

Living in Germany...

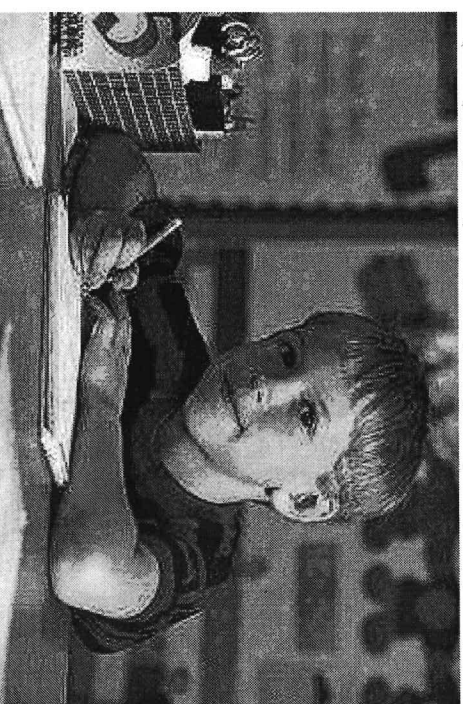
Germany: Basic Facts

Population:	82,422,299 (July 2006 est)
Size:	357,021 sq km (slightly smaller than Montana)
Bordering countries:	Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Switzerland
Coastline:	2,389 km
Climate:	temperate and marine; cool, cloudy, wet winters and summers; occasional warm, tropical foehn wind; high relative humidity
Lowest point:	Neuendorf bei Wilster (-3.54 m)
Highest point:	Zugspitze (2,963 m)
Life expectancy at birth:	78 (75 for males, 82 for females)
Religions:	Protestant 34%, Roman Catholic 34%, Muslim 3.7%, unaffiliated or other 28.3%
Government type:	federal republic
National capital:	Berlin
Voting Age:	18
States:	Baden-Württemberg, Bayern, Berlin, Brandenburg, Bremen, Hamburg, Hessen, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Niedersachsen, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Rheinland-Pfalz, Saarland, Sachsen, Sachsen-Anhalt, Schleswig-Holstein, Thüringen
Political parties:	Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU), Free Democratic Party (FDP), Social Democratic Party (SPD), Alliance 90/Greens, Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS)
Currency:	1 euro (€) = 100 cents
Telephones:	Main line: 54.57 million (2004) • Cellular: 71.3 million (2004) Internet Country Code: .de • Internet users 48,722,055

	(2003)
Radio broadcast stations:	AM 51, FM 787, shortwave 4
Television broadcast stations:	373
Railways:	46,166km of track
Highways and roads:	231,581km
Waterways:	7,467km
Airports:	552
Heliports:	33

The ABCs of the German school system

Trying to size up the education system is one of the hardest things facing those embarking on a foreign posting. Andrew McCathie sets out what you should know about German schools and daycare.



Education is a far cry from the strict Prussian system that some expats fear

Like almost every aspect of German social policy, the education system is facing a series of major changes. This follows the publication of a comparative international study of education that showed Germany's educational standards have slipped in recent years sparking a major debate about the need for overhauling the country's education system.

The way things stand at moment, the German education system is state-based with each of the German 16 states (Laender) operating their own school and educational system which differ in varying degrees from one another.

While German students are held to high academic standards and Germany and students regularly face oral examinations, the nation's education is a far cry from the strict Prussian system that some expats fear they are launching their children into when they take up a posting in Germany. Often, however, the curriculum is very focused on academic pursuits rather than a range of more general interests such as photography or different kinds of music.

On average, children start school at the age of six. Some of the states have a cut-off date (such as 30 June). If the child is born after this date, they are considered a 'kann Kind' (literally 'can child') as opposed to a 'muss Kind' ('must child'). This means that they can attend school if they pass a test but they are not obliged to start the following September.

The administrators generally try to discourage early admissions based on the assumption that even if the child is intellectually ready they may still be too socially and physically immature to begin school.

Prior to entering 'Grundschule' (primary or elementary school), most children attend 'Kindergarten' (pre-school.)

Kindergarten

Kindergarten is not a part of the regular public school system and is not required or free. Tuition is normally based on income. Space is often limited and even though it's not mandatory, the majority of three to six year olds attend them.

Kitas

Daycare services are also provided at Kitas, which offer after-school and sometimes pre-school activities for children. The maximum age is about 11 or 12 with many Kitas offering facilities for quite young children. Once again a fee is charged for children attending for what are a very popular form of daycare in Germany.

Kinderlaeden and Schuelerlaeden

These are privately operated daycare services, which offer an alternative to the state-run Kitas. While Kinderlaeden offer activities for pre-schoolers, Schuelerlaeden only offer after-school activities. Parents also have to pay a fee.

Grundschule

Children attend 'Grundschule' for four years. In some of the states, however, 'Grundschule' lasts six years.

On their first day at 'Grundschule' children bring a 'Schultuete' which is a large decorative conical parcel filled with candy and little presents and the older school children turn on a performance for the new students and their families.

In addition to the '3 R's', the children learn about science, local history and geography. Additionally, children are given religion lessons. Parents may opt their children out of religion classes by having them attend ethics lessons.

Non-German students

The school grade into which foreign pupils are placed when they arrive in Germany depends on how well they speak German.

Children who do not speak German at home and who have not attended a German kindergarten often repeat the first or second grade.

Since the number of non-German students has constantly risen over the years some adaptations have been made. Children who were not born in Germany or whose parents do not speak German at home are offered additional lessons in the form of preparatory classes, bilingual classes, intensive courses and remedial classes depending on the State.

Foreigners whose children are born and raised in Germany are often concerned that their children are losing their cultural roots. Therefore, in some states, children with non-German parents have the right to some tuition coverage for classes in the mother tongue of their parents.

High school

In the last year of 'Grundschule', the decision is made as to whether pupils will attend the 'Hauptschule', 'Realschule', 'Gymnasium' or 'Gesamtschule'.

The system is quite rigid with the pupils placed into the different types of schools based entirely on their academic performance.

School hours

The school day starts at 8am and is generally over by 1pm with the schools tending not to offer anything much in the way of extracurricular activities.

There are of course a host of school groups such as theatre and sport associations. But there are also a range of after-school and sometimes pre-school facilities for essentially for child minding for children up to the age of about 12 and which are sometimes provided in the actual school grounds. Once again a fee is charged based on income.

School vacations

The children generally have six weeks of summer vacation, one week of autumn vacation, two weeks of Christmas/winter vacation, two weeks of Easter/spring vacation and two weeks vacation in June.

Gymnasium

About a quarter of the children go to 'Gymnasium'. It has nothing to do with sports or any kind of physical education and instead is the literal translation of 'high school'.

'Gymnasium' lasts from about age 12 to 18 or 19 and is required for anyone planning on tertiary education.

At least two foreign languages are required, (one being English and the other is generally Latin or French). In the 13th grade students prepare for the 'Abitur'. This is an examination that students in general need to pass in order to the tertiary level.

In most of the German states, a student who fails more than two subjects will have to repeat the whole school year. However, he or she cannot repeat the same grade twice. The student is then required to change schools. Unlike the US, there is no summer school.

Students also have to choose a 'Zweig' (literally branch) in the seventh grade, for example, math/science or languages or humanities. The students then have extra classes or more hours in those subject areas.

Realschule

About one quarter of the children attend 'Realschule' where they learn the basic subjects which will prepare them for a mid-level job in business.

It's possible (if a student receives high enough grades) to transfer from a 'Realschule' to a Gymnasium.

After six years, the students graduate with a diploma called the 'Mittlere Reife'.

The next step is normally a vocational school where they learn skills that put them in to the middle strata of business and industry. Salesmen, nurses, mid-level civil servants, secretaries, and so forth generally have been to 'Realschule'.

Hauptschule

The final half of the elementary school children are sent to the 'Hauptschule'.

It's five-year program teaches basic skills, including one foreign language, and prepares its pupils for apprenticeship or an unskilled or semiskilled role in the job market.

They also continue learning basic subjects as well as English.

After a student graduates from a 'Hauptschule' they can go on to a vocational school, which lasts about two years.

Gesamtschule

Another option for the parents is to send their children to a Gesamtschule (comprehensive school) which is attended by students of all different abilities.

Students can also take their final exam (Abitur) at a so-called 'Kollegeschule' which is associated with the Gesamtschule.

Private schools

The exception to the rule in this whole system is the private schools. There are currently about 3,000 private schools in Germany, many of them boarding schools. These schools often have a longer school day.

There are also international schools at which the classes are taught in English. Often the curriculum is designed to prepare students for the International General Certificate of Education (IGCSE) and the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma.

Berufskollegs

German education system also includes vocational schools called 'Berufskollegs' where students normally aged between 16 and 19 can undertake a range of work-directed studies such as economics and specific business studies.

GRADE	AGE
13	18
12	17
11	16
10	15
9	14
8	13
7	12
6	11
5	10
4	9
3	8
2	7
1	6
	5
	4
	3

13	University and college	18	Secondary School (Second Phase)
12	Specialized vocational training	17	Secondary School (Second Phase)
11	Specialized vocational training	16	Secondary School (Second Phase)
10	Vocational training (full or part-time classes)	15	Secondary School (Second Phase)
	Realschule students usually graduate after 10 years.	16	Secondary School (Second Phase)
	Hauptschule students usually graduate after 9 years.	15	Secondary School (Second Phase)
10	Realschule	14	Secondary School (First Phase)
9	Realschule	13	Secondary School (First Phase)
8	Realschule	12	Secondary School (First Phase)
7	Orientation Stage	11	Secondary School (First Phase)
6	Orientation Stage	10	Secondary School (First Phase)
5	Orientation Stage	9	Secondary School (First Phase)
4	Orientation Stage	8	Elementary School
3	Grundschule	7	Elementary School
2	Grundschule	6	Elementary School
1	Grundschule	5	Elementary School
	Kindergarten	4	Pre-school
	Kindergarten	3	Pre-school