

Should We Bring in the Germans to Run our Schools?

Shôn Ellerton, November 30, 2018

Every German or Swiss student that has stayed with us stated that Australian schools are too much on the easy side. But is this really true?



We host a variety of international students here in Australia from time to time. They come from all around the world including Brazil, China, Japan, Italy, France, Switzerland, Germany and Indonesia just to name a few. One thing they all have in common, is that they all believe that the school system in Australia is unchallenging and far too easy. Some go so far as to say that the school system here is an absolute joke; a very harsh and unfair statement to make.

Hearing this for the first time, I didn't pay much credence to the above observations considering that it came from just one student attending one school; a student who is quite bright and probably a shelf above most of the others for her age. However, after hearing a similar story many times from all the students we hosted who, by the way, attended different schools, I became curious as to why. I asked the question to a Swiss student we had at the time and more recently, the same question to a German student staying at another host family.

Here are 7 of their comments as to, perhaps, why Australian schools differ from the schools they attend to in Europe.

1. The use of laptops, tablets and calculators

German and Swiss students are generally not allowed to use them except under particular circumstances. For example, coding, computer-aided drawing (CAD), computer graphics, etc. My argument against this is that there should be the right balance. Our children will be immersed in a world of technology so banning them could be counterproductive.

2. Too many multiple-choice exams

Most exams in Germany and Switzerland are handwritten essay-style whereas in Australia, most exams are multiple-choice format. The advantage of a handwritten essay-style exam is that the ‘workings out’ of the solution is as important as the final answer. I agree with this most of the time; however, there are occasions where the administrative work to correct exams or tests without multiple choice answers would be too onerous. This applies to national-type exams; for example, in my case when I was a student in school, the *Iowa*, *SAT* and *ACT* tests in the United States.

3. Two-tiered system of private and public schools

The German student stated that, in Germany, there are only a handful of private schools, whereas in Australia, there is a clear division of those that attend public state-run schools and those that attend privately-funded schools. I absolutely agree with this. In Australia, private schools are often far too highly idolised.

4. Diluted and fragmented syllabus

Both students agree that the syllabus is very different from what they are used to in their home countries. For example, in Switzerland and Germany, a normal high-school student might have physics, chemistry and biology as separate classes during the year, whereas in Australia, it all seems to come under the one banner of *science*. However, in Australia, you have the option to attend many other *alternative* subjects such as psychology, media studies,

social science and gender studies. Perhaps this is true; however, parents are invited to participate with their local schools to share and make local decisions. Problem is; not enough parents do so.

5. A lot of spare time between classes

Both the students state that on one or two days of the week, they might have only one class, the rest of the day being devoted to so-called 'study time'. I could not figure out why this was the case; perhaps, it applies more to foreign-exchange students. In any case, most schools have a variety of extracurricular programs but many students and parents may not be aware of them.

6. Very little homework

The students, naturally, did not complain about not having enough homework; however, they did note that it was exceptionally easy to get ahead of the others with very little effort.

7. Content of work too easy

Both students commented that the difficulty of schoolwork they were given to in Australia was usually the same as that given to a German or Swiss student one or two years younger.

From the answers I received from the students, I could possibly agree with some of them except, perhaps, for having too little homework. I'm not altogether sure that ramming several hours of homework each night is entirely conducive to anyone's education (or sanity); however, having that amount of spare time between classes does seem rather wasteful.

Many parents blame the teachers; however, I know of two teachers; one based in South Australia, the other in New South Wales. They both work in excess of 3,000 hours per year with no overtime pay or extra bonus. They both state that they simply cannot complete their work within the allotted standard workday and that they must bring their work home each night. Moreover, much of their work is attributed to *collecting data* rather than actual teaching.

Like many institutions, such as nursing (which my wife practices), it is not the teachers who are problematic but rather, the stigma many parents have of sending their kids to state schools in the belief that private schools will offer a better education. Another reason is that it is all too easy to criticise but not take part with the running of the school. I once attended an AGM at my kid's primary school and during the offering of positions in the committee, only two hands were raised from the parents out of about thirty or so.

There are some very good state schools in Australia, and, like many other comparisons of state-driven schools in other countries, they can vary enormously. I took a tour of our local 1,600+ student R-12 school and found the school to be well-kept with competent teachers, great surroundings, fantastic resources and additional subjects available outside of the national curriculum.

Yes, we can certainly learn a few lessons from our German and Swiss state school equivalents; however, we just need to value and represent our own rather than continuously ostracising them in favour of private institutions.