

## Real-World Skills in the Classroom

Amanda Ripley

Amanda Ripley, a journalist and an Emerson fellow, is the author of "The Smartest Kids in the World -- and How They Got That Way."

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It's not about time; it's about relevance.

Each year, nearly one in four American teenagers drops out of high school. Twenty other countries now have higher high-school graduation rates. This makes no sense. Of all the countries in the world, the United States is one of the worst places to be a high-school dropout. The unemployment rate for recent dropouts is 50 percent. Without a diploma, you can't work as a garbage collector in New York City; you can't join the Air Force.

So why do so many American kids still drop out of high school? One reason is that they don't see the point. In one large survey of high school dropouts, about half cited uninteresting classes as a major reason for their decision. Four out of five said they wished they'd had more opportunity to do real-world learning in high school.

After spending a year following three American teenagers who had a chance to attend high school in countries with much higher graduation rates, I have started to think that we could do a better job of getting our kids to buy into the premise of school. But it's not about how long school lasts. It's about how challenging and relevant school is on a daily basis.

What's compelling about P-Tech is that school is tied directly to an interesting job. Graduates are first in line for jobs at IBM. Students can move at their own pace, and many are on track to graduate with an associate's degree in fewer than six years. Teenagers, like adults, are motivated by the chance to prove their mastery of a subject or skill — and move on.

By contrast, most American kids experience a very slow, expensive and turbulent transition from high school to a job. Very few of them, compared with students in other countries, attend high-quality vocational programs tightly aligned with industry needs. Vocational students in America spend less than a quarter of their time in actual workplaces — while their peers in Switzerland, Norway and Denmark spend half to three-quarters of their schooling in work placements.

That kind of vivid experience helps kids see into the future; they can connect the dots between what they are doing in school and how interesting their lives can be. As one American exchange student to Finland told me, "I got the feeling that Finnish

students saw school not as something to endure, but something from which they stood to benefit.”

America abandoned vocational high schools for good reason, decades ago: too many were second-rate warehouses for minority and low-income kids. But now that all decent jobs require higher-order skills, there's an opportunity to get this right. American employers want higher-order skills, and American teenagers want more interesting work. The sooner they get together, the better.