

From Stigma to Spotlight: Designing CTE for Community and Economic Impact



A4LE MWGL 2026



Presenter



GEORGE KACAN,
AIA, REFP, LEED AP
Education Sector Leader - WIGHTMAN
gkacan@gowightman.com



Our Time Together

Introductions

1. The Problem We Inherited: What Is CTE...Really?
2. The Reality We Face: Why Change Is No Longer Optional
3. The Opportunity We Created: Aligning Education, Economy & Community
4. The Proof & Takeaways: Designing CTE That Communities Value

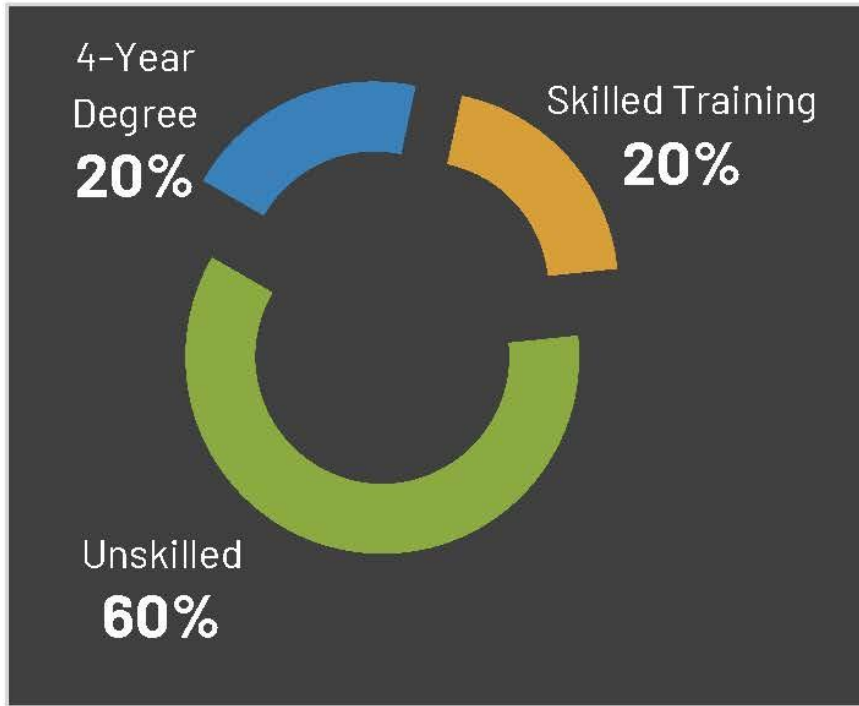


State of Play



- 4 in 10 school districts considered “CTE deserts” in Michigan
- Students and families calling for relevance
- Young people leaving HS without a clear next step
- Industry clamoring for talent

A Changing Economy



1960 JOBS



2018 JOBS

Source: (Re)Defining the Goal: The True Path to Career Readiness in the 21st Century, Kevin J. Fleming, Ph.D. July 2016

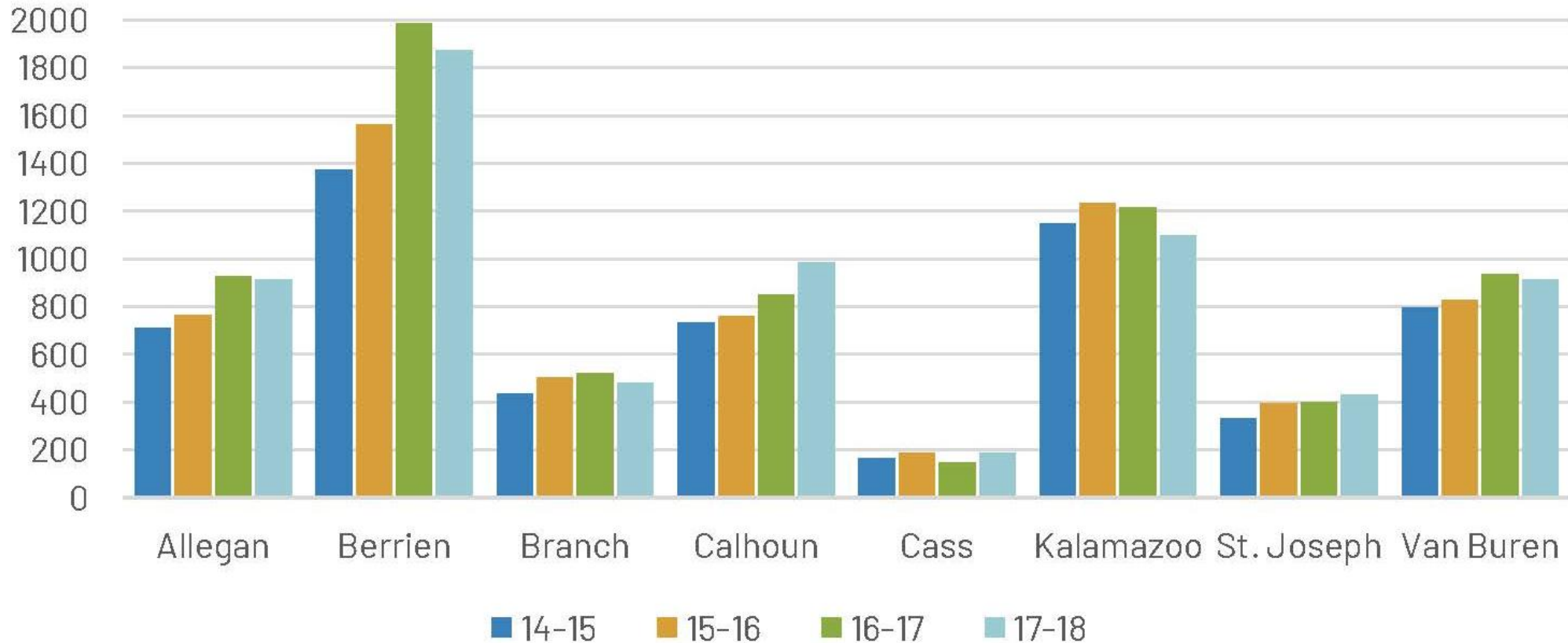


**It all started with
continuous improvement
data.**



Enrollment Trends: County-Level

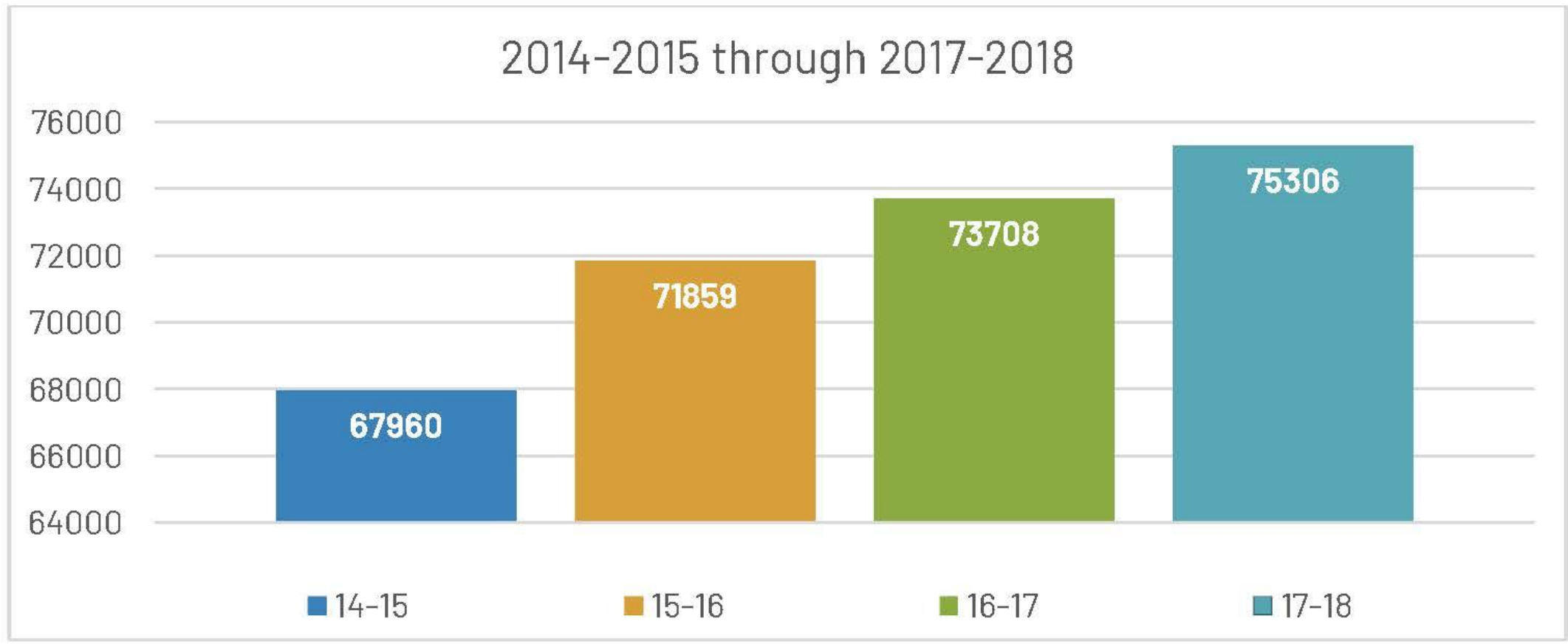
2014-2015 through 2017-2018



Enrollment Trends: Statewide

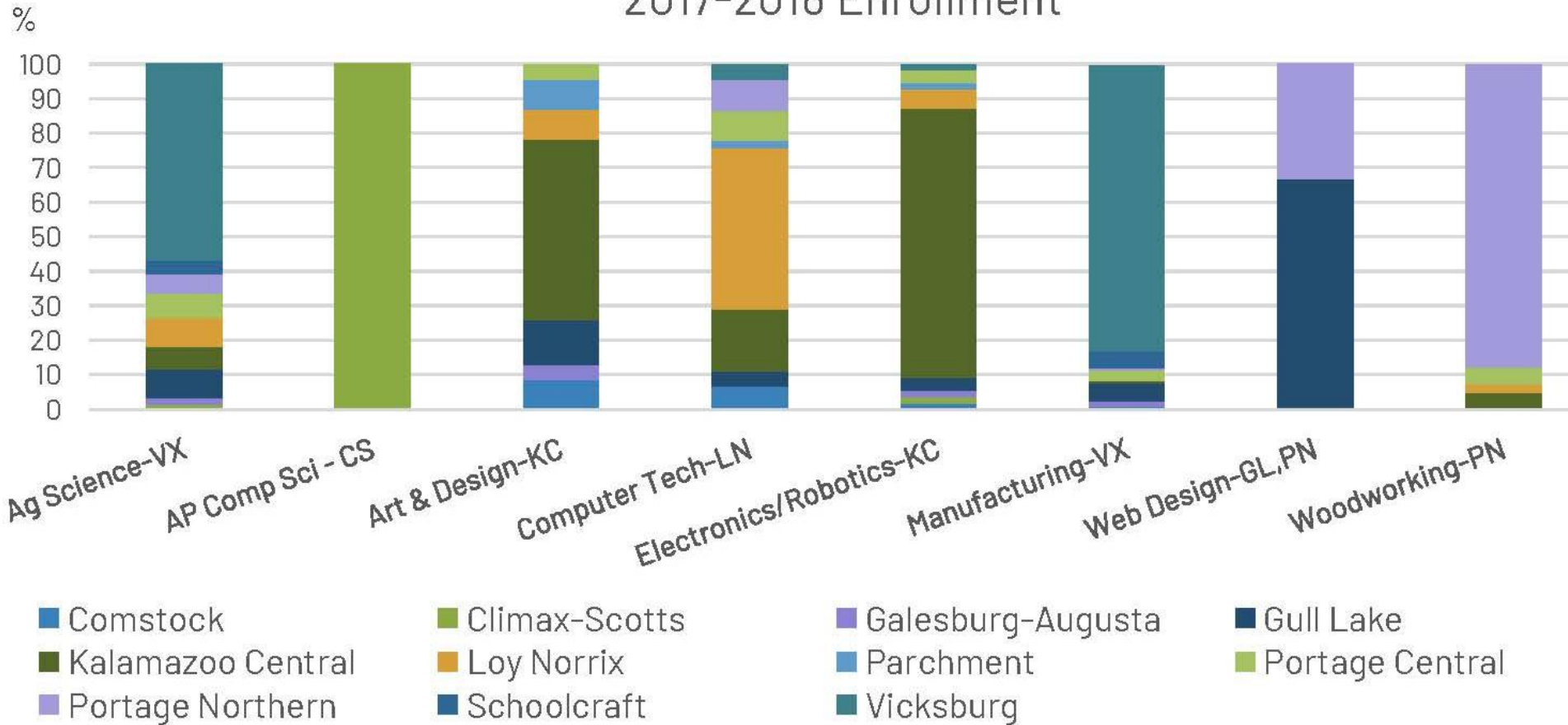
STATEWIDE CTE ENROLLMENT TREND

2014-2015 through 2017-2018



Enrollment Trends: By High School

2017-2018 Enrollment



The data pointed to challenges, so we got curious and dug a little deeper.



Why were we seeing lower enrollment in CTE compared to our peers in Michigan?

Why were we seeing “enrollment clusters” within high schools?

Because...

- **Decentralized model** with bulk of programs in local high schools
- Inefficient and **complicated transportation** system
- Lacking countywide **career awareness** and exploration strategy
- Arms-length relationship to **instructional quality** and student experience - teachers working for local schools or training partners with programs administered by KRESA
- **Lacking** a unified / aspirational vision
- **Stigma** associated with “vocational education”

BUT....

- Serving a community with energy, commitment, and resources to **redefine** CTE in Kalamazoo County

Addressing the Stigma(s) of Vocational Education



What types of students are CTE spaces for?



SHIFT

SHIFT FROM

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION TO **CTE**

THEN

VOCATIONAL
EDUCATION

vs.

NOW

CAREER TECHNICAL
EDUCATION



THE IMPORTANCE OF WORK IN AMERICA

Kudlow



Mike Rowe: Works Foundation: What's the problem?

We've got a PR problem!

- **We've made work the enemy**
→ ~70% of high school grads are told a 4-year degree is the only path (college only)
- **Success = college (only)**
→ Average student loan debt per student is \$3,000+
- **Trades are treated as "alternatives"**
→ Skilled trades account for 10% of job openings, but far fewer enrollments
- **We removed vocational training**
→ U.S. has reduced vocational offerings by ~30% since the 1990s
- **Perceptions are real**
→ 10 million unfilled skilled jobs + \$1.7+ trillion in student loan debt

It isn't an education problem.
It's a perception problem.

WE NEED TO CHANGE THE LANGUAGE!



How We Lost Career & Technical Education

The unintended consequences of “college for all.”

- In the 1960s–1990s, vocational tracking became politically controversial
- Career preparation programs were **removed from high schools**, not reformed
- Hands-on learning disappeared alongside flawed tracking systems
- Students were told there was **one path to success: a four-year degree**
- CTE became stigmatized as a “**lesser**” **option** instead of a parallel pathway

We didn't eliminate tracking — we eliminated opportunity



The Cost Reality: College vs. CTE

The math no longer works.

- **Average college cost:** ~\$36,000/year → ~\$300,000 per degree
- Of 5 students who enroll in a four-year college, **only 2 graduate and work in their field**
- College enrollment is declining: **70% (2016) → 62% (2022)**
- Nearly **50% of parents** now prefer a paid apprenticeship over a four-year degree
- Government funding favors universities over apprenticeships ~**1,000:1**

***This isn't a workforce problem.
It's a value and investment problem.***

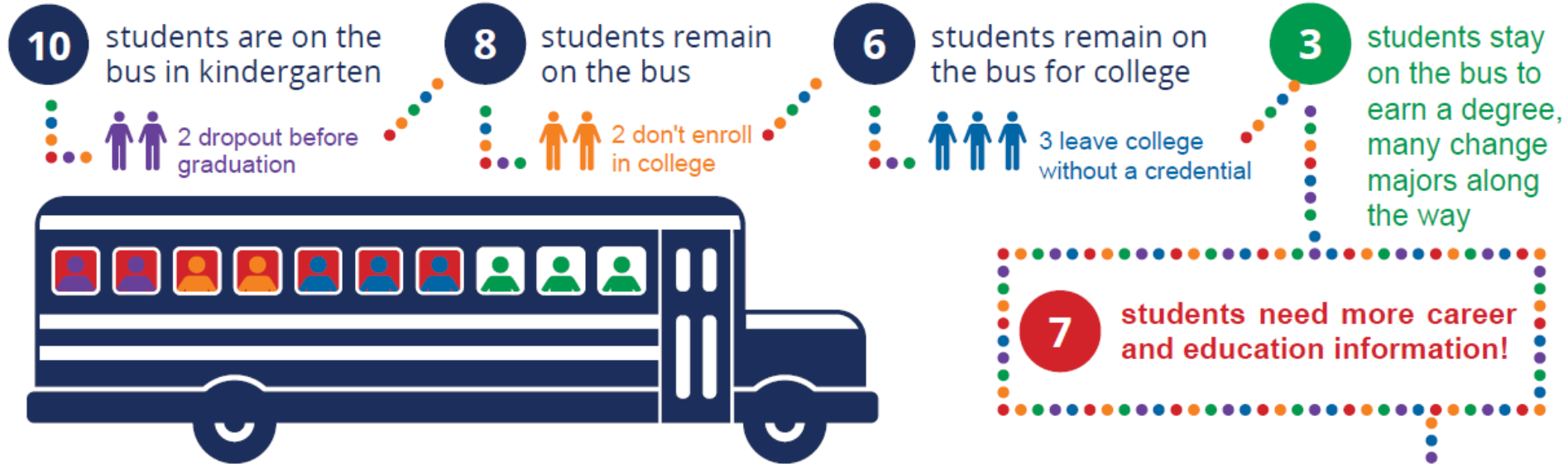


College ~~X~~ career?

“College is a place,
not a plan...”



Students must know what they *CAN* be before they must choose a career!



Let us help you change this statistic to ensure all students are successful!

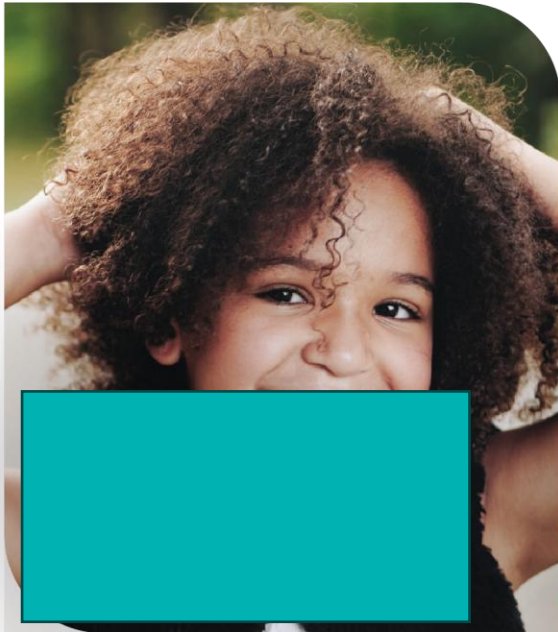


KALAMAZOO RESA

Career Connect



Out of 10 jobs, how many would require each kind of credential?



requires a Master's degree or more



require a Bachelor's degree



require a professional/skilled trades 1-year certificate or 2-year degree



Starting with the WHY



requires a Master's degree or more



require a Bachelor's degree



require a professional/skilled trades 1-year certificate or 2-year degree

Building a Countywide Coalition



The big question...

How do we achieve world-class Career and Technical Education (CTE) in Kalamazoo County?

...led to more questions:

- How can we make CTE more equitable, accessible and welcoming for all kids?
- How can we create a robust and well coordinated system of career development focused on four areas:
 1. Self-Awareness
 2. Option Awareness
 3. Skill Development
 4. Career Pathway Planning
- How can we engage and activate an ecosystem of industry, education and community in this work?
- How can we provide what business and industry need from us in terms of skills, credentials, and numbers?
- How can we attract and retain highly effective staff?
- How can we create a state-of-the-art home for our programs?
- How can we reshape narratives around CTE and specific occupations?
- How do we “build the plane while we are flying it”?

**These questions became
our strategic imperatives,
shaped in partnership with
key stakeholder groups.**



Community Coalition-Building Imperatives

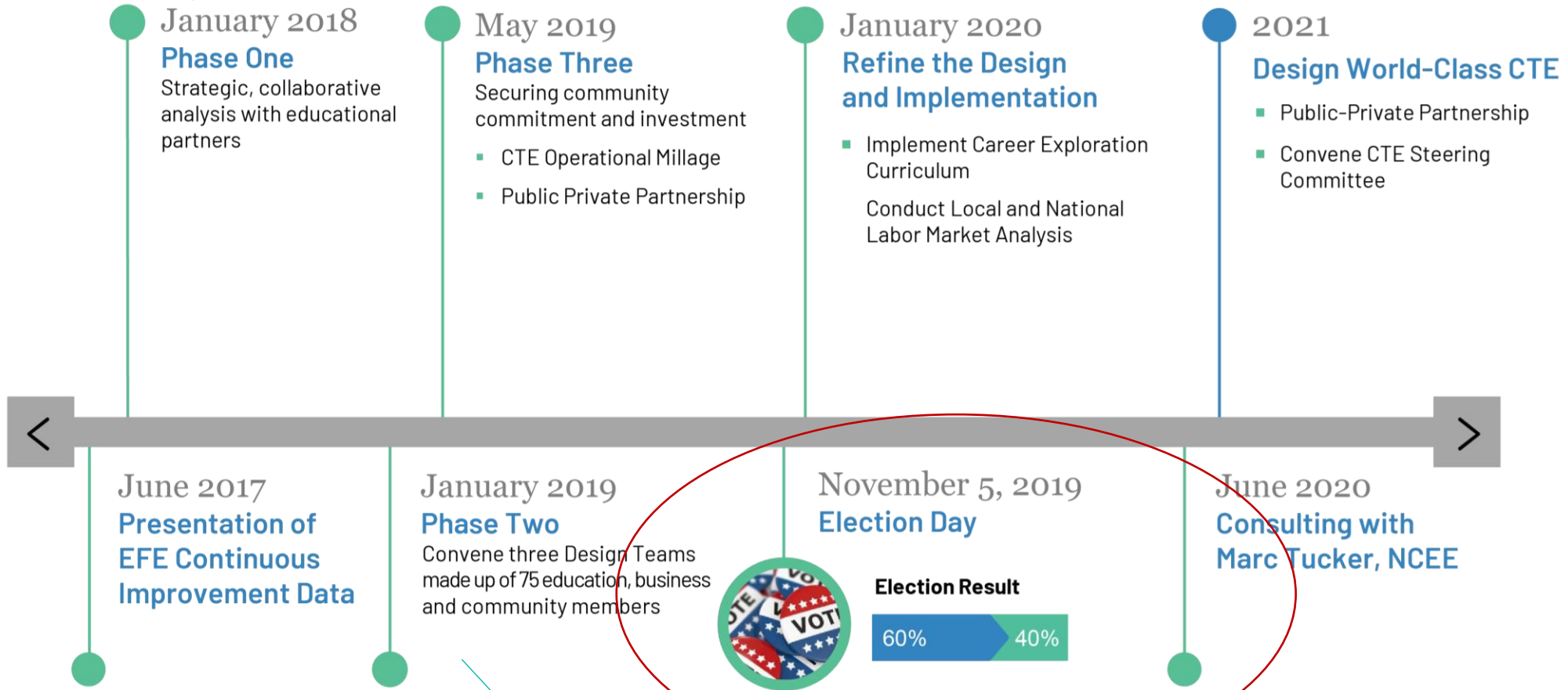
1. **Engage multiple diverse communities** for a common goal, shaping experiential learning opportunities for all students
2. Develop a **Leadership Team** to address educational opportunity gaps for both students and the community
3. **Lead a diverse cross-section of stakeholders in a community engagement process**, including education, government, business, non-profit, and spiritual entities, and develop consensus.



A multi-phased approach with tiered stakeholder engagement allowed us to (a) refine the design and (b) bring people along.



1.) Analysis + Problem Definition: Our Closest Peers and Collaborators



2.) Early Solution Visioning: "Three Legs of the Stool"

Redesign: Core Focus Areas

CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION SYSTEM DESIGN TEAMS

CAREER READINESS & EXPLORATION

To help ALL students see what they can be at younger ages through stronger career readiness and exploration programs

HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAM DESIGN

To redesign high school Career and Technical Education programs

COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

To maximize cooperation and collaboration with employers and higher education

Kalamazoo RESA Career Connect

A K-12+ continuum of career development experiences and opportunities focused on building learner self-awareness, option awareness, skill development and career pathway plans.

CAREER CONNECT PROGRAMS & SERVICES

Career Development Experiences

- Career Awareness and Exploration
- Work-Based Learning
- Out-of-School Time Programming

High School Courses

- Career & Technical Education
- Early/Middle College
- Education for the Arts

Support Services

- Employer and Community Engagement
- Research Partnerships
- Advisories



Labor Market Analysis

National Labor Study

Purpose: Analyze Southwest Michigan economy and compare local labor market to state and national trends

Partner: University of Michigan

Labor Market Analysis

Purpose: Identify industry clusters with high-growth, well-paying positions in Southwest Michigan

Partner: Upjohn Institute for Employment Research

Employer Survey

Purpose: Identify in-demand program/course areas as well as near-term employment projections. Evaluate current employer perceptions of CTE

Partner: Upjohn Institute for Employment Research

Employer Focus Groups

Purpose: Share employer survey results + deeper dive by industry into specific credentials / skillsets desired + assess desire for engagement

Partners: Southwest Michigan First & Upjohn Institute for Employment Research

Pathways of Study

- Well-paying, high demand, and high growth occupations as verified by four-part labor market analysis
- Produce industry recognized credentials
- Utilize current and emerging technologies
- Curriculum input provided by business and industry partners



CCC Pathways

▶ **Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources**

- Horticulture
- Veterinary Sciences

▶ **Architecture and Construction**

- Construction Trades
- Electrical Technology
- HVAC-R
- Plumbing

▶ **Automotive + Heavy Equipment**

- Automotive Technology
- Heavy Equipment Maintenance

▶ **Culinary Arts**

▶ **Design**

▶ **Health Science**

- Medical Laboratory Science
- Patient Care Technician
- Pharmacy Technician
- Rehabilitation Therapy

▶ **Information Technology**

- Computer Programming
- Computer Networking
- Cybersecurity

▶ **Manufacturing**

- Machining
- Mechatronics/Robotics
- Welding
- Supply Chain

▶ **Educator Academy**



Additional Satellite Pathways

- ▶ Aviation Technology at the Air Zoo
- ▶ Conservation Biology at the Kalamazoo Nature Center
- ▶ Law Enforcement & Public Safety at Kalamazoo Valley Community College
- ▶ EMT, Dental Dual-Enrolled at Kalamazoo Valley Community College

- ▶ Accounting at Local Districts
- ▶ Business Management at Local Districts
- ▶ Marketing at Local Districts



21st Century Skills



COLLABORATION



COMMUNICATION



CRITICAL THINKING



PERSONAL MANAGEMENT



PROBLEM SOLVING



Designing a World-Class CTE Facility for a World-Class CTE Program



Facility as a Statement of Value

Value of the New CTE Center:

- **Signals value and relevance** through strong curb appeal that attracts students, families, educators, and employers
- **Flexible, future-ready spaces** that adapt to evolving industries, equipment, and instructional models
- **Strategically located** to support efficient transportation, industry partnerships, and real-world work-based learning along the I-94 corridor
- **A shared community asset**, providing access and use during non-peak school hours

Designed to build 21st-century skills—for students and the broader community.





DESIGN CHARRETTE— BUILD EMPATHY

Recommendation

The outcome of the visioning workshops and the design charrette, based upon voting of the entire group, is the recommendation of **Visioning Option No. 3, 'Discovery Trail,'** as the preferred option to further develop during conceptual design.

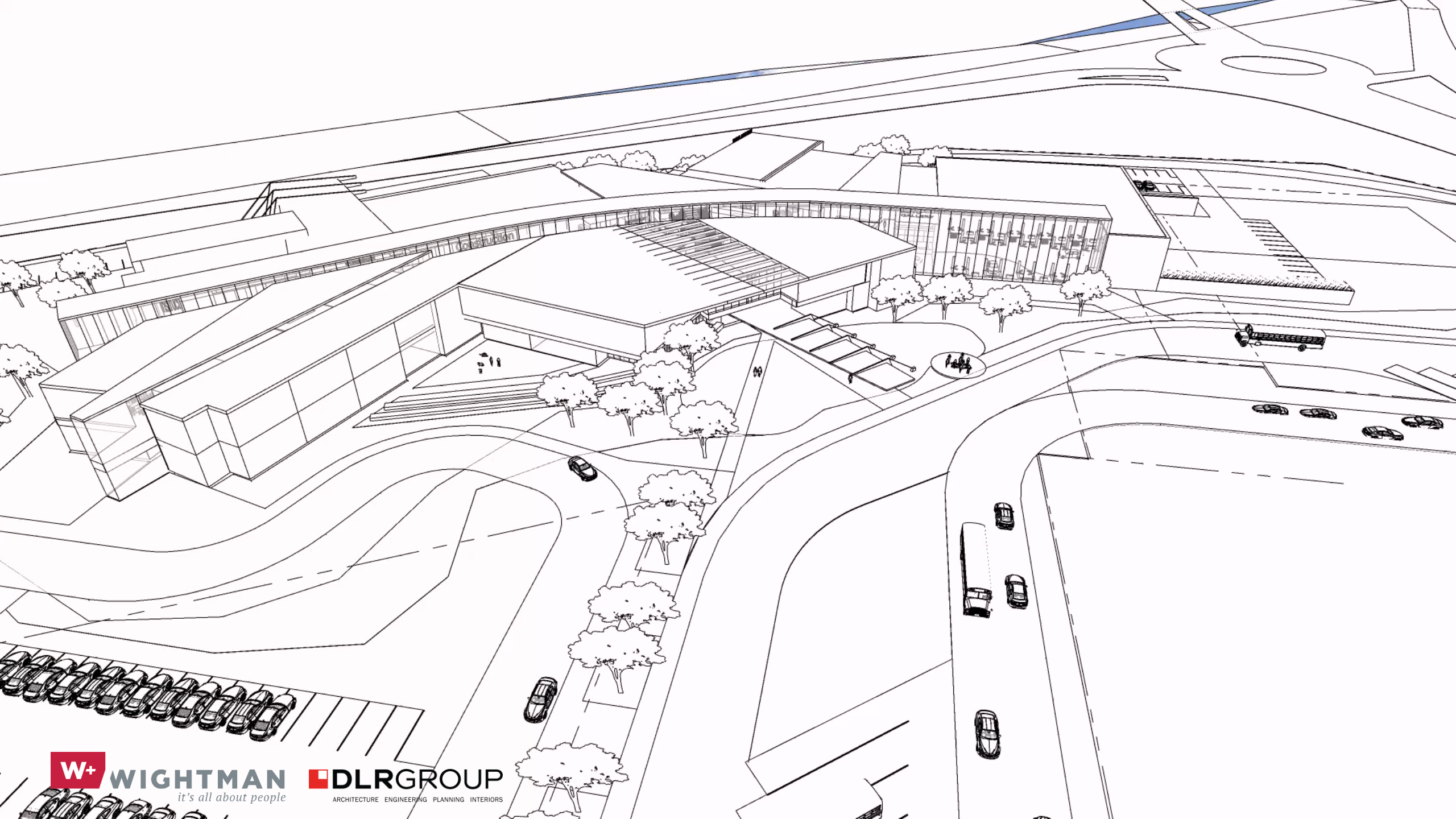
Vote Breakdown - Top 3 Tables	
Table #1	33 Points
Table #3	38 Points
Table #5	32 Points



DESIGN CHARRETTE— CHOICE

New Career Center | Concept Design







KRESA CCC Bridging Communities



KRESA CCC Threshold Experience



KRESA CCC Welcome



KALAMAZOO RESA

CAREER CONNECT CAMPUS

KRESA CCC

CTE Programs & Students are Valued





KALAMAZOO RESA

Career Connect Campus

August 25, 2025
First Day for Students



By the Numbers

- **1,360** - Campus capacity at opening
 - Current enrollment: ~1150
 - Increase of 25.6% YoY
- **167,000 +** sq ft
- **22** instructional labs + **1** greenhouse
- **1,265** pieces of lab equipment, excluding hand tools (as of last count)
- **17** instructional studios
- **22** courses offered **2** times per day
- **25** planned industry recognized credentials (and growing)
- **72** staff
- **19** advisory committees with **230+** advisors
- **3** dedicated large conference spaces + **1** industry meeting space

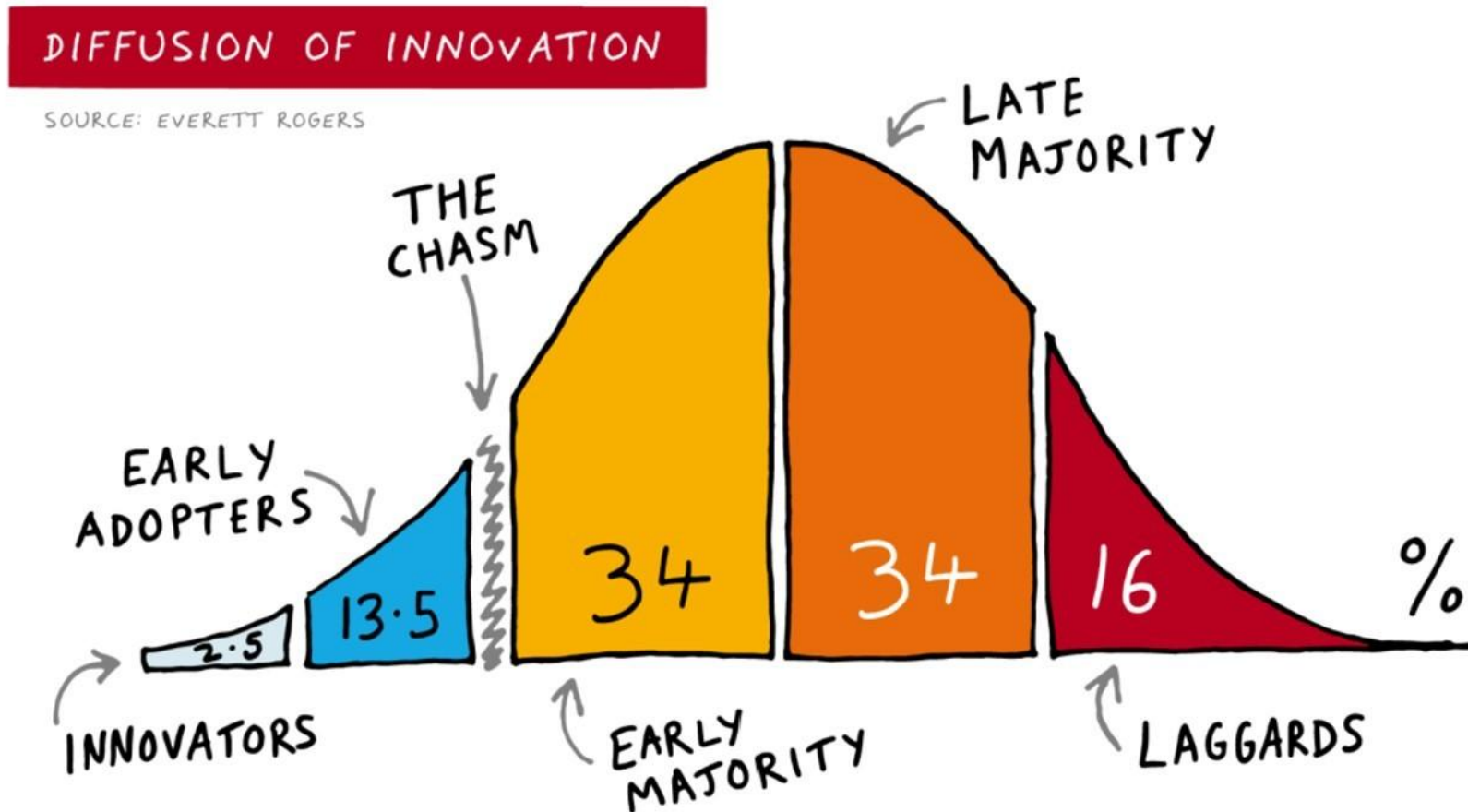
KRESA Opens, May 2025



Lessons Learned



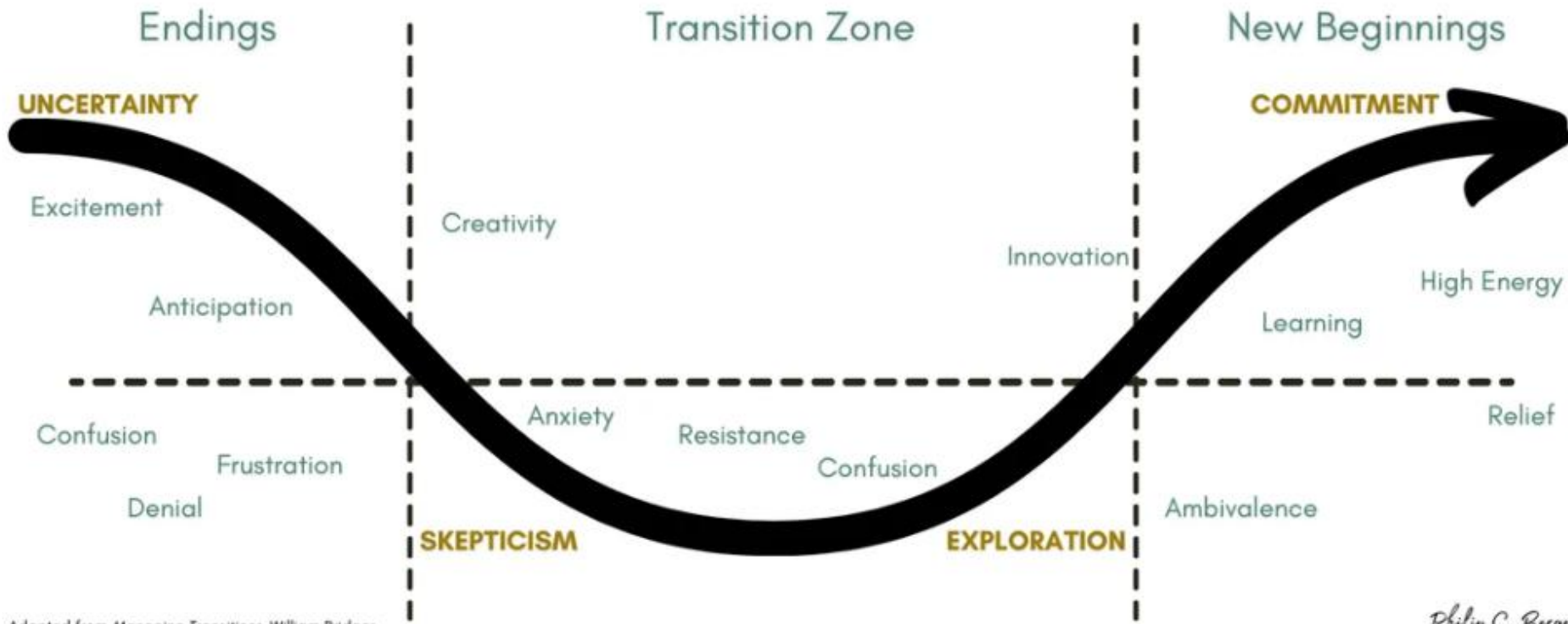
Innovation and continuous improvement are different scales of change. Which muscles do you have personally as a leader? Your team? How has the community experienced innovation?



- **The combination of leadership and project management required to pull off a project of this scale requires excellence equally in four domains:** strategy, relationships, influence, and execution.
 - Where is your strongest strength?
 - Those of key members of your team?
 - Where do you need to “rent talent” and get others involved?
- **9/10 of the work lives in the “messy middle.”** Anticipate that reality. Narrate it for your team.

LEADERSHIP *meets* LIFE

MANAGING CHANGE & TRANSITIONS



Adapted from *Managing Transitions*, William Bridges

Philip C. Berger





If you want to go fast,
go alone.



If you want to go far,
go together.



KRESA CCC





Concept Book



Contact Information

**George Kacan, AIA, REFP, NCARB, LEED AP
Education Market Sector Leader**

Wightman

306 S. Washington Avenue
Suite 200

Royal Oak, MI 48067-3833

Office: 947.941.4650

Cell: 248.840.0875

Other: 419.305.3333

www.gowightman.com

