The historical development of career and technical education (CTE) in America began with the Smith-Hughes National Vocational Education Act of 1917. This legislation was enacted to address the need for vocational education in secondary schools and provided funding for states to develop programs in agriculture, home economics, and industrial education.

On February 23, 1917, the Smith-Hughes National Vocational Education Act was signed into law, launching the federal investment in career and technical education (CTE). Since then, federal CTE policy has evolved in response to changing United States economic and social conditions.

The federal role in CTE began 100 years ago with the establishment of the National Vocational Education Association of America. By 1917, the National Agricultural Education Association had been founded to support agricultural education. The Vocational Education Association of America was created in 1919. The American Vocational Education Association was founded in 1936, and the National Association of Schools of Business and Technology Education was established in 1951.

Vocational education was renamed after Carl D. Perkins, a representative from Kentucky and education advocate, with the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act of 1976. Funding for states was increased to support vocational education programs for persons of all ages, including economically disadvantaged and disabled students.

In 1990, the 1990 Act's authorization expired, and modified state authorizations were established. In 1994, Congress approved a Fiscal Year 1994 appropriations bill that increased funding for CTE by $70 million, a significant increase in the federal investment in CTE, bringing the total to nearly $1.263 billion.

The 21st Century Act (Perkins V) continued the 1990 Act's focus on alignment and accountability. Congress emphasized a strong emphasis on the importance of student and local outcomes. The Act authorized a competitive grant program to encourage innovation through partnerships, including partnerships with employers, State and local education agencies, and regional technical education organizations.

The Strengthening Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins V) maintained the Fiscal Year 2018 through Fiscal Year 2021 appropriations; the Act also included a streamlined reauthorization process for Year 2022 and beyond. The Act promotes CTE programs of study that focus on programs of study leading to high-quality employment opportunities, including high-skill, high-wage, or in-demand occupations in high-growth sectors.