

School Reform in the 1960s (Retrospective Account, 2011)

Abstract

Hildegard Hamm-Brücher (FDP), an outspoken advocate for German education system reform, recounts successful initiatives to eliminate confessional school segregation in Bavaria. At the end of this excerpt, she restates her abiding critique of bureaucratic structures that inhibit the kind of meaningful federal-level coordination that would eventually lead to less diversification in school forms and practices and promote better educational outcomes.

Source

[...]

My own career as an expert in education policy began in 1950 when I was elected to the Bavarian state parliament [*Landtag*]. My party group designated me as the speaker on school and education policy, and as a young liberal I soon ended up in a wasps' nest. I bravely battled against the *corporal punishment in schools* that was reintroduced at that time; it was called physical chastisement—but it remained legal until the seventies. In addition, I became acquainted with the strict confessional separation of students and teachers, which carried over into teacher training and school bureaucracy. It was implemented all the way down to separate bike storage units and salt containers in the school kitchens. It was a veritable “*confessional apartheid system*.” Moreover, I fought against girls not being admitted to public *Gymnasien* [academic high schools] financed by the state [*Land*]; they were relegated exclusively to municipal or confessional schools and for the most part ended their schooling with the *Mittlere Reife* [a mid-level school certificate]. I also opposed the dismissal of female teachers as soon as their husbands returned to the civil service after being released from captivity.^[1]

In a nutshell: the Bavarian school system was not progressing, but rather moving backward. The number of one- and two-room *village schools*, where students ranging from grade one to eight were taught by a single teacher in one classroom, surged to as many as 8,000; school buses were forbidden as “indecent.” This created an enormous disparity between urban and rural children when it came to educational opportunities, with rural children mostly attending the *Volksschule* [elementary school] for only seven years, later eight. When I sought to illustrate this in the Bavarian state parliament with homemade charts and statistics, trying in this way to demonstrate the great inequalities, I was expelled from the plenary meeting. Instead, I traveled through Bavaria with my charts, discussed the issue at parents' evenings, and in this way convinced the voters of the dismal state of Bavarian schools.

Already at the beginning of the sixties—I was an “MdL” [member of the state parliament] in my third legislative term, without a single one of my countless motions and measures having been adopted—I decided [...] to collect signatures with the help of article 74 of the Bavarian Constitution,^[2] which the SPD constitutional scholar Wilhelm Hoegner had brought back from Swiss exile. They were for a petition for a *referendum* in favor of introducing a Christian integrated school system in place of the existing system, which was based on confessional separation.

Nobody had ever tried that. But when I sensed how unhappy parents were with the rigid confessional separation of their children in school—by now I was among them, my husband was Catholic, my children had been baptized Protestant, so which school to put them in?—I decided to embark on this venture. In the spring of 1966, parent groups sprang up virtually everywhere in Bavaria and began gathering the required 25,000 signatures for a petition. In a short time, we had gathered twice as many as necessary.

Using megaphones, we spread information; we put signature lists in public squares and shops; we used bike parades and other events to mobilize enough parents to embark on the second step, the actual “referendum.” That required officially verified signatures from at least ten percent of all eligible voters in the entire state of Bavaria. Nobody believed we would be able to achieve that goal. We had no large organization, no resources behind us, only our commitment. In addition to being opposed by the CSU, with its extensive apparatus, we were also opposed by both churches, excepting a few Protestant pastors. During worship services, my school plans and I were even denounced from the pulpit as “hostile to the faith.”

With 9.6% we just barely missed our goal; but two years later, in a second attempt in which the SPD also officially participated, we made it easily. For the final step, the actual *referendum*, we agreed upon a level-headed text, which was eventually backed by the all representatives in the state parliament, excepting a few CSU representatives who were especially beholden to the clergy. Today, the integrated Christian school system in Bavaria is a matter of course, and nobody remembers any longer how tough and scurrilous the situation was back then during our *Kulturkampf* [cultural struggle].^[3] A few years later, it was even possible to introduce the school buses that were once labeled “indecent.”

[...]

At the beginning of 1967, I left Bavaria and followed the call of the Social Democratic government in Hesse. There, I started as state secretary in the Ministry of Culture.

[...]

For me, pursuing progressive educational policy on the state [*Land*] level with a constant eye toward the big picture meant constantly being hemmed in from two sides. On one side, I was blocked by the Conference of State Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs [*Kultusministerkonferenz der Länder* or KMK], which had expanded into a mammoth agency, a kind of third authority, outside of the two constitutional levels of the Basic Law. The KMK is not subject to any kind of parliamentary oversight, and the minutes of its meetings are not accessible, not even to members of the various state parliaments. Since I myself, as a state secretary from Hesse, belonged to the KMK for a time, I have many a nasty tale to tell about its bizarre bureaucratic pretensions to power. Hence my consistent demand: the KMK should be dissolved and in its place a cooperation between the states and the federal government should be put in place, if possible, under a single roof. With that it might be possible to defuse the constant wrangling over *cultural federalism* [which includes education policy]: after all, cooperative work between the federal and the state levels in this area—and this was the second blockage—was constantly being impeded or even rendered impossible. To date, the situation within the KMK has not changed much, and it is—politically speaking—a persistent relic of the individual states [*Länder*] doing their own thing in a way that is hostile to reform.

To this day, I regret that we did not succeed in making the education of future generations the shared task of the federal government and the individual states [*Länder*]; not in a centralized fashion, but in the sense of a *responsibility borne by the state as a whole*. This is a decisive subject for current as well as future education policy in Germany, Europe, and worldwide.

NOTES

[1] “Captivity” meaning prisoner of war camps in the Soviet Union.

[2] This article outlines procedures governing state-wide referenda.

[3] A reference to the *Kulturkampf*, a conflict between the government of the newly founded German Reich and the Roman Catholic Church in the 1870s.

Source: Hildegard Hamm-Brücher, *Und dennoch Nachdenken über Zeitgeschichte – Erinnern für die Zukunft*. Siedler: Munich, 2011, pp. 122–26. Republished with permission.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: School Reform in the 1960s (Retrospective Account, 2011), published in: German History in Documents and Images,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-5039>> [July 13, 2025].