

The Education System in Germany

At a recent ESHA meeting held in Budapest Hungary, Dr Burkhard Mielke, the National Coordinator for ESHA Germany, delivered a very interesting and comprehensive overview of the educational system in Germany. This article is an adaptation of his speech.

I think it is extremely useful to have an organisation like the European School Heads Association (ESHA) to provide the possibility to meet and to discuss and exchange our opinions on educational questions. We all know the results of the PISA study and it is a pleasure for me to hear about successful systems in other countries, for example Finland, which emerged at the top of the scales. And we are all interested in learning from the best school systems in the world.

Considering this, it is not easy for me to represent the German school system after PISA, because our results are not as good as we expected them to be. But our PISA results are only one important aspect on the way to a more efficient school system. Besides being successful at these tests, we have to try to achieve a similar level for the schools in all European countries, because our students will soon work not only in their own countries, but on an international basis. They will be in tough competition for jobs all over Europe and therefore we need comparable conditions of learning and the mutual acceptance of qualifications or final exams in all European countries.

This is one of the most important ESHA goals. And we as principals and members of this European Confederation of Principals – we, above all, have to define the role of the principals in Europe, because we will be responsible for the development of schools. Our leadership will be essential for the academic future of the European Community. What we realized on our ESHA meetings is that we don't have sufficient information and knowledge about the education systems of the other European Countries. If we don't understand the different systems, the different ways of funding or financing and the different political frames, we cannot reach our goal.

I will do my best to bring some light to a very complex system and I will start by explaining the Basic Structure of education in the Federal Republic of Germany.

The last time I tried to explain the very complicated German school system was last autumn, for ESHA France in Toulon. France is a centralised country with similar conditions for schools in the whole country and we discussed whether it would be better to work in a more decentralised system. The German system is decentralized, but it is so complicated and different in each state of the country that even experts have problems understanding it, especially after the German reunification in 1990.

In contrast to a centralised system, the responsibility for our education system is determined by the federal structure of our state. The Federal Republic of Germany consists of 16 "Länder", 16 federal states or counties.



On this map, you see the 16 federal states of Germany and every state has an independent Ministry of Education. The Federal Government in Berlin has no real influence on the education system, because the states are responsible for it. This is part of the autonomy of the federal states – and this autonomy is guaranteed by our Constitution.

In the German Constitution, only fundamental provisions are guaranteed, for example the freedom of art and scholarship, research and teaching, free choice of profession, freedom of faith and creed, equality before the law, the rights of parents and the law that the entire school system is under supervision of the state.

The states - in respect of these fundamental laws –have the right to legislate. The result is that we have 16 more or less different school systems in Germany – a decentralized system with enormous differences from state to state. Sometimes it is easier to change school from Germany to another European country than from Bavaria to Hamburg.

The necessary regulations between the 16 federal States are in the responsibility of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs who meet several times a year. You can imagine how efficient these meetings are when the ministers of different political parties try to find common ground.

I will not enumerate all types of schools and describe the differences. In the following you see an incomplete list of different types of schools we have in Germany and I believe that you will understand – even though it is in German – how complicated it is to achieve similar standards.

Förderstufe, Orientierungsstufe, Mittelschule, Regelschule, Sekundarschule, Erweiterte Realschule, Integrierte Haupt- und Realschule, Verbundene Haupt- und Realschule, Regionale Schule, Wirtschaftsschule, Mittelschule, Sekundarschule, Regelschule, Erweiterte Realschule, Verbundene

Haupt- und Realschule, Integrierte Haupt- und Realschule and Regionale Schule, Berufliches Gymnasium Fachgymnasium, Berufsoberschule, Berufskolleg, Fachakademie, Sonderschule, Hauptschule, Realschule and Gymnasium, Gesamtschulen,

But there are some general structures in all 16 federal states.:

- pre-school education
- primary education
- secondary education
- tertiary education
- continuing education.

General Compulsory Schooling begins for all children at the age of six and ends after nine or 10 years. As in other European countries all children attend primary school together, but then - and this is the main difference - they are separated in the majority of the states and they are sent to three different types of Schools – Hauptschule-Realschule-Gymnasium. This is a selective system which separates children at the age of 10. They are sent to these schools on the basis of their grades they achieve at the end of their primary education (4 years). It also depends on which level of performance the teachers expect from the students.

-Besides this, there are comprehensive schools in some states which started to reform the old system in 1970. But political and ideological forces tried - and are still trying today - to prevent any reform of the old system. Structure of the education system and of courses of education

There are many different ways within a complex system from Kindergarten to primary school, secondary and tertiary school to University or through vocational schools to the different non-academic professions. Till the end of the Primary school, the students are taught together, then we separate them when they are about ten years old. After the 9th or tenth grade we separate the students again. 60 to 65 % of them will leave the lower secondary schools to continue in the upper secondary education - in the so called "Dual"System, where vocational schools and the industry work together. The other 35 to 40 % will attend the "Gymnasiale Oberstufe" for 3 years to leave school with the Abitur (graduate). These students have the right to go to university.

II. The Triangle or how Government, Communities and Schools Work Together

Within the states, there is a structure of responsibility for schools between the states, the cities and the school. I will explain this system by using the state I work in - North Rhine – Westphalia, as an example. It is a very important state, because it has the largest population of all federal states in Germany.

To understand the system, imagine a musical instrument you all know from your childhood: the triangle. The three sides of this instrument are: the government, the cities/communities (school districts) and the principals.

1. The responsibility of the government for the schools

The laws for the schools are made by parliament and the political majority. They are controlled by the Ministry of Education. The government is responsible for the salaries, for hiring the teachers, for the school programmes and the evaluation, the curricula and the quality and control of the final exams. To execute this, our state North Rhine-Westphalia is divided into 5 regions with regional governments. They advise and control the schools through inspectors.

2. The communities / school districts

These communities – also dependant on the political majority - are responsible for all outer school affairs which have nothing to do with the contents of teaching (inner school affairs). That means: they provide the budget for construction and conservation and renovation of the buildings, all teaching materials, secretaries and caretakers.

They have the right to found and to close schools.

In the process of school reform, everything depends of the will of the changing political majority on the communal level. This majority decides whether schools can be reformed or not.

3. The principals and the schools

In the past, principals were only the “first teachers” of their schools. Nowadays the situation has changed essentially and the German principals are gradually on their way to be the heads of increasingly autonomous schools, to be no longer “primus inter pares” but managers of their institutions. They have the responsibility for the development and the success of their schools, the budget, recruiting of the staff etc.

To return to the picture of the triangle, the principals have to be able to play various scores on this instrument—together with the community against the government or together with the government against the community. They have to use the press and the influence of parents, institutions and organisations to reach the best possible result for their schools

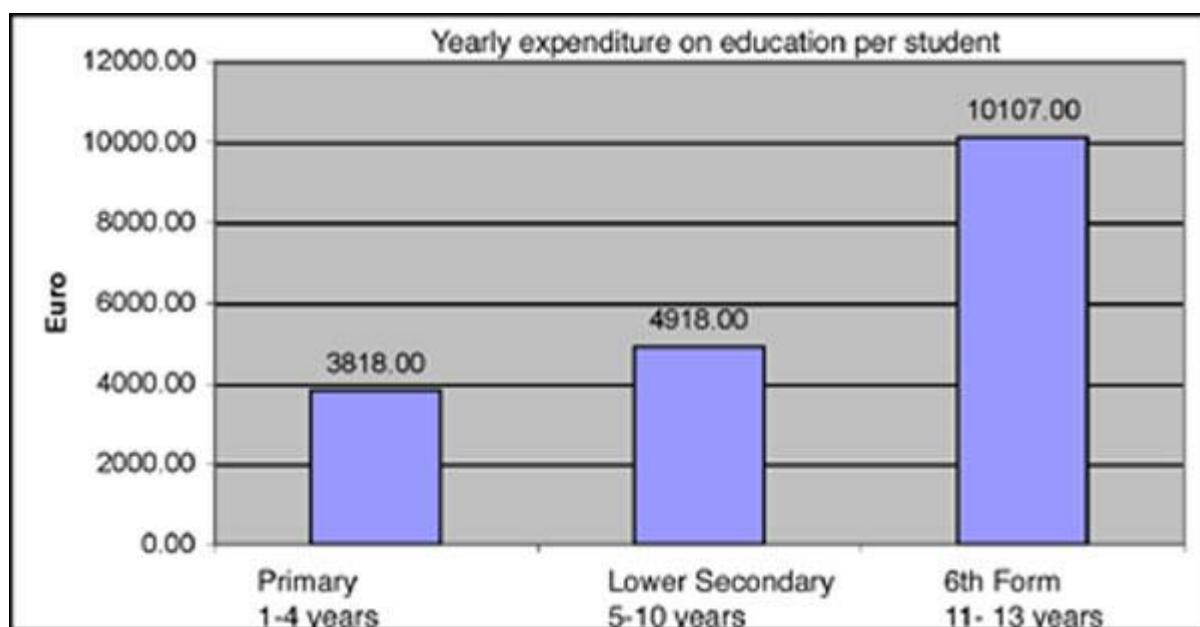
This is the principal’s position in a federal and decentralized country.

III. Funding in Education Expenditures on Education in the Federal Republic of Germany

On average, Germany spends 5.6 percent of the gross national product, i.e. some thirty billion euros, on education. This amount of money contains the expenditures on the following items:

- colleges and universities, schools and vocational schools
- research
- salaries for professors, assistant lecturers, teachers and administrative officials and assistants
- teaching materials
- equipment of faculty and department rooms

The average expenditure on schools is distributed among the different schools as follows:



The financing of a school is mainly based on the following three pillars:

- the respective “Bundesland” (federal state or county)
- the local authority
- the parents

The basis for the figures mentioned below is the Bundesland North Rhine-Westphalia.

This information can also be applied to the other “Bundesländer” (states)

Expenditure on school education incl. Vocational schools			
	“Bundesländer”	Local Authorities	Parents
Tasks	Teachers Salararies Teaching Materials School Books Contributions to local Authorities Further Education School Board	Maintenance of Buildings inc.caretaker School Administration Fares and travel costs equipment of schools	School Books School Bags exercise books Travel cost for class trips Voluntary Donations
Average Expenditure per Student	5,416 euros	250 euros	100 euros
Total Expenditure	16,857 million euros	48.1 million euros	19.2 million euros
Percentage	99.6%	0.28%	0.11%

The expenditures of the local authorities vary considerably. The numbers chart above are on the lower level of the scale. Due to the renovation of buildings caused by the pollution level and the new fire safety measures the expenditures per student can rise. However, so far it has not been clarified yet whether or not a re-financing through a “Bundesland” is possible.

Conclusion

I hope that I could give you an overview on the conditions for schools in Germany. A memory of the ESHA Meeting in Toulon : their former president Mark Sackur wrote in the announcement of the conference: “Je suis pour ma part un ferme partisan d'une gestion plus décentralisée...et d'une plus grande autonomie” (I am a strong partisan of a decentralised system and more autonomy). As for me, I am convinced that he is right, but we in Germany sometimes – but only sometimes -dream of a little bit more centralism – but only a little bit. I think this dream is caused by a system that is too strongly decentralised and dominated by political parties. That leads to immobility and hinders every real attempt of school reform. So German politicians dream in vain of Finland's Pisa study results within the traditional German school system. This is not possible without a fundamental reform and I think we need more tests like PISA and more international exchange and information to be able to join the leading schools in Europe again.

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