potential of such practices.

Refining the YPAR Model for CTE: Lessons Learned from Kentucky



Kentucky's YPAR pilot revealed important lessons for scaling this model to other states:



Start with Clear Alignment to State Goals: Kentucky's CTE leaders recognized the potential for YPAR to align with state goals around improving program evaluation and design. Building on existing relationships between KDE and KSVT, the pilot seamlessly fits into broader CTE priorities, particularly learner engagement and program evaluation.



Make the Learners the Core of the Process: KDE provided broad areas of interest for the pilot, such as advising, middle grades, and work-based learning, but demonstrated a commitment to letting learners drive the final topic selection based on their priorities and lived experiences.

Kentucky learners acted as participants and leaders. They designed surveys, conducted analysis, and facilitated meetings, fully owning the research process. As one of the near peers from the facilitator team reflected, learners quickly discovered how to craft thoughtful research questions and design effective surveys.



Encourage Iterative Feedback and Peer Support: The collaborative structure of weekly Zoom meetings helped the learners refine their approach. According to one of the near peers, learners in the group responded positively to iterative feedback, with two schools even running pilot surveys before the project timeline called for it. For state leaders, providing opportunities for learners to test and refine their research methods can enhance the quality of insights gathered.



Tailor Processes to CTE Contexts: While YPAR has been used in broader education settings, adapting it for CTE meant focusing on CTE-specific questions and outcomes. Kentucky's learners designed custom surveys focusing on critical issues such as the alignment between CTE programs and career pathways. As the facilitators noted, emphasizing CTE-specific outcomes and learner-driven questions helped learners connect their research to real-world applications.



Elevate Findings at the State Level: KDE showed a solid commitment to elevating learner-generated findings to inform state-level policymakers, ensuring that insights gained from the pilot had a broader impact.



Use Multiple Methods to Facilitate Engagement: Kentucky's use of Zoom for weekly meetings across schools demonstrated the power of technology in bringing learners together. Facilitators found that having each learner on their own device, rather than using a single room microphone, helped lower the barrier to participation, allowing more voices to be heard. However, they also noted that incorporating more face-to-face time, especially at the start, could have fostered stronger relationship building and accountability. States should consider blending in-person and virtual interactions, supported by financial resources, to create spaces for learner engagement and collaboration



Ensure District and School-Level Buy-In: The pilot underscored the importance of engaging district and building leaders to support the YPAR process. For example, a Tate Creek High School faculty member was instrumental in enabling YPAR learners to present their findings to school leadership, fostering trust and amplifying their impact. However, variations in adult engagement across schools revealed challenges. While some educators were supportive and highly engaged, others were less involved, leading to discomfort and reduced buy-in and trust among learners. These differences highlighted the need for consistent buy-in and active support from adults.



Challenges in Scale and Sustainability: The pilot highlighted significant challenges when considering scale and sustainability. The 1:1 nature of the project-specific modules made it challenging to extend the model without heavy customization for each new group of learners. Additionally, the project faced barriers with learners' testing schedules and upcoming graduation, which limited continuity in leadership and research across the cohort. Further, the lack of clearly defined roles and expectations for local school-based adults—beyond recruitment and ensuring that learners had the space to be trained and conduct research—limited the support needed to sustain the model long term. These factors underscored the need for more structured involvement from local educators and administrators to ensure future similar initiatives' longevity and scalability.



Leverage Intermediaries to Add Capacity: One of the key lessons learned from Kentucky's YPAR pilot is the critical role intermediaries and adult research partners play in ensuring the success and scalability of such initiatives. The complexity of coordinating multiple partners—state agencies, local educators, learners, and facilitators—requires a central organization to streamline efforts, maintain alignment with state goals, and manage logistics. Intermediaries such as Advance CTE could play a pivotal role in bridging these gaps, particularly by facilitating communication among partners, developing resources to support implementation, and providing technical assistance.

Additionally, involving an adult research partner with expertise in YPAR methodologies enhances the technical rigor of the initiative. These partners bring valuable skills, such as guiding learners in designing valid surveys, analyzing data, and presenting findings to policymakers. The presence of a dedicated intermediary and research partner alleviates the burden on state agencies, whose staff may lack the time or specialized expertise to manage such an intensive project.

For other states seeking to replicate Kentucky's model, establishing partnerships with organizations that can serve as intermediaries or technical advisors will be crucial for sustainability. These partnerships ensure that the initiative remains learner-centered while supporting the systemic changes necessary to integrate learner leadership into the broader CTE landscape.





Recommendations for State Leaders: Actionable Steps for Enhancing Learner-Led Program Improvement

The pilot in Kentucky highlighted the power of YPAR in engaging learners directly in CTE program improvement. However, it also revealed the significant labor and intensity required to implement a full YPAR model. This approach may not be ideal for state education agencies looking for a more sustainable and scalable solution. While YPAR's comprehensive, learner-driven research process may be resource heavy for broader state adoption, its principles—such as learner agency, community collaboration, and data democratization—offer valuable insights for enhancing learner-led research in CTE. Moving forward, states can leverage principles from YPAR to inform and elevate learner-centered program improvement efforts, ensuring that learners' voices remain integral to shaping educational pathways without overwhelming existing systems. The following recommendations provide actionable steps for state leaders to adopt some of these principles, creating meaningful and sustainable opportunities for learner engagement in CTE.

Foster Strategic Partnerships: Kentucky's success was built on strong partnerships among state agencies, KSVT, and local schools. To engage learners meaningfully in program improvement, state CTE leaders should identify organizations with expertise in youth advocacy and learner engagement as key partners. These partnerships can help facilitate learner-led research and ensure that learner voices are central to CTE decisionmaking. Additionally, involving intergenerational partners—such as educators, community leaders, and parents—in the training and supports can strengthen collaboration and expand the support network for learners.

Engage Learners Early in the Process: Involving learners from the outset is crucial. States should create opportunities for learners to actively identify key questions, design research tools, and analyze and share data. Starting earlier in the school year, if possible, can help avoid the challenges of running up against the end of the school year. This approach democratizes data and empowers learners to produce and consume the information they gather, giving them agency in shaping the CTE programs that affect them.

Provide Ongoing, Structured Support: While learners should lead the research, adult facilitators are essential in offering guidance and capacity building. Regular, structured check-ins—such as weekly meetings—can provide learners with the necessary support while allowing them to maintain autonomy. Additionally, preparing school leaders and staff to serve in a supportive role as facilitators and active partners in the process is crucial. This balanced approach ensures that learners have the tools, guidance, and institutional support to succeed while driving the research.

Start Small, Scale Gradually: One key lesson from Kentucky is the importance of starting with small-scale pilots before considering broader implementation. States should begin by launching learner-led research initiatives in select schools or districts, ensuring that the structure can adapt to varying local contexts, schedules, and resource availability. This flexible approach allows for the refinement of the model before scaling it more widely.

Institutionalize Learner Engagement: For learner-led research to have a lasting impact on CTE program improvement, states should work to productively and contextually adapt and institutionalize these practices. This effort could involve creating permanent roles or positions within state agencies or school systems that focus on embedding learner engagement in all CTE program design and evaluation aspects. By institutionalizing these efforts, states can ensure that learner perspectives continue to shape CTE policy and practice beyond a one-off project. Additionally, embedding an intergenerational model, in which multiple generations collaborate on research, can deepen the impact and broaden the support base for continuous learner engagement toward the ultimate goal of better and more robust learner career preparation.



Sustainable Learner Engagement in CTE: Advance CTE's Learner-Driven Efforts

Building on the insights and lessons learned from the Kentucky YPAR pilot, Advance CTE is embarking on Phase II of this work to institutionalize learner-led research in CTE. In 2025, Advance CTE launched a technical assistance cohort with three states to support integrating learner-led research and YPAR principles into the Comprehensive Local Needs Assessment process. This next phase will provide targeted support to help states embed these practices into their CTE program improvement efforts, ensuring that learner engagement is not just an isolated project but a sustainable and integral part of their CTE systems.

The Kentucky pilot has been instrumental in shaping the materials, trainings, and facilitation strategies needed to make learner-led research successful. Advance CTE's ongoing efforts will focus on providing states with the tools, resources, and leadership development necessary to guide them in creating systems that prioritize learners' voices. These resources will ensure that state leaders, local educators, and learners have the support they need to move toward a future in which learner-driven research is central to CTE programs' ongoing improvement and innovation.

Looking Ahead: Engaging Learners, Shaping CTE



Kentucky's pilot demonstrated the potential for learner-driven research to affect CTE program design directly. This approach, which values the expertise of learners as critical consumers and shapers of their education, offers a replicable model for state leaders seeking to create more learner-centered and inclusive CTE systems. By engaging learners in meaningful ways, states can ensure that CTE programs not only meet the workforce's needs but also reflect the perspectives and aspirations of the learners they aim to serve.

As states continue to explore ways to empower learners and strengthen CTE, it is important to remember that engaging learners is not a one-time initiative—it is an ongoing process that requires intentional effort and support. To help foster meaningful learner engagement, we encourage you to explore the resources available on the [Advance CTE website](#). There, you will find [blog posts](#), [tools](#), and frameworks that offer practical insights on embedding learner voice in program development, policy decisions, and community partnerships.

Additionally, Advance CTE provides a wealth of resources, training opportunities, and [technical assistance](#) to help state leaders design CTE systems that are more inclusive, responsive, and aligned with learners' needs. Reach out to Advance CTE to learn more about how these resources can support your efforts to engage learners in meaningful and sustainable ways.

Together, we can build CTE programs that prepare learners for the future of work and empower them to be active contributors to the education systems that shape their lives. Let's continue to engage, listen, and collaborate to ensure that every learner has a voice in their future.

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