

How to Promote Gender Equity in Career and Technical Education: A Primer for Schools

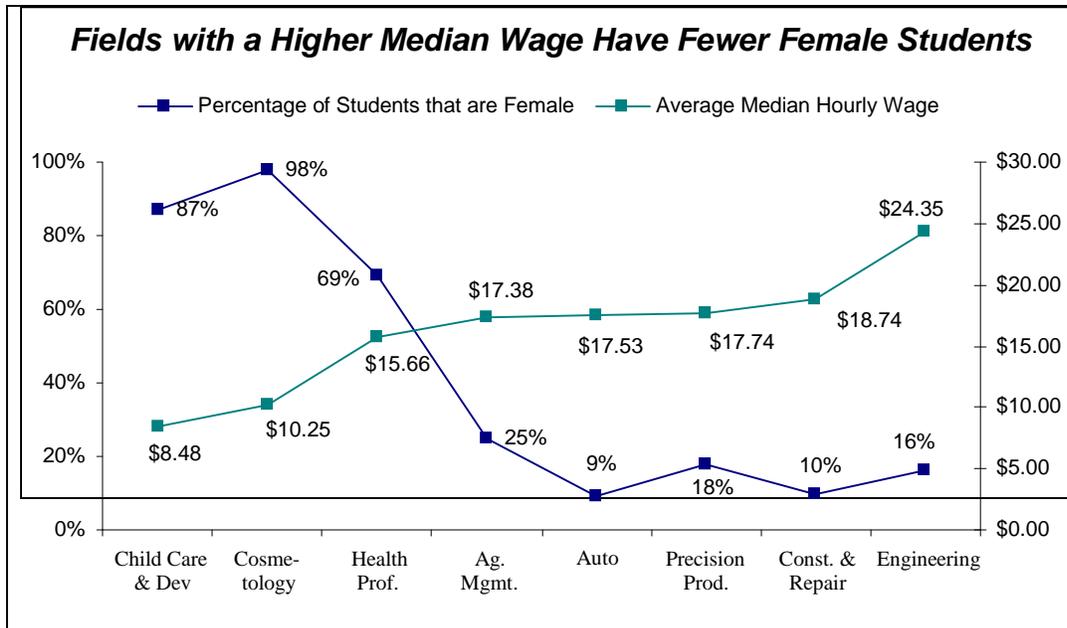
This fact sheet is part of a series of tools designed by the National Women's Law Center to help schools address the dropout crisis. Girls are dropping out of school at alarming rates, and studies show that schools can be successful in reducing their dropout rates where they offer CTE programs and make the link between academic work, college success, and careers. Schools that want to reduce their dropout rates must ensure that girls have equal access to career and technical education ("CTE") classes that provide training for high-skill, high-wage jobs.

Career and Technical Education Can Lead To Economic Security For Girls

CTE, formerly known as vocational education, makes up a significant portion of both secondary and postsecondary education in the United States. CTE can keep students engaged, an important factor in reducing the high drop-out rate,ⁱ and can lead students to take higher levels of math and science. Furthermore, many CTE programs are increasingly academically rigorous and can offer training in new and emerging high-tech fields. Thus, it is important to offer high-quality CTE and to ensure that girls have equal access to training for high-skill, high-wage occupations.

Even though Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972—the federal law prohibiting sex discrimination in education—has been in effect for 35 years, there has been virtually no change in girls' access to high-skill, high-wage CTE courses that are nontraditional for their gender. For example, in high schools across the country, programs such as automotive technology, construction and engineering are dominated by male students, while programs such as nursing are dominated by female students.

Although lack of access to these educational opportunities affects both genders, it is particularly troubling for women in today's economy. Discouraging young women from pursuing nontraditional training can limit their access to jobs that are nontraditional for their gender, which pay considerably more than those to which young women traditionally have been funneled. As the chart below shows, male-dominated fields pay an average median hourly wage of \$18.48, while the traditionally female fields pay just \$14.26 on average. This translates into a median annual salary of \$38,429 for men and \$29,663 for women – an \$8,766 wage gap.ⁱⁱ



While the reasons for this persistent under-representation are complex, the evidence shows that the persistent under-representation of female students in traditionally male CTE courses is linked to sex discrimination and sex stereotyping. It therefore is imperative that administrators, educators, lawmakers and advocates take steps to ensure that neither sex discrimination nor outmoded stereotypes affect students' attitudes toward, access to, enrollment in, or completion of nontraditional programs that can lead to higher-paying careers.

Successful Programs And Practices Incorporate Promising Techniques To Recruit And Retain Students In Nontraditional Courses

Programs that have been successful in recruiting and retaining students in CTE classes that are nontraditional for their gender share a number of common characteristics. To replicate successful strategies and increase the likelihood that girls will stay in school, schools should, among other steps:

- Effectively identify and build strong education-community partnerships, interagency coalitions and business partnerships;
- Introduce students to role models, including professionals who have nontraditional careers and peers who participate in nontraditional CTE;
- Provide hands-on opportunities, starting in middle school, for students to learn about and apply skills;
- Build upon or cultivate an institutional commitment to gender equity and compliance with civil rights laws and use the program as an opportunity to train all staff about gender equity;
- Respond to the needs of the local labor market by featuring high-demand occupations;

- Measure the outcomes and results of the project by collecting data about the students who participate in the program or benefit from the practice, including whether they have been retained in the field or continued their education in other areas;
- Collect testimonials and seek both positive and negative input from program participants to measure their enthusiasm for the program and make improvements where necessary;
- Document the program in a manner that is replicable by others attempting to implement similar programs;
- Expand model programs to other under-served populations that historically have not participated in careers that are nontraditional for their race, disability or socio-economic status; and
- Develop and regularly update a comprehensive equity plan to identify and address discriminatory practices and artificial barriers to girls' enrollment and completion of nontraditional programs, such as steering by counselors, differential treatment by teachers, and sexual harassment from peers, and take necessary steps to remedy any problems that may exist.

Schools that follow the above steps can increase the chances that their female students – *and* their male students – will stay in school. For more information on providing equal access to career and technical education classes, visit our website at <http://www.nwlc.org/details.cfm?id=2776§ion=education>. For assistance implementing these reforms, please contact us at info@nwlc.org. To read the Center's report, *When Girls Don't Graduate, We All Fail: A Call to Improve High School Graduation Rates for Girls*, visit www.nwlc.org/dropout.

ⁱ See NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION: REPORT TO CONGRESS (1994). In addition, a 1998 University of Michigan study reported that a quality CTE program can reduce a school's dropout rate by as much as 6 percent. James A. Kulik, *Curriculum Tracks and High School Vocational Studies*, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN (1998) (as cited in the Southern Regional Education Board, *Facts About High School Career/Technical Studies*). See also Stephen Planks, *Career and Technical Education in the Balance*, NATIONAL RESEARCH CENTER FOR CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION (2001) (A mixture of CTE and academic courses reduces the likelihood that students will drop out, particularly for low-performing students.).

ⁱⁱ Wage data is from May 2006. Annual wages have been calculated by multiplying the hourly median wage by a "year-round, full-time" figure of 2,080 hours; for those occupations where there is no published hourly median wage, the annual wage has been directly calculated from the reported survey data. BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, OCCUPATIONAL EMPLOYMENT AND WAGES (May 2006) *available at* http://www.bls.gov/oes/oes_dl.htm#2006_m (last visited July 2007).