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German School System — From Enrollment to Abitur

How the German school system works: primary school, secondary schools, compulsory education and tips for parents. Updated: March 2026.

Deutsche Begriffe: Einschulung | Grundschule | Gymnasium | Realschule | Hauptschule

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> Updated: March 2026. All information without guarantee.

Compulsory Education

Germany has **universal compulsory education**:

- Start: at age **6** (cutoff date varies by state: June 30 or September 30)
- Duration: **9-10 years** full-time compulsory education + possibly 3 years of vocational school
- Applies to **all children** resident in Germany — including children without German citizenship

School System Structure

1. Grundschule (Grades 1-4)

- Duration: 4 years (Berlin/Brandenburg: 6 years)
- All children attend Grundschule together
- Subjects: German, mathematics, environmental studies, art, physical education, religion/ethics

2. Secondary Schools (from Grade 5 onwards)

School Type	Qualification	Duration	Next Step
Gymnasium	Abitur	8-9 years	University
Realschule	Intermediate qualification	6 years	Apprenticeship or Fachabi
Hauptschule	Lower secondary certificate	5 years	Apprenticeship
Gesamtschule	All qualifications	5-9 years	Flexible
Stadtteilschule (HH)	All qualifications	6-9 years	Flexible

3. Vocational Training or University Studies

- **Dual apprenticeship:** 2-3.5 years (company + vocational school)
- **University:** Bachelor's degree (3 years), Master's degree (+2 years)

Costs

- **Public schools:** free (textbooks usually provided as loans)
- **School materials:** approximately €100-200/year (notebooks, pens, backpack)
- **Education and Participation (BuT):** school supplies €195/year for low-income families

School Enrollment — What does my child need?

- 1. School registration** (1-1.5 years before enrollment with the school authority)
- 2. School entrance examination** (health department checks school readiness)
- 3. Schultüte** — German tradition! Filled with sweets and school supplies
- 4. Backpack, pencil case, sports clothes**

Tips for Children with Non-German Native Language

- **Welcome classes / DaZ classes** (German as a Second Language) — specialized German instruction

- Children learn German at school **remarkably quickly** (6–12 months for basic communication)
- **Maintain native language** — bilingualism is an advantage, not a disadvantage!
- **Tutoring:** BuT funds learning support if grade progression is at risk

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