Germany: New education standards—perfecting the system of social selection

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The conference of German education ministers (*Kultusministerkonferenz*—KMK) has rushed through an agreement on nationwide education standards for the coming school year. Instead of correcting the well-known failings of the German education system, these standards are part of a process that will result in the broad privatisation of the school system. The main feature of the German school system—its function as a means of social selection—is being carried to extremes and perfected.

These educational standards specify skills that students must attain within a certain period. For example, according to the educational standards agreed by the KMK, after 10 years at school a student should know "a spectrum of works appropriate to his age—including literature for young readers—by significant authors" as well as be able "to tell the difference between epic, lyrical and dramatic texts, especially different forms of epic, novella, longer narratives, short stories, novels, drama and poetry." In addition, pupils should be acquainted with "specific media forms such as print and online papers, infotainment, hypertexts, advertising and film." Moreover, they should "be able to recognise and evaluate intentions and effects" as well as "use various means of gaining information in different kinds of media, compare, select and evaluate the information acquired (search strategies)".

It would be an enormous achievement if schools and teachers were in a position to impart such knowledge to *every* pupil. It would also not be wrong to monitor the education system, including teachers and schools, by means of education standards, if that meant seeking out and rectifying weaknesses. It is understandable that those dealing with society's most important asset—its children—should be subject to scrutiny of their work.

This raises many questions concerning both schools and teachers. Can they ensure a good education for all pupils? Do they sufficiently support weaker pupils, or do they avoid their responsibilities by passing weaker pupils on to an inferior school? Which methods are used? How do schools and teachers see themselves? However, in this context it becomes apparent that the effects of education standards on a school system depend upon the ethos of the whole education system, as well as its fundamental values, concepts and aims.

In Scandinavia, where the education system achieved good results in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), education standards largely serve as an orientation—a means of finding any weaknesses that can then be corrected. Education standards, and the fact that they are regularly checked and revised, have the aim of supporting weaker students, as well as scrutinising and revising teaching methods. Although there is no real equality of opportunity in Scandinavia either—poverty and wealth also exist there—the education system nevertheless still serves to mitigate somewhat these contradictions. Schooling for 11- to 16-year-olds is much more unified, formal marking comes only in later classes, students do not have to repeat a year, and there are no expulsions for "poor performance."

In Germany, on the other hand, the education system is more directly a tool of social selection—it is the authority that reinforces social origins at a very early stage. The introduction of education standards, whilst maintaining the fundamental orientation of the education system, will perfect the system of early and continuous selection. In this system, the education standards, and the regular testing accompanying them, will become hurdles that pupils must clear to move up a class, or to pass final exams and go on to a higher school. This is apparent from the fact that education standards are initially being developed for the 10th grade—when an intervention in the student's interests is no longer possible.

The education ministers are keeping a low profile in explaining concretely what should happen with the proposed education standards. Are they designed to provide schools with an orientation or as a means of control? The 16 *Länder* (federal states) aim to check whether individual schools have fulfilled their tasks as set down in the education standards. Will the evaluation of these tests, including advice and suggestions for improvement, be given to the schools—and only the schools? This is the demand being made by education scientists who otherwise fear the worst: namely, that all the results will be published, as in Britain. Are further "reforms" similar to those already implemented in Britain being planned?

A glance at the function of Britain's national education standards makes clear which developments German education scientists fear. In 1998, Tony Blair's Labour government introduced national standards for all schools. Since then, national attainment tests have become a source of torment for both pupils and teachers. Seven- and 11-year-old British pupils must take exams in reading, writing and arithmetic; they are tested again in English and mathematics at the age of 14.

The results of these tests are published each autumn in the form of "league tables." So-called "weak" schools have already been shut down. "Good" schools, on the other hand, attract rich parents. A few months ago, the German weekly *Die Zeit* wrote: "Especially in and around London, property prices react like a seismograph according to the results of the school tests... Good schools are rare in the big city and wherever a school has managed to improve,...ambitious parents

begin to look for a house nearby."

At the same time, the British government has linked teachers' wages to attaining the standards. This measure means that a student with difficulties at school—even if they are only initial or short-term—becomes a financial problem for the individual teacher. Moreover, schools in less well-off districts with a higher proportion of poor families are disadvantaged by this kind of "evaluation." Instead of receiving more funding and personnel because of the difficult conditions they face, they are punished financially. If a school receives bad results in two consecutive years, officials of the local education authority take over the running of the school. According to *Die Zeit*, "Their first task is to get rid of incompetent teachers and disruptive pupils."

The result is increased social inequality within the education system. The differences between high- and low-attaining pupils are increasing, as is the gap between girls and boys. Twenty-five percent of 11-year-olds are inadequate in reading, writing and arithmetic.

The tests are torture for the children. Since a great deal of money is bound up with the results of the tests, the children are put under enormous pressure. For weeks, they are drilled to pass the test. One study showed that one third of the 11-year-olds facing their second test show definite symptoms of stress: crying fits, insomnia, lack of concentration and panic attacks. The teachers are not much better off.

The tests and the publication of the "league tables," which are stressful for everyone involved, now cost £3 million a year (4.32 million euros). This money could be better used by the schools to renovate rundown buildings and replace out-of-date equipment.

Few would openly argue that the German education system should follow the British system, but all indications point in this direction. The introduction of education standards is only one component of extensive plans to change Germany's school system. The Christian Democratic Party (CDU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP) are very explicit in this respect. They regard education standards and national tests to be a means of controlling schools and above all their pupils; and this has one aim: selection.

Once again, the Greens are left to provide an elaborate verbal cover for these policies. In their statements, they have become expert in using pompous phrases and key buzzwords to cover up ugly banalities. In a policy document, the Green Party national education working group explains that it views education standards as "part of a paradigm shift in schools policy." The Greens say this means, amongst other things, "independence and autonomy of schools, reduced curricula, including pedagogical and organisational freedom for schools to raise their profiles," and "internal and external evaluation." The Greens' proposals lead inevitably to the conditions that now exist in Britain.

The Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) coalition in the Berlin city government leads the way on many fronts in Germany, and is already carrying out these policies. Under the name "Autonomous Schools Model Project" (MeS), a mechanism is being tested during the 2003-04 and 2005-06 school years—aimed at driving forward the privatisation of the school system. Last June, the Berlin city legislature selected 28 schools to take part in the model project.

The Berlin city government web site states: "MeS is not about *if* schools should have more autonomy in the future but *how* this autonomy will be developed" (emphasis in original) and "MeS is the main project regarding schools policy for the next years." The Berlin city legislature declares its aim is to "change educational governance by setting standard targets and cost controlling" and warns that "individual schools will be responsible for the financial returns of their educational endeavours."

As in Britain, schools are obliged to develop and implement a school programme and an individual "school profile." These will be measured against the education standards. The sanctions threatening a school that cannot comply with these standards are not mentioned. But since the schools will receive separate budgets for personnel, further education and materials, one need only put two and two together.

Financial "autonomy" is supposed to make schools seek other means of funding. This is the explicit aim of the Berlin "model project." Under the heading, the "Rights" of schools, alongside the separate budgets, there is also mention of the "role as landlord for the utilisation of school buildings," the "recourse to consultation and support systems," and the "selection of school personnel."

The stage is being set for a two-class education system. Schools in wealthier districts have far greater opportunities to use their "autonomy" and "individual responsibility," and to "develop the school profile" than schools in poorer districts. They have various means of raising money from parents as well as from companies (via so called "co-operations")—for example, with advertisements in schools, or by renting out school buildings. Posters with slogans such as "Come and meet the Siemens team next Saturday in the assembly hall of School X" could soon be hanging in schools.

The Berlin city legislature will probably publish the test results, but even if it does not, what will stop an autonomous school from making its results public and thereby gain the attention of rich parents and companies (and perhaps real estate agents)?

Even advertisements will make social differences apparent. Rich schools would be in a position to turn down some offers. The result could be McDonald's billboards advertising soft drinks in the playgrounds of schools in poorer districts; a new computer centre from Siemens; or a presentation by a renowned company in the hall of schools in the better-off parts of town.

Then, with money coming from big business and wealthy families, additional and more competent teachers could be recruited. And if the schools already can choose their personnel, why should they not also select their students?

The university "reforms" began with the demand that colleges should have more "autonomy" and "individual responsibility." They have reached the stage where "elite universities" are now being discussed. Similarly, the entire "model project" in Berlin aims to initiate a development that will result in "good" (rich) and "bad" (poor) schools drifting farther and farther apart.