

Berlin funds rearmament over education: Pupils record lowest PISA scores since 2000

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Earlier this month, the OECD published the results of the latest PISA study (Programme for International Student Assessment), which tests the science, reading and mathematics skills of 15-year-olds in dozens of countries worldwide. Germany's results lay bare the catastrophic consequences of starving education and the younger generation of resources while channelling them instead into the military and the pockets of the super-rich.

In Germany, all three areas—science, reading and mathematics—recorded their worst scores since the PISA surveys began in 2000.

In science, scores fell from 516 points in 2006 to 486 points today, while reading—a key competency for successful learning in every other area—dropped from 484 points in 2000 to 465 points today. The collapse in mathematics is especially dramatic. Where pupils scored 503 points in 2003, the figure today stands at just 464 points—a decline of nearly 8 percent.

Even more dramatic are the results on how many pupils remain stuck at the lowest competency level. In mathematics, for example, 34 percent fail to reach competency level 2, meaning they are unable, for instance, to compare two alternative routes by their total length or convert prices from one currency into another.

In reading comprehension, 32 percent are at the lowest level. These 15-year-olds are unable to grasp the central message of a medium-length text or to extract specific information from texts using given criteria. Only 7 percent of pupils in Germany are at the other end of the spectrum in reading, at level 5, meaning they are able, for example, to “distinguish between fact and opinion based on implicit cues relating to content or source.”

And the situation has been worsening for years. Since 2015, the proportion of these lowest-performing pupils who fail to reach competency level 2 has grown by 10 percent in science, 15 percent in reading literacy and a full 17 percent in mathematics.

The scale of Germany's education catastrophe becomes especially clear in international comparison. In China, 93

percent of pupils reach the minimum competency level in reading. Just 8 percent of pupils in Germany reach the highest competency levels, 5 and 6, compared with 54 percent in China.

But the study does not merely reveal the failure of the education system to progressively impart knowledge and skills. It also exposes that system as part of a class society.

In hardly any other country is educational success so heavily dependent on parents' socioeconomic status as it is in Germany. From 2015 to 2025, the performance of pupils from the poorest families deteriorated enormously, while that of pupils from the top 25 percent stagnated.

In Germany, success in science is 19 percent dependent on pupils' socioeconomic status, well above the OECD average of 11.6 percent. In only five of the 90 countries surveyed is educational inequality greater than in Germany.

Growing inequality in schools mirrors the social inequality that has intensified enormously in Germany in recent years. The number of super-rich individuals with assets of more than \$100 million rose by around 1,100 in a single year—from 2024 to 2025—to reach 5,000. Meanwhile, the number of people officially living below the poverty line has grown by around 3 percent since 2010, to 17.8 percent.

The study confirms what has long been known about the German education system, that it is an instrument of social selection. Only a handful advance while the mass of pupils are left ever further behind, increasingly unable to learn within a dysfunctional system that is, at the same time, marked by relentless performance pressure.

As early as 2001, the first PISA study exposed the stark shortcomings of the German education system and triggered the so-called “PISA shock,” which was followed by a lengthy debate.

Taken as a whole, the trajectory of Germany's PISA results reads like a fever chart of the capitalist crisis. After recovering somewhat in the wake of the first PISA study, scores plunged across the board from the start of the 2010s onward. The impact of the 2008–2009 financial crisis reached society at large—the funds mobilised overnight in

historic worldwide bailouts for the rich were clawed back by the ruling class through savage social cuts. Schools were hit especially hard, whether through direct cuts or a lack of investment.

What would be needed to reverse this trend requires early-years support, small and efficient learning groups, infrastructure that is not merely functional but genuinely inviting, a substantial workforce—from teachers to social workers to IT specialists—and, not least, the effective and thoughtful use of artificial intelligence.

Unlike the €100 billion “special fund” for the military, there is no such special education fund that would be needed to implement such measures. On the contrary, the Merz government’s current draft budget for 2027 provides for a 7.1 percent cut in education spending. The draft was debated in the Bundestag (parliament) just two days after the PISA results were published.

Instead, the money is being poured into the most comprehensive rearmament campaign since the end of Nazi rule, now totalling €152 billion. Almost one in every four euros of the future federal budget is flowing into the German war machine to prepare for war against the nuclear power Russia and other rivals. For the education portfolio at federal level, by contrast, only around €15 billion is earmarked.

The government is attempting to hide these obvious causes of the education catastrophe—the ever more glaring underfunding of education and the flood of money for the military—behind a barrage of accusations.

In the arrogant manner that has by now become typical of him, Chancellor Friedrich Merz (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) has once again pointed the finger at the population and turned the facts on their head. It is not the federal government that bears responsibility, he claims, but those affected themselves. Parents, he said, could not “outsource education and upbringing to the state.” In doing so, he flouts the constitution, which enshrines the state’s duty to provide education.

Education Minister Karin Prien (CDU) said the PISA results did not surprise her. What did surprise her was “that parents simply do not consider education as important as they do in other OECD and EU countries.” The meritocratic principle—precisely what is already making many pupils ill—and the willingness to perform needed to be strengthened, and this, Prien said, must “naturally also come from the parental home.”

Teachers were quickly made the scapegoat. *Die Zeit* headlined a comment on the study’s findings, “Dear teachers, PISA is your failure too.” Two days later, the same publication declared, “The willingness to demand performance has declined”—a sentence that could be lifted from the programme of the far-right Alternative for

Germany (AfD).

The so-called opposition bemoaned an alleged failure by the federal government that is, in reality, a deliberate policy. The Left Party’s parliamentary group leader in the Bundestag, Heidi Reichinnek, accused the government of “abandoning” children and teachers, as though her party had ever stood on their side. She accused the government of “failure.” In the education debate too, the Left Party carefully avoided any reference to the obvious connection with militarisation, which necessitates enormous cuts to social spending.

The fact that not a single country has succeeded in significantly improving its PISA results over the long term makes clear that the solution does not lie in this or that isolated fix within the education system. The problem is the social system common to all OECD states. The capitalist profit system, which enriches the wealthy by exploiting the mass of the population for that purpose, means social regression across the board, including in education.

Capitalism finds itself in an existential crisis in which no answer is possible to the catastrophic developments in the education system, which strip young people of precisely the prospects indispensable to successful learning. Halting and reversing the destruction of the education system therefore requires a socialist movement that overcomes capitalism.

Proof of this was furnished more than 100 years ago by the October Revolution. It not only ended the mass slaughter of the First World War. It also provided the decisive impetus for enormous educational progress in a society where, as late as 1920, more than 62 percent could not read or write—progress that, despite the enormous brake that Stalinism represented, reached its high point after little more than 40 years with Yuri Gagarin’s first flight into space.

The Social Democratic Party (SPD) too—back when it was still a socialist workers’ party—contributed 10 times more to workers’ education than the governments of the German Kaiser ever achieved. To resolve the education catastrophe in Germany and worldwide, and to resume progress, it is essential to build on these traditions.



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