

# READY TO 'GO BIG'

## Swiss Apprenticeship Program Entices Indiana Leaders

By Anthony Schoettle

Indiana has its eyes on an apprenticeship model that could be a game-changer in bolstering the state's talent pipeline.

A contingent of more than 100 Hoosiers – business, education and government leaders, including top officials from several universities – visited Switzerland for a week last fall on a fact-finding mission. The charge: to observe and study a groundbreaking vocation education and training (VET) model and talk to Swiss officials that have made it a key part of lowering unemployment, improving educational outcomes and bolstering business productivity in that country.

The trip was organized and led by the Indy Chamber as part of its Leadership Exchange program.

The attending participants were so universally impressed that they are already taking steps to implement a version of it throughout Indiana.

"This apprenticeship model absolutely has the potential to be transformative in many ways here in Indiana," declares David Becker, CEO of Indianapolis-based First Internet Bank. "This a great opportunity for Indiana to put itself on the map and really make the state, its businesses and educational system soar."

Becker admits selling the idea of an apprenticeship program as a transformative initiative to the delegation was no easy feat.

"No doubt there was skepticism among the group. I was a skeptic," he relates. "And no one in the group wanted to waste time on a trip of this length without some reasonable promise of a return on that investment. But when we got there and talked to Swiss officials and students in the program, we were absolutely blown away."

"The Swiss unemployment is in the 1% range, and a lot of that has to do with their apprenticeship program," he offers. "It has changed the whole dynamic of the country."

## Changing minds

Count Indiana Senate President Rodric Bray as initially unconvinced, too.

"I've been invited on these trips before and never went," he admits. But Bray was intrigued because "this was looking at a new idea of reaching all the kids going through the educational system."

Once the group observed the Swiss system firsthand, Bray shares, "I could see they had something that was having a real impact. There are definitely aspects of this we could implement here in Indiana."

Claire Fiddian-Green, president and CEO at Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation, first visited Switzerland to study its blueprint in 2019.

"Once you see this system work at scale, you can better see it working here in Indiana," she adds. "The majority of the people on the trip felt similarly."

Fiddian-Green, who helped organize the learning experience, says "years of preparation" went into the excursion.

"We had to make sure we were getting the right topics covered ... to help people in our group understand the information," she explains. "Now we have an action plan that wouldn't have been possible without all the prior years' work."

One of the primary purposes of the fall trip was to engage Hoosier business leaders on the positive impact of the Swiss apprenticeship model

and modern youth apprenticeships, says Indiana state Rep. Bob Behning.

"The only way we are going to be able to grow this program is to have businesses understand the value an apprentice can have on their bottom line and how it is not just about the talent pipeline, but also a way for them to have a more immediate return on their investment," he expresses.

Behning, the chairman of the House Education Committee, is also convinced putting a statewide apprenticeship program in place here can positively transform the state's education system.

"In the U.S., we have our academic tracks to get an associate or a bachelor's degree. The Swiss have a parallel system in professional education, and it's more of what I would call qualification framework. It's a qualification system that breaks down the barriers for how you arrive at a profession. It has the potential to be revolutionary in the way we educate young people."

## Swiss history, Hoosier impressions

Katie Caves is a native Californian who moved to Switzerland in 2012 to study the Swiss apprenticeship model. After earning a master's degree in education from the University of Tulsa and a doctoral degree from the University of Zurich, Caves became the lab director of the Center on the Economics and Management of Education and Training Systems (CEMETS) in Switzerland and chair of Education Systems at ETH Zürich.

At CEMETS, Caves and her associates study the design, implementation and outcomes of education reforms on all six inhabited continents. She's had a front row seat for more than a decade to Switzerland's impressive apprenticeship program.

At the Swiss federal level, the Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) is responsible for VET. While Caves doesn't work for SERI, the officials there have a keen interest in her research – especially that produced by her organization's Swiss Education Lab, and it has no doubt had an impact on the development of their VET program. In the Swiss model, VET refers to the dual nature of the program, combining classroom studies with on-the-job work. The "apprenticeship" aspect, says Caves, refers to the on-the-job element.

"The Swiss VET program is not different because Switzerland is Disneyland and this has been in place a million years set up by men in kilts," she stresses. "The Swiss education system is the product of the last 50 years. It's not different (from the U.S.) because it's a magical, European thing."

"It's successful because it's a system that pays off for companies involved making it sustainable and gives children exposure to career



Left to right: Key players – Rep Bob Behning, Sen. Jeff Raatz, Indiana Secretary of Education Katie Jenner and Indiana Commission for Higher Education Chris Lowery – participate in a panel discussion on apprenticeships during their recent trip to Switzerland. At right, Fairbanks Foundation CEO Claire Fiddian-Green is interviewed by an apprentice from Swisscom during the trip.

paths, on-the-job training and various companies while giving them options as they progress through the system.”

Admittedly, Caves doesn’t always love dealing with visiting groups. Dealing with the almost constant stream of them takes away from the research Caves and her colleagues see as vital to bolstering education systems.

“We avoid delegations like the plague,” Caves shares. “But we really like the Indiana team, and they’re working on a really good strategy. We were super impressed by the level of preparation, research and planning the group had done. They did a great job of preparing everyone on their delegation and fleshing out why this is important to Indiana.”

Indiana and Colorado are the front runners in implementing the type of apprenticeship program in the U.S. that is working so well in Switzerland, Caves adds.

Becker says the Indiana contingent worked together for eight to 12 hours a day during the week in Switzerland. “We stayed up late and got up early, and we weren’t talking about Switzerland tourism attractions or what was going on at home. We were researching and talking about apprenticeships. I’m as excited about this as anything I’ve ever done.”

Fellow attendee Melissa Proffitt, a partner with Ice Miller, says that enthusiasm stems from the fact that this apprenticeship model addresses one of Indiana’s biggest business shortcomings.

“One of the most significant problems we have in this state is a weakening of our talent pipeline for businesses,” she expresses. “It doesn’t matter how many businesses you retain or how many new businesses you bring to your state if you don’t have the talent they need to be involved in their business.”

“The whole point of this Swiss apprenticeship model is that the businesses become part of the educational component. The businesses write the curriculum for the students to come and work for them and basically intern for them while they’re in high school and college.”

## How the model works

Some trip goers held the common view many Americans have regarding career and technical education and apprenticeships – that it’s for students who train for a trade and ends their schooling.

“I’ve had many family members in the trades, and every single one of

them went through an apprenticeship,” relates IU Health CEO Dennis Murphy. “So, I did have in my mind a preconceived notion. (But) Switzerland has a massively different definition that it’s really about a pipeline into every kind of profession.”

Around the age of 15, Swiss students face an important choice at the end of their compulsory schooling. They can either move on to a VET program or continue their education in preparation for college. Approximately 70% of Swiss students choose to do an apprenticeship, and only 25% choose a traditional university pathway.

Curdin Duschletta, a former apprentice who is now the managing director of Community Affairs Switzerland, says that countries should not look to the Swiss model to lower their youth unemployment rate and get “kids off the streets.” Instead, he says, “the model builds up the next generation and creates innovators.”

Swiss students can choose from 250 career paths, including health care, communications, banking and finance, advanced manufacturing and technology.

This dual-track approach offers flexibility throughout the apprenticeship program. After gaining their certificates, apprentices can take additional professional training or enroll at a college, which offers federally recognized programs in fields like engineering, hospitality and health care.

Apprentices also can prepare for the Federal Vocational Baccalaureate which gives access to Universities of Applied Sciences and Arts, Switzerland’s more practically orientated institutions, which are mostly attended by qualified apprentices. A further exam gives them access to academic universities.

Perhaps the most critical aspect of the apprenticeship program is the corporate involvement and the return on investment Swiss companies get from participating in the program.

Caves says outsiders who come to learn from the Swiss system are often surprised at how productive working teenagers can be. “If the companies that participate in this don’t realize a return, this is not sustainable,” she remarks.

For the first 12 to 24 months, Caves admits the apprentices require much training and don’t make their employers much – if any – money. But through four years with an apprentice, she continues, the employers on average earn an 8% return on their investment in that teen employee.

“Your kids behave better at someone else’s home than your own,” says Sen. Bray, who has 15- and 18-year-old children. “If you put kids



Apprentices are already utilized by select organizations in Indiana, including the Indianapolis International Airport. Hoosier leaders expect that to increase in the coming years.

in an environment where a lot is expected of them, they often rise to the occasion. That's exactly what the people in Switzerland found. The young apprentices we met were truly impressive."

Bray agrees any system implemented in Indiana must make financial sense for the employers involved. "Without that, companies simply aren't going to participate."

What's more, the program cannot be government subsidized, he insists. "Under no circumstances is the government to pay the companies to train these kids. Companies must do this willingly and see the value in it."

## No copycatting

The Indiana delegation believes the apprenticeship program brought to Indiana can be modeled after the Swiss system but must be tailored to the needs here.

"No copying and pasting ever," Caves states. "It won't work that way. However, states or regions in the U.S. can take this information and figure out how this can work (there). The U.S. needs to figure out ... what can work if they can have a permeable education system. Permeability is necessary but not good enough all by itself. You need high-quality programs with work-based learning where employers have power over the system."

Bray assures, "We're not going to put a system in place that looks exactly like Switzerland's. It's going to be Indiana-centric."

He then points to one of the things that he found "was super promising" in the Switzerland model. "When you look at our workforce, one of the most challenging parts of our workforce is 18 to 25 year olds. We have to find a way to reach an awful lot of kids, and this seems to be a way of doing it."

"Another thing it does is pull kids into the workforce gradually. It works them in from 15 or 16 years old, and it's a much better onboarding system."

## Making the push

While Bray says House Enrolled Act 1002, which passed last year, "kind of puts a framework in place, allowing kids to get out of school, get into the workforce and get school credit. We're looking at what else is needed as a framework."

He and Behning expect apprenticeships to be a priority during this year's General Assembly. Behning is so excited about the prospect, he notes: "I have language drafted that creates this qualification framework in a statute."

Additionally, other lawmakers who



Apprenticeships in Switzerland are available in a wide range of industries including advanced manufacturing and technology fields.

returned to the Statehouse in January are already looking to make enhancements to HEA 1002. Among other things, the law established the career scholarship account fund to provide money students in 10th, 11th and 12th grades can use toward apprenticeships, applied and work-based learning and other postsecondary credentials.

The program isn't set to fully roll out until the 2025-26 school year, but the law's author, Rep. Chuck Goodrich, has filed a bill to make some changes and additions to the program. This year's House Bill 1001 would clarify that career funds can be used for costs related to obtaining a driver's license and allows recipients to use money obtained from the state's 21st Century Scholars Program – currently set up to provide college scholarships – for training by an approved intermediary, employer or labor organization.

But a lot more would be needed to put a system in place that mirrors the one in Switzerland.

Bray says: "We have to have buy-in from public schools, higher education and industry. Industry is a real key. We have to make our case. We have to start with a handful of industries and make sure this goes beyond traditional trades."

The Indiana group that went to Switzerland continues to meet, and Caves and her boss, professor Ursula Renold – who was involved in crafting Switzerland's apprenticeship program, are coming to Indiana to consult on a VET system here in April, according to Behning. "The work on this is truly starting,"

he says. "The committees to make this happen have pretty much been established."

Still, things take time and challenges remain. Becker says the biggest of those is "logistics."

"That will be the toughest part," he expounds. "Countries like Switzerland have better mass transit. That will be a difficult issue here – making sure the apprentices can get to their jobs. We also must put the school accreditation piece together and have to get companies lined up to participate."

Steering an apprenticeship program around extra-curricular activities like sports and band also is an issue. Those school-sponsored extra-curriculars aren't as prevalent in Switzerland.

The group that went to Switzerland is intent on making this a statewide program, though lining up all the schools, government officials and companies throughout the state could take years.

Becker, who along with Fiddian-Green is co-chairing a coalition that just launched an Implementation Lab to develop a statewide youth apprenticeship system in Indiana, is undaunted.

"Indiana had one of the largest delegations to ever show up in Switzerland ... It was an absolute who's who," Becker notes. "I told them, we have the right people in the room, and this is our shot to make this work. This is a five-to 10-year journey, but it needs to start now."

"We must take this shot to help all of Indiana. We absolutely have to go big with this."

**RESOURCES:** David Becker, First Internet Bank, at [www.firstib.com](http://www.firstib.com) | Rep. Bob Behning, Indiana House of Representatives, at [www.indianahousererepublicans.com](http://www.indianahousererepublicans.com) | Sen. Rodric Bray, Indiana Senate, at [www.indianasenaterepublicans.com](http://www.indianasenaterepublicans.com) | Katie Caves, CEMETS, at [cemets.ethz.ch](http://cemets.ethz.ch) | Claire Fiddian-Green, Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation, at [www.rmff.org](http://www.rmff.org) | Dennis Murphy, IU Health, at [www.iuhealth.org](http://www.iuhealth.org) | Melissa Proffitt, Ice Miller, at [www.icemiller.com](http://www.icemiller.com)