

German Schools: Creating Social Division or Reflecting It?

Critics say Germany's educational system is far from egalitarian

Chancellor Merkel wants to hold a high-level integration summit after last month's crisis at a Berlin school whose pupils are mainly from immigrant families. Who's to blame? The parents or the school system? Or both?

Politicians of all stripes agree on one thing: the equally gifted child from a working class immigrant background should have the same chance to enter university as the son of a dentist. Since police were brought in to control violence at a Berlin *hauptschule* where over 80 percent of pupils come from Muslim immigrant families the question of what can be done to remedy such social inequities has become a political hot potato.

Hauptschule is the lowest rung in a three-tier educational system that tracks pupils according to academic performance by age 10. Critics say it is a dumping ground for social misfits and migrant children with poor language skills. Some would like to see the entire system overhauled.

"Back in the industrial age, the tripartite system worked, since the goal was to maximize the academic potential of only a few, but it has no place in a modern society," said Andreas Schleicher, an education expert at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris.

Educational system reflects society

"Migrants are not more stupid. There is too little being done to push language competence. We need to ask ourselves, how can we support the child individually?" added Schleicher.

In Germany, those from more affluent families are at least four times more likely to achieve the *abitur*, the diploma that is the ticket to higher education. Family background has always played a critical role in achievement in every industrial nation, according to Heinz-Peter Meidinger, head of Deutsche Philologenverband, an association of *gymnasium* teachers. The gymnasium is the most academically demanding path and leads to the abitur.

"The educational system is not the cause of problems, but reflects society as a whole. In Germany, we have a terrible integration problem, which is in part due to the type of immigrant who came here," said Meidinger.

In the 1950s, postwar Germany needed low-skilled labor for its Wirtschaftswunder, and imported guest workers, largely from Turkey, who were supposed to go home, but many didn't. "Germany has reacted far too late to the reality that we have this ethnic underclass that is here to stay, and too little is being done to integrate those who have been here for generations," said Klaus Bade, a professor at the Institute for Migration Research at Osnabrück University. The main problem of integration has to do with poverty and poor education, according to Bade.

Parental support essential

Investing in education is a place to start. "We need more teachers, smaller classes, full-day schools and to get away from the mentality that you get rid of the problem by getting rid of the kid," said Bade.

At the primary level, most German schools are open only long enough to send a child home for a hot lunch. Parents are expected to help with homework, with some investing in tutoring if a child has a learning problem, so that a mediocre pupil with home support still stands a better chance of entering gymnasium than a brighter child from a poor migrant family.

"There are so many pupils from families who offer no support whatsoever. So many parents couldn't care less," said Barbara Brüse, a primary school teacher in Bonn who has spent decades teaching immigrant children.

Parents can even be counterproductive when faced with a bright child. Only 36 percent of migrant children who have the smarts to attend gymnasium do so, according to Heinz-Peter Meidinger. "There is resistance to sending girls in particular, because the attitude is: what does she need an education for?"

Is a good education so unimportant to migrant families? "Our educational system should have the ambition to change those values," concluded Andreas Schleicher.

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