

# Low education rating stuns Germany

**John Schmid/IHT** International Herald Tribune

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**FRANKFURT** Treasured stereotypes are dying in Germany. That the country's finances are solid, its workers productive and its economy a powerhouse are all broken myths. Even Mercedes-Benz sedans have fallen in quality ratings.

And now the nation has awakened in disbelief to findings that its prized education system has fallen to the bottom third of the industrial nations, panicking a generation of parents and posing an unexpected competitive threat as societies push further into the brave new world of the information age, education experts concur.

"It is a question of the future of individuals but really also of the future of the whole society," said Hans-Konrad Koch, a planner in the Ministry of Education.

Education Ministry staffers in Berlin say they are working "day and night" on a spectrum of reforms of kindergartens, grade schools and universities, even as they concede that the cash-strapped nation lacks funding for an aggressive overhaul. The education minister, Edelgard Bulmahn, warns that it will take a full decade to restore the nation's schools to the level of the top five or six advanced countries.

Germany has emerged as an academic underachiever in a succession of studies released over the last 14 months by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA, showed that German 15-year-olds came in 21st among those in the 32 leading industrial nations, well behind Britain, Japan, South Korea and much of Continental Europe. Worse, German students scored "significantly below the OECD average" in all three of the disciplines studied: reading literacy, mathematics and science.

American teenagers rank higher than the Germans in all three subjects despite studies that found one in 10 young Americans cannot find his country on a blank map of the world.

"Nobody knew" about Germany's slippage, explained Andreas Schleicher, who carried out the study. "There is no central examination system, there is no way of knowing what the system actually delivers and so no one really worried."

Schleicher, himself a German who attended a private grade school in Hamburg, said the lack of uniform standards and an oversight agency to monitor performance were among the shortcomings laid bare by the study.

"It is a scandal" that the system lacks monitors, Koch said.

As one of many planned reforms, the Education Ministry this month will hold a national conference for a debate on nationwide standards and evaluation.

The “PISA shock,” as the Education Ministry calls the stunned sense of disillusion, is a common topic among parents during morning school drop-offs.

The Allensbach polling institute found that 60 percent of Germans were “alarmed” at the results and that 25 percent did not want to accept them.

While the OECD study focuses on grade schools, universities have come under fire during the economic downturn as corporate leaders have issued a chorus of protests that German university graduates fail to meet the criteria of the modern work force.

The prospect of a looming skill shortage highlighted shortcomings in higher education, said Klaus Landfried, president of the Association of German Universities.

In fact, the skills shortage is already glaring. The government actively recruits foreigners with skills in biotechnology and computers, even enduring an emotional backlash against immigration that the effort has triggered. A nation of engineering icons like Mercedes-Benz and Porsche has seen the number of homegrown graduates with engineering and mathematics degrees shrink by a fifth from 1993 to 1998, said a spokesman for the ministry, Florian Frank.

The Education Ministry will release a study next month that attempts to explain why up to 30 percent of university students drop out before they get their degree, a ministry spokesman said. That compares to a 19 percent dropout rate in Britain. According to the OECD, only 16 percent of Germans hold a university degree, roughly the same proportion as Turkey and Mexico, and well below 35 percent in the United Kingdom and 33 percent in the United States.

The average German earns his university degree at age 28, with anecdotes abounding of those who stay on far longer. Germans on average study at a university for more than six years, compared to four in the United States and 3.5 in Britain, OECD figures show.

Students commonly complain of aloof professors whom they seldom meet outside crowded lecture halls. German universities are underfunded compared with those in Finland, Sweden, Japan or the United States, Landfried said. The ratio of faculty to students in German is “three to four times” worse in Germany than in the United States or Britain, he said.

None of this sits well in a nation proud of its learning centers that excelled in humanities and classic science. A century ago, Japanese and American educators came to Germany to emulate what they saw as model institutions. “We were once world masters with our universities and we want to win back that status,” Bulmahn said.

On campus, change already is under way. Since 1998, students have been able to elect a four-year degree, similar to a U.S.-style bachelor’s, and cut the number of years at university from six years. And professors hired since January 2002 are being paid less than their older colleagues but are entitled to performance-linked bonuses. Experts believe that it will take about a decade for older professors accustomed to the perks, such as jobs for life and automatic raises every two years, to retire in meaningful enough numbers to allow the younger generation to take charge of the intellectual life on campus.

Although funds are tight at the universities, Germany is one of only six OECD nations where university education is free. Many educators, including Landfried, believe it is time to charge some tuition. But resistance to any form of tuition runs so deep that no politician dares to broach it. Indeed, the government last autumn enshrined into law a ban on tuition for anyone pursuing a first degree.

The reform-minded Association of German Universities wants to instill greater autonomy, more accountability and greater competition among universities.

Berlin, meanwhile, laments that Germany still lacks formal rankings of the best schools for law, medicine and other disciplines that are common in the United States. At a time when the World Trade Organization allows for the free trade in education services, German universities have lost any vestige of monopoly on higher education and increasingly must compete just like banks and businesses.

Those searching for the roots of the trouble point to early education. Critics say an unresponsive and tradition-bound bureaucracy often fails to put the student in the focus of their efforts. Finland, which scored in the top ranks of the OECD study, has become the model for many reformers here. The Finns manage to work with individual children more closely, fewer of them repeat grades and a teacher's career commands higher esteem in Finnish society.

"Children are naturally curious but the kindergartens and primary schools in Germany never developed the tradition of rewarding such curiosity," a government education official complained.

Causes for the education deficit are complex, but many come back to one feature in particular. Germany has clung longer than many other Europeans to a rigid tradition that sorts children at age 10 into one of three different education channels, effectively determining whether they will end up at a university or limit their skills to one of the trades, which range from dental assistants to bakers and beauticians.

In extreme cases, gifted children who lack social skills sometimes are shunted into special schools with handicapped children. "A significant portion of the population does not reach their human potential," Schleicher said.

Many critics cannot wait to dismantle the entire system and emulate Finland, which preserves flexibility throughout studies. They say that no one can know at age 10 what he will do with his life. And, more wrenching for those who cherish the German system's egalitarian underpinnings, the study showed that it reinforces class divisions rather than breaking them down.

Educators want to exploit the PISA study shock to halt resistance to the sort of "revolution" of the whole system. But change does not come easy in a state-regulated bureaucracy.

Reformers want to phase out the dominant practice of half-day grade schools, which send the children home for the afternoon, forcing one parent or a baby-sitter to stay home. But officials estimate that it would take at least five years just to convert a quarter of the nation's schools into full-day institutions.

Funding new programs is next to impossible in a post-reunification era when taxes cannot

be increased and deficits are already over the limit imposed by the common European currency. Still, Berlin wants to pay more for early education, full-day schools and the support of children from “migrant families” from Turkey and Russia.

German education clung to its venerable reputation for so long because the system turned out so many skilled tradesmen who could find work as master bricklayers and auto mechanics. Critics say that the only problem with vocational training, which evolved from the medieval guild system, is that such skills are geared to the 19th and 20th centuries, not to the global economy.