



Volume 10. One Germany in Europe, 1989 – 2009
Teachers at a “Problem School” Issue a Cry for Help (March 30, 2006)

Unable to cope with the breakdown of discipline, the increase in violence, and students' complete lack of motivation, teachers at a Berlin *Hauptschule* where students from immigrant backgrounds make up more than four-fifths of the student body issued a cry for help to the Berlin authorities. The letter was reprinted in a number of leading German newspapers, and it sparked a nationwide debate on integration policies and the reform of the *Hauptschule*.

A Cry for Help from the Rütli School

As was explained in the meeting of school administrators on February 21, 2006, the ethnic composition of our student body has changed in recent years, so that students of Arab descent now make up the largest group, presently 34.9 percent, followed by students of Turkish descent (26.1 percent). The total proportion of young people of non-German descent is 83.2 percent. Statistics show that the percentage of students of Arab descent has grown continually in recent years. [. . .]

Our school has no faculty members from non-German cultural backgrounds. In some classrooms, we are confronted with an atmosphere that is currently characterized by aggression, a complete lack of respect, and indifference toward us adults.

Very few students bring the materials they need for class. The propensity toward vandalism is growing: students kick in doors, use wastepaper baskets as footballs, set off fireworks, and tear down picture frames from corridor walls.

If students are confronted about something, other students cover for them. It is virtually impossible to identify the guilty party. One student reported that a school gets special recognition in the neighborhood if it generates as many negative headlines as possible. [. . .]

Our efforts to enforce the rules meet with considerable student resistance. It is getting harder and harder to overcome this resistance. In many classrooms, student behavior during lessons is characterized by a total rejection of the subject matter and by uncivil conduct. Teachers are not respected at all; objects aimed at teachers fly through the classrooms; instructions are ignored. Some teachers will only enter certain classrooms with a cell phone, so that they can call for help if necessary.

As a result, teachers are exhausted and at the end of their rope. The sick-leave rate is correspondingly high. In the first semester of the 2005-06 school year, teachers called in sick more often than students. [. . .] Some colleagues have been submitting transfer applications for years, but their requests aren't being granted because no substitutes are available.

Up to now we have received little support from parents in our efforts to enforce rules and regulations. Appointments aren't kept and telephone calls don't work because of language problems.

We are desperate

Through the neighborhood management office, we applied for two social workers of Turkish and Arab descent, primarily to facilitate conversations with parents. But this measure alone will not de-escalate the situation.

The principal has been out sick since the beginning of the school year (2005-06) and will be going into early retirement. An expanded school administration, comprised of four teachers, ran the school until December 2005, at which point an acting principal was appointed from within the group.

Considering the development of our school over the past few years, we must concede that the vocation-oriented secondary school [*Hauptschule*] has reached a dead end, and there is no turning back anymore. What is the sense of a school that gathers together all of the students who have been given no chance, either by their parents or the economy, to meaningfully shape their lives?

In most families, our students are the only ones who get out of bed in the morning. How can we explain to them that it is still important for them to come to school and finish their schooling and receive a diploma? The students are usually preoccupied with procuring the newest cell phone, choosing outfits that won't get them laughed at and that will help them fit in. For them, school is the stage upon which they carry out their struggle for recognition.

Repeat offenders become the role model. School provides no positive role models for the students. They are trapped among themselves and never have a chance to get to know other young people who live differently. The *Hauptschule* isolates them. They feel singled out and conduct themselves accordingly. For this reason, any sort of help for our school can only make the present situation more bearable. In the longer term, the *Hauptschule* in its present form needs to be eliminated in favor of a new type of school with a totally new configuration.

In the short term, we need to expand the faculty to bring calm and order into the everyday school routine, which – as mentioned above – is characterized by cancelled classes and substitute teachers. [. . .]

We need to have a specialist at the school every day to help us with de-escalation and crisis intervention. [. . .]

Our school building will be one hundred years old in 2009, and we hope that by then it will be possible to create a school atmosphere in which students and teachers enjoy learning and teaching.

Source: "Der Hilferuf der Rütli-Schule" ["A Cry for Help from the Rütli School"], *Tagesspiegel online*, March 30, 2006.

Translation: Allison Brown