

Development of the Austrian School System

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In order to better understand the Austrian school system, it is necessary to take a brief look at its historical development.

The "Theresia School Reform" of 1774 introduced a public state school with a 6-year compulsory attendance, but it was implemented only slowly.

The bases for a modern educational system were first created in the second half of the 19th Century by means of the Reich Public School Law ("*Reichsvolksschulgesetz*") of 1869, which established for the first time a universal compulsory school system on a uniform basis.

With the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and founding of the First Republic (1918), development of the educational system was politically influenced by the Social Democrats, which resulted in a school reform movement, especially in Vienna, based on the principle of giving community assistance to the weak and needy. This period, for example, introduced free teaching and learning aids into the compulsory schools. This hopeful development was aborted by the establishment of a fascist regime in Austria and by the Second World War.

With the beginning of the Second Republic, the two major political parties in Austria, the Austrian People's Party ("ÖVP") and the Socialist Party ("SPÖ"), entered into negotiations to re-legislate the Austrian school system, the final product of which was the "School Law" ("*Schulgesetzwerk*") of 1962, which remains the statutory basis for the entire Austrian school system. The statute incorporated the "Contract between the Holy See and the Republic of Austria", the first concordat to have been ratified by a freely-elected parliament. The concordat provided, among other things, for the extension of religious instruction to the vocational schools and for statutory government subsidies to private parochial schools at 60% of teacher salary costs, which was amended to 100% in 1972.

In order to assure the continued force of the School Law, it was elevated to the status of a Constitutional provision, with the effect that from then until today, reforms had to be passed by a 2/3 majority vote of Parliament. The price for seeking stability of the Austrian school system was a pronounced rigidity with regard to the implementation of innovations. This condition characterises Austrian school development to the present.

Whether the "School Law of 1962" was the "nudge" as such for a new period of Austrian school development is difficult to say even today; in any event, it was a suitable basis at the time for appropriate contemporary innovations, inasmuch as the goal was a nation-wide harmonisation of the educational system and improvement of the education and viability of our youth.

This goal subsequently took the form of successive dismantling of the often primitively organised upper level *Volkschule* (an intermediate level form), extension of compulsory schooling to nine years, the establishment of a "music-oriented *Realgymnasium*" (as an independent upper level form leading to the *Matura* exam; later "Upper Level *Realgymnasium*") and a "Pedagogic Academy" to train public school teachers (as a post-secondary facility). In vocational middle schools and higher level schools, the vocational and general education ("*allgemeine Bildung*") curricula were co-ordinated, while in compulsory vocational schools, technical education took precedence. The expansion of general education as the additional province of the vocational school was first established in 1975 and put into practise after 1990 with the introduction of "Technical English" and "German and Communications" into the curriculum.

In the late 60's, Austria was swept up in the reform movement which the findings of various OECD conferences and resulting recommendations triggered in nearly all industrialised countries. Perspectives from the first OECD Report, "Educational Planning in Austria", was one of the primary foundations for the subsequent intensive educational planning and school development policy. As a complement thereto, the "School Reform Commission" ("*Schulreformkommission*") was set up in 1969, followed two years later by the "Centre for School Experiments and Development" ("*Zentrum für Schulversuche und Schulentwicklung*").

The first SPÖ non-coalition government (minority cabinet, 1970/71) announced the following goals: *Gesamtschule*, full-day school, changes in dual-track apprentice training, teacher training as a university discipline. These educational policy programs enjoyed great resonance among the public. Comprehensive school experiments were launched to prepare the necessary reforms.

The most important evaluation projects primarily concerned

- pre-school and "pre-school classes" (assistance to children held back from school attendance)
- *Grundschule*, a better match of learning opportunities to the individual child's abilities by the creation of appropriate organisational forms and application of specific methods, the mainstreaming of the handicapped, foreign language orientation classes, and all-day day care.
- at the Secondary Level I, the testing of various features of integrated school type organisational forms (integrative, supplemental, orientation level) and forms of all-day care.
- in the "polytechnical curriculum", testing of performance groups and remedial courses in compulsory subjects such as German, mathematics and technical drawing, so-called "seminars" (fairs for those interested in agricultural or technical fields) and electives, improved vocational orientation with respect to passage from the Secondary Level I to Secondary Level II, in particular with regard to dual-track vocational education, as well as
- in the institutes of general higher education, testing of new curricula, new performance groups (including lift and support courses), the concept of electives and reform of the college entrance exam ("*Reifeprüfung*").

If one subjects these centrally-organised expansive school experiments to critical assessment with a view to how efficiently they were implemented in the regulated school system, it is evident that they succeeded in many respects. Examples are the care in pre-school classes of children of school age who were not ready for school, the foreign language orientation classes in the *Volkschule*, the offer of all-day day care programs, the elective courses and reform of the *Matura* in the institutes of general higher education, along with various remedial and assistance measures in terms of subject and teaching method, and recommendations.

Of course, the expectations of the reformers with respect to a fundamental organisational change of the Secondary Level I (*Gesamtschule*) were not fulfilled: even today, the lower level of the institutes of higher general education and the *Hauptschule* are operated in parallel. The academic training for teachers was also not achieved in compulsory school.

After the mid-80's, a certain "change of paradigm" occurred with regard to Austrian educational planning and school development. If the emphasis up until then was on comprehensive and wide-ranging structural measures in the schools, then the accent since then is on "internal school reform", the greater accessibility and autonomy, quality of the school -- though without necessarily rendering structural changes obsolete --

and the necessary increased professionalism of those directly and indirectly involved in education and education policy (administration, monitoring, teachers).

In order to do follow up on the resulting impetus and challenges, a "Department for Education Research and Planning" was set up within the Federal Ministry for Education and Art, which attempts to capitalise on the existing potential of school research, by co-operation with national and international research institutes and sponsorship of expert forums for educational policy discussions. This takes place in close co-operation with the "Centre for School Experiments and School Development", which has been assigned new goals and agendas and whose mission is to serve as liaison for scholarship, planning, school administration and school realisation.

The present emphases in education are founded on the conviction that future school development must be geared more closely to the needs of those directly affected by education. One consequence of this attitude is to design measures to create more discretion for individual schools ("School Autonomy"). A related law from 1993 (14th Revision of the School Organisation Law) takes a first step in this direction by which all schools are offered the voluntary option of submitting curriculum proposals to the school community committee or school forum (a board composed of faculty, pupils and guardians) for approval by a 2/3 majority vote. Changes in the curriculum for each school type may be made only to the extent of 15% of the instruction hours, altering these to required courses so as to create an individual school profile ("Curriculum Autonomy"). Moreover, within certain parameters, the school in question can decide on the class participant size. School autonomy in the vocational middle and higher schools is implemented by electives within course areas. The funding requisitions process for all federal schools has been simplified ("financial autonomy").

Since this idea is necessarily designed to gear school development more closely to the individual school, an issue arises about the "functioning" of these system levels and ultimately about their (measurable) quality. This is even more the case since the eventual degrees awarded by schools with differing profiles must be comparable.

Work is presently underway in Austria to create quality standards and evaluation tools in reliance on and in furtherance of OECD projects (e.g. "Schools and Quality", "Teacher Quality"). The prerequisite is certainly to clarify the criteria for school quality, which must be the subject of an on-going dialogue in the community. The following criteria are suggested: the quality of teaching and learning at school ("contemporary learning culture"), teacher quality and credentials (by discipline/content, method/teaching ability, sociability/co-operativeness), the response to demands for school administration within the context of the evolving self-image of schools (leadership, co-operation, management), the nature and means of co-operation by school partners (teachers, pupils, parents in terms of commitment, democratisation, shared design and shared responsibility), as well as the avenues for and obstacles to developing school quality.

The autonomy of the school also requires an expanded "professionalisation" of teachers. In this connection, so-called "autonomy advisors" are presently being trained who will suggest suitable development processes for individual, "autonomous" schools, monitor them and report on the results in a teacher training and continuing education setting.

This development also requires critical reflection on the present self-image of school superintendents. The school administration must learn to delegate more decision-making authority and disposition rights all while simultaneously exercising its advisory and support functions. Initial steps in this direction are being taken.

In keeping with the basic intention of greater autonomy for the schools, the Federal Ministry for Education and Art has begun a program of deregulation in which the number of its dictates is to be sharply reduced.

Alongside the now very pronounced organisational-functional emphases, the basic idea and to some extent the motor of the new approach of the comprehensive Austrian school development is not to be ignored, namely, to continue to improve equal opportunity and access to education in the Austrian school system. The points being emphasised are:

- relaxation of school entrance requirements and introduction of alternative forms of performance measuring in the primary school,
- improvement of the horizontal passage (Primary level -> Secondary Level I -> Secondary Level II -> post-secondary area) and the creation of greater intermobility in vertical interfaces (*Hauptschule* -> General High School Lower Level; vocational compulsory school -> vocational intermediate schools -> vocational upper-level schools -> Academic High School Upper Level)
- continuation of the integration of handicapped at the Secondary Level I (schools for ages 10 to 14) and
- improved internationally-oriented education and continuing education (measures for mobility and exchange, foreign language offensive, intensification of intercultural learning).

The description of the most recent focus points Austrian school development clearly shows that a school confronted with numerous new national social tasks needs stronger offensive strategies to expand its operating scope.

It is to be expected that Austria's admission to the European Union -- if this has not already occurred -- will give further impetus to its school development. Conversely, Austria -- in all modesty -- offers a wealth of experience on educational policy to the EU, which is suitable to constitute a constructive component on the European education scene.