

Frederick the Great, Compulsory Education Decree (1763)

Abstract

Frederick II (the Great, 1712-1786) ruled Prussia from 1740 to his death in 1786. Frederick inherited the throne from his father, Frederick William I, who was known as the soldier king because of the enhancements to Prussian military capacity he engineered. This royal decree, written by Johann Julius Hacker, commanded that Prussian subjects – both male and female – undergo eight years of state-funded education. The goal of this program was not only to cultivate knowledge in Prussian children but also to ensure that teachers had some professional training.

Source

General Regulations of Elementary Schools and Teachers

August 12, 1763

We Frederick, by the grace of God, King, etc.:

Whereas, to our great displeasure, we have perceived that schools and the instruction of youth in the country have come to be greatly neglected, and that by the inexperience of many sacristans (aistos) and schoolmasters, the young people grow up in stupidity and ignorance, it is our well-considered and serious pleasure, that instruction in the country, throughout all our provinces, should be placed on a better footing, and be better organized than heretofore. For, as we earnestly strive for the true welfare of our country, and of all classes of people; now that quiet and general peace have been restored, we find it necessary and wholesome to have a good foundation laid in the schools by a rational and Christian education of the young for the fear of God, and other useful ends. Therefore, by the power of our own highest motive, of our care and paternal disposition for the best good of all our subjects, we command hereby, all governors, consistories and other collegiates of our country; that they shall, on their part, contribute all they can, with affection and zeal, to maintain the following General School Regulations, and in future to arrange all things in accordance with the law to the end that ignorance, so injurious and unbecoming to Christianity, may be prevented and lessened, and the coming time may train and educate in the schools more enlightened and virtuous subjects.

1. *School attendance age.* First, it is our pleasure that all our subjects, parents, guardians or masters, whose duty it is to educate the young, shall send their children to school, and those confided to their care, boys and girls, if not sooner, certainly when they reach the age of five years; and shall continue regularly to do so, and require them to go to school until they are thirteen or fourteen years old, and know not only what is necessary of Christianity, fluent reading and writing, but can give answer in everything which they learn from the schools book, prescribed and approved by our consistory.

2. *Apprentices to be taught.* Masters to whom children in Prussia, by custom are bound to render work for certain years, are seriously advised not to withdraw such children from school until they can read well, and have laid a good foundation in Christian knowledge; also made a beginning in writing, and can present a certificate from the minister and schoolmaster to this effect to the school-visitors. Parents and guardians ought much more to consider it their bounden duty that their children and wards receive sufficient instruction in the necessary branches.

3. *Leaving certificates.* If children, by their own aptitude or by the care of the teacher are sufficiently advanced in the common studies before they attain their thirteenth or fourteenth year, even then the

parents or guardians are not at liberty to retain them at home, but can do so only when the superintendents or inspectors, after a notice from the minister and a testimonial of the schoolmaster, that the pupil has acquired a sufficient knowledge, have issued a regular dismissal based on the above testimonial. Still such children must attend the Repetition School, not only on Sundays, at the minister's, but also, on week-days at the schoolmaster's.

4. *Attendance required.* As in many towns, parents do not send their children to school in summer, on the plea that they have to guard the cattle; our magistrates and judges in the districts containing towns and communes, shall see that a special shepherd is engaged, rather than allow the children to be kept from school. [...]

5. *School hours.* In order to regulate definitely the summer and winter schools, we decree that winter schools must be held on all the six days of the week, from 8 to 11 o'clock in the forenoon, and from 1 to 4 o'clock in the afternoon, except Wednesday and Saturday afternoons. The winter school must be continued from Michaelmas to the Easter-days. But the summer schools shall be open only in the forenoon or, if necessary by the location of the place, during three hours every week-day, when the ministers can best decide at what hour to commence. No vacations are to be given, not even during harvest time; the schools shall be kept in the prescribed manner, with this distinction, that in summer each lesson is to be of half an hour's duration, and in winter of a full hour.

6. *Sunday instruction.* On Sundays, beside the lesson of the Catechism or repetition school by the minister given in the Church, the schoolmaster shall give in the school a recapitulatory lesson to the unmarried people of the township. They shall there practice reading and writing. Reading should be from the New Testament or some other edifying book, and as an exercise in writing, the young people should write some passages, or the Epistle, or Gospel of the day. In towns where the schoolmaster is not likewise sexton, and not obliged to travel through the parish with the clergyman, he shall be bound to sing with the children in Church, either morning or afternoons, to hear them recite the catechism and address to them easy questions on the order of salvation. If the sacristan or schoolmaster has no experience in catechising, the minister shall write down for him the questions he must ask, that in this manner, together with their children, the people may be edified and improved in scriptural knowledge.

7. *Tuition fees.* In regard to tuition fee, every child, until it can read, shall pay in winter six pennies, after it can read, nine pennies, and when it can write and read, one groschen a week. For the months of summer, however, they shall pay only two-thirds of this fee, so that those who paid six pennies in winter, after his proportion shall pay four; those who paid nine pennies shall pay six; and those who paid one groschen will pay eight pennies. If, in any place the schoolmaster has been paid better, he must continue to receive the customary fees.

8. *Children of the poor.* Parents too poor to pay the tuition fee of their children, and orphan children who cannot pay, must petition the magistrate, patron, minister or church-council for an allowance from any funds of the church or town at their disposal, that the schoolmaster may get his income, and teach the children of the poor and rich with equal diligence and fidelity.

9. [*Annual school sermon and collection.* Provides for the general delivery of an annual sermon, on Saint Michael's Sunday, on the subject of Christian education and edification of youth. After the sermon, the collection to provide textbooks for the children of the poor.]

10. *Compulsory attendance.* Having made good and sufficient provision for the instruction of the young, all parents, guardians, and others, having children to educate, who act contrary to this ordinance, by withholding them from school, shall still be obliged to pay the common school-fee for the term; and guardians shall not be permitted to charge the money thus paid to the account of their wards. And if, after earnest exhortation of the minister, they do not send their children regularly to school, then the

magistrate of the town, in the last resort, shall direct execution against them. It is made the duty of the school-visitors to impose on such parents as have not made their children attend school regularly, a fine of sixteen groschen, to be paid into the school-treasury.

We therefore command all officers and magistrates to ascertain without delay, after receiving notice from the schoolmaster, of the non-attendance of any child, from the parent or guardian of the same the cause of such absence, and if it is for other reason than sickness, they shall employ proper legal means to secure that child's attendance.

11. *School census.* To this end, and to enable him the better to control the matter, the schoolmaster shall receive, from the register of the church or the town in which they are engaged, a list of all children of school age, that they may know who are due to the school; and the teacher shall also keep a monthly register, in which the children are enrolled as follows: (i) By their name and surname; (2) their age; (3) the names of their parents; (4) their residence; (5) the date when they enter school; (6) the lessons they study; (7) the degree of their diligence or negligence; (8) their abilities of mind; (9) their morals and conduct; (10) the day when they leave school.

This register, which no child should be suffered to read, is sent to the school-visitor before his annual inspection, and inspected by the minister during his weekly visits that he may know the delinquent children, and exhort them to greater diligence, and speak with their parents in this regard.

12. *Requisites for a teacher.* Since the chief requisite in a good school is a competent and faithful teacher, it is our gracious and earnest will, that one and all, who have the right of appointment, shall take heed to bring only well-qualified persons into office as teachers and sacristans. A schoolmaster should not only possess the necessary attainments and skill in instruction, but should be an example to the children, and not tear down by his daily life what he builds up by his teaching. He should therefore strive after godliness, and guard against everything which might give offence or temptation to parents or children. Above all things, he should endeavor to obtain a correct knowledge of God and of Christ, thereby laying a foundation to honest life and true Christianity, and feeling that they are entrusted with their office from God, as followers of the Saviour, and in it have an opportunity, by diligence and good example, not only to render the children happy in the present life, but also to prepare them for eternal blessedness.

13. *Teachers habits.* Though we intend to leave undiminished the privileges of the nobility and other patrons to select and appoint their sacristans and teachers, yet our superintendents, inspectors, and the clergy must see that no incompetent, unsuitable, nor reckless and wicked person is employed or continued in office. [...] All teachers are forbidden to keep tavern, to sell beer or wine, to engage in any other occupation by which their labor may be hindered or the children lured by their example into habits of idleness and dissipation, such as the hanging around taverns or making music at dinners and balls, which is prohibited under high fine and punishment.

14. *Examination of teachers.* No sacristan or teacher can be installed into office before his qualifications, ascertained by actual examination, are certified to by the Inspector. No clergyman can admit any person to such position in church or school who does not produce said certificate of a successful examination. [...]

15. *License to teach.* No person shall assume to teach in any school of the country, village, or town, who has not regularly obtained a license to teach; and all schools, whether kept by man or woman, not duly authorized, are entirely prohibited. But parents of wealth may, as heretofore, engage private teachers for their children, provided that the children of others who cannot yet be taught the higher branches, are not induced to withdraw from the regular school in order to share the private elementary instruction.

16. *Attendance to duty.* As a schoolmaster is not permitted to employ his pupil3 for his own work during

school hours, neither shall he attend to his trade or other business during such hours, or entrust his wife with the duties of the schoolroom; though he may employ her or another person to assist when the school is too large for his personal instruction. If, for any cause, he neglects to teach the prescribed hours, the clergyman shall remind him of his duty; and, in case of persistent neglect, notice must be sent to the inspector that such irregularities may be corrected or punished.

17. [*School to open with prayer. Nature of.*]

18. [*School hours. Eight to eleven, and one to four, unless ordered otherwise.*]

19. [*Course of study. Rather detailed provision made as to each hour of instruction. Summarized, it is as follows:*

Morning.

First Hour — Singing of a hymn, a different hymn to be learned each month. This followed by a prayer, and this in turn by instruction in the Catechism. Luther's "Smaller Catechism" for younger children; the larger for the older. Saturday lesson to be preparatory for Sunday, the Epistle for that day being read and written.

2nd Hour — ABC class; reading from Old and New Testament; spelling; finding passages in the Scriptures; and memorizing verses from the Bible and learning Biblical names.

3rd Hour — Reading, writing, spelling; writing in copybooks; rules of reading. School closes with prayer and reading of psalm. On Saturday children exhorted to behave well on Sunday; to be quiet in church; and to treasure up the word of God for their salvation.

Afternoon.

4th Hour — Pupils sing verses, read a psalm, and are taught Biblical history from Rochow's "Manual for the Instruction of Children in Country Schools."

5th Hour — Catechism, after method given in the "Berlin Reader." Pupils commit to memory, reading it with the teacher. Interpretations for the larger children. Children to learn a Bible verse weekly. Luring second half of hour, larger children to learn to read; middle class to spell; and lower class to learn their letters, as in second hour.

6th Hour — Upper class write and cipher; middle class spell; and lower class study their ABC.

In cities, where schools had more than one class, the local consistory could regulate the order of the lessons, and the method of instruction.]

20. *Uniform textbooks.* As the country has hitherto been deluged with all sorts of school-books, especially with interpretations of the Catechism, and so-called "orders of salvation," because every preacher selects the books after his own pleasure, or writes some himself and has them printed, by which children, especially if parents change their residence, are much confused, it is our will, that henceforth no other books, than such as have been approved by our consistory, shall be used in any country-schools over which we have the right of patron. These books include, according to the wants of the country, the New Testament, the book called "Exercise in Prayer," in which not only are the contents of each book in the Bible, but the main subject of each chapter is framed into a prayer, to assist the young in expressing their invocations in the words of divine truths. Also the Halle or Berlin Bible, both of which agree in their divisions into paragraphs and pages; next the small and large Catechism of Luther; the Index of the books of the Bible; the Christian Doctrines in their connection; the Berlin Spelling-book and Reader; the

General Attributes of God, of the world and man; and the Little Book for children in the country, on all sorts of necessary and useful things.

21. *Each pupil to have a book.* Each class must not only have the same books, but the clergyman and teacher must see that every child has his own book, so that two pupils need not look over the same book. Children, whose books are furnished from the funds of the church or the commune, are not allowed to take them home, but will deliver them to the master, at the close of the lessons, who will take charge of them as the property of the school.

22. [*Discipline.* Lays down rules for.]

23. [*Church attendance.* Parents on Sunday to send children to schoolmaster, who shall escort them to church and note conduct and absences, and on Monday question them on the sermon.]

24. *Relations of schoolmaster and clergyman.* In all other affairs of the school, the teacher must avail himself of the advice and suggestions of the clergyman, as his superior officer, and by his school-regulation the teachers are so directed. Of all that regards their office they must, on demand, give an account, and accept directions in reference to the prescribed method and discipline, because we have confidence in our ministers and bind it upon their consciences that in their towns they will earnestly endeavor to abolish all abuses and defects, and improve the condition of the schools. In case however one or the other of the schoolmasters should neglect the duties of his office, after he is engaged, and be found unreliable, the pastor's duty will be, earnestly to remind him of his duty, with kindness once or twice, and if he still continues in his negligence, to apply for a remedy to the nearest justice; at the same time to inform the Superintendent or Inspector, and if their warning is not heeded, make a report to the consistory, that, according to the circumstances, they may decree a suspension or removal.

25. *Clerical supervision.* Especially is it our pleasure, that clergymen in villages and towns shall visit the schools of their place, generally twice a week, sometimes in the morning and sometimes in the afternoon, and shall not only take the information of the sacristans or schoolmaster, but themselves examine the children in the Catechism and question them after other schoolbooks. They shall hold a monthly conference with the schoolteachers *in matre*, and designate to them the portion of the Catechism, the hymn, the psalm and Bible-verses which the children shall learn during the next month. Then he instructs them how to observe the principal divisions of the sermon and how to examine the children; he also points out the defects of their instruction in school, their method, discipline, and gives them other information, that the schoolteachers may fulfil their duties. If a clergyman, against our expectation, should be careless in his visits to the schools, or in the performance of other duties enjoined upon him in these regulations, and not labor earnestly to effect an exact observance of this law on the part of custos and teachers, he shall if convicted of the non-fulfilment of these instructions, be suspended *cum effectu*, for a time, or, as the case may be, removed from office: because the care for the instruction of the young and the supervision thereof, belong to the most important duties of the ministry, as we always desire them to be considered.

26. *Annual inspection.* The Superintendents and Inspectors of every district are hereby commanded, in the most expressive manner, annually to inspect every country-school in their jurisdiction, and with due attention to inquire into the condition of the schools, and examine whether parents and school authorities have held their children to regular attendance at school or have been negligent; whether the clergymen have done their duty in the observance of these regulations, by visiting the schools and superintending the teacher; especially whether the schoolmaster has the ability required or is not competent, and whatever else is in need of improvement. About all this the said Superintendents and Inspectors shall remit a dutiful report, every year, to our High Consistory in this city, for further examination and disposition. [...]

Conclusion. In general we here confirm and renew all wholesome laws, published in former times, especially, that no clergyman shall admit to confirmation and the sacrament, any children not of his commune, nor those unable to read, or who are ignorant of the fundamental principles of evangelical religion. [...]

Given Berlin, August 12, 1763.

Frederick

Source: Barnard's *American Journal of Education*, vol. xxii, pp. 861–68; reprinted in Ellwood Patterson Cubberley, ed., *Readings in the History of Education: A Collection of Sources and Readings to Illustrate the Development of Educational Practice, Theory, and Organization*. Boston, New York [etc.]: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1920 pp. 458–66. Available online at: <https://archive.org/details/readingsinhistory00cubb/mode/2up>

Source of original German text: *Königlich-Preußisches General-Land-Schul-Reglement, wie solches in allen Landen Seiner Königlichen Majestät von Preussen durchgehends zu beobachten*. Berlin and Magdeburg: Hechtel, 1763. Available online at: <https://digitale.bibliothek.uni-halle.de/vd18/content/pageview/5561426>

Recommended Citation: Frederick the Great, Compulsory Education Decree (1763), published in: *German History in Documents and Images*, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/the-holy-roman-empire-1648-1815/ghdi:document-5369>> [July 16, 2024].