**The German School System**

**From Kita to Uni**

The education system in Germany varies from state to state, although the basic K-12 system is fairly uniform. As in the US, education is the responsibility of each of the 16 German states (*Bundesländer*), but there is a national conference of state education ministers (*Kultusministerkonferenz*, KMK) that serves to coordinate educational practices at the national level. However, there is still a lot of variation in the school systems across Germany.

**GENERAL OVERVIEW**

Compared to the United States, the German primary and secondary school system is a rather complicated one in which there are sometimes as many as five different kinds of secondary schools (usually starting at grade 5) and various paths leading to academic higher education, advanced technical training or a trade.

In addition to Germany’s extensive public school system, there are also some private and parochial schools, but far fewer than in the US and most other countries. Among the private schools, Montessori, Waldorf, Jena and other alternative education models are popular. But in all of Germany, a country of 80 million people, there are only about 2,500 private and parochial schools, including boarding schools (*Internate*).

**Compulsory School Attendance**  
Part of the reason for the lack of private or church schools is the German conviction that public education is a vital element that contributes to a well-educated citizenry and a sense of common purpose. Germany has a compulsory school attendance law. The law requires school attendance (*Schulpflicht*), not just instruction, from age 6 until age 15. This helps explain why homeschooling is illegal in Germany.

**The German Educational Class System**  
Although most Germans claim to be against elitism and favoring any social class, their entire educational system is basically a three-class system that divides students into three different tracks: (1) *Gymnasium* for bright students headed for college, (2) *Realschule* for the next step down, kids headed for average or better white-collar positions, and (3) *Hauptschule* for the bottom tier, generally aimed at the trades and blue-collar jobs. By the age of 10 most pupils in Germany have been put on one of these three educational tracks. Although it is possible to switch tracks, this is not very common.

**The School Day in Germany**  
Traditionally, the German school day has started at 8:00 a.m. and finished at 1:00 or 2:00 p.m. – and that is often still the case. But in recent years, some schools in Germany have started offering a full day of education (*Ganztagsschule*). They offer study hours for homework, extracurricular activities and a hot lunch at the cafeteria. Since most German schools never had a cafeteria, this often requires new construction to provide them.

**Class Schedule**  
German secondary schools have a class schedule that resembles a US college schedule, with different classes offered each day. Some subjects are taught three days per week, with others taught only twice a week. On Monday a typical schedule might offer four 45-minute classes (and sometimes double 90-minute classes) in (1) math, (2) history, (3) art and (4) English, while on Tuesday a student might have five classes: (1) German, (2) religion, (3) calculus, (4) French and (5) PE. There are also break periods, usually a short and a long break (*große Pause*), during the school day. Most students eat lunch at home, since schools usually have no cafeteria, and the school day ends fairly early. Although there is some physical education, German schools are more academic in nature. Competitive sporting events between schools are rare. Athletics is usually done outside of school by belonging to a sports club.

For a long time in many parts of Germany the school week included Saturday. In the 1980s schools in Baden-Württemberg still had classes every other Saturday. In East Germany Saturday was a school day nationwide. Since the early 1990s most German school students, including those in Baden-Württemberg, have enjoyed a full weekend. Only a very few local schools still have Saturday classes (*Samstagsunterricht*).

Now let’s look at the various types of schools in Germany.

**Preschools in Germany**  
Surprisingly, in the land that invented the kindergarten, preschool education is not part of the public education system. Most preschools or daycare centers for young children in Germany are run by churches or other non-profit organizations. The federal government does provide some funding to the states, but despite new laws that “guarantee” at least half-day childcare for children between the ages of one and three, there are not enough places available. Efforts to increase the availability of childcare have been hindered by a lack of funding, plus a lack of trained staff. Less than a third of three-year-olds in Germany had access to daycare in 2012.

The German preschool system varies from state to state, but in general it works this way:

* **Kinderkrippe** (literally, “crib” or “crèche”) – For ages eight weeks to three years.
* **Kita** (short for *Kindertagesstätte* (children’s daycare center) – For ages 3-6, open from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. or later.
* **Kindergarten** – For ages 3-6; half-day or full-day kindergarten.
* **Hort** or **Schulhort** – Provides after-school daycare for elementary school pupils.

Finding a place for your preschooler can be difficult, since there are also many other parents trying to find a good Kita or kindergarten. The better facilities tend to fill fast, so it is necessary to plan ahead. Finding a place for your child often depends on where you live. Getting your child into a good facility near where you live is considered a wonderful stroke of luck.

**Elementary Schools in Germany**  
After preschool, German pupils attend primary school (*Grundschule*, “basic school,” grades 1-4). Compulsory school attendance *Schulpflicht* starts in September after a child has turned six. All students attend elementary school from grade one to grade four in most states. Before beginning the fifth grade (seventh in Berlin/Brandenburg), students and their parents must choose the type of secondary school they will attend, in other words, which educational track they will be on.

The majority of children attend a public elementary school in their neighborhood. As in the US, schools in affluent areas tend to be better than those in less-affluent areas. In bigger cities students “with a migratory background” (as the Germans refer to immigrant Turks and other non-Germans migrants) often lower the quality of education in schools with a high percentage of foreign students. Efforts to combat this inequality have met with limited success.

**Secondary Schools in Germany**  
After completing their primary education (at 10 years of age, 12 in Berlin and Brandenburg), children attend one of five types of secondary schools in Germany. The five kinds of schools vary from state to state in Germany:

**Hauptschule** (HOWPT-shoo-luh, grades 5-9 or 5-10)  
The *Hauptschule* is generally considered the least demanding of the five types of secondary school, but it may be very appropriate for students who wish to enter the trades or go through an apprenticeship for certain types of industrial employment. The Hauptschule prepares pupils for vocational education, and most of the pupils work part-time as apprentices. Upon completion of the final *Hauptschulabschluss* examination, after grade 9 or 10. They also have the option of earning the more prestigious *Realschulabschluss* after grade 10. With that, the next step is often a *Berufsschule*, an advanced technical/vocational school with a two-year course of apprenticeship and study.

**Realschule** (ray-ALL-shoo-luh, grades 5-10)  
This is the most popular type of secondary school in Germany. About 40 percent of German pupils attend this kind of school. The *Realschule* may be a step below the *Gymnasium* (more below), but it can be a very good school, with academic standards that usually exceed those of a typical high school in the US. For instance, Realschule students must study at least one foreign language (usually English or French) for a minimum of five years. (In Gymnasium a second foreign language is required.) Graduates earn a *Realschulabschluss* diploma. In some communities a Realschule and a Gymnasium may share the same building, with a common library, and other common facilites.

**Mittelschule** (MIT-tel-shoo-luh, grades 5-10)  
Only some German states have this type of intermediate school (grades 6-10) that combines the Hauptschule and Realschule tracks.

**Gymnasium** (ghim-NAH-zee-uhm, grades 5-12 or 5-13)  
The German *Gymnasium* is an academic secondary school that prepares pupils for a university education. It begins with the fifth grade (seventh in Berlin/Brandenburg). After grade 12 or 13 (depending on the state), students earn a diploma called *das Abitur* by passing an oral and written examination. The Gymnasium has a long history, dating back to 1528 in Saxony. Traditionally there was a heavy emphasis on the study of Latin and Greek, but modern languages are favored today. Until the 1970s there were separate *Gymnasien* for boys and girls. Nowadays they are co-ed. The Gymnasium curriculum is highly academic, with two foreign languages required, plus higher math and science courses. Students also have the option of taking more advanced “honors” courses (*Leistungskurse*).

Any student with an “Abi” diploma from a Gymnasium must be admitted to a German university, but there are no guarantees concerning the field of study. Popular fields such a law and medicine are very competitive. Students often have to choose a second or third choice for their major, or have to enroll in a more distant university than they might prefer.

**Gesamtschule** (guh-SAHMT-shoo-luh, grades 5-12 or 5-13)  
Only some German states have this kind of school, which combines the three school types into a comprehensive school that is similar to an American high school. Even after parents have decided which school type they prefer, there remains another choice, at least in larger communities. In a typical city of even average size, there may be a choice of five or more *Gymnasien* or *Realschulen* in the area. Unlike in the US, students are not zoned to a school in their neighborhood or district. Students and their parents have a choice of any school that will accept the student.

SOME US vs GERMANY SCHOOL DIFFERENCES

**The Grading System**  
The German grading scale runs from 1 to 6, with one being the best grade (A) and six the worst (F). Poor grades in several subjects can result in a student having to repeat an entire school year.  
**Class Schedule**  
A German class schedule is not the same every day. More like a college schedule, with some classes three times a week, while others are only two days a week.  
**School Days**  
German students attend school for 220 days in an academic year. The school year in the US lasts 180 days. German students only get a six-week summer vacation, but they have more frequent vacation breaks during the school year.  
**School Vacation Dates**  
In order to avoid massive traffic jams, German schools in the 16 states have a staggered vacation (*Ferien*) schedule that rotates each year. One year schools in Berlin may begin their summer vacation in June, while those in Bavaria begin in July. Another year it may be the reverse.  
**No Substitute Teachers**  
If a teacher is absent, there is no class that day, or the class is taught by a colleague who has a free period. Substitutes (*Ersatzlehrer*) are only hired for lengthy absences.  
**School Trips**  
School trips are often more ambitious and more extensive than in the US. A typical English class in Germany might have an annual trip by bus to London with their teachers for a week or ten days, staying in youth hostels.

**No Hall Passes, No Study Hall**  
If a student has a free period, she is free to do whatever she wants during that time. There are usually no study halls (except in a Ganztagsschule) or hall passes. German secondary students are not treated like babies. They are expected to be responsible.  
**Klassenlehrer**  
Beginning in the fifth grade in a Gymnasium (seventh for other school types), students are grouped into “homerooms” with a particular teacher *Klassenlehrer*. They stay together for the rest of their school years.  
**No School Bus**  
Although there may be school buses in some rural areas, in most German cities and towns, pupils walk or use public transportation to get to and from school.

**Berufsschule**  
Usually the *Berufsschule* (vocational school, technical school) is not part of the normal German public school system, but is financed and supervised by the federal government in conjunction with industrial groups (chambers of commerce/trade) and trade unions. As part of a concept known as “duale Berufsbildung” (dual vocational education), in which businesses and schools work together, a Berufsschule combines academic study with an apprenticeship. In most cases, students must have a diploma from a Realschule or Mittelschule in order to be accepted by a Berufsschule, which usually has a two- or three-year course of study. Successful tech school graduates are certified in a certain trade or industrial field. With the increasing sophistication of manufacturing and other fields, Germany’s technical schools help fill an educational gap in a way that the US and other nations could learn from. Austria and Switzerland also have their own dual education vocational programs.

**Higher Education in Germany**

Up until recently university attendance in Germany has been tuition free. That is such an embedded German tradition, that when seven states (between 2004 and 2007) introduced very modest tuition fees (*Studiengebühren*) of 500 euros, or about $650 per semester, there were mass protests. By 2013 only Lower Saxony (*Niedersachsen*) still had university tuition fees. Bavaria recently dropped them, and now Lower Saxony, the last holdout, has dropped its tuition fees, starting in 2015.

So a German university education continues to be tuition free. (Non-German exchange students may have to pay fees for some programs.) Students usually have to pay only for textbooks, certain administrative fees, and for room and board. However, most states continue to assess a so-called *Semesterbeitrag* (semester fee) that ranges from about 50 to 300 euros. In some states if a student’s studies exceed four semesters, there is a special tuition charge of 500 to 800 euros per each additional semester. Tuition policies in Germany depend in large measure on which political party (or parties) has control of the state legislature (*Landtag*). In general the conservative CDU/CSU party and the FDP (Free Democrats) are in favor of tuition fees, while the Greens and the SPD (Social Democrats) oppose tuition for entering students. The Linke (Left) party opposes any tuition fees, and none of the states in what was once East Germany has even attempted to introduce tuition.

As of 2013, there were a total of 427 institutions of higher learning in Germany. Besides 108 universities (Universitäten), there were six teachers colleges (pädagogische Hochschulen), 17 theological seminaries (theologische Hochschulen), 52 art colleges (Kunsthochschulen), 215 technical institutes (Fachhochschulen) and 29 state administrative training institutes (Verwaltungsfachhochschulen). Fewer than 100 of these are private institutions.