



Powering Futures:

How Cardinal Ritter Leverages Indiana's Career Scholarship Account (CSA) for Student Success

Cardinal Ritter uses the CSA to empower students with real skills and industry-recognized credentials that lead to satisfying careers upon high school graduation.

Background - A New Era for Graduation Pathways

Cardinal Ritter High School has long been committed to preparing students for both college and meaningful careers. As Indiana introduced new diploma requirements – especially “Bucket 3,” which mandates students complete a postsecondary-ready competency – schools like Cardinal Ritter faced a pivotal moment.

Erik Longenecker (Mr. Lo for short), a former elementary teacher turned high school vice principal, stepped into this landscape with a fresh perspective and a drive to learn.

“I explored state certifications and LCPs (locally created pathways) and dual credits,” he says.

Guidance Director Joanne Lettich adds, “When we start meeting with kids as Freshman, we start looking at ALL of the graduation requirements. For that third pathway, they tell us what they’re looking at AND we come up with a back-up plan. We start having conversations early and every year we get an update.”

Challenges - Outdated Options and Community Needs

Initially, Cardinal Ritter relied on online Career and Technical Education (CTE) classes through Edgenuity to fulfill the state’s graduation requirements.

But Mr. Lo wanted something better than just online virtual classes. He and his team envisioned more robust, engaging options that would actually connect students to in-demand careers.



Location: Indianapolis

Work-based learning programs:
Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC), Cybersecurity, Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), Pharmacy Technician, Digital Design, and Principles of Teaching



Cardinal Ritter's CSA students visit the Statehouse to advocate for the program.

The school's leadership identified two core problems:

- Limited, Impersonal Options - Online classes and generic certifications didn't inspire students or meet local workforce needs.
- A Disconnect With Local Industry - There was little existing infrastructure for partnerships between the school and area employers, especially in high-demand trades and technical fields.

Mr. Lo's approach was both practical and visionary. "I asked the questions, 'Where is the community in most need?' And then, secondly, 'What are our students interested in, or what are their families involved in?'"

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- Erik Longenecker
Vice Principal
Cardinal Ritter High School

Solution - Indiana's CSA and Cold Outreach

Mr. Lo set out to build something better. Funding was a challenge, but when he found out about Indiana's Career Scholarship Account, he was stoked. With support from school leadership, he applied for CSA funding to help students earn industry-recognized credentials.

He dove into state databases, reached out to local businesses, and met with everyone from electrical companies to steel fabricators.

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Two partnerships quickly stood out:

- Armor Air (an HVAC company)
- Lionfish Cybersecurity

These collaborations were a natural fit — not just for workforce needs, but for values alignment.

"Being a Catholic school, with Christian values, a lot of these businesses have the same kind of values."

Mr. Lo's vision didn't stop there. "I would like in the next five years to add welding, electrical engineering and even more work-based learning opportunities for our students. Just partnering with different businesses to do it and then get kids' graduation requirements completed and give them a free certification."

Results - Real Credentials, Real Impact

The program's rollout was not without challenges. Mr. Lo and his team navigated a maze of state requirements, shifting lists of approved certifications, and the logistical headaches of funding cycles and student withdrawals.

This is our first year, so there's been a learning curve," notes Mrs. Lettich. "You can't just go around dropping a class like you might otherwise do, because with CSA, there's a lot of money involved there."

Some students might also assume that choosing a CTE pathway and the CSA is an "easy path" to graduation.



"It may sound cheesy, but I think they feel special and have a bigger 'why' to their school journey," Mr. Lo explains.

"We're a uniform school, so when the CNA students show up in their scrubs, and the HVAC students show up in their Armor Air polo shirts, it gets noticed and other students ask questions and get excited about the possibilities."

Superstar CSA student Angel Costa participated in the HVAC program, will earn an in-demand industry certification debt-free, and has already been offered a job upon graduation. His long-term goal is to use his earnings to finance law school and graduate without debt.

Mr. Lo has big dreams for Cardinal Ritter's work-based learning programs and CSA partnerships. He's started several conversations with other prospective certification partners, some of which are in the process of creating new student pathways aligned with state certifications.

Cardinal Ritter's partnership with Indiana's Career Scholarship Account (along with Mr. Lo's leadership) shows how schools can respond to changing graduation requirements by taking initiative, nurturing relationships, and building real bridges of opportunity and community impact.

"Nothing is a guarantee. Just because you're in the CTE classes doesn't mean you're going to pass," she warns. "You've got to maintain certain grades. We work really hard at communicating that with students and parents."

"You've got to give kids that experience to try things and succeed, but also to fail," Mr. Lo notes, emphasizing the importance of real-world rigor and resilience.

Scheduling with partners can also be a challenge, but as Mrs. Lettich puts it, "We plan for it, so most of the time it works out."

The school's approach is dynamic, responsive, service-oriented, and deeply student-centered. In addition to their partnerships with Lionfish and Armor Air, they have created partnerships with a local nursing facility for CNA students and with their sister elementary school for Principles of Teaching students.

Despite initial hurdles, the results have been transformative:

- Expanded student opportunities – Students can now pursue credentials in fields with strong local demand – Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC), Cybersecurity, Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), Pharmacy Technician (Pharm Tech), Digital Design, and Principles of Teaching.
- Growing participation – Prior to joining the CSA, Cardinal Ritter had only a handful of work-based learners at the local CTE center. Currently they have 150 students in their first year of participating, and that number is increasing for the next school year.
- Faculty development – The school nurse is now a full-time faculty member, teaching all senior CNA courses.
- Innovative in-house programs – By hiring consultants and leveraging faculty expertise, Cardinal Ritter is able to offer more programming on campus, reducing barriers for students.

Want to partner with CSA? *Here are some tips from Cardinal Ritter's team:*

For Schools:

1. Assemble a team - Cardinal Ritter has three people working on CSA programs, balancing the workload based on their individual strengths.
2. Get out of your comfort zone - There is a learning curve, so be willing to take initiative, ask questions, and do cold outreach.
3. Develop an elevator speech - It will make your outreach easier.
4. Look at degree reqs of your teachers - They may have additional competencies outside of their teaching specialty and be willing to help build out courses and programs.

For Businesses:

1. Select someone from your team to communicate what you offer to education teams and navigate the process.
2. Plan for scheduling - School schedules and business schedules don't always coincide, so have those conversations early and create a plan for a smoother transition.
3. Have patience with high school teens - They are learning and some may not have previous work experience.
4. Know there will be wrinkles as you build programs to align with state certifications and graduation requirements. It's worth it to push through.
5. Know that funding is disbursed quarterly - Plan and budget accordingly.

Ready to take the next step? Register to become a CSA provider [here](#). Students can join the CSA waitlist [here](#).