

Electronic School



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Apprentice Approach

The Swiss apprenticeship model could be gaining traction in the U.S.

MATTHEW DIERS HAS SPENT HIS entire education career working on Colorado's Western Slope, the rural, sparsely populated side of the state best known for ranching and mining. As the executive director of high schools and academic alternative schools for Mesa County Valley School District 51, he knows his students need more middle-skills training.

He also knows most of that training, designed for jobs that require

more than a high school education but less than a bachelor's degree, will revolve around the ever-changing world of technology.

"Technology is part of everything we do now, from talking on the phone to working on our tablets and computers," says Diers, whose 22,000-student district is the largest in Colorado west of the Continental Divide. "We need people to support it."

That's one reason Diers is excited

about CareerWise Colorado, an ambitious effort designed to bring 20,000 apprenticeships to the state's high schools over the next decade. High school students, starting in their junior year, will be eligible to participate in the program beginning next fall.

CareerWise is modeling its effort on Switzerland's apprenticeship program, which serves 70 percent of the country's students in more than 200 occupations. Over the past year, delegations from the state, local business, industry, organized labor, and several school districts have traveled twice to Switzerland to study the country's apprenticeship programs.

I met Diers last October, when I was fortunate to accompany the delegation that visited Zurich and Bern to see first-hand how apprenticeships are embedded into the Swiss Vocational Education and Training (VET) program. Like the others, I left knowing why the Swiss model is considered the gold standard in the world, and saw the potential for bringing aspects of the VET to the United States.

FLEXIBILITY AND CHOICE

Revisiting the apprenticeship model for K-12 schools comes at an opportune — and critical time — in the U.S., especially in the technology sector. Middle-skills jobs now comprise almost 40 percent of U.S. employment, and eight out of 10 of those positions require digital skills, according to a 2015 survey by Burning Glass Technologies.

"Technology support is the area where we see the greatest growth and the greatest need for employers in Mesa County," Diers says. "No question. There are so many businesses that need that kind of support — hos-

pitals, banks, manufacturers. Apprenticeships are a great introduction for that kind of work.”

What makes the Swiss model appealing, both for students and employers, is the choice and flexibility it offers. Students have more than 250 pathways they can pick from, and can move back and forth between them as their skills and interests evolve. Once they finish the program, usually a year or two after graduating from high school, they can continue in their chosen career path, pursue advanced professional degrees, or move into a university setting.

Over three days, we toured a number of companies and schools that offer both traditional and nontraditional employment opportunities for students, including Libs, CYP, Zurich Business School, Swisscom, and EWH-Zurich. We saw the work of numerous apprentices, most of whom started at age 15 and are enrolled in two- to four-year programs that feature a combination of hands-on and classroom work.

“What we are trying to do is put the apprentice in the driver’s seat so that they have to decide what they want to learn and to really be responsible for their own apprenticeship,” says Julien Hautle, head of talents and promotion next generation at Swisscom, the country’s largest telecommunications provider. “If you want the next generation of products, you need to invest in the next generation of people.”

At Swisscom, 10 percent of the company’s 8,000 employees are apprentices, many of whom remain with the company after completing the program. And while the benefits to businesses — inexpensive labor, a grow-your-own workforce — are obvious, the model has

another twist that makes it appealing to potential employers.

In Switzerland, industry determines the VET standards used by the schools and pledges to help to carry them out. While some U.S. school districts may be skeptical of the idea of having a stamp of approval from local industry on their career and technical education curriculum, the potential for buy-in and shared responsibility between the two parties is worth considering.

Noel Ginsburg, chairman and CEO of the Denver-based Intertech Plastics, also is serving as the CEO of Career-Wise Colorado. He estimates that the state has 25,000 job vacancies in high-growth industries due to an ongoing skills gap.

“Business can play a critical role in education that goes far beyond simply advising educators,” Ginsburg says. “By extending the classroom into our places of business, we can become producers, not just consumers, of the education system.”

RADICAL INNOVATION

The key, of course, is getting that buy-in, which is one reason CareerWise is starting small. Plans are to have 250 apprenticeships in place across the state next fall.

Ursula Renold, director of the Comparative Education System Research Division at the Swiss Economic Institute in Zurich, is one of the foremost researchers on apprenticeship programs in the world. She calls Colorado’s effort “radical innovation” and cautions education and business leaders to be patient.

“Changing social and educational institutions takes time,” Renold says. “This is not an overnight process but one that will take 10 to 20 years. As ed-

ucators, you are half of the rubber that meets the road. Business is the other half. You will have to identify these folks, survey them, and find out their willingness to train your students. But they have to meet you halfway.”

Diers went to Switzerland with school counselor Andrea Bolton, the director of the Mesa County Workforce Center, a principal in an adjoining district, and leaders from a community college and nearby university. He believes 30 to 50 employers in the area will take on apprentices. Plans are for students to start the program as juniors and complete as community college students a year after graduating from high schools.

“I was afraid I would see apprentices in dead-end jobs with no opportunity for advancement,” Diers says of the Switzerland experience. “That was not the case at all. What we saw is students who have been able to take that apprenticeship, make a contribution, and catapult themselves into college, into careers, and into other opportunities. If we can do that here, it makes sense. Things are changing too fast not to start now.”



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