

Are German students really below average?

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Oh, the shame of it! A new study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has concluded that German fifteen-year-olds are, well, academically challenged. They're mediocre at math. They're slow at science. And when it comes to reading comprehension, they're at the back of the class. The study's findings amount to a slap in the face for the country's politicians, parents, and educators. They're all blaming each other for the sorry state of German education.

For a country that's long prided itself on the achievements of its educational system, the results of the OECD study are sobering. In a thirty-one-country comparison, German students not only failed to make it into the top ten percent, they didn't even make it into the top half. In math and science they ranked way down at number twenty. In reading literacy (the principal focus of the test), Germany came in a miserable twenty-first.

The substandard performance of Germany (the world's third-largest economy) is particularly glaring when compared to other European countries. Finnish students, for example, took first place honors in reading, scored third in science, and fourth in math. Austria consistently made it into the top third. The UK ranked eighth or better in all three categories. No major European country performed as badly across the board as Germany.

Of course, the announcement of the test results in December sparked a major debate about the quality of German education. Almost everyone acknowledges that the country's students aren't performing as well as they might. But there's little agreement on why they're doing so badly or what should be done about it. Some feel that class sizes (comparatively large in Germany) should be reduced. Others believe the country's pedagogical approach places too much emphasis on rote learning, to the detriment of problem solving skills. Many educators argue that Germany's teachers are overburdened, underpaid, and burned out.

Alongside standard pleas for more teachers and higher spending on education, the education debate is also focusing on the role of foreigners in German society. Conservative politicians point to the poor scores of students from non-German-speaking households as justification for curbing immigration. They claim the high proportion of foreigners (particularly Turks) in some schools compromises the ability of teachers to address the needs of native German speakers. Educational policy makers in some German states are calling for mandatory language tests of four-year-olds and an obligatory year of kindergarten with an emphasis on learning German.

Nevertheless, even those fifteen-year-olds who are perfectly able to read German often aren't willing. The OECD study found that forty-two percent of the students in Germany never read for pleasure. No other country showed a greater aversion to browsing through a magazine or cracking open a book. In a country with such a diverse and colorful range of print-based media, this statistic is particularly baffling. It certainly doesn't bode well for the future of Germany's publishing industry.

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