



The German High School Experience: One Student's Perspective

by John T. Brentar, Ph.D.

Our cover article touched briefly on how the American educational system measures up against those in other countries. There are no easy answers regarding which system works best—in fact, it is likely that each has its merits and issues—but one thing is certain: No two are exactly alike.

Take the German educational system, for example. By the age of 10, most students in Germany are placed into one of three educational tracks:

1. **Gymnasium**, a highly academic high school program for students intending to pursue a university degree
2. **Realschule**, for students with a career goal for average or better white-collar positions
3. **Hauptschule**, for students who are working toward the trades and blue-collar jobs

About 40% of German high school students attend realschule, which has academic standards that equal or exceeds those of a typical high school in the U.S. It is possible for students to switch tracks as they change or modify their career goals, which is becoming increasingly common.

German students attend school for 187-190 days in an academic year, depending on the state. Germany has a compulsory law that requires school attendance, not just instruction, from age six until age 15. Therefore, homeschooling is not an option in Germany.

Students who attend a gymnasium are eligible to earn a diploma known as **das Abitur** by passing a series of oral and written examinations. For example, a recent Abitur for English assessed students' reading comprehension for a selected passage, as well as their understanding of Brexit and ability to analyze two Brexit-related cartoons. Any student with this type of diploma must be admitted to a German university, but there are no guarantees concerning their field of study. Popular fields such as law and medicine are very competitive. Although the Abitur grades are the most important factor for admission to a particular university, admission is also based on the students' grades during their last two years in the gymnasium.



Marie Curie Gymnasium, Dresden, Germany

Insights from Inside

I recently spoke to local student **Charlotte Seibt**, who attends the **German International School of Silicon Valley** in Mountain View. Last year, as a ninth grader, she studied at the **Marie Curie Gymnasium** in Dresden, Germany. Charlotte shared with me her experiences of attending a high school in Germany:



Charlotte's gymnasium school day began with a 90-minute class period in the morning, followed by 45-minute periods. School ended at various times, usually between 3 and 4pm, depending on the day's schedule.

Besides German, Marie Curie Gymnasium students are required to learn two foreign languages—usually English and an elective language, with Russian, French, and Spanish as the most popular options. In addition to her three languages, Charlotte studied math, physics, biology, chemistry, history, art, ethics, information technology (IT), and sports (PE). All students take physics, biology, and chemistry for three years. Some subjects are taught twice per week, others three times per week.

Charlotte reported that the homework demand in Germany was less than her current school in the U.S. In her German class (comparable to language arts in the U.S.), she tended to have more reading assignments, primarily poetry and short stories, than writing assignments such as papers or essays.

In fact, Charlotte noted that she had few writing assignments during the course of the school year in Germany.

Charlotte's test schedule was one to two exams in each subject per semester. Marie Curie Gymnasium did not have school assemblies, but students participated in frequent field trips including visits to a former concentration camp, Goethe's home, and technology centers. Students do not use laptops in class, but rather have access to 30 computers in a large room.

Students are required to hand write their work. Charlotte knew one classmate who received testing accommodations in class due to her diagnosis of dyslexia, but she was unaware of other students using accommodations.

According to Charlotte, one of the biggest differences between being a student in Germany vs. the U.S. is in the social realm: because of the excellent transportation system, students are not as reliant on their parents for transportation, which gives them much more freedom of independent movement.