

A Primer on German Schools

Choosing a Track

In Germany compulsory public education begins at age 6 and continues for nine to 12 years with the possibility of an additional three years of vocational schooling. After Grundschule (elementary school, grades one through four), students choose one of three options:

- Hauptschule, a middle school, grades 5–9, with the probability of continuing study at a vocational school for three years beyond the ninth grade.
- Realschule, middle/secondary school, grades 5–10, where students prepare for mid-level, non-professional careers.
- Gymnasium, middle/secondary school, grades 5–12, where the focus is on preparing for higher education
- Comprehensive School, grades 5-12, which includes Hauptschule, Realschule, Gymnasium.

Vocational Schools

The six types of post-middle/secondary vocational schools in Germany are:

- Berufsschule – part-time, for students taking initial vocational training and those who go to work after Hauptschule and are required to complete additional schooling.
- Berufsfachschule – full-time, for students who have graduated from Hauptschule or Realschule.
- Berufsaufbauschule – full-time, mid-level, for those who want to broaden their general and vocational training after compulsory vocational training.
- Fachoberschule – part-time, advanced-level, for students in 11th and 12th grades who have completed Realschule and want more theoretical and practical education in fields such as engineering, business administration, home economics, social work, design, navigation. A diploma from Fachoberschule allows a student to enter Fachhochschule (technical college).

- Berufliches Gymnasium – full-time, advanced-level, a Gymnasium with vocational emphasis, courses in economics and technical sciences. With a diploma from here a student can continue at an institution of higher education.

- Fachschule – full-time, advanced-level, offering advanced vocational as well as general education for students who will be mid-level managers in the workplace. Most students here have worked for several years in their field of specialization.

In Germany, attending college or university is not the usual course for all students. In fact, about one-third of all students leaving school in any given year will do so. Approximately two-thirds will enter vocational training within the traditional dual system: a combination of hands-on, practical experience and theoretical instruction in the skill of their choice. Transparency 12 demonstrates this two-sided approach to training.

The opportunities for vocational training in Germany are great. Possibilities exist in almost every firm and company, big or small; public vocational training schools are within the geographic reach of every potential trainee in the country. Currently, there are opportunities for training in over 380 different skills and trades.

The vocational training system is supported by the government and supervised by local chambers of commerce and industry. Apprentices are paid a substantial wage, the exact amount of which varies according to the skill in question and increases in the course of the training.

Higher Education

German institutions of higher education include degree-granting universities and technical colleges for study in the arts and sciences and professions; teacher colleges; music academies; art academies; general colleges and special discipline colleges.