

Private schools boom in Germany

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Private school businesses are flourishing in Germany. Given the austerity policies of the federal and state governments which have significantly lowered educational standards in public schools, more and more parents are choosing to send their children to private schools.

A recently published study by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung offers a comprehensive view of private schools, currently operating throughout the country. The study ascribes the mounting intake of these schools essentially to the desire of middle-class families and educated layers to dissociate their social class from the poorer sections of the population. But the study largely ignores the role of the austerity measures that led to this development in the first place. The shortage of staff, resources and rooms has made it impossible for schools and teachers in many areas to compensate for the consequences of class division in society. Wealthy layers have always expressed their elitist demands, including those for private schools. However, this does not explain the rapid proliferation of these institutions. The real reason lies in the decimation of state education provision.

The study found that the proportion of male and female pupils in private schools increased from 4.8 percent to 7.7 percent between 1992 and 2008, i.e. by 55 percent. A significant increase was particularly due to the publication of the catastrophic results of the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) survey in 2001: “As a consequence of this, independent schools were able to increase their ‘market share’ from 4.8 percent to 7.7 percent nationwide, i.e. from 6.1 to 7.8 percent in the former Federal Republic of Germany, and from 0.9 percent to 6.9 percent in the new German states.”

The difference between eastern and western Germany is striking. While the number of private pupils in the old federal states increased by 42 percent between 1992 and 2008, they quadrupled in the eastern part of the country. On one hand, this sharp increase might be explained by a “pent-up demand”. However, a more significant cause would be the widespread closure of schools after the collapse of the former Stalinist German Democratic Republic. According to the authors of the study, there is in “eastern Germany... an observable trend, indicating that numerous private agencies (especially religious)

are jumping into primary school education in the absence of sufficient state provision.”

Academic secondary schools (“Gymnasien”) are particularly affected by this trend. These independent high schools increased their “market share” from 9.8 percent to 11.1 percent, slightly declining from 12.3 percent to 11.5 percent in western Germany, and climbing from 1.7 percent to 8.1 percent in the new federal states.

The relationship between the brutal cuts in education and the growth of the private education sector is particularly evident in Berlin. According to figures published in the *Tagesspiegel* newspaper on May 8 this year, the number of private school pupils in Berlin rose from approximately 16,600 to about 28,000 (i.e. just on 70 percent) between 2001 and 2011. This period includes much of the governing term of the Social Democratic-Green coalition.

The widespread closure of primary schools is also reflected in the statistics. The percentage of independent elementary schools in Berlin—about 6 percent—lies far above the national average of approximately 2 percent. For example, there are already 10 private primary schools, compared to 41 state schools, in the Berlin district of Pankow.

Regarding the rest of the country, the study shows that “the establishing of private education is leading to deficits in the provision of all-day schools, special needs schools and bilingual teaching.”

The proportion of private school pupils in the new federal states is still far below that of the states in western Germany. A comparison of federal states shows that Bavaria (western Germany) has almost 11 percent of its schools under private management, the bottom-ranking Schleswig-Holstein (eastern Germany) has just 4 percent, and the city-state of Berlin has roughly the national average of 8 percent.

The study claims that private schools select their pupils according to both social and ethnic criteria. Only about 4 percent of children from foreign backgrounds attend private schools, compared to approximately twice as many who are of

German origin. The most important reasons for parents choosing private schools were found to be “the hope of the child’s entry into a better social environment, perceived advantages for its personality development, as well as expectations of its improved school performance and better opportunities in later working life.”

A key feature of the study is the finding that private schools, despite widespread expectations and prejudices, are not better places for learning. Although the schools themselves are usually much smaller, an average class consists of only one pupil less than the average public school class, and is therefore not noticeably smaller.

With respect to the extent of available classroom teaching (measured in terms of the number of weekly lessons divided by the number of pupils), private schools fare slightly better, offering each pupil a fifth of a lesson more teaching each week. A significant difference was observed in relation to special needs schools, where the teaching provision ratio was 4.4 lessons per week for each pupil in private schools, compared to only 3.5 lessons for each in public schools. Comparison of pupils’ educational achievement led to inconsistent findings. While private “Realschulen” (secondary schools) performed a little better than the public ones, the opposite was the case for “Gymnasien” (the more academic secondary schools). Overall, however, the differences are rather minimal.

That the average private school does not do better in achievement tests—and even does somewhat worse in the case of the average academic secondary school—is certainly to a large extent due to the low pay frequently received by teachers in private institutions that are not bound by collective bargaining agreements. According to a report by the German Education Union (GEW), teachers in a now-closed private school in Stuttgart, charging €1700 per month for a child’s education, earned less than half as much as their colleagues in the public sector. Their employer paid them €17 to €35 per lesson instead of €50 to €75. Although there are considerable differences among the individual institutions, it is evident from these figures that the—frequently very high—school fees are often not used to improve the quality of teaching, but simply pour into the coffers of the private agencies.

In view of the modest achievement of private school pupils in comparison to those in the average public school, the authors of the study attempt to present the latter as the superior institution. It is true that these averaged comparisons of public and private schools reveal distinct differences between particular academic high schools, primary schools etc., as well as differences among the school systems of the various federal states. Schools in wealthy neighbourhoods are normally far better equipped and can offer their pupils more favourable learning conditions

than secondary schools in deprived areas.

While the public school system is deteriorating due to severe cost-cutting measures on the part of the state, those who can afford it are striving to place their children in private schools to give them the chance of receiving a reasonable education. Parents from the lower middle class often have to scrimp and save to get the necessary school fees. Children from the working class have no chance at all.

A survey conducted by the magazine *Eltern* (Parents) in 2009 revealed just how widespread dissatisfaction with conditions in the public school system actually is. Some 54 percent of the surveyed mothers and fathers with children under 18 years of age said they wanted to send their child to a private school, if they could afford it.

Social and ethnic selection, presented in the study as an unintentional although necessary “byproduct” of the private school system, actually constitutes its foundation. Increasing social polarisation in Germany is constantly accompanied by attacks from the ruling classes on all social amenities, especially state education.

An ever-growing private school sector of uneven quality is emerging on its ruins. Although it is only implied in the present study, there seem to be just as many significant differences in pupil achievement and teaching standards among private schools, as there are among the various public schools. Each private school differs from the others, and institutions attended by the children of the upper class obviously demand different fees and offer different teaching standards, compared to those with a tuition fee of €200 per month. It is precisely the “worse private schools” that are benefiting from the government’s austerity measures in education, and thereby snatching money out of the parents’ pockets.



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