

The Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany 2010/2011

**A description of the responsibilities, structures and
developments in education policy for the exchange of information in Europe**

- EXCERPT -



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5. PRIMARY EDUCATION

5.1. Introduction

The *Grundschule* [primary school] is attended by all school-age children together. It covers grades 1 to 4. In Berlin and Brandenburg the *Grundschule* covers six grades.

General objectives

The tasks and objectives of the *Grundschule* are determined by its position within the school system. The primary school's role is to lead its pupils from more play-oriented forms of learning at pre-school level to the more systematic forms of school learning, and also to adapt the form and content of teaching programmes to fit the different learning requirements and capabilities of individual pupils. The aim of the primary school is to provide its pupils with the basis for the next educational level and lifelong learning. Particular importance is attached to the general improvement of linguistic competence and to the basic understanding of mathematical and scientific concepts. The primary school should make pupils capable of grasping and structuring their experience of the world around them. At the same time, they should further develop their psychomotor skills and their patterns of social behaviour.

The primary school sees its function as the fostering of children with different individual learning backgrounds and learning abilities in such a way as to develop the basis for independent thinking, learning and working, and to provide experience of interacting with other people. Thus children acquire a solid basis which helps them find their way and act within their environment and prepares them for the process of learning in secondary schools.

Specific legislative framework

The Basic Law [*Grundgesetz* - R1] and the constitutions of the Länder [R12-27] include a number of fundamental provisions on schools [inspection, parents' rights, compulsory schooling, religious instruction, privately-maintained schools] which also have a bearing on primary schools. The legal basis for the *Grundschule* as the first compulsory school for all children is to be found in the Education Acts [R85, R87, R89, R91, R93, R96, R98, R100, R102-103, R105, R107, R113, R115-117], the Compulsory Schooling Acts [R108] and the *Schulordnungen* [school regulations] for the primary school enacted by the Ministries of Education and Cultural Affairs in the Länder.

5.2. Organisation of Primary Education

Admission Requirements and Choice of School

Choice of school

In order to complete general compulsory schooling, pupils must, in principle, attend the local *Grundschule* [primary school]. In some Länder efforts are underway to put parents in a position to freely choose a primary school. In Nordrhein-Westfalen since the 2008/2009 school year parents have been free to enrol their child in a *Grundschule* other than the one nearest their home. From 2011 onwards the school maintaining bodies are to be given the opportunity to fix catchment areas for schools.

Start of compulsory schooling

Compulsory schooling starts on 1 August for all children having reached their sixth birthday before a statutory qualifying date. Following the resolution of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs [*Kultusministerkonferenz*] of October 1997 entitled Recommendations on Starting School [*Empfehlungen zum Schulanfang*], the Länder can set the qualifying date between 30 June and 30 September. They can also make provision for the possibility of starting school during the course of the school year. The aim of the recommendations is to reduce what are, in part, high deferment rates and to encourage parents to send their children to school as early as possible. The strengthening of the collaboration between day-care centres for children and primary schools in most of the Länder serves the same purpose. Offers of flexible school entrance phases are being further developed.

In 2004, Berlin set the statutory qualifying date for compulsory schooling at 31 December; thus, compulsory schooling starts after the summer holidays for all children who reach the age of six before the end of the year.

Early entrance

All children who have their sixth birthday after the statutory qualifying date as determined by the Länder may be permitted to start school early on their parents' application. Compulsory schooling for such children starts with their admittance.

Deferment of schooling

Deferment of school attendance is usually possible only as an exception to the rule if it is deemed that support in a school environment does not constitute a favourable precondition for the development of a child.

In the majority of the Länder the children involved may attend a *Schulkindergarten* or a *Vorklasse* or *Grundschulförderklasse* [see chapter 12.3.]. Should neither of these be available within a reasonable distance, children whose compulsory schooling has been deferred may attend a *Kindergarten* or receive special help in grade 1 at primary school. Where doubts still remain at the end of the period of deferment as to the child's suitability to attend a mainstream school, the schools supervisory authority will decide whether he or she should be required to attend a *Förderschule* [special school].

Age Levels and Grouping of Pupils

Primary school pupils [aged six to ten, in Berlin and Brandenburg six to twelve] are normally taught in classes according to age. In grades 1 and 2, most lessons are with the same member of staff, the class teacher. It helps pupils become accustomed to school life if they can relate to one teacher rather than having different members of staff for each subject. The principle of class teachers is used to ensure a certain combination of education and teaching, and a consistent pedagogical approach and makes it easier to respond to pupils' individual needs. From grade 3 onwards the children increasingly encounter subject teachers, which helps them prepare for the transition to secondary school where subject teachers are the rule. In addition to lessons according to age group, individual Länder provide teaching for mixed age groups for the first two years of school in particular. In these cases, pupils can pass through the first two years of school in one to three years, depending on their own individual progress.

Organisation of school time

Organisation of the school year

With a five-day school week, teaching takes place on 188 days a year on average [365 days minus 75 days holiday, minus ten additional free days, minus 52 Sundays and 40 Saturdays]. As a rule, in Länder with a six-day school week, there are two Saturdays per month on which no lessons take place. In this case, the number of days on which lessons are taught increases to 208 [365 days minus 75 days holiday, minus ten additional free days, minus 52 Sundays and 20 Saturdays]. However, the total number of teaching hours per year is the same regardless of whether teaching is carried out on the basis of a five-day or six-day week, since the lessons which are held on a Saturday in the six-day week are distributed among the other weekdays in the five-day week.

In accordance with the Agreement between the Länder on harmonisation in the school system [*Hamburger Abkommen*], the school year begins on 1 August and ends on 31 July. The actual beginning and end of the school term depend on the dates of the summer holidays. Summer holidays have been restricted to the period between mid-June and mid-September for educational, organisational and climatic reasons. Pursuant to an agreement of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder, the six-week summer holidays are fixed within this period in accordance with a rota system, whereby the Länder take turns to have the summer holidays later or earlier. The long-term agreement adopted by the Standing Conference in May 2008 lays down the dates of the summer holidays for all Länder until 2017. Under the rotating system, the Länder are divided into five groups each with about the same population. Apart from the summer holidays, there are shorter holidays which the Länder decide annually on the basis of certain principles and their own considerations. These minor holidays fall at Easter and Christmas. The teaching administration can fix a shorter holiday at Whitsun and in autumn, and authorise individual variable holidays to take account of special local situations. The total annual duration of school holidays is 75 working days.

Weekly and daily timetables

Primary school pupils attend lessons for 20 to 29 periods a week. In most Länder there are 20 to 22 periods in the first year, rising to 27 in the fourth [final] year of primary education. As a rule each period lasts 45 minutes. Lessons are usually held in the morning, with up to six periods a day.

The weekly teaching periods laid down by the Ministries of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder for the different types of school may be distributed over five or six days in the week. As a rule, in Länder with a six-day school week, there are two Saturdays per month on which no lessons take place. In most Länder, the responsible Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs has introduced a five-day week for all schools. In some Länder, the *Schulkonferenz* [school conference] may decide the number of days in the school week.

In the primary sector, lesson times are laid down from 7.30/8.30 a.m. to 1.30 p.m. or 11.30 a.m. [Monday to Friday or Monday to Saturday].

Supervision of pupils outside lesson times and provision of all-day education and supervision

Changes in children's living conditions mean that the primary school is expected to contribute to their supervision both before and after lessons and also in the afternoons. All-day supervision and care for children aged between six and ten is increasingly provided through all-day education and supervision offers, and also by *Horte* [after-school centres]. In many places all-day offers are implemented in cooperation with partners from outside school such as the maintaining bodies of youth welfare services or bodies maintaining cultural education, youth sport clubs and parents associations. In the majority of Länder, after-school centres are run by the public youth welfare services. Pedagogical efforts are concentrated on closer cooperation between schools and after-school centres.

All Länder are currently in the process of expanding their provision of care and supervision for children outside lesson time. A growing number of primary schools have introduced fixed opening hours [approximately 7.30 a.m. to 1.00/2.00 p.m. depending on local conditions] so that parents can be sure their children have somewhere to stay even outside compulsory lessons. This involves amended school and teaching concepts, and offering activities which complement lessons and are run by non-school bodies. Participation in the additional activities is usually voluntary. The children are looked after, amongst others, by qualified employees and part-time staff who as a rule are paid by the maintaining bodies providing the care, which also cover the material costs. Parents are normally expected to pay a charge for such services, the actual amount depending on their circumstances. This extra supervision is subject to the consent of the school supervisory authorities in some Länder, particularly where there are provisions for subsidies by the Land. The primary school with fixed opening times [*verlässliche Grundschule*] and the primary school with guaranteed support and surveillance are currently being further expanded.

Within the compass of the investment programme Future Education and Care [*Investitionsprogramm Zukunft Bildung und Betreuung - IZBB*] of the Federation, until 2009 the setting up and expansion of schools offering all-day activities and care was promoted in the primary sector as well. In *Ganztagschulen* [all-day schools], the extracurricular activities in the afternoon are to bear a conceptual relationship with the teaching in the morning, and be carried out under the supervision and responsibility of the school administration [for further information, see chapter 6.3.]. In 2009, 41.7 per cent of all public and private primary schools were *Ganztagschulen*. A total of 21.5 per cent of all primary school pupils were involved in all-day education – an increase of 2.6 percentage points over 2008.

5.3. Teaching and Learning in Primary Education

Curriculum, Subjects, Number of Hours

Subjects

Lessons at the primary school initially focus on reading, writing and arithmetic. Teaching takes place both in lessons concentrating on a specific subject or area and in cross-disciplinary classes. As a rule subjects include German, mathematics, *Sachunterricht*, art, music, sport and in most Länder religious instruction. Several areas, especially e.g.

German, *Sachunterricht*, drama, music, art and handicrafts are often brought together to produce lively and varied work on topic focuses or lesson units. As for a first encounter with foreign languages at primary school age the Länder have developed various approaches.

Foreign language teaching in the *Grundschule* is understood as a distinct offer with its own specific didactic methods. Foreign-language learning is guided by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [CEFR] and encourages pupils by motivating them to speak. The emphasis is placed on the communicative success of verbal expression rather than on grammatical correctness. It is characterised by play-based learning methods which permit each individual child to make his or her own progress. Additional features include a close link between foreign language offers and the subject matter and methods of other lessons taught at primary school, an emphasis on spoken language, participation of all pupils and, as a rule, the absence of formal assessment. Two approaches coexist: In the communicative approach, the encounter with foreign languages takes place on a situational basis and several languages may be involved. The other approach provides for a more systematic and thematically oriented learning process on the basis of a [framework] curriculum with result-oriented progression. In both concepts, foreign language skills are imparted in a vivid way particularly suitable for the age group in primary school. Currently, in all Länder foreign language teaching in the primary sector is being extended. This concerns mainly grades 3 and 4, in some Länder, grades 1 and 2 as well. The report, *Fremdsprachen in der Grundschule – Sachstand und Konzeptionen*, published by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder [*Kultusministerkonferenz* – KMK] provides an overview of the regulations valid in the Länder in 2004.

In addition to the subjects mentioned, the following areas are to be increasingly included as constant principles in the programme of education at the *Grundschule*: linguistic education [encouragement of linguistic development], mathematical education [promoting lifelong involvement with mathematical demands, logical thinking and problem solving], media education [using media in a critical way], aesthetic education [creative activities and sensory experiences], using technology, movement education, encounter with foreign languages, environment and health [treating nature and one's own body in a responsible way], attachment to one's home country or region combined with an international outlook, i.e. the general area of intercultural learning. Sustainable development issues are moreover to be integrated into teaching even at *Grundschule*, in *Sachunterricht* in particular. Within the context of strengthening democratic education children are to be introduced in *Grundschule* to the basic principles of the democratic state and social order, and the differences with dictatorial regimes.

Besides, in recent years, the curricula of the Länder have increasingly taken into account the concept of lifelong learning. The acquisition of fundamental knowledge, abilities and skills, as well as the acquisition of a knowledge that will serve as an orientation aid for further learning, together with the development of key competences, have become main educational objectives.

Development of curricula

The material and competences which are important to the educational process at primary school are laid down in curricula, education plans or framework plans which may be

subject-related, area-related or interdisciplinary. To implement the *Bildungsstandards* [educational standards] of the Standing Conference for the primary sector, the subjects in the curricula are adapted accordingly. The national educational standards specify the goals themselves, whilst the curricula describe and structure the way in which to achieve these goals. For further information on quality assurance and development by means of national educational standards, see chapter 11.2.

Curricula or education plans for the primary school as well as for other types of school are the responsibility of the Ministries of Education and Cultural Affairs in the Länder. The curricula are published as regulations of the Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs. They take the form of instructions from a higher authority and, as such, are binding on teachers. It is the responsibility of the head teacher to ensure that the current curricula are taught at his/her school. At the same time, curricula are formulated in such a general way as to leave the teachers the freedom of teaching methods in practice. Nevertheless all the teachers of a specific subject at one school hold conferences to reach a degree of consensus on methods and assessment criteria.

A curriculum is usually drawn up as follows. Once the Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs of a particular Land has reached the decision to revise or completely reorganise a curriculum, a commission is appointed usually consisting in the main of serving teachers, including heads, as well as school inspectors, representatives of the school research institute of the Land concerned and – to a lesser extent – of experts in the relevant disciplines from institutions of higher education. As a rule, it is the job of the commission to devise a curriculum for a certain subject at a specific type of school, for a specific school level or for a type of school. It will then work on a draft. The curricula not only deal with the contents, but also the course objectives and teaching methods. Experience gained with previous curricula is taken into account when it comes to devising new ones. In some Länder curricula are launched on a trial basis before being finalised and becoming universally valid. Finally, there are set procedures according to which the commission may consult associations and parents' and pupils' representative bodies.

As soon as a new curriculum has been completed and is introduced on a definitive or preliminary basis at schools, the in-service training institutes for the teaching profession maintained by the Ministries of Education and Cultural Affairs are charged with training teachers to work with it. This is the stage when textbook publishers embark on a revision or completely new edition of their titles.

A central database with curricula for schools providing general education is accessible on the website of the Standing Conference [www.kmk.org].

Teaching Methods and Materials

Primary school teaching builds on pupils' personal experience and is designed to widen their horizons. The primary school includes its pupils in the process of planning, carrying out and evaluating lessons in a manner suited to each particular age group, and uses their experiences, questions, concerns, knowledge, abilities and skills as a basis for lessons.

In different teaching situations, pupils should increasingly develop the ability to choose subjects and methods, social forms in learning, and the place of work or the tools of work, as well as to manage their own work. They can develop the wealth of their own

ideas and their independence by organising phases of work themselves [free work] and by helping to structure the work planned for the day and the entire week.

It is the task of the teachers' conference to select textbooks from the regularly published lists of textbooks approved by the Ministry. The use of new media [multimedia] is becoming increasingly important, both as a teaching aid and as something to be taught and learnt. By now, access to electronic networks [Internet] is provided for all schools. The latest information about the use of online resources in teaching and internet projects can be found on the Education Servers provided by the Länder Ministries which is accessible via the national information portal maintained by the federal and Länder authorities, the German Education Server [www.eduserver.de].

5.4. Assessment in Primary Education

Pupil assessment

Altered forms of learning in the *Grundschule* are contributing towards a new understanding of what is conducive to learning, and of assessing pupil performance. The focus has shifted to encouraging each individual pupil to achieve all that he or she is capable of – guided by the learning requirements for the respective school grade. In order to do this it is necessary to monitor the individual development and performance of each pupil on a constant basis, as well as their working and social behaviour, and assess these factors comprehensively.

Educational progress is normally examined by constant monitoring of the learning processes and by the use of oral and written controls. In grades 1 and 2, the focus is on direct observation of the pupils. In grade 3, pupils also begin to be familiarised with written class tests in certain subjects [especially German, *Sachunterricht* and mathematics].

Assessment is always based on curriculum requirements and the knowledge, abilities and skills acquired in class. Assessment is carried out by the teacher responsible for lessons, who is responsible educationally for his or her decision.

In most Länder, for the first two grades of primary school this assessment takes the form of a report at the end of the school year describing in detail a pupil's progress, strengths and weaknesses in the various fields of learning. At the end of grade 2, or sometimes later, pupils start to receive their reports at the end of each half of the school year with marks, which enable the individual pupil's performance to be recorded and placed in the context of the level achieved by the entire teaching group, and thus a comparative assessment to be made. In addition to the marks awarded for the individual subjects, the reports can also contain assessments concerning participation in class and social conduct within the school. In approximately 50 per cent of the Länder, an assessment of the work-related and social behaviour is already being performed. The reintroduction of assessments of this kind simultaneously gives rise to heated debates in other Länder.

Pupils experiencing difficulties with reading and writing are generally subjected to the same assessment standards that apply for all pupils. Compensation for any disadvantages and deviations from the basic principles for surveying and assessing performance generally take place in primary schools. They are reduced with the provision of ongoing promotion in the higher grades.

Progression of pupils

All children automatically move from grade 1 to grade 2 at the primary school. As a rule, from grade 2 of the primary school onwards each pupil is assigned to a suitable grade depending on his or her achievement level, either by being promoted a grade or by repeating a grade. The decision whether or not to move a pupil to the next grade is based on the marks achieved in the pupil's school report [*Zeugnis*] at the end of the school year.

Pupils who are not moved up have to repeat the grade they have just finished. Under certain circumstances, a pupil may also repeat a grade even if a decision has been made to let him or her move up from that grade at the end of the school year. On the basis of the total number of pupils in the primary sector, only 0.5 per cent of pupils repeated a class in school year 2009/2010.

Certification

There is no leaving examination at the end of primary school, and, as a rule, pupils are not awarded a leaving certificate. However, at the end of grade 4 [or grade 6] pupils do receive a report for that year. An exception is the Land of Baden-Württemberg, where a leaving certificate is issued at the end of the *Grundschule*. In Baden-Württemberg only pupils who have not achieved *Grundschule* target outcomes at the end of grade 4 receive a report. The transition from primary school to one of the secondary school types is regulated differently according to Land law. For further information, see chapter 6.2.

5.5. Organisational Variations and Alternative Structures in Primary Education

Pupils who are not ready to go back to school following hospital treatment may receive lessons at home. Teachers of the school type which the pupil is to attend after his or her convalescence are employed to this end, thus effectively working towards the pupil's reintegration.

Pupils who cannot attend school for a longer period or even permanently, due to illness, without requiring hospitalisation, should also be taught at home. This depends on their ability to follow lessons. This, and the pupil's physical capacity, is certified by a school doctor.

For children and young people whose life is characterised by continual moves and a consequent lack of continuity in their school development, an improvement in the schooling situation must aim above all at continuity, and at elements which stabilise their school career and motivate those pupils to attend school. Children of circus artists, fairground entertainers and other occupational travellers have to change school up to thirty times a year. The Länder have developed concepts to guarantee an improvement in school provision for these children. The measures include parental counselling and improved access to primary schools, secondary schools and to vocational training. Under a resolution of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs last amended in 1999, these measures also include subsidies for the costs of accommodating children of the travelling professions in homes.

Among other things, the Länder governments aim at reinforcing the willingness of schools to accept these travelling children and young people and to provide means of promoting them or create additional facilities on site during their travels. Most Länder

have a system of regular schools [*Stammschulen*] and base centre schools [*Stützpunktschulen*]. The regular school assumes responsibility for the child's school career at the family's winter site, while the base centre schools are situated near fairgrounds and endeavour in particular to provide educational support for travelling children. The special teachers available in most Länder for travelling children, the so-called *Bereichslehrkräfte*, provide particularly effective support here. They help preparing and implementing the children's school attendance during their travels. They also support children according to their abilities and skills and their learning outcomes, and develop coordinated lessons which also allow the children self-directed learning.

In addition, pilot projects are underway in some Länder in the form of a *travelling school*, which allows, in particular, the children of circus performers to be taught at the same time at different locations. The *travelling school* [e.g. the *Schule für Circuskinder* in Nordrhein-Westfalen] accepts pupils of pre-school age as well as of primary and lower secondary level age with the aim of guaranteeing uninterrupted school attendance. In November 2001, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder sought advice with regard to the teaching of children of occupational travellers. It requested the Länder to provide suitable distance learning materials, as well as to include the teaching of children of travellers in in-service teacher training. In September 2003, the Standing Conference concerned itself with a school diary [*Schultagebuch*] for the children of occupational travellers, and recommended its introduction to the Länder. With the concept of Vocational Competence for Young People from Fair Ground Families and Circus Families [*Berufliche Kompetenzen für Jugendliche aus Schaustellerfamilien und von Zirkusangehörigen* - BeKoSch], the Länder have also developed a scheme for vocational education and training. Moreover, there are initial projects for travelling children based on e-learning. Further information, important addresses, the school diary and guidelines are provided on a supra-regional website [www.schule-unterwegs.de].

As a rule, International Schools in Germany, including the 27 member schools of the European Council of International Schools [ECIS], cater for primary as well as secondary school pupils. There are also three European Schools, which offer bilingual lessons in various languages.

