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OPINION

## Germany's Economic Stagnation Has a Root Cause — and It's in the Classroom



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### From Innovation Leader to Educational Decline: Germany's Growing Crisis

According to a study commissioned by UNICEF, only 60 percent of 15-year-olds in Germany still possess a “minimum level of competence” in [reading and mathematics](#). The German daily newspaper “Die Welt” commented: “In plain language, this means that 40 percent are almost illiterate and do not master the basic arithmetic operations. This places us 34th out of the 41 countries surveyed. It is a catastrophe.”

### At War with Mathematics

At the same time, the newspaper reports, academic standards are being continuously lowered. Recently, several German states removed long division and decimal calculations from [mathematics lessons](#) in elementary schools. One reason given was that students made too many mistakes when dividing numbers. Responding to criticism, Lower Saxony's Minister of Education, Julia Willie Hamburg, made the amusing remark that [simplifying mathematics instruction](#) represented a “scientifically based further development of mathematical education.”

The minister belongs to the Green Party, whose supporters are notoriously uncomfortable with mathematics. This was one of the findings of a survey conducted by the Allensbach Institute for Public Opinion Research, in which

1,118 representative Germans aged 16 and older were asked: “Which subjects were you good at in school, what were your best subjects?” They were also asked in which subjects they performed poorly.

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One of the findings: according to their own statements, Green Party voters were particularly good at English and social studies in school. They performed especially poorly in history, and they were also significantly worse at mathematics than the voters of all other parties — with the exception of voters of the Left Party, who performed worst in mathematics by far.

## More and More People Without School or Professional Qualifications

Germany’s economic output has stagnated for seven years, and one of the causes is the educational disaster. Daniel Stelter writes in his book “Absturz. So retten wir Deutschland” (“Crash: How We Save Germany”): “In Japan, 32 percent of students reach the highest level of mathematical achievement, while in Germany only five percent do. The consequences become visible later:

in 2023, Japanese researchers filed more than three times as many patents as their German colleagues.”

Stelter reports that according to the MINT Nachwuchsbarometer 2023, 22 percent of students in Germany were classified as “at risk” and possessed hardly any basic understanding of numbers and arithmetic operations. The number of school dropouts, Stelter writes, has reached a historic high in Germany. After Romania, Spain, and Hungary, Germany has the fourth-highest school dropout rate in the European Union.

The situation is even more dramatic among young adults without vocational qualifications. According to the Vocational Training Report 2025, 2.86 million people between the ages of 20 and 34 have no professional qualification, corresponding to 19.1 percent of this age group. In addition, the share of apprentices who abandon their vocational training prematurely doubled from ten percent in 2005 to more than 20 percent in 2020.

The situation at German universities is even worse. Thirty-two percent of students drop out of university. “More and more students lack the basic prerequisites for successful university studies,” Stelter observes.

### **Innovation: No Longer Among the Top Ten**

Besides a hostility toward achievement and mass migration, one of Germany’s major problems is educational federalism. Each of the 16 federal states independently determines its education policy, and there are no uniform national standards.

All this has consequences for the economy. In the Global Innovation Index 2025, Germany fell from 9th to 11th place and, for the first time in years, no longer ranks among the world’s ten most innovative economies, while China entered the Top 10 for the first time. According to Stelter, Switzerland has led the ranking for many years, followed by Sweden and the United States. South

Korea, Singapore, the United Kingdom, Finland, the Netherlands, and Denmark also rank ahead of Germany.

What stands out is the close connection between the degree of economic freedom and a country's innovative strength. In the 2026 Index of Economic Freedom, Singapore and Switzerland lead the rankings; Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden are also among the Top 12. Finland ranks 13th, while Germany is only in 24th place.

“German inventors,” writes economist Stelter, “created the printing press, the automobile, X-ray technology, the MP3 format, and countless other technologies that changed the world. This innovative strength lies behind today's key industries on which our prosperity depends.” As a country poor in natural resources, Germany depends especially on well-educated and innovative people. But the foundation for this no longer exists. Germany is falling further and further behind. The 2022 PISA study documents a dramatic decline in performance. In mathematics, German 15-year-olds achieved 475 points, a decline of 25 points since 2018.

**Editor's note: This is part two of a four-part series.**