

CTE WAS FILED IN THE WRONG CABINET

MAR. 17, 2026

ARTICLE 13

What the Quiet Migration of Federal Education Programs Says About the Future of Workforce Development

A recent Education Week article caught my attention for a reason that many readers might have missed. The headline alone was striking: “The Ed. Dept. Is Sending 118 Programs to Other Agencies.” But the real story lies deeper than the headline.

According to the report, the U.S. Department of Education has entered into nine interagency agreements transferring 118 federal education programs to four other cabinet agencies, including the Departments of Labor, Interior, State, and Health and Human Services.

Let me clarify something at the outset. This is not a defense of the U.S. Department of Education as an institution. There are legitimate debates about whether the Department should be restructured, or even dissolved entirely. My concern is not that federal education programs are being moved. My concern is where they are being moved, and what those choices reveal about how our nation fundamentally views career education and workforce development.

For many observers, this appears to be a bureaucratic reshuffling. But for those of us who work in Career and Technical Education (CTE), it raises a far more significant question: *What happens when workforce education becomes labor policy rather than economic strategy?*

When Workforce Education Becomes Labor Policy

The EdWeek article notes that programs from several offices within the Department of Education, including the **Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE)**, are among those being transferred through these interagency agreements. In practical terms, this means that tens of billions of dollars in federal education grants are gradually moving outside the Department of Education itself.

The Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education is being moved to the Department of Labor. Other are shifting to the Department of Interior or the Department of Health and Human Services. At first glance, this may appear pragmatic. After all, workforce development intersects with many policy areas.

For those of us in the CTE community, this issue is not new. In fact, my colleague **Kristy Volesky** and I have discussed this dynamic many times. The federal workforce system has long been split across multiple agencies:

- **Education oversees Perkins-funded CTE programs**
- **Labor oversees workforce development systems under WIOA**
- **Commerce oversees regional economic development**
- **Various other agencies manage industry-specific workforce initiatives**

While each agency has a legitimate role, the structure itself sends a subtle but powerful message. It implies that career education exists primarily as a labor supply mechanism rather than a strategic component of national economic growth.

That framing matters because the agency that governs a policy area inevitably shapes how that policy area is perceived.

A Century–Old Narrative Still Shapes Policy

To understand how we arrived here, we need to look back at the origins of federal vocational education.

The Smith–Hughes Act of 1917, the first major federal investment in vocational education, was designed primarily to prepare workers for industrial jobs.

At the time, the United States was rapidly industrializing. The federal government viewed vocational education largely as a means of supplying skilled labor to factories and farms. More than a century later, the economy has changed dramatically, but the underlying policy narrative has remained remarkably similar. Even today, career education is frequently framed as:

- job training
- workforce remediation
- labor market alignment

Rarely is it framed as what it truly represents in the modern economy: **a strategic driver of national competitiveness.**

The Missing Cabinet Department

This is where the current policy conversation becomes interesting. If workforce education is fundamentally about economic development, then neither the Department of Education nor the Department of Labor is the most natural home for it.

Instead, one could make a compelling case that the federal agency most aligned with modern CTE is the Department of Commerce. Consider the mission of Commerce:

- promoting job creation
- strengthening American industry
- supporting regional economic growth
- advancing innovation and competitiveness

Is this not a perfect descriptor of how Career Educators want CTE to be viewed? These objectives align almost perfectly with the modern goals of CTE programs.

Across the country, high-quality CTE programs are doing precisely what economic development agencies hope to accomplish. They are:

- **building talent pipelines for critical industries**
- **supporting regional economic ecosystems**
- **creating pathways to prosperity for students and communities alike**

Yet the federal governance structure continues to treat workforce education primarily as a labor issue rather than an economic one. This is a mistake!

The Language We Use Shapes the Systems We Build

If you are reading this article, there is a good chance that you are also familiar with our first article series, Semantics or Sabotage: CTE's Word Problem, where I discussed that much of the language surrounding CTE is not only antiquated but also dangerous, creating a perception that is antithetical to the mission of CTE. So it should come as no surprise that I see a perception issue here as well. This is why the current reshuffling of education programs across federal agencies deserves closer attention.

On the surface, these interagency agreements may appear administrative. But they reveal something deeper. They reveal that the federal government itself is still grappling with a fundamental question: **Is career education an educational program, a workforce program, or an economic development strategy?**

Until that question is answered clearly, it should surprise no one that federal policy continues to scatter responsibility across multiple agencies, each interpreting career education through its own institutional lens.

A Different Way to Think About CTE...A Conversation Worth Having

For those of you familiar with my Reverse Career Fair design, you know my affinity for flipping scripts. Well, what if we flipped the script in this situation? Instead of asking how education can better serve labor markets, we might ask a different question: **How can talent development drive economic growth?**

When viewed through that lens, **CTE begins to look less like workforce training and more like economic infrastructure.** Just as roads and ports enable commerce, talent pipelines enable industry. And if talent pipelines are essential to national competitiveness, then career education deserves a governance structure that reflects that reality.

The current migration of education programs across federal agencies may ultimately prove temporary or administrative. But it also presents an opportunity for us to rethink how the United States organizes the systems responsible for developing its workforce.

An opportunity to reconsider whether CTE belongs primarily within education policy, or whether it should be recognized as a core component of national economic strategy.

For those of us working in the field of CTE, the answer may be clearer than many policymakers realize. Career and Technical Education is not merely about preparing individuals for jobs. It is about preparing communities for prosperity. And perhaps the most important policy question we can ask moving forward is a simple one:

Have we put CTE in the correct cabinet?

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