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New Report: The Secret to Switzerland's Continued Economic Success: World-Class Vocational Education & Training

Washington, D.C.- At more than \$80,000, Switzerland's per capita income is the 3rd highest in Europe and the 4th highest in the world. Switzerland is home to one of the world's most innovative economies and its unemployment rate rests comfortably below 4 percent. All of this in a nation that produces comparatively few university graduates. In an era marked by increasing competition, automation, and globalization, what is the secret to Switzerland's success? According to a new report from researchers at the Center on International Education Benchmarking (CIEB) of the U.S.-based National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), Switzerland's vocational education and training (VET) system, one of the strongest in the world, is a very important contributor to that country's economic success.

In the report, *Gold Standard: The Swiss Vocational Education and Training System*, authors Nancy Hoffman of Jobs for the Future and Robert Schwartz of the Harvard Graduate School of Education shed new light on the Swiss VET system, how businesses play—and benefit from—a central role in the training of a highly skilled workforce, and the seamless connections between VET and the broader Swiss education system.

With 70% of young people participating, the Swiss VET system is not only held in high esteem by the public, it is also a critical component of the Swiss economic engine. The system prepares a wide cross-section of students—including many high achievers—for an expansive range of occupations, including in information technology, advanced manufacturing and healthcare, as well as the traditional trades and crafts. The system also seamlessly connects young people with careers in white-collar and blue-collar jobs through a robust apprenticeship system, keeping youth unemployment rates low: a rare accomplishment, according to the report's authors.

While U.S. companies largely avoid collaborative training programs for fear of trainee poaching and the resulting lost investment, each Swiss industry sector partners with the State Secretariat for Education, Research, and Innovation to develop industry qualifications and assessments, training curriculum, and additional course work for students during their upper secondary vocational education. The system produces highly skilled, ready-to-work new employees for Swiss businesses, serving as a real and important economic incentive for businesses to participate. Indeed, according to the report's authors, this is vital to the continued strength of the Swiss economy as Switzerland's small size and dearth of natural resources makes it dependent on the production of world-leading services and material goods.

The authors also found that the Swiss VET system enjoys broad-based support and enrollment because it is especially attractive to the nation's young people for the following reasons:

- It immediately puts young people in a setting with adults, where they are treated differently than in school and given more responsibility, coupled with ample coaching and support.
- The learning is much more hands-on, contextualized, and applied: academic concepts are made real.
- Students are paid while they are learning, typically the equivalent of about \$600- \$700 a month to begin, growing to \$1,100- \$1,200 by the third year, and this for three to four days of work a week at the most.
- And at the end of the apprenticeship they have a nationally recognized qualification that is portable, and the opportunity to move directly into full-time employment or to continue on into higher education

And, unlike in some other countries, the Swiss system intentionally provides a number of crosswalks and points of transfer to allow students to move between academic and vocational studies as well as from VET on to higher education at a university of applied sciences. Because of this, employees beginning their careers on the factory floor or in a bank have a real chance to one day move up the corporate ladder by pursuing further education and advanced qualifications.

Despite the fact that the Swiss VET system enjoys widespread participation and respect, it does face threats to its continued success. With an aging population and recent moves to cap immigration, combined with a fear that over time Swiss parents will succumb to the view that their children would be better served through the country's academic upper secondary and traditional university pathways, the potential for the Swiss VET system to see the declines in enrollment witnessed by the German and Danish VET systems is a real concern for Swiss government and industry leaders alike.

Gold Standard: The Swiss Vocational Education and Training System is the third report in a four-part international comparative study of vocational and technical education systems aimed at informing the efforts underway in many countries to redesign vocational education and training systems for the 21st century. Other titles in this series include [*The Phoenix: Vocational Education and Training in Singapore*](#), [*Made in China: Challenge and Innovation in China's Vocational Education and Training System*](#), and a forthcoming report on vocational and technical education in the United States.