

School in Lower Saxony

A concise, clear guide



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Foreword

Dear parents*,

Each one of us has been to school. But this experience was different from that of our children today. And many parents attended school in other countries, which was probably even more unlike present-day schools in Lower Saxony.

This brochure has therefore been written to provide useful basic information. Its title, "School in Lower Saxony: a concise, clear guide" reflects this modest ambition.

One double page is devoted to each of six topics:

- 1 Compulsory education and registration with the school
- 2 The educational system in Lower Saxony
- 3 From the school day to the school year
- 4 Costs and support
- 5 The parents as partners with the school
- 6 Language as the key to education

We hope you will see that school in Lower Saxony is organizationally not that complicated!

- › You register your child for school.
- › After primary school, various educational tracks are available to choose from.
- › The school day is structured by the lesson timetable, and the school year by reports, parent-teacher conferences and holidays.
- › School attendance is free of charge, but parents have to pay a contribution towards books and school trips if they can.
- › While parents are obliged to send their children to school, they do not only have obligations. They also have the right to be kept informed by the school and involved in decisions.
- › Good German-language skills are a prerequisite for success at school – but the school will help its pupils acquire these skills.

If you want to know more about specific aspects such as choice of educational track or school-leaving qualifications, please contact your school directly. You can also order one of our brochures online at the Lower Saxony Ministry of Education website www.mk.niedersachsen.de
› Service › Publikationen.

For schools, dialogue with parents is an important basis for success – so take the initiative and talk to your school!

I wish your child the best of success in his or her school career – and I am confident that you will enjoy a harmonious relationship with the school and its teachers.



Best regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Grant Hendrik Tonne". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

Grant Hendrik Tonne
Lower Saxony Minister of Education

* Throughout this brochure, the word 'parents' is used to include all parents and guardians.

1 Compulsory education and registration with the school

In Lower Saxony, school is compulsory for each child who has reached the age of 6. Compulsory education lasts for 12 years. Each child of school age is entitled to a school place. Parents need to register their child with the school.

Which is the 'right' school?

Education authority areas (i.e. school districts) are established for primary school (Years 1 to 4). The child is registered with the school in whose district he/she lives. About 18 months before their child starts school, the parents are invited to register with the relevant school. They also find out how long the registration period is. At secondary school (from Year 5), parents can choose between different educational tracks and, in some cases, between different schools providing the same track.

When they have decided, they take the child to register with the school chosen. If this school has no free places, it can arrange education on the same track at a different school. But the child's entitlement to a place still remains and this must be satisfied at a local school.

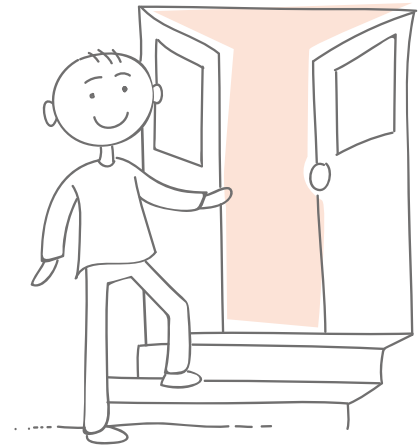
There is an official deadline – shortly before the summer holidays – for registration in time for the school year. If the intention is to register the child during the school year, a date must be agreed with the school administration through the school office. Registration involves the parents completing a form by providing information about themselves and their child.

Here is an extract from the registration form for a primary school:

Child's surname:	
Child's first name:	Sex: <input type="checkbox"/> Girl <input type="checkbox"/> Boy
Date of birth:	
Place of birth:	
Country of birth:	
Nationality:	<input type="checkbox"/> German <input type="checkbox"/> Other:
Religious affiliation:	<input type="checkbox"/> Protestant <input type="checkbox"/> Catholic <input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> Other:
Parent/guardian:	Father: Mother:
Full address:	
Telephone:	

Forms used by other schools contain further questions; for example, they ask for information about siblings at the school, health problems and special requirements.

SCHOOL



For children who have recently arrived from other countries, additional information is often requested so that specific support can be provided to them.

Here is an extract from an extended application form:

Religious affiliation:	
Native language:	
Written language skills:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Familiarity with the Roman (i.e. Western) alphabet:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Other languages:	
School attendance in country of origin:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Number of years spent in school:	
English tuition in the country of origin:	
Years, number of lessons/week:	
German-language skills:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

The registration interview not only involves the school asking questions to the parents. Parents can also ask questions of the school's head teacher so they can understand better what their child can expect at this school.

Regular school attendance

When the child is registered with the school, he/she must, from the beginning of the school year or from the date of enrollment, attend school every day and remain there until the end of the school day.

The parents must ensure that the child does not miss any lessons.



2 The education system in Lower Saxony

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN LOWER SAXONY																		
Year		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		11	12	13			
Educational institution	Child daycare facility (Kindertagesstätte)	Primary school (Grundschule) Special-needs school (Förderschule)				Secondary schools (weiterführende Schulen): • Special-needs school (Förderschule) • Lower secondary school (Hauptschule) • Intermediate secondary school (Realschule) • Integrated Hauptschule and Realschule (Oberschule) • Upper secondary school (Gymnasium) • Comprehensive school (Gesamtschule)					Junior-level secondary school-leaving certificate (Sekundarabschluss I)	Vocational training schools (berufsbildende Schulen)	Vocational qualifications, etc. (Berufsabschlüsse)		Upper secondary school (Gymnasium) Comprehensive school (Gesamtschule)	General higher-education entrance qualification (allgemeine Hochschulreife)		Vocational training (Berufsausbildung) / Higher education (Hochschule)
Level (Bereich)	Elementary level (Elementarbereich)	Primary level (Primarbereich)				Junior secondary level (Sekundarbereich I)						Senior secondary level (Sekundarbereich II)						
Age	0 – 6	6 – 10				10 – 16						16 – 19						
Compulsory education		12 years																

Child daycare facility: early education

Children aged 1–6 (elementary level) are entitled to attend a child daycare facility (*Kindertagesstätte*) or, up to the age of 3, to a childminding place (*Kindertagespflege*). Attendance at a child daycare facility or the use of a childminder is voluntary. There is generally a monthly fee for attending a daycare facility. These places are run by municipal authorities or private organizations such as churches or charities.

Preschool language development support

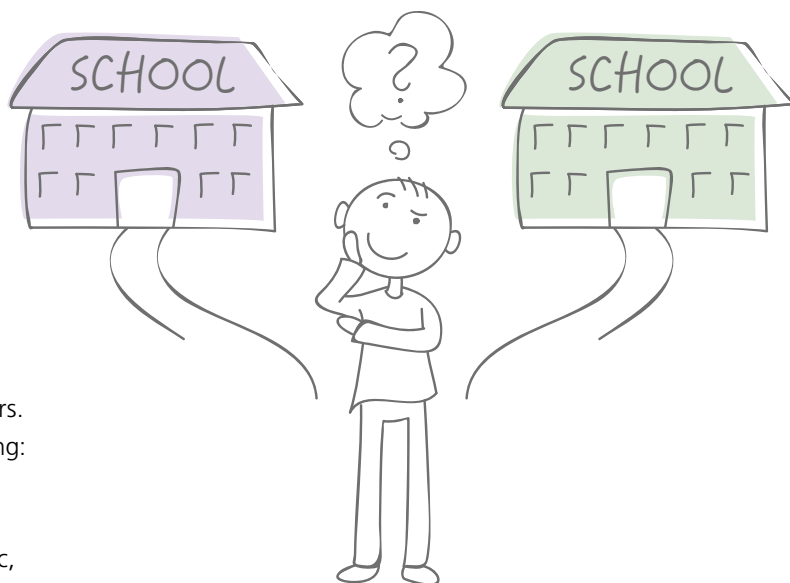
Eighteen months before a child starts school, his or her **language level** is ascertained. If the child does not yet speak good German or needs help to improve his or her language skills, he/she takes part in the preschool language development support programme (*vorschulische Sprachförderung*).



Compulsory nature of education

School attendance (primary and secondary level) is both a right and an obligation. Compulsory schooling begins in the year in which the child reaches the age of 6 by 30 September – specifically, at the beginning of the school year after the summer holidays.

Compulsory education ends after 12 years. Those on vocational training schemes are required to attend vocational school (*Berufsschule*) for the duration of the relevant training programme.



A child's school career

Primary school lays educational foundations

Almost all children attend primary school for four years. Here they acquire knowledge and skills in the following: German, mathematics, English and general studies (history, social studies, political and economic studies, geography, science and technology), and also in music, art, physical education and religious education.

Secondary schools allow a choice based on aptitude and interests

Starting in Year 5, all children attend a secondary school. Lower Saxony currently has the following types of secondary school: special-needs school (*Förderschule*), lower secondary school (*Hauptschule*), intermediate secondary school (*Realschule*), integrated Hauptschule and Realschule (*Oberschule*), comprehensive school (*Gesamtschule*) and upper secondary school (*Gymnasium*). They differ in terms of subjects taught and the requirements in individual subjects. After consultation with the teachers, the parents decide for which school and educational track to register their child in Year 5. The decision in favour of a specific school need not be irreversible. It is possible, and may be beneficial, to subsequently switch to a different school and a different educational track.

Secondary education leads to school-leaving qualifications

In the various secondary school types, different junior-level secondary school-leaving qualifications (*Abschlüsse des Sekundarbereichs I*) can be obtained after the 9th or 10th year of school. Depending on the qualification achieved, vocational training can be commenced directly afterwards, or school education can be continued.

In two of the secondary school types (*Gymnasium* and *Gesamtschule*), a second school-leaving certificate can be obtained after a further three years of school: the *Abitur*.

This is a general entrance qualification for studying at universities or other higher-education institutions. Alternatively, the holder may enter vocational training.

Vocational training schools are a gateway to the world of work

After 10 years of school, many young people are keen to enter the world of work. Vocational training schools offer a wide range of opportunities here. These include three-year 'dual' vocational training courses that combine part-time vocational schooling with workplace experience. The workplace provides practical skills and experience, and the school complements this with theoretical instruction.



3 From the school day to the school year

The school day

Classes are usually taught on each of the **five school days** of the week, i.e. from Monday to Friday. The school day is organized with reference to the **timetable**.

Here is an example of a timetable for Year 5 at a *Gymnasium* (coloured shading indicates main subjects; school whose timetable includes double periods).

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
7:50 – 8:35	Art	Geography	Englisch	Physics	Physical education
8:35 – 9:20					
9:45 – 10:30	Mathematics	Religious education	Biology	German	Englisch
10:30 – 11:15					
11:40 – 12:25	German	Music	Mathematics	'Class business' session	History
12:25 – 13:10					
13:40 – 14:25		Remedial classes	Remedial classes		
14:25 – 15:10					

The timetable indicates:

- › when lessons begin;
- › when lessons end;
- › which subjects are taught and in which order.

Pupils can plan their day around the timetable:

- › when to set off for school;
- › what they need to take to school;
- › when they will be back home; and
- › what they need to prepare for the next day.

Because the timetable is so important, it should be visibly on display where both pupils and their parents can see it.

Full-day programme

As well as the usual school subjects, in most cases the school day includes a full-day programme that pupils can take part in.

The range of **school clubs** (*Arbeitsgemeinschaften, AGs*) at a typical school in Lower Saxony is as follows:

Sports clubs:

badminton, movement activities, indoor football, table tennis

Science and technology clubs:

'Exploring Science' clubs, nature club, pupils do research, computer club

Music clubs:

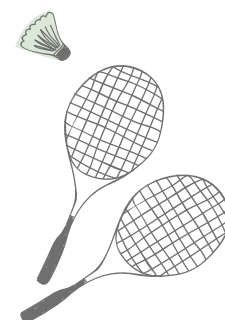
choir, band

Language and travel clubs:

French club, Chinese club ('China – Journey to a Fascinating Country')

Other clubs:

film club, school newspaper club, chess club, first-aid club



At many schools, involvement in clubs is voluntary. However, in signing up for a club, pupils are making a commitment to go to every session.



The school year

Lessons begin after the summer holidays and end before the following summer holidays. The school year is divided into two terms. At the end of each term a report (Z) (Zeugnis)

is issued on how the pupil has done over the term or the entire school year. The school year is interrupted by holidays which are intended as periods of rest and refreshment.

School year 2016/2017												
August												
September												
October	Autumn holidays: 04.-14.10.											
November												
December	Christmas holidays: 21.12.-06.01.											
January											Z	30. 31.
February												
March												
April	Easter holidays: 10.-21.04.											
May											26.	
June	6.									Z		
July	Summer holidays: 22.06.-02.08.											

Special events in the school year

Special events are held during every school year. Some of them involve only the pupils; these include individual-class outings in extracurricular learning settings such as the municipal library, museums or the theatre. In some years, longer class trips are held on which the class spend several days (involving overnight stays) at a non-school location.

In the school itself there are a number of special occasions and festivities for the children, including sports day, school parties and Christmas celebrations.

There are also events held at the school to which parents are especially welcome. These include class-based parents' evenings (Elternabende) and (at least once a year) parent-teacher conferences (Elternsprechtage) at which parents and teaching staff discuss the children's learning progress. Parents are, of course, also welcome at school concerts and theatrical evenings at which their own children perform.

It is a good idea to have a year calendar with school and holiday dates on the kitchen wall: that way everyone knows what's going on and when.



4 Costs and support



State schools in Lower Saxony do not charge school fees; **education is free**. However, parents must meet certain costs, including those for:

- › school textbooks;
- › consumable items such as exercise books and pencils;
- › outings and residential class trips.

If the child eats in the school canteen, meal costs must also be paid. In some schools and classes, there may be further costs.

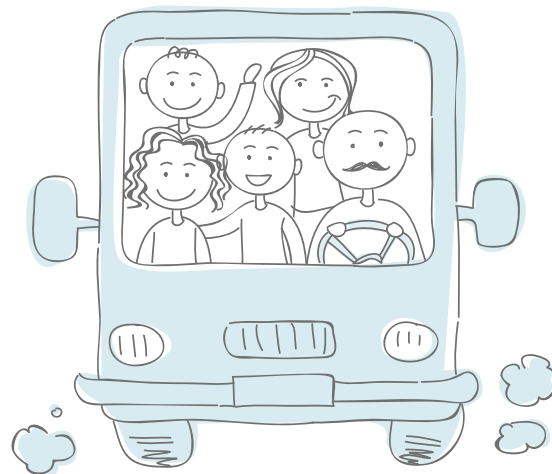
School textbooks: buy or borrow?

In many subjects, teachers use a textbook during lessons. These explain the relevant subject matter and include questions or tasks as aids to understanding and to consolidate learning. A list is issued stating which specific books are needed for a given class. Here is the schoolbook list for Year 5 at a comprehensive school:

Subject	Title (simplified)	ISBN	Price
To borrow			
German	German book		Approx. €25
English	Textbook		Approx. €23
Mathematics	<i>Mathe Ausg. N</i>		Approx. €21
Social studies	Project		Approx. €26
Science	<i>NatWiss 1 – D-Ausg.</i>		Approx. €28
Religious education	<i>Religion Elementar (5/6)</i>		Approx. €23
The following school-related items must be bought			
German	Workbook/Exercise book		Approx. €10
English	Workbook		Approx. €10
Mathematics	Workbook or educational software		Approx. €8 / €10
Social studies	World atlas		Approx. €20
Physical education	Table tennis bat		

These books can be bought. Alternatively, to save money, parents can join a school book-lending scheme. This involves paying **fees** considerably lower than the purchase price.

The disadvantage of this scheme is that books may not be written in or marked. Each book must be returned in good condition at the end of the school year.



Consumable items

The consumable items required in a given class are usually stated in a list that the pupils receive from the school. There is no lending option for these materials, as exercise books, pads, pencils, etc. are 'consumed' or used up during use.

Outings

Sometimes the pupils, accompanied by their teacher, go to a museum to visit a particular exhibition. Or they may attend a theatrical performance. Costs are incurred here for admission and perhaps also for travel to the venue. **These outings are compulsory as they are part of the teaching provided.** The costs must generally be paid by the parents.

Financial assistance

School-related costs may be a problem for parents on very low incomes. Financial assistance is available in such cases. The best-known form of assistance is known as the **Education and Participation Package** (*Bildungs- und Teilhabepaket*) and is for recipients of unemployment benefit II (*Arbeitslosengeld II*), welfare (*Sozialhilfe*), housing benefit (*Wohngeld*), child benefit (*Kinderzuschlag*) or asylum seeker's benefit (*Asylbewerberleistungen*). The parents can request financial assistance for their child to help with specific school-related costs. Application forms are available from the school office and, when completed, must be returned to the place from which other financial support is obtained (e.g. the municipal/district administration or job centre).

Below is an extract from an application form for financial assistance under the Education and Participation package.

The following payments for Education and Participation are requested under Sec. 28 of the Code of Social Law book II (SGB II):	
<input type="checkbox"/>	for one-day field trips organized by the school / child daycare facility
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	for class trips of several days' duration
<input type="checkbox"/>	for school supplies
<input type="checkbox"/>	for school transport
<input type="checkbox"/>	for appropriate supplementary learning support
<input type="checkbox"/>	for communal lunches at the school or child daycare facility
<input type="checkbox"/>	for participation in social and cultural life

In this sample form, the box 'for class trips of several days' duration' is selected. The child would like to take part in a class trip to the Harz mountains. However, the parents are unable to meet the costs of outward travel by rail, youth hostel accommodation and the activity programme. In

order that their child can still go, the parents can request funding from the job centre or municipal authority. At some schools, the Friends of the School association (*Förderverein*) provides help when there are insufficient resources to pay for the child.

5 The parents as partners with the school

A child's parents are responsible for his or her education. It is, therefore, natural that they are seen as partners of the school, and this brings both obligations and rights.

Obligations

Obligations describe what parents **have to do**. They primarily involve the child's attendance at lessons.



Compulsory nature of education

The parents ensure that their child attends school **daily**. This means that:

- › they make sure that the child gets up, has breakfast and sets off in time for school;
- › they ensure that their child has his/her schoolbooks, exercise books and writing implements with them (this is necessary with younger children in particular);
- › they ask their child to report on what he/she has learned at school;
- › they make sure their child does his/her homework.

Taking note of communications from the school

The school provides the parents with **written information** about school-related matters. This may include:

- › school rules and federal-state-wide arrangements (e.g. prohibition on weapons);
- › timetable, changes to the timetable;
- › specific information for the parents of a particular child, e.g. requesting attendance at a parent-teacher meeting.

Parents need to read these communications **carefully and act upon them**.

If so requested, they must confirm with their signature that they have received the information in question.

Informing the school that the child is ill

If the child is ill, the school must be informed, first verbally, e.g. by telephone, and later in writing.



Religious holidays

If the parents want the child to take part in a religious festival during school time, they must request this in writing beforehand. If the school agrees, the child must catch up on the teaching missed through his/her absence.

Going on family holidays

Children may go on holiday trips only during school holidays. Requests for children to be excused from classes so that the family can go on holiday are generally not granted – and neither is an extension of school holidays.

Parental rights

Parents' **rights** describe what they **are allowed to do**. They primarily involve school-related matters and involvement in decisions.

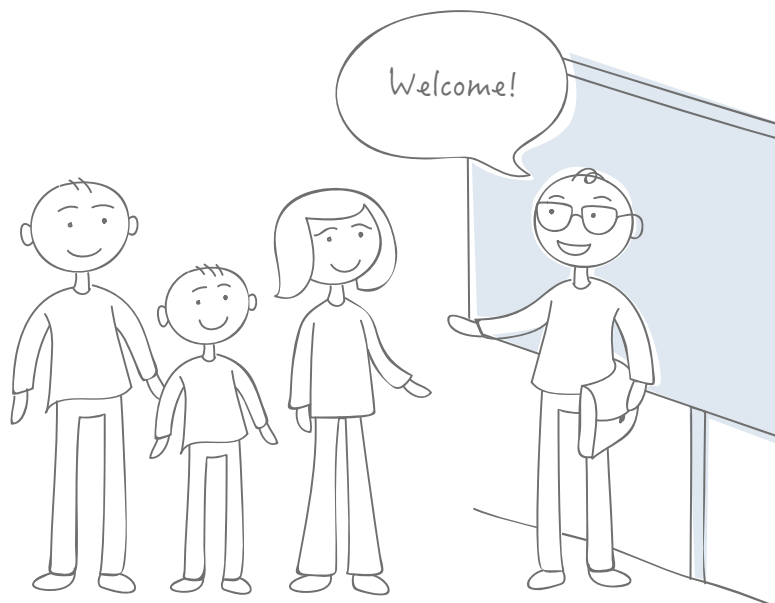
Individual meetings with teachers

Parents are entitled to be informed about their child's schoolwork and, in particular, about his/her performance. They do not have to wait until the school informs them on its own initiative. Instead, they can themselves seek contact with the school and its teachers, and arrange an individual appointment.

The best opportunity to speak with all of the child's teachers is at the school's **parent-teacher conferences**. These take place at least once a year, often shortly after the half-year reports are issued. Additionally, **class-based parents' evenings** are held several times in a given school year. Here, parents are informed about schoolwork in this class and have the chance to ask questions and input their own thoughts.

Half-year reports as the basis for guidance

A particularly good opportunity for communication between school and parents is afforded by the half-year reports at the end of January. These indicate how the child is doing after the first half of the school year.



- 1 = very good (*sehr gut*)
- 2 = good (*gut*)
- 3 = satisfactory (*befriedigend*)
- 4 = fair (*ausreichend*)
- 5 = unsatisfactory (*mangelhaft*)
- 6 = poor (*ungenügend*)

The school reports identify the child's strong subjects and where he/she is having particular difficulties in acquiring the knowledge and skills required. The following grades are usually awarded at most schools between years 3 and 10:

If a child receives the grade '**unsatisfactory**' or '**poor**' in two subjects, the child is at risk of being held back (i.e. repeating a year) at the end of the school year instead of moving up a year. The teachers advise the parents on how their **child can do better** with, for example, additional practice exercises, homework support or remedial teaching.

Ways in which parents can get involved in the school

Collectively the parents can, in many cases, play a part in decision-making. To this end, they elect representatives who have children in a given class, and these form the parents' association (*Schulelternrat*). Parents are also represented on the School Board (*Schulvorstand*). Ultimately, the chairs of the parents' associations also work together at both municipal and federal-state level to represent parents' interests vis-à-vis the school authorities and Lower Saxony's Ministry of Education. All parents are invited to make use of these opportunities to get involved. This applies especially for the parents of pupils from abroad.



6 Language is the key

Language plays a key role in the school environment. Teachers explain, ask questions and set tasks. Pupils give answers, ask questions and express their opinions. Learning takes place by means of classroom dialogue, and this requires that those involved both listen and speak. Reading and writing are just as important for learning: children read their school textbooks and perform written tasks.

If in doubt – ask!

If a child doesn't understand something in a lesson, he/she should tell the teacher immediately. It may be that other children don't understand either, and the teacher will explain it again, perhaps in a different way.

Questions are a good thing!

However, if a child doesn't understand because his or her German isn't good enough, then he/she needs additional help. Children whose native language isn't German receive special support from the school if they require it.

School support for children with inadequate German-language skills

Special **remedial German courses** or **language-learning classes** provide a basic grounding in the German language.

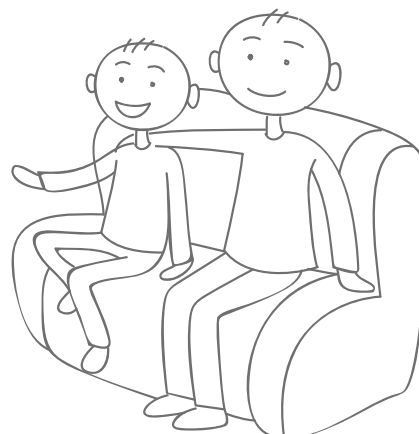
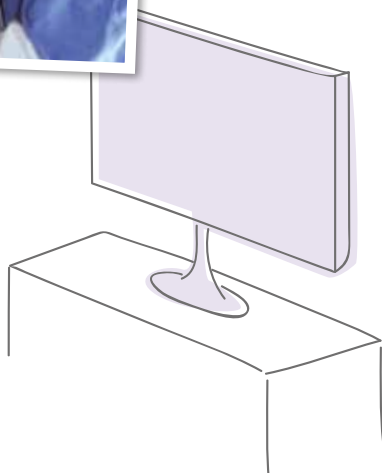
The children start by learning the right words, expressions and phrases for simply everyday situations, and they learn the grammatical rules governing how words are changed and combined.

At the same time, the children attend lessons in a normal mainstream class as soon as possible. In this setting they learn by following the class and being able to speak with German fellow pupils.

What can parents do?

Parents who don't speak German themselves cannot teach their children German. But they can encourage them to learn German by:

- › helping them make contact with German-speaking children;
- › providing them with access to German-language media (e.g. newspapers, radio, TV);
- › showing interest in the German language themselves.



Important school-related words

Abitur

Pupils at the end of university preparatory level (*gymnasiale Oberstufe*) take the *Abitur* school-leaving certificate exams. If they pass, they will have obtained a general higher-education entrance qualification (*allgemeine Hochschulreife*) which is their passport to university or other forms of higher education.

Registration (Anmeldung)

Parents need to register their child with a school. The registration process takes place in the school itself.

Clubs (Arbeitsgemeinschaften)

School clubs enable pupils to learn things that especially interest them personally, such as drama skills or basketball.

Subject (Fach)

Teaching at school is organized into subjects. Certain subjects, such as mathematics, are taught in all types of school. Others are offered only in certain types of school, such as general studies (*Sachunterricht*) at primary school.

Parent-teacher conference (Elternsprechtag)

This is a day on which parents can speak with all the teachers about their child's performance and behaviour.

Sick note (Entschuldigung)

If a child is unable to attend school, the parents must notify the school by sending an e-mail or a short letter.

All-day school (Ganztagsschule)

Many schools provide lunch and are also open in the afternoon.



Class teacher (Klassenlehrerin / Klassenlehrer)

One teacher is specifically responsible for each class. This person is the most important contact if the pupils or their parents have questions.

Junior-level secondary school-leaving certificate (Sekundarabschluss I)

These qualifications after Years 9 or 10 are a passport to vocational training or continuing school education.

Compulsory nature of education (Schulpflicht)

In Germany, school-age children are required to attend school. Their parents must ensure that this requirement is observed.

Lessons (Unterricht)

Lessons involve pupils learning under the guidance of a teacher. It is important that the children play an active part on their own initiative: asking and answering questions, and contributing their own thoughts and opinions.

Moving up a year (Versetzung)

On completion of a school year, almost all pupils move up to the next-highest year.

Reports (Zeugnisse)

School reports are documents in which a pupil's performance is described, often in the form of grades.



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