

What can we learn from the great German school turnaround?

It took Germany just over a decade to improve test scores and reduce inequality. Their education overhaul is a lesson in structure, monitoring and philosophy



'Schooling is fresher, more orientated around students and their lives, influences and media consumption habits,' says teacher Julia Döllner. Photograph: Alamy

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In 2000, Germany experienced an uncomfortable reality check when the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) revealed disappointing results for performance and equality in its schools.

The country tested below average in maths, reading and science in the [Programme for International Assessment](#) (Pisa) report – and received the unwanted accolade of having the most unequal education performance among the 43 countries examined.



The results were a blow to a country that prides itself on its strong literary tradition and belief in social equality. “Germany’s school system – and indeed the whole nation – was shocked by the first Pisa results of 2000,” says Christian Füller, German author and commentator on education. “It revealed a broad group of ‘at risk’ students that could not properly read and were termed ‘functional illiterates’. This seemed to destroy any notions of being Goethe’s and Thomas Mann’s ‘kulturation’ of thinkers and poets.”

Just over a decade later, Germany was celebrated in the same research. In 2012, it was one of just three countries surveyed by the OECD that reduced inequality while improving its math scores. The great “Pisa shock” led to what has now been [called the “great turnaround” in German education](#). So, does Germany, with its complex and fragmented education system, and school days that have traditionally stopped at lunchtime, have a lesson or two to teach other countries?

A change of structure

While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact recipe for success, Miyako Ikeda, senior analyst on the Pisa team at the [OECD](#), argues one of the most significant changes was structural reform of the secondary school system. The findings of 2000, which laid bare how far socio-economic background was tied to educational performance, added fuel to the argument that streaming children at the age of 10 didn’t work. The old system– where children moved into either a Gymnasium (for academic students), Realschule (for intermediary students), or Hauptschule (for the less academic) – was felt to be perpetuating inequality.

Several measures were taken to relax the system. These reforms included delaying the age when children are assigned to different secondary schools, combining Realschulen and Hauptschule, and introducing more comprehensive schools. “These measures have broken down the segregation between children set on academic paths and those on a vocational path. It has allowed children more flexibility in their learning and taken away a lot of stigma,” says Sascha Stollhans, tutor at the [University of Nottingham](#) and representative of the [German Academic Exchange Service](#).

States closed Hauptschules, which were characterised as places for children with poor prospects, and created an alternative with a more positive learning environment, says Maria Lujan, department head of romance languages at the [International School of Düsseldorf](#). “Merging with Realschulen also improves the employment prospects of those students,” she adds.

Offering more support to migrants

One of the most important lessons has also been to prioritise support for the lowest achievers, argues Ikeda. He says improvements in reading and maths were largely due to changes in this group.

A significant proportion of low performers in the Pisa report were migrants, and central to turning things around was improving their language skills. “Due to their poor German, foreign students are usually assigned to Hauptschulen,” says Lujan. The introduction of subsidised all-day schools and comprehensives that don’t segregate by ability provides more language support and scope for integration, she argues.

There has also been more encouragement for migrant families to send their children to kindergarten, Lujan adds. “In Germany kindergarten used to be a place in which children just played, but the Pisa results made us see that it’s an important link in the chain of education.”

Lujan says that the Pisa shock led to kindergarten pedagogy reforms and more development opportunities for teachers. “Language difficulties among students were also diagnosed as early as possible through the introduction of new tests,” she adds.

Unifying a fragmented system

“It is difficult to talk about the German education system because every state has its own,” says secondary teacher Julia Döller, describing the patchwork of policies and reforms in Germany’s decentralised structure. One of the key reforms post-Pisa was to standardise curricula and introduce national tests. “School books, the curriculum and teaching have all changed since the Pisa shock. Students are now preparing for standard tests,” says Döller, explaining how reforms have made lessons and teaching more focused.

She also believes it has become more interactive - classes are a far cry from the lessons of rote learning that Döller remembers as a pupil in 1990s Bavaria. “Since 2000 [and the Pisa report] there is more focus on communication and teamwork,” she says. “Schooling is fresher, more orientated around students and their lives, influences and media consumption habits.” Ikeda also argues that teaching quality has, perhaps unsurprisingly, been key to Germany’s turnaround.

A little bit of monitoring, but not too much

A little bit of monitoring can go a long way. “One of the most striking differences between schooling in the UK and Germany is the level of monitoring,” says Stollhans. “While national curriculums and tests have been introduced since 2000, results are not published, there are no league tables, and so schools are not constantly worried about their reputation. It is less target driven,” he explains.

One of the key lessons of the German experience has been to ensure that monitoring is not excessive and does not inhibit the teachers’ creativity. “In Germany there is less pressure on teachers and pupils to perform. They can focus on the process of education rather than the result,” says Stollhans.

A different philosophy



At its heart, many see the turnaround in German education as being successful because it has negotiated change while maintaining its commitment to free, quality education. “You don’t have tuition fees in Germany and therefore students are not seen as customers,” argues Stollhans. “You can see that business attitude in UK schools when you look at the results-driven approach of things like [Ofsted](#) and the league tables.”

German educated Anja Abney, now researching education in the US, agrees there is something other countries can learn from the philosophy underpinning the German attitude to learning. “In Germany there is an awareness of letting children be children while they learn,” said Abney. “Teaching the whole person is much more what we do in Germany.”

And yet for some, the great “turnaround” still has some way to go. While the progress made since 2000 has been significant, Lujan believes that tackling what still remains of the “highly discriminatory and unfair” tracking system, is the final hurdle. “The educational system has gone from average to good. Now Germany needs to move from good to great. We still need to create a system in which every pupil is encouraged to try hard and succeed.”