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Germany's PISA Results: The Worst Since Testing Began – and Why PISA Itself Is Part of the Problem

A Commentary by Prof. Dr. Volker Ladenthin

(Bonn, 14.09.2026) "In the 2025 PISA results, Germany records its weakest performance since the study began, ranks only around the OECD average overall, shows widening social disparities in achievement, and – despite strengths in some areas – struggles with shortages of resources, disciplinary problems, and growing distraction, while students' attitudes and learning behavior present a mixed picture." (Press release text)

But PISA is by no means merely a straightforward diagnostic tool. PISA has been used – and was intended to be used – to justify social and educational reforms, new educational goals, new forms of social behavior, and a new kind of classroom instruction. All of that, PISA 2026 now shows, has failed.

PISA encouraged "teaching to the test." For precisely that reason, it was never simply a useful diagnostic instrument; from the outset, it was also intended to serve as a lever for restructuring the education system in a more centralized direction. This is stated explicitly: "PISA also demonstrates impressively that change is possible. Germany took the wake-up call of the PISA shock of 2001 as the starting point for a comprehensive reform program." (p. 6) Yet education in Germany was once understood above all as the responsibility of the Länder – the sixteen federal states, which under Germany's federal system retain primary responsibility for schools and education.

School learning itself was supposed to change. It was to be organized according to the requirements of quantitative, empirical learning psychology. The problem is that learning and teaching in schools do not function according to rules derived from laboratory settings. Schools work differently. That difference needs to be explained briefly.

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For more than 150 years, this other model worked so well in Germany that, for a time, some of the world's leading scientists, many Nobel Prize winners, and highly respected engineers emerged from the German educational system. The educational model that produced these specialists was dismantled – deliberately or through excessive confidence in reform. School learning was subordinated to a framework foreign to the academic disciplines themselves: learning psychology. Why is that so problematic?

The modern German idea of *Bildung* – a concept broader than “education” in the narrow sense and combining knowledge, judgment, intellectual formation, and personal responsibility – assumed that significant knowledge should be acquired by mastering the methods through which scholarship and science themselves generate socially relevant knowledge. Students were expected to learn how to develop and test knowledge in a methodologically controlled way. This was described as academically grounded, academically oriented, and, at the upper-secondary level, preparatory for university-level study. Its central task was the rational justification of claims. It was meant to make students intellectually independent and able to shape the future. After 1960, all major German school types were increasingly committed to this principle of academic and disciplinary orientation. In classroom practice, this meant enabling students to acquire knowledge and skills by drawing on the very methods by which the relevant academic disciplines produce knowledge.

In the humanities, for example, the rules of hermeneutics – disciplined interpretation of texts and meaning – were treated as fundamental learning methods for history, politics, social studies, literature, and related subjects. A student who had learned to interpret Goethe's “The Sorcerer's Apprentice” or Hitler's 1943 Sportpalast speech according to the rules appropriate to their respective genres had learned how texts are interpreted. The student learned this through substantive texts that were historically and culturally significant and that helped illuminate both the present and the methods needed to analyze it.

In the natural sciences, observation and classification, mathematical and logical reasoning, and experimentation were understood as foundational methods. They also informed the empirical components of the social sciences. Students who understood basic laws and the methods by which those laws were established could continue thinking independently.

Music, art, and physical education followed the standards proper to their own fields: understanding artistic forms, practicing movement, and fostering creativity. In doing so, they also contributed to forms of cognitive training that benefited work in other subjects.

The learning psychology associated with the PISA approach, by contrast, assumes that a relatively small number of cognitive operations are applied across learning processes of very different kinds and can therefore be trained at different levels of difficulty: ordering, analyzing, synthesizing, transferring, and so forth. Empirical educational researchers expected future students to reduce the need for the laborious, methodologically disciplined acquisition of subject content by practicing these general cognitive operations. Train one set of operations on one kind of material, and then use it everywhere: that was the time-saving utopia. After all, do we not use the same linguistic competencies

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when reading a poem, a table, or a science problem – understanding words, sentences, meaning, and context? From this perspective, reading ability could be taught using almost any text, regardless of subject matter or disciplinary context. Under experimental laboratory conditions, this seemed to work.

The decisive factor was therefore no longer to be the academically grounded method of a discipline, leading through substantive reasoning to relevant content. Instead, education was to emphasize formal, ostensibly content-neutral competencies that appear in every person and every context: in Thomas Mann as in the writer of an administrative letter; in Einstein as in a tile setter; in a chief engineer as in a hobbyist. Practiced competencies – which is why the word “competence” became so important to PISA’s architects – were supposed to substitute for the independent, methodologically grounded, and controlled acquisition of substantive knowledge.

This program was implemented with considerable political force. From the beginning, many subject specialists and classroom practitioners objected that competencies cannot be acquired independently of content and cannot, by themselves, generate content. A person may possess analytical ability, social skills, and strong personal motivation and still be unable to repair a burst pipe. That requires systematic, subject-specific knowledge from the plumbing trade. Yet precisely this body of knowledge tends to be treated as secondary in competence-oriented instruction.

The foreseeable result was a system producing graduates who could explain how something ought to work but could no longer reliably do it themselves: they could not adequately read their employment contract or a story by Kafka, calculate compound interest, or explain the difference between voltage and electric current. Apprentices increasingly risked becoming, in practical terms, culturally illiterate. Ask German employers in the skilled trades. Holger Schwannecke, Secretary General of the German Confederation of Skilled Crafts (Zentralverband des Deutschen Handwerks), has put it this way: “The results presented confirm what training companies in the skilled trades have been experiencing for years: too many young people leave school without the basic competencies needed for successful vocational training. This jeopardizes the successful course of company-based training and thus their start in working life.” He adds that the findings show the state of students’ skills in reading, mathematics, and the sciences – precisely the abilities apprentices need in order to gain a foothold in the skilled trades. Where these abilities are missing, learning stalls from the beginning and employers must invest substantial effort in remediation. Germany’s dual vocational-training system, in which apprentices combine workplace training with instruction at a vocational school, depends heavily on such basic academic skills.

In mathematics, computational fluency – needed in everyday life – and rigorous reasoning within a formal system – needed for later study in science and engineering – were increasingly displaced by something that can only be used effectively once calculation and reasoning have already been mastered: judgment. This was presented under new labels such as modeling competence, meaning the ability to identify the mathematical rule or model with which a real-world problem can be solved. In mathematics and the sciences, the third step was thus repeatedly practiced before the first two. The results

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are now documented by PISA. The long-term consequences are visible at German universities. Although the Abitur – the secondary-school leaving qualification earned primarily at the Gymnasium, Germany's academically oriented upper-secondary school – is legally intended to certify readiness for university study, universities increasingly offer remedial and refresher courses in mathematics. In short: the Gymnasium no longer reliably achieves one of its central objectives. One need only look at German university websites and search for such courses.

This also means that even “teaching to the test” – teaching primarily what is tested and what can readily be tested – has not worked as a steering mechanism. In school practice it encourages memorization and the rehearsal of procedures that matter mainly within a particular type of classroom exercise, while the content itself often remains of little interest – especially to students. One PISA problem, for example, asked sixteen-year-olds to calculate whether it was worthwhile to take a shortcut by car when a lower speed limit applied on that route. How many sixteen-year-olds in Germany are actually driving cars?

At the same time, the highest educational ideal in Germany's constitutional tradition – often summarized since the 1960s in the formula “self-determination in social responsibility” – was increasingly replaced by the demand for “participation.” But participation in what? Participation in an unjust state? In tax evasion? In environmental pollution? All of these are realities in which people can participate. Are they therefore to become educational goals? What happened to self-determination? And who determines the rules of the larger social whole in which everyone else is merely expected to participate? The individual was disempowered. In place of self-determination came the recognition of given social norms, apparently understood as either static or arbitrary. In place of individual responsibility came integration into an unquestioned social whole. In this sense, the PISA program becomes a program of subordination.

The same tendency appears in the content of learning. When students and teachers work with scientific and scholarly methods, they can reach different conclusions and can therefore enter into genuine discussion about what is true or false, right or wrong. Such open-ended discourse is much harder within competence training, because the competencies themselves and their purpose – participation rather than active shaping – are no longer placed at the students' disposal for critical examination. They are not justified to students; they are simply to be internalized. School learning is thus replaced by practice and internalization. That may be a way to train circus horses; it is not a way to prepare mature citizens of twenty-first-century democracies to understand reality, act within it, and take responsibility for it.

PISA has now established that PISA did not work. Recognition of that fact is the first step toward improvement.

About the Author

Dr. Volker Ladenthin (born 1953) is a German scholar of education and author. From 1995 to 2019, he was Professor of Systematic and Historical Education at the University of Bonn (Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn).

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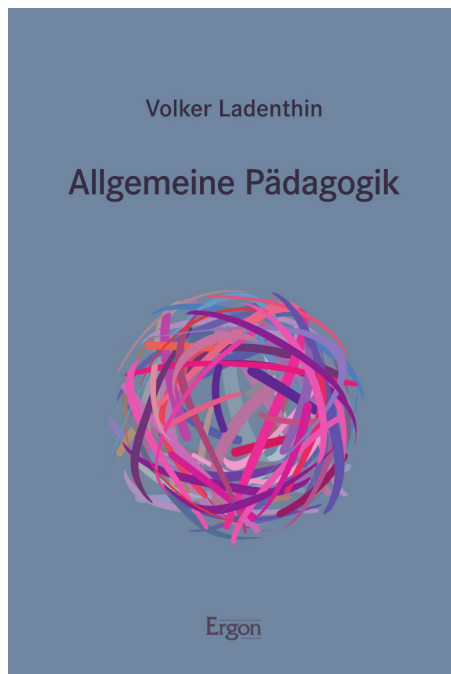
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Ladenthin has published extensively in the field of educational theory and has written monographs on a range of school types. He has also served as co-editor of major academic publications, including the *Handbuch der Erziehungswissenschaft* (Handbook of Educational Science, from 2008), the 25-volume collected works of Maria Montessori (from 2009), the journal *Vierteljahrsschrift für wissenschaftliche Pädagogik*, the magazine *Schulleitung intern*, and the book series *Systematische Pädagogik*. Until 2018, he was also a member of the academic advisory board of the Edukanat program of the Association of Catholic Boarding Schools and Day Boarding Schools.

His work focuses on fundamental questions of education, upbringing, and schooling. Of particular importance is his *Allgemeine Pädagogik* (General Education), published by Ergon Verlag in 2021. In this 294-page work, Ladenthin develops the principles of educational practice. Starting from human freedom and responsibility, he describes teaching, upbringing, care, discipline, and the formation of community as central conditions of education.

His other publications include *Zukunft und Bildung* (Future and Education, 2004), *Das Internat* (The Boarding School, 2009, with H. Fitzek and M. Ley), *Das Internat. Struktur und Zukunft. Ein Handbuch* (The Boarding School: Structure and Future. A Handbook, 2009, co-author), *Kulturschulen – Schulkulturen* (Schools of Culture – School Cultures, 2012), and *Wert Erziehung* (Value Education, 2013). His body of work combines systematic educational theory with a practice-oriented examination of the tasks of schools in teaching and formation.



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- 2019: *Religiöse Bildung ist interdisziplinär*
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- 2018: *Wie man richtig studiert* (with Jared Schmitt)
- 2018: *Gegenwart und Zukunft des Internats* (co-editor)
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