

Education policy of SPD and Left Party in Berlin: A devastating balance sheet

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Since the Berlin Senate came under the control of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Left Party in 2001 there have been no less than 23 educational “reforms”.

One of the first changes was to reduce the number of years spent at *Gymnasia*, the more academically oriented type of German secondary school—a measure that has been implemented in almost all of the German states. This year, graduating students will take their final exams after 12 years of school instead of 13. The Berlin Senate also introduced a centralised final exam for students moving on to a *Gymnasium*.

Even before the reform had been put into practice there were numerous complaints about both its intention and its execution. Students, in particular, were highly critical of the changes.

Most feel overburdened with growing workloads and unable to prepare adequately for their Abitur exam and ensuing university education. They are fearful of obtaining poor grades in the Abitur due to time pressure and consequently failing to obtain a place at university.

The chances for timely admission to a university have already been lowered since twice as many students are taking the Abitur this year. One reason is the abolition of Germany’s former policy of conscription into the army.

In 2010, Education Senator Jürgen Zöllner decided that graduates from *Gymnasia*, unlike those from the newly introduced integrated comprehensive schools, should take seven additional courses, four of which are counted as part of the grade for the Abitur. Grades and therefore chances for a place at university have worsened due to these additional demands. At the same time, the learning conditions in *Gymnasia* are far from favourable. Classes are too large, because there are not enough classrooms or teachers.

Fewer and fewer students are able to enter a *Gymnasium*, while the poor learning conditions ensure that more privileged parents send their children to private

schools.

The introduction of integrated secondary schools has to be seen in this context. Since the 2010/2011 school year, Berlin’s *Hauptschulen* and *Realschulen* (the other two types of German secondary schools) have merged with its comprehensive schools.

It is not yet possible to evaluate the secondary education reform based on statistics, but an article in the *Morgenpost* from January 28 speaks of growing discontent among teachers with the execution of the school reform, which, like all so-called reforms, is starved of funds.

Under the given circumstances, it is hardly possible to achieve the supposed goal of giving “low performing” students the possibility of improving by placing them together with more able ones. On the contrary, the overall level of classes is lowered, affecting everyone’s education negatively.

Those who believe that these reforms were based on good intentions, despite all the obvious problems in execution, should know that the Berlin Senate modelled its secondary school concept on the city-state of Hamburg, which is the only German state to score below Berlin in the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) test. Thus, the creators of the reform knew very well what they were doing and what results could be expected. However, the negative balance sheet of the Berlin Senate’s educational policy does not stop there.

The GEW (Education and Science Workers’ Union) estimates that 630 teaching jobs remained unfilled in the first semester of the 2010/2011 school year—about three percent of the total number of teachers. This is a significant number under conditions where many teachers become unavailable due to sickness or other causes.

Moreover, teachers in Berlin are on average 50.6 years old, much older than those in other parts of Germany. When the SPD-Left Party coalition gained control of the

senate, the average age was 48.4 years. Teachers in Berlin also often have a lower level of qualification than those in other states, because better qualified teachers choose to leave the city.

The education policies of the Berlin Senate have played their part in this flight of teachers, together with the worsening of working conditions for teachers over the past decade, part of the senate's overall offensive against public service workers.

In 2003, work hours for civil servants were increased from 40 to 42 hours. Teachers now have 26 class hours a week instead of 24. Furthermore, newly employed teachers no longer receive the status of civil servant.

The excessive stress resulting from intensified working conditions has led to a rise of chronically ill teachers from 830 in 2006 to 1,450 in 2010.

School facilities are decaying. According to estimates by the districts, an additional €500 million is required for urgently needed renovation. Based on funding from the government's economic stimulus package, only 11.4 percent of the required sum was made available in 2010.

While the standards at public schools are continually lowered and numerous schools are closed, private schools are proliferating.

After the shocking PISA results for Germany in 2001, private schools all over Germany had a new lease on life, and several new ones were founded. Currently, every twelfth pupil in Germany attends a private school.

According to the German Federal Statistical Office, the number of private school students in the "new states", including Berlin, rose from 22,802 in 1992 to more than 91,000 in 2008. Due to the large-scale closure of public schools, there is a higher-than-average number of private elementary schools, where the number of pupils has grown eightfold—from 3,865 to 30,204.

There is as yet no statistical proof that private schools offer a better education. The statistics suggest that there are no significant differences in performance between the students at public and private schools. In some cases, students at public schools performed better. Neither do the teaching conditions at private schools differ significantly from those at public ones.

Nevertheless, fewer and fewer parents think that public schools can provide a good education to their children. According to a survey from 2009, 54 percent of parents said they would send their children to a private school if they could afford it. One of the reasons for this high percentage is the education "reforms" of recent years.

According to a survey of the Society for Empirical

Social Research, 42 percent of the participants would send their children to a private school to enable them to grow up in a "better social environment" and because "formation of the children's personality" was not sufficiently emphasized at public schools. For 35 percent, it was important that their children's creativity be nurtured, 33 percent assumed that the teachers at private schools were more committed, and 30 percent hoped that a private education would increase their children's career opportunities.

At the same time, it is clear that only a small percentage of those interested could afford a private education for their children. A large proportion of private school students come from middle-class families with higher education levels. Between 1997 and 2007, the number of private school students from such backgrounds increased by 77 percent, while only 12 percent were children of less educated parents.

The number of foreign nationals is very low as well, only four percent. On average, more girls than boys attend private school.

The education "reforms" implemented in Berlin are drastic austerity measures. They increase the element of social selection at public schools, with *Gymnasias*, despite poor teaching conditions, becoming more and more elitist in comparison with secondary schools. While the majority of the population is increasingly denied access to good-quality education, a privileged minority ensure that their children are educated at private schools. The Berlin Senate is abetting the creation of a two-tier education system.



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