Ladies and Gentlemen, as educators and community leaders, you play a critical role in preparing the next generation for a future filled with both challenges and opportunities. Today, I want to talk about a cornerstone of education that often doesn't receive the recognition it deserves: Family and Consumer Sciences, or FCS. Far from being just a class on cooking or sewing, FCS equips students with the skills, knowledge, and experiences they need to excel in 21st-century careers and life.

Let's start with why FCS is essential in today's rapidly changing job market. The 21st century demands a workforce that is adaptable, technologically savvy, and equipped with both hard and soft skills. FCS bridges the gap between traditional education and the practical, real-world skills employers are looking for. Whether it's financial literacy, food science, early childhood education, or interior design, FCS offers a curriculum that integrates academic rigor with life skills. These subjects prepare students not only for careers, but also for the responsibilities of adulthood, such as managing finances, maintaining health, and fostering relationships.

One of the most innovative approaches FCS uses to prepare students for the workforce is work-based learning. Imagine a high school student interested in culinary arts. Through an FCS program, they could gain hands-on experience working in a commercial kitchen, learning not just how to cook but also about inventory management, food safety, and customer service. These opportunities provide students with a competitive edge, giving them real-world experience before they even graduate.

However, not everyone has access to work-based learning programs. A survey conducted by American Student Assistance found that while 79 percent of high school students expressed interest in participating in such experiences, only 34 percent were aware of opportunities available to their age group (Shannee Simhoni, 2024). Furthermore, the U.S. Government Accountability Office reported that even when programs are accessible, students often face significant barriers to participation, such as lack of transportation, limited support services, language challenges, and inflexible scheduling (Shanee, 2024, *CAREER and TECHNICAL EDUCATION Perspectives on Program Strategies and Challenges Report to Congressional Committees United States Government Accountability Office*, 2022)

Although federal legislation incentivizes state and local education agencies to implement work-based learning programs, there is considerable variation in how states develop and execute these programs. For example, the Nebraska Department of Economic Development has an internship program called InternNE. This program helps students find paid internships in Nebraska businesses. According to the Nebraska Department of Education website, this program allows students in high school and college to connect with employers in Nebraska to "co-invest in the future." Students gain valuable experience in present-day businesses, while employers help build their future workforce. Nebraska's Department of Education reports that more than 50

percent of interns secure full-time employment at their internship site after completing the program (*Internships – Nebraska Department of Education*, 2021. Programs like these across the nation are vital to students successfully entering the workforce.

Another key innovation is technology integration. In today's digital age, technology is at the heart of almost every profession. FCS programs are evolving to include tools such as virtual reality for interior design, simulation software for financial planning, and digital platforms for nutrition tracking. For example, students learning about personal finance might use apps to create and manage budgets, mirroring the tools they'll use in real life. Two such tools are **Banzai** and **Next Gen Personal Finance (NGPF)** and they are free for teachers to use for financial literacy. **Banzai** excels in offering real-life financial scenarios like budgeting, paying bills, and handling emergencies, making it highly practical and easy for students to relate to. **NGPF** provides a wide range of interactive simulations, such as budgeting games and investment tools, along with comprehensive lesson plans. Both tools are user-friendly and browser-based, making them accessible for classroom use.These technological tools not only make learning more engaging, but also ensure that students are comfortable navigating the digital landscape of the modern workplace. It's not just about having technology available; it's about strategically using it to improve learning outcomes and enrich the learning process.

To strengthen FCS and ensure its continued relevance, we must explore new strategies in addition to adding innovative learning to the classroom. First, expanding industry partnerships is crucial. By collaborating with local businesses and community colleges, we can provide students with mentorships, internships, and job-shadowing opportunities that transfer to high school and college credit. These partnerships ensure that our curriculum stays aligned with industry needs, students graduate with skills that are in demand, and have an invested interest in their futures.

Second, we must integrate soft skills training into the FCS curriculum. Communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability are skills that employers consistently rank as vital. Through group projects, leadership opportunities, and role-playing scenarios, FCS can teach students how to navigate professional environments effectively. For instance, a project on event planning could teach students not only how to manage logistics but also, how to communicate with vendors, work as a team, and resolve conflicts—all critical skills in any career.

Third, we should focus on incorporating more project-based learning (PBL) teaching methods, modeled after the hands-on approach used in science labs. By engaging students in hands-on, real-world projects, PBL helps students apply theoretical knowledge in practical, meaningful ways. According to PBL Works, students work on a project for an extended period of time—ranging from a week to an entire semester—engaging in solving real-world problems or answering complex questions (Buck Institute For Education, 2019). This approach not only deepens their understanding of FCS topics but also builds critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork skills, which are essential for success in both personal and professional settings.

Finally, we need to advocate for FCS as a vital part of the educational landscape. This means not only securing funding and resources, but also changing perceptions. FCS is not just an elective; it's a critical pathway to careers in education, healthcare, business, and beyond. It's a field that teaches students how to balance a budget, prepare nutritious meals, and manage relationships—skills that are essential for personal and professional success.

As we look to the future, I encourage each of you to become champions for FCS. Advocate for its inclusion in your schools, support its programs in your communities, and help us build partnerships with local industries. Together, we can ensure that every student has access to the opportunities FCS provides, empowering them to succeed in their careers and lives.

In closing, Family and Consumer Sciences is not just about preparing students for jobs; it's about preparing them for life. It's about equipping them with the skills to solve problems, adapt to change, and thrive in an ever-evolving world. Let's work together to ensure that FCS remains a vital part of our educational system, shaping the leaders, innovators, and professionals of tomorrow. Thank you.