

# What the German Education System Can Teach American School Reform



Given the [rising costs](#), concomitant increases in [student debt](#), and seemingly ever-waxing [administrative bloat](#), debate about how best to reform America's educational system has become an integral part of our political discourse. Many of us are looking at our schools and wondering, "Is the whole thing broken? What can we do to fix it?" Initiatives like "No Child Left Behind" are [failing to prepare more kids for college](#). Many of us are [not holding our breath](#) for the "Common Core," either.

I believe that the German model of education offers wisdom that might help us not only reform the structure of American education, but also prioritize the important things: a diverse workforce, pride in everyday workers and entrepreneurs, and a renewed belief in the importance of liberal education.

In the German system, there are three major types of high school: *Hauptschule*, *Realschule*, and *Gymnasium*. The first is essentially a trade school, and produces carpenters, plumbers, and other craftsmen. The second trains white-collar professionals such as IT workers for jobs in the ever-growing world of technological bureaucracy. The final type is the most like American high school because it cultivates students who wish to attend university in order to become academics, doctors, lawyers, and the like.

The benefit of the German system is that it doesn't glut universities with students who attend solely because they are required to, a problem I have seen first-hand and which [teachers have begun to notice](#). While college opens some professional doors, it most often means accruing debt that is not easily paid by the job options available to recent graduates with little to no work experience. Students with trade skills will not go into grave debt, have immediate earning potential, and also put a dent in the world of for-profit education, which some see as a [scam](#).

If we were to adopt a similar high school, trade education approach, it would also benefit those of us who

choose to attend college. Universities have become too business-like. My own alma mater, the College of the Holy Cross, chose to [remove the cross from its logo](#), primarily because it looks more marketable without it. Universities are also increasing the number of non-faculty staff because the more students, services, and such they have, the more bureaucrats they require. Having fewer students would not only drive down costs, it would also return the university to its original purpose: the edification of learned people and not just working professionals. It could even help schools hire more faculty! One of my personal heroes, George Grant, wrote of the dangers of the “multiversity,” which had lost all unity of purpose. Switching to the German model of education could reverse this decline, returning dignity to workers and true purpose to our universities.

I am not naïve, and I recognize that such a reform is unlikely to happen. Given our current system, investing in [community colleges](#) and [lagging trade schools](#) might be our best option. But it is important to shine a light on a model that, while not perfect, does provide benefits amenable to workers, professionals, and academics.

ARTICLE SEARCH