

I don't often get too excited about proposed legislation until it crosses the finish line. So many bills at the state and national level never make it into law. That's probably good, the often invoked idea that the government that governs least governs best. One legislator I have known was fond of saying, "My most important job is not to pass good legislation, it's to keep bad legislation from becoming law."

So a lot of bills come up, get folks excited both for and against, then fails to get a hearing, or dies in committee, or fails to make "turn around," or fails to get "above the line", or fails on a floor vote, or gets co-opted into a bad bill, or amended to death, or gets vetoed. It is a messy process, but when it works, occasionally great things happen.

Take for instance, the almost eight years old now Kansas Senate Bill 155, the Excel in Career and Technical Education (CTE) act. That bill made it possible for Kansas high school students to take college-level CTE programs like welding, construction, certified nurse aid, HVAC. (Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning) all for free. It has explosively grown our CTE course offerings and graduated thousands of students across the state with industry-recognized certificates and/or state licensure in areas that will get the students employed right out of high school. It has been wonderful to grow those programs and we have plans to expand those programs even further in the fall of 2021 and in coming years.

So Excel in CTE is fantastic for high school students, but what about those who are out of high school? We have so many empty positions in the state due to the economic effects of the pandemic of course, but that also existed before COVID-19. Businesses are asking for more qualified workers in CTE fields especially in areas like nursing, early childhood education, computer support, and many others. If Excel in CTE worked to greatly increase the number of high school students becoming industry certified, would clearing the cost barriers work for adults in Kansas too? And if so, would they stay in the state after graduation to work here?

Thanks to the vision of Kansas House leadership and specifically Speaker Pro Tem Blaine Finch, Rep. Sean Tarwater, and in the Senate, Molly Baumgardner we now have a solution! The Kansas Promise Act has overwhelmingly passed both the Kansas House and Senate with fantastic bipartisan support and, late breaking news here, was just signed by Governor Kelly. Truth be known, I was almost finished writing this article which ended with an impassioned plea to the Governor to sign the bill, but while I was writing it she signed the Promise Act! So as much as I don't love rewriting a draft, this time I don't mind at all.

In our service area, in addition to Rep. Blaine Finch from Ottawa, both Rep. Kent Thompson, and Rep. Mark Samsel voted for this legislation as did Senators Virgil Peck and Caryn Tyson. A clean sweep for our service area! I want to personally thank our representation in the Kansas Legislature for getting the bill to the Governor for her signature! This will be good for Kansas businesses and good for Kansans who are willing to get trained or re-trained to fill one of the long open jobs in Kansas.

I don't want to go into too much detail about the Act in this column. I often write too much so that my column looks like a "wall of text" or a "giant gray box" as I have been lovingly told. Once all is said and done we will be putting all of the rules on our website. But here are some broad strokes.

The Kansas Promise Act, in short, will help any recent Kansas high school graduate and any adult who has lived in the state more than three years go through selected CTE programs for free! The student has to apply for financial aid, but if there is an outstanding bill for tuition, fees, or books after aid and other scholarships are applied, then the Act would pay the rest! So if you qualify for federal aid, great, but if

not, and scholarships don't cover the balance, then the Promise Act kicks in and there will be no cost to the student. That means middle class families that make too much for federal aid, but may not have enough money to pay for the classes will still get the help they need. Free, that's what I said, free, for most everyone.

The Promise Act graduate will have to live and work in Kansas for two years after graduation to qualify for this program. There are also rules about household incomes which are set where most Kansans will qualify, and limits on how long it should take to get through the program. But I'll tell you, looking through the rules it looks like the majority of those living in Kansas could qualify and meet the requirements. The architects of the bill wanted as many folks as possible to take advantage of it to ensure Kansas businesses have the workforce they need to grow and thrive, so as many hurdles as possible were removed.

Which CTE programs will qualify? They have to fall within four general areas – IT and Network Security, Building Trades and Advanced Manufacturing Technology, Early Childhood Education, and/or Physical and Mental Health. While the list is currently being compiled for the specific programs that qualify, I can tell you nearly all the CTE programs at NCCC may be on the list, including our largest – Nursing! And the Act allows each institution to name one program that's not in the four general areas that is of need to the state or their specific area, which is also wonderful.

Again, this is directed to areas where businesses and institutions are in the most need, in areas with good paying jobs. These programs run from two-year associate degrees, to one year certificates, to several that are just a few courses. So we are not talking about a four-year degree most of the time, although there is a provision in the Act that allows for transfer to a four-year program if needed.

We need to get people working in areas where they can make a difference and make a family sustaining wage. We need to solve the qualified workforce shortage in the state. And we need to make that easy for the student. The Kansas Promise Act does all of that. I believe it is going to change many lives for the better and make some significant progress in the long battle to strengthen the Kansas workforce and end generational poverty.

To all of our state representation for Neosho, Franklin, and Anderson counties, on behalf of NCCC and all the future graduates of the Kansas Promise Act, I say a very heartfelt thank you. A special thanks goes to Speaker Pro Tem Blaine Finch for his leadership, who told me about this idea pre-COVID and persevered to make it happen. I was excited then and I'm even more excited now that it is here. And, of course, to Governor Kelly for signing it into law, a big thank you as well! It's so great when both sides of the aisle can come together to do something truly impactful.

Soon all of the rules and procedures will be created and finalized about the Act. We will be publicizing those along the way. Word on the street is that the legislature wants this initiative ready for students to take advantage of by this fall! So we will have our work cut out for us to have everything up and running in just a few months. But that's what we in the two-year college sector do—we act quickly! So stay tuned for more information on this late-breaking news as it comes in. For now – let's get this Promise started!

If you have any comments about this article or anything else, please contact me at [binbody@neosho.edu](mailto:binbody@neosho.edu).