



Education hits the rocks

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Emotions are running wild in the run up to a referendum in July in which Hamburg citizens will decide whether to abolish what are known in Germany as Hauptschule. These are the standard, open-to-all schools that children of no special ability attend for the final five or six years of their education, until they hit 15 or 16. And these are also the schools that have gained the reputation for being good at producing dropouts.

Rather than being just a local quarrel, however, the whole country is currently waking up to the fact that German pupils do not always get the best education possible. In a knowledge-driven and globalised economy where kids from Berlin will have to compete with those from Zürich and Bangalore, this is not good news.

Every year 60,000 young Germans leave school without graduating – most of them go straight to welfare. Studies show that a fifth of all 15-year-olds cannot read, write or calculate properly. In films such as director Detlev Buck's *Knallhart* ("Bad-Ass") schools in German cities are depicted as war zones where gangs of migrant children terrorise the last remaining – and inferior – German kids.

Not surprisingly, parents are increasingly opting out of a public school system they perceive as flawed. Already 12 per cent of children attend a private school. Their numbers are rising slowly but it's a "significant trend" says Josef Kraus, head of the German teachers' association. □ The trend will see Hamburg become the home in August of a *Moderne Schule* ("Modern School"), a sophisticated private school where all pupils will learn to speak English and Chinese from grade one – a first for Germany. There will be yoga classes, and school holidays are going to be "on demand". *Moderne Schule* is a symptom of a larger trend: parents' masterplans for the perfect résumé.

After what Germans called the "PISA Shock" (in recent years their schools did not do very well in the Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA, survey) private schools and daycare centres have sprung up all over the country. They promise to deliver everything public schools do not: in Berlin the *Be Smart Academy*, run by a TV-actress, teaches three-year-olds cosmopolitan manners. In Hamburg there's now a private school run by pop-singer Nena.

Germany's education system is being Americanised as it faces up to a deep divide that sees public schools left to educate a growing number of immigrant children, often to a less than satisfactory standard and sometimes with gang problems thrown into the mix. Yet for Kraus, parents who send their children to private schools often are overambitious, "trying to make

even eight-year-olds fit for the global market. Sometimes you feel sorry for the children,” he says.

But preparing children for a globalised world is exactly what Moderne Schule’s founder Axel Beyer wants to do. His all-day school is not elitist he claims – it costs only €200 a month and offers discounts as well as scholarships for lower-income households. He says that he talked to a lot of parents and offers them services that they looked for but couldn’t get at public schools. “In the afternoon our pupils will even speak Chinese at their music class and English at a soccer game,” he says with pride. □ □

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