



hamboorg.city

# School Types in Germany — Grundschule to Abitur

An overview of different school forms in the German education system: from primary school to high school explained.

**Deutsche Begriffe:** Schulformen | Grundschule | Gymnasium | Realschule | Hauptschule | Gesamtschule | Abitur

## The German School System — An Overview

The German education system is **organized federally** — that is, each of the 16 federal states has its own school laws. Nevertheless, there is a common **basic structure** that applies throughout Germany.

### Educational Stages

Stage	Age	Grade	Duration
<b>Kindergarten / Daycare</b>	0-6 years	-	Voluntary
<b>Grundschule</b>	6-10 years	1-4 (Berlin/Brandenburg: 1-6)	4 years
<b>Secondary School</b>	10-16/18 years	5-10/12/13	5-9 years
<b>Vocational Training / University</b>	16/18 years and up	-	2-5+ years

## Grundschule (Grades 1-4)

All children attend **primary school together**. This is where the **foundations** are laid:

- **Reading, writing, arithmetic**

- **General knowledge** (nature, society, technology)
- **Physical education, art, music**
- **Religion or ethics**
- First **foreign language** (usually English from grade 3)

## Grades

- **Grades 1-2:** In most federal states, there are **no grades**, but written evaluations instead
- **From grade 3 onwards:** Grades from 1 (very good) to 6 (failing)

## School Recommendation

At the end of primary school (grade 4), the school issues a **recommendation** for secondary school:

- **Gymnasium** — for high-achieving students (grades 1-2)
- **Realschule** — for average performance (grades 2-3)
- **Hauptschule / Gesamtschule** — for all others

**Important:** In most federal states, the recommendation is **not binding** — parents can choose freely. In **Bavaria and Brandenburg**, it is binding (with a trial period as an alternative).

## Types of Secondary Schools

### Gymnasium (Grades 5-12/13)

The Gymnasium is the **academic pathway** to Abitur (university entrance qualification):

- **Duration:** 8 years (G8) or 9 years (G9) — depending on the state
- **Degree: Abitur** (general university entrance qualification) — entitles you to study at any university
- **Subjects:** Broad range, from grade 6 a second foreign language (French, Latin, Spanish)
- **Requirements:** High academic achievement, independent learning
- **Upper school** (grades 11-12/13): Choice of **advanced courses** (LK) and **basic courses** (GK)

**For whom?** Children who enjoy learning, can think abstractly, and plan to attend university.

## Realschule (Grades 5–10)

The Realschule offers **broad general education** with practical relevance:

- **Degree: Mittlere Reife** (Realschule certificate / intermediate school-leaving certificate)
- **Subjects:** Similar to Gymnasium, but less abstract; elective subjects (technology, business, social studies)
- **Next steps:** Vocational training, technical college (FOS) → technical Abitur → study at university of applied sciences

**For whom?** Children who want a solid education and haven't yet decided between vocational training and university.

## Hauptschule (Grades 5–9/10)

The Hauptschule is **practice-oriented** and prepares students for **vocational training**:

- **Degree: Hauptschule certificate** (after grade 9) or **Extended Hauptschule certificate** (after grade 10)
- **Practice:** Many internships, close cooperation with businesses
- **Next steps:** Vocational apprenticeship
- **Tip:** A good Hauptschule certificate opens many doors — many craft businesses desperately seek apprentices

**For whom?** Children who are practically talented and want to start working early.

**Note:** The Hauptschule is being **abolished** or merged with the Realschule in many federal states (→ Stadtteilschule, Oberschule, Gemeinschaftsschule).

## Gesamtschule (Grades 5–12/13)

The Gesamtschule combines **all educational pathways** under one roof:

- **All degrees possible** — Hauptschule certificate, Mittlere Reife, Abitur
- **Differentiation:** Advanced courses at different levels (E-level, G-level)
- **No early tracking** — the decision about the degree is made only in upper school
- **All-day program** — often with lunch, clubs, afternoon supervision

**For whom?** Children who are still developing and don't want to be pigeonholed after grade 4.

## Stadtteilschule / Gemeinschaftsschule / Oberschule

These school types are **variations of the Gesamtschule** depending on the state:

- **Hamburg:** Stadtteilschule (all degrees including Abitur)
- **Berlin:** Integrierte Sekundarschule (ISS)
- **Schleswig-Holstein:** Gemeinschaftsschule
- **Lower Saxony:** Oberschule
- **Baden-Württemberg:** Gemeinschaftsschule

## Special Education School (Förderschule)

For children with **special educational needs**, there are special schools:

- **Support areas:** Learning, speech, emotional development, intellectual development, physical development, vision, hearing
- **Small classes** (8-12 students), specialized teachers
- **Inclusion:** The trend is toward **inclusive education** — children with special needs attend regular schools with support (school aide, special education teacher)

## Certificates and Their Value

Certificate	School Type	Opportunities
<b>Hauptschule Certificate</b>	Hauptschule, Gesamtschule	Apprenticeships in crafts, retail, hospitality
<b>Mittlere Reife</b>	Realschule, Gesamtschule	Apprenticeships (commercial, technical), FOS → technical Abitur
<b>Technical Abitur</b> (Fachhochschulreife)	Technical College (FOS), Vocational Higher School (BOS)	Study at universities of applied sciences
<b>Abitur</b> (general university entrance qualification)	Gymnasium, Gesamtschule	Study at any university

### Second Educational Pathway

You can **obtain any certificate later:**

- **Evening school / Kolleg** — Abitur for adults
- **Adult education center** — Hauptschule and Realschule certificates
- **Distance learning** — flexible from home
- **External examination** — exam without school attendance

# Which School is Right?

## Decision Guide

Question	Gymnasium	Realschule	Hauptschule/Gesamtschule
Enjoys learning?	Yes	Partly	Rather practical
Can think abstractly?	Yes	Moderately	Rather concretely
Reads a lot and enjoys it?	Yes	Sometimes	Rarely
Planning to attend university?	Likely	Maybe	Rather vocational training
Needs much support?	Little	Moderate	Much

### Important: Permeability

The German school system is **permeable**:

- Switch from Gymnasium to Realschule — if it's too difficult
- Switch from Realschule to Gymnasium — with good grades
- Hauptschule certificate → Mittlere Reife → Abitur — all possible, just a longer path

**No certificate is final** — in Germany, you can always move up!

## Tips for Foreign Parents

**1. Take the school recommendation seriously, but not as a verdict** — your child can develop

**2. Visit open house days** — almost every school offers this (January–March)

**3. Gesamtschule as an option** — if you're unsure, Gesamtschule keeps all doors open

**4. Language is the key** — children who speak German well have better chances

**5. Use education and participation support** — subsidies for tutoring if school is difficult

**6. Don't compare** — the German system is different from your home country, but not worse

--- As of: March 2026. All information without guarantee.

---

[hamboorg.city/knowledge/article/schulformen-deutschland/](https://hamboorg.city/knowledge/article/schulformen-deutschland/)  
hamboorg.city jest i zawsze będzie za darmo