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VOCATIONAL PROGRAMS GET BOOST FROM CONGRESS

Bill that provides incentives for technical training programs set to pass, in rare moment of bipartisan agreement

By Michelle Hackman
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WASHINGTON – Congress is poised to renew a bill providing incentives for states to increase their vocational education offerings at high schools and community colleges, a rare point of bipartisan agreement on Capitol Hill.

The bill represents a priority for the White House, which has made bolstering job-training programs a centerpiece of its domestic agenda. Vocational education programs are geared toward filling openings that require technical skills but not necessarily a college education, and such jobs make up a growing sector of the economy.

Should the legislation reach President Donald Trump’s desk this summer, he and Republicans can tout it ahead of the November elections as a bipartisan achievement that occurred under their leadership, though Democrats can claim credit as well.

The bill, which reauthorizes the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, passed the House last year on a voice vote, attracting bipartisan approval that is unusual for major legislation these days. The Senate is also expected to give the bill its unanimous consent, likely in coming days.

It encourages states to fund high-school programs in such fields as culinary arts, information technology and welding, where students can learn a trade and graduate with a job or relevant credits to put them ahead in higher education settings. The six-year, \$1.2 billion bill also attaches funding for such programs to performance goals, including graduation rates and job placements.

The push to increase technical training in secondary and postsecondary education, unlike many issues in education policy, has support from all corners – Democrats and Republicans, business and labor, officials from the Trump and Obama administrations.

That is partly because of the need for people to fill jobs. There were 6.7 million unfilled job openings at the end of April in the U.S., the most on record back to 2000, according to the Labor Department.

Following its passage through a Senate committee this week, the bill was praised by committee leaders from both parties along with the Chamber of Commerce, Business Roundtable and individual companies including Boeing Co.

“Time and time again we have heard from companies and workers that reauthorizing and modernizing the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act...is a key step in enabling more Americans to acquire the skills they need to succeed in the modern economy,” Ivanka Trump, the president’s daughter and senior adviser, said in a statement.

Although the House passed its bill last year, legislation in the Senate initially stalled over objections from Sen. Lamar Alexander (R., Tenn.), who believed the Perkins program granted the Education Department too much authority to revoke federal dollars or steer the direction of state programs.

His objections halted the bill's progress until the White House, concerned about the legislation's struggles, deemed career education a priority and made it clear it wanted the bill to pass.

Ms. Trump, for example, held multiple meetings and dinners at her home with chief executives and groups of senators from both parties.

"Only a few months ago, we were at an impasse," Sen. Mike Enzi (R., Wyo.), the bill's Republican author, said at a committee meeting Tuesday. "It's not an easy bill, but it's one that has a lot of potential to really solve some problems."

Taylor Haulsee, a spokesman for Mr. Alexander, said the senator is also now proud of the negotiated bill.

"The Senate Perkins bill that sailed through committee this week was the result of bipartisan negotiations, including successfully negotiating a difference of opinion between Democrats and Republicans over whether states have to ask 'Mother May I' from the Department of Education when they want to make changes to do what is best for their students," Mr. Haulsee said.