CRPE
REINVENTING
PUBLIC EDUCATION

The Politics of Budgets: Lubbock Independent School District

Lubbock, Texas

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Facing declining enrollment, school consolidations, and other challenges, Lubbock Independent School District (ISD) leaders knew they needed to think critically about how to use their limited resources. Amidst major changes to Texas state accountability policy regarding students' postsecondary readiness, Lubbock ISD leaders undertook a vigorous analysis of their career and technical education (CTE) pathway offerings. They hoped to determine which programs had the best returns on investment (ROIs) so they could sunset pathways that led to poor student outcomes and free up money for more effective programming. This case study is a companion to a larger report, *The Politics of Budgets: How Fourteen Districts Reduced Spending While Protecting Student Learning Experiences*.

I. Background and District Overview

Texas's education system is focused on students' postsecondary outcomes, or "college, career, and military readiness" (CCMR)[1]. In Texas, an average of 65% of high schoolers graduate ready for their next steps according to these standards.

1. CCMR is a higher level of proficiency and preparedness than traditional graduation measurements. Students can graduate high school with a low GPA and few durable skills and not be quite ready for college or a career. Graduating CCMR assesses whether students are prepared for postsecondary success. Examples include earning a high GPA, taking dual-enrollment classes to earn college credits, enrolling in pre-military groups, or taking courses of study that teach technical skills. The Texas Education Agency provides more information about how districts receive their accountability grades for CCMR.

But the state's CCMR accountability system—which rates schools on an A through F scale depending on several factors, including the percentage of CCMR graduates—is set to change in the coming years. The state has revamped its college prep courses and career and technical education (CTE) programs, and earning an A now requires schools to have 88% of their graduates considered CCMR graduates, compared to 60% in previous years.

For Lubbock ISD, this major policy shift coincided with declining enrollments and other budgetary challenges. In 2025, Lubbock ISD leaders decided to address the CCMR changes by conducting a thorough, data-driven analysis to assess the ROI of their CTE pathways. As the district could not reallocate non-CTE funds to CTE programs to meet the state's new requirements, this analysis helped them surface programs that were effective and eliminate ones that were not. It also helped them make the right tradeoffs and ensure continued investment in the CCMR strategies that were working.

Students in Lubbock ISD are predominantly Latine (61.1%), White (20.4%), and Black (13.4%). A smaller proportion of students are Two or More Races (2.7%), Asian (1.9%), Indigenous (0.4%), or Pacific Islander (0.2%).

LUBBOCK ISD BY THE NUMBERS

- Schools: 61 (5 high schools, 1 advanced technology center, 1 Agri-STEM complex)
- 2024-25 enrollment: 24,007 students
- Percent of economically disadvantaged students: 73%
- Teachers who teach at least one CTE section: 98
- Total CTE staff compensation: $4.2 million
- Total CTE expenses: $8.7 million

II. Strategy Development and Decision-Making

Lubbock ISD's methodical ROI analysis helped them align on two districtwide priorities: student needs and outcomes and financial sustainability.

Starting a conversation about these two priorities required collaboration between Misty Rieber, Chief Academic Officer; Rick Rodriguez, Chief Operations Officer; and Dewayne Wilkins, Chief Financial Officer. Together, these leaders formed an ROI committee and a CCMR committee to organize and systematize their analysis and make moves on their core priorities.

With the support of consultants from Education Resource Strategies (ERS), the team focused on determining which of the district's 32 CTE pathways drove the highest ROI and which drove the lowest. Pinpointing which CTE pathways to keep and which to sunset would enable leaders to make the case for strategic resource use adjustments.

Based on a custom ERS analysis, the team followed six steps to evaluate their CTE programs:

1. Establish Metrics for Determining Pathway ROI

For the purpose of their analysis, Lubbock ISD defined the ROI as both the return on their financial investment for operating each CTE pathway and the lifetime outcomes each pathway provided graduates in terms of potential wages and job growth. To pinpoint that intersection, the team started by using local labor market statistics to identify whether the jobs on a given pathway exhibited the following characteristics:

- **High growth:** Do the jobs in the pathway have an above-median local labor market growth rate?
- **High wage:** Do the jobs in the pathway offer an above-median wage?
- **High job market share:** Is the share of expected jobs in the local labor market above the median?
- **Living wage:** Does compensation for the jobs in the pathway fall above the living wage threshold, as defined by the Texas Commit Partnership?

The team also collected data from actual Lubbock students to determine **persistence:** Does the pathway have an above-median share of completers and concentrators at Lubbock?

2. Analyze Pathways According to Job Market Data

Next, the team used current job market data to assess each of the 32 CTE pathways against their ROI metrics. This analysis helped them determine which CTE pathways offered the highest opportunity for job attainment and wages and which did not.

The analysis revealed that the Nursing Science pathway, for example, offers a 20.3% local labor market growth rate, an above-median wage, and a high percentage of Lubbock completers and concentrators. Information Technology science, on the other hand, has a far lower growth rate, a median wage, and a lower number of completers and concentrators.

But the team also went beyond the data. They found that the Education pathway offered a lower growth rate and median wage, but the team also knew that investing in the next generation of educators was critical to their community. Combining this community-driven knowledge with data enabled Lubbock leaders to take a nuanced approach to their assessment and make informed decisions. Leaders knew they could better promote pathways like education to encourage higher enrollment and thereby yield a higher ROI.

3. Score Each Pathway's Potential Student Outcomes

Lubbock leaders combined labor market share, growth, wages, and persistence data to score each pathway on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 representing the best possible outcomes for students. Nursing Science, for example, received a 4, while Information Technology received a 0 and Education received a 1.

Table 1. Lubbock ISD CTE Pathways Scored on a Scale of 1-5.

5	4	3	2	1	0
• Graphic Design and Media Arts	• Business Managment • Cybersecurity • Engineering (Foundations and PLTW) • Healthcare Therapeutic • Nursing Science • Programming and Software • Development Welding	• Accounting and Financial Services • Culinary Arts Architectural Design • Family and Community Services • Law Enforcement • Networking Sytems	• Carpentry • Electrical • HVAC • Legal Studies • Plumbing • Marketing and Sales	• Animal Science • Automotive • Biomedical • Cosmetology • Emergency Services • Education and Training • Env. And Natural Resources • Plant Science — Production • Plant Science — Floral	• Digital Communication • Food Science and Technology • Information Technology and Support Services

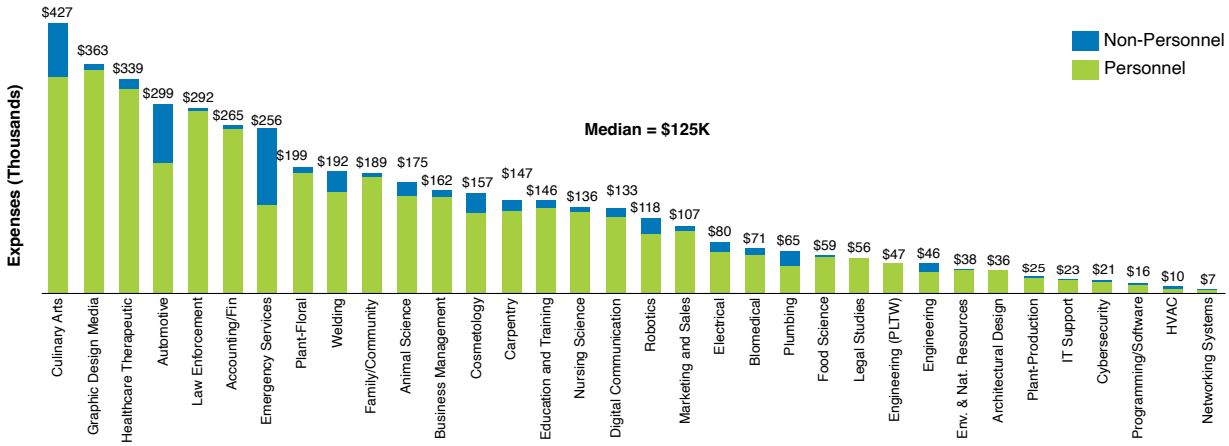
Based on student outcome metrics. Source: ERS analysis of Texas Education Agency Labor Market Report, Commit Living Wage Dashboard, and Lubbock ISD Cohort Analysis from 2023-2024.

Organizing the CTE pathways on a scale helped the team visualize their comparative efficacy and determine which had the highest ROIs.

4. Determine Financial Efficiency for Each Pathway

With student outcome metrics analyzed and organized, the team then evaluated the financial efficiency, or the dollars-per-pupil spent, for each pathway. They conducted this analysis by examining the personnel and non-personnel expenses related to each category.

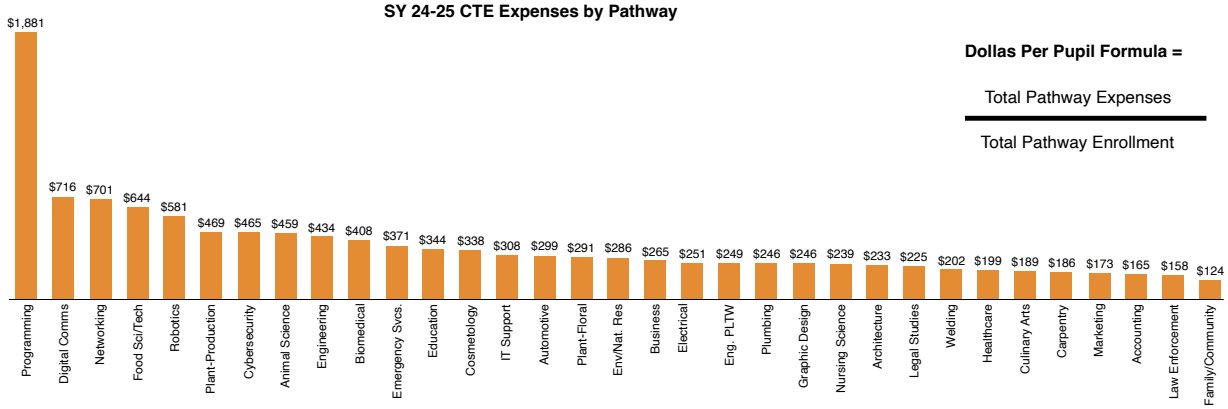
Figure 1. Overall Expenses for Lubbock ISD CTE Pathways, SY24-25



This figure includes personnel and pathway-specific non-personnel costs. Source: ERS analysis of Lubbock CTE Expenses FY24-25, Lubbock Payroll Snapshot April 2025, Lubbock Course Enrollment Data FY24-25.

The team then analyzed the pathway expenses in relation to total pathway enrollment to land on the per-pupil expenses for each pathway.

Figure 2. Relationship Between Total Expenses and Total Enrollment, by Per-Pupil Cost



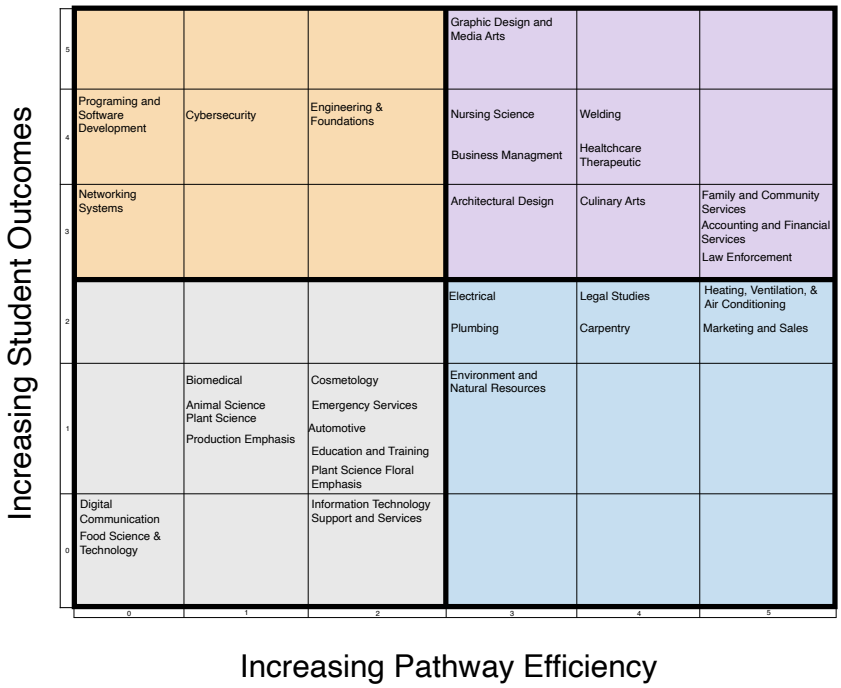
Source: ERS analysis of Lubbock CTE Expenses FY24-25, Lubbock Payroll Snapshot April 2025, Lubbock Course Enrollment Data FY24-25.

5. Map Student Outcomes and Financial Efficiency for Each Pathway

As it turned out, many of the district's largest CTE investments were also their best investments. In other words, spending a lot on a pathway didn't necessarily translate to a low ROI. If the pathway generated high enrollment and set students up for post-graduation success, then that pathway was worth the investment.

Lubbock leaders created a matrix that mapped student outcome metrics and per-pupil dollars to help make these decisions.

Figure 3. Relationship Between Student Outcomes and Per-Pupil Cost for Each Pathway



Source: ERS analysis of Texas Education Agency Labor Market Report, Commit Living Wage Dashboard; Lubbock ISD Cohort Analysis 23-24, CTE Expenses FY24-25, Payroll Snapshot April 2025, Course Enrollment Data FY24-25.

Using the matrix, the team considered these questions:

- **For high-outcome, high-efficiency pathways:** Can we scale these pathways? What staffing, materials, or space will we need to scale them?
- **For high-outcome, low-efficiency pathways:** Can we recruit and retain students in these pathways? How can we generate interest? What staffing availability do we have to scale these pathways?
- **For low-outcome, high-efficiency pathways:** What are the root causes of the lower outcomes? Can we improve those outcomes? How can we best support students in these pathways?
- **For low-outcome, low-efficiency pathways:** How can we help students in these pathways choose higher-outcome pathways? What factors do we need to consider before sunsetting these pathways?

III. Implementation, Outcomes, and Impact

While the team's analysis was methodical, the district has experienced implementation challenges. In some cases, the community's interest in a certain pathway directly conflicted with its financial efficiency. In other cases, students expressed interest in high-efficiency pathways that the Lubbock team had trouble staffing.

But rather than simply sunsetting low-ROI pathways and keeping high-ROI pathways, the team took their analysis a step further to explore *why* pathways generated specific ROI values. They then took strategic steps to protect their investments from inevitable fiscal challenges and ensure that they continue to generate a high ROI. Those steps included:

- **Sharing outcome data.** Leaders shared student outcome metrics with the community to foster a broader understanding of certain pathways that generated high interest but low ROI (such as cosmetology).
- **Creating gateways to higher-ROI pathways.** The team educated students and families about using lower-ROI pathways as gateways to higher-ROI pathways. Floral plant science (which received a 1 on the outcome scale), for instance, could lead students to the higher-ROI pathway of agricultural science.
- **Promoting pathways to increase enrollment.** To promote the education pathway, leaders targeted a different group of students by providing a more expansive understanding of education-related jobs, such as coaching. This resulted in double the enrollment in education for the upcoming school year. Similarly, the Lubbock team began promoting the HVAC pathway to middle school students, which has led to high student interest and a long waitlist.
- **Adjusting staffing structures.** The analysis showed that some pathways generated a lower ROI because the teacher-to-student ratio was off. In some pathways, there were too few students, while in others, there were too few teachers. By adjusting staffing, Lubbock leaders were able to yield better ROIs while maintaining student enrichment.

- **Combining pathways.** Some pathways involved complex staffing, scheduling, and coursework. By strategically combining and streamlining these pathways, Lubbock leaders were able to deliver the same student experience with increased efficiency.
- **Sunsetting some low-outcome, low-efficiency pathways.** Some pathways with low outcomes and low efficiency, such as the information technology pathway, will be phased out gradually over the next three to five years.

IV. Implications

Lubbock ISD leaders didn't approach this analysis with a specific reduction target in mind. Rather, they made programming decisions based on how well each CTE pathway met desired student outcomes. They used data to make the case for continued investments in the highest-ROI pathways and balanced investments with strategic tradeoffs.

When districts face declining enrollment and shifting student outcome requirements, a student-centered approach like Lubbock's is both admirable and effective. It can be tempting to make across-the-board cuts amid fiscal challenges. Still, by taking the time to analyze the ROI of specific strategies systematically, leaders can make transformational changes that help their districts better support students.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is a research organization at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation, where transformative ideas are rigorously examined and tested, and research informs action. Since 1993, we have remained independent of any single ideology while holding firmly to our core belief that public education is a goal—to prepare every child for citizenship, economic independence, and personal fulfillment—and not a particular set of institutions. From that foundation, we study what it will take for public education to meet every student's needs and use those insights to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice. Learn more about our work at crpe.org.

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Front cover photo: Lubbock ISD assistant principals attend the district's Principalship Cohort program. Courtesy of Lubbock Independent School District.

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