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Federal President Roman Herzog Calls for a Reform of the German Education System
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Alarmed by the German educational system's loss of international prestige, Federal President Roman Herzog calls for a fundamental reform of education at all levels and a move toward more choice, greater competition, and better performance.

A Fresh Start in Education Policy

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As federal president, I am venturing into a minefield today. But we cannot carry out this discussion in the federal states alone. And it is not the exclusive preserve of specialists and lobbyists. Parents, teachers, school students, and university students all need to participate. In a word – everyone. Because this is ultimately one of the decisive questions for the future of our country. We need a broad national debate on the future of our education system!

Everyone is talking about it: knowledge today is the most important resource in our natural-resource poor country. But we can only acquire knowledge through education. Whoever strives for the highest standard of living, the best social welfare system, and the most sophisticated environmental protections also needs the best education system.

Furthermore, education is an indispensable means for social equalization. Education is the key to the labor market, and it remains the best protection against unemployment. It keeps the mechanism of social mobility up and running and thus keeps our open society moving. At the same time, it is also the lifeblood of democracy in a world that is becoming increasingly complex, a world in which cultural identities are becoming blurred and crossing cultural boundaries is becoming a matter of course.

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We already know one thing: ahead of us lies an open world that promises greater complexity and new freedom but also entails greater responsibility on the part of each individual. It is

important that our children and grandchildren are able to find their bearings in this complex world, and that they don't get lost in an avalanche of unorganized facts and events.

It isn't enough to make cosmetic changes. This isn't about making minor touch-ups to university requirements. And it's also more than a spelling reform. We need to address the very substance of our education system! I encourage everyone to participate in a public discourse on the substantive issues that will set the course for the twenty-first century.

For this to happen, we need – at least in core form – a new basic consensus on our educational goals, so that all of our educational institutions have a point of orientation. Here, I am certainly not saying that we need a new prescribed uniformity, but rather new guidelines that offer room for creativity and diversity. I know how hard that is. Nevertheless, I would like to outline what I – from a subjective point of view – see as the key points of such an education model.

I believe in the future of an education system that possesses six qualities: first, a system that is value-oriented; second, grounded in practice; third, international; fourth, diverse; fifth, a system that promotes competition; and sixth, one that makes reasonable use of the resource that is time.

On the first point: I want our education system to be value oriented.

I know very well that any laundry-list of values rouses suspicions of ideology, at least if it doesn't devolve into platitudes. But education cannot be limited to conveying knowledge and functional skills! Character formation not only entails cultivating sensitivity, creativity, and critical faculties, it also involves imparting values and social skills. Here, I also mean imparting virtues, which aren't nearly as old-fashioned as they might sound: reliability, punctuality, and discipline, and above all respect for one's neighbors and the ability to care for others.

We should also be more aware of the connection between certain values: there can only be tolerance where individual viewpoints also exist. Encounters with foreign thought and value systems presuppose a knowledge of our own heritage and the traditions that influence us. Other cultures tend to view the creative potential of our freedom-based occidental society much more consciously than we do ourselves. This is the basis of our strength, and we should not downplay it. But we also need to teach our children that freedom without goals leads to a lack of orientation, and that no polity can be founded on individualism without solidarity.

So we need the courage to assertively reintroduce educational values into the classroom. At the same time, our educational institutions have to return to the knowledge that one cannot foster achievement without also demanding it. Of course, that means we need to acknowledge that there is no such thing as an effort-free life. If we agree that one educational aim is to prepare young people for a life in freedom and self-determination, then a *laissez faire* attitude does not suffice; instead, we have to make it clear that freedom is strenuous, because everyone is responsible for his or her own freedom.

In short: we need a new culture of independence and responsibility! And neither can be imparted by abstract theories. Instead, parents and teachers must set a daily example.

Second, I would like our education system to be grounded in practice.

This does not mean advocating a kind of “educational materialism” that only emphasizes knowledge that is primarily valuable to the economy. But I am dismayed by complaints that as many as fifteen percent of young people who apply for apprenticeships fail to meet the basic prerequisites, not least because they lack the necessary reading, writing, and arithmetic skills. And I am concerned that a considerable portion of our college graduates cannot find a job in keeping with their training.

Given the level of economic and administrative specialization that exists today, I am well aware that no educational program can teach a young person everything he needs to know for his first job and that on-the-job training will therefore remain unavoidable. But that is no reason to totally separate formal education from real life. A brief look at textbooks already shows how far removed they are from reality. Schooling sometimes prepares students for other subjects or educational paths but not necessarily for real life.

Not every school subject needs to prepare students for an academic course of study. Universities already offer enough physics courses for physicists and linguistics courses for linguists. In a world that is splintering into smaller and smaller professional spheres, where experts and specialists communicate in their own specific jargon, we shouldn't promote specialization too early. The spectrum of required subjects must remain broad; or rather, it must be broadened once again. But this doesn't mean that secondary school students will face an even more densely packed curriculum. On the contrary: this is about concentrating on what is essential and giving students a broad general education, whether they want to eventually become lawyers, doctors, technicians, or police officers.

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Are our vocational and educational programs sufficiently up-to-date and suitable for practical application today? Above all, I have doubts about our dual education system. It is bad enough that we obviously have too few apprenticeships and that eager young people have to console themselves with last-minute initiatives. The actual problem, however, is that changes in the professional world occur a hundred times faster than our response to those changes and our formulation of appropriate new job descriptions. There is no defined educational path for many of the jobs in the booming service sector here in this country. Many young people have to content themselves with “on the job training” – and this, of all things, in an up and coming sector.

If we want to prevent our justifiably praised dual education system from becoming obsolete, and if we want to continue guaranteeing employers and young people a certain standard of training, then we need to continually modernize our training requirements. If the classically skilled tradesman is gradually being threatened with extinction, as some are saying, and if multi-functional workers with teamwork skills will be needed in the future, then our vocational training system also needs to react: with new vocational training associations, interdisciplinary rotation programs, the strengthening of key qualifications, and so on. I know that relevant proposals have been on the table for a long time, and that more than fifty occupational tracks have received a fundamental overhaul in recent years. The vocational academies are also setting a good example and some companies have established exemplary in-house vocational schools. But despite all the recent progress, the wheels of our vocational training bureaucracy are still turning too slowly.

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Third, I would like an education system that is international.

As important as it is to introduce new, internationally recognized college degrees, this isn't enough. All of our educational institutions need to open themselves up to the world more than ever before and to become more cosmopolitan. We must learn the important world languages very early on. Why don't we start with English classes in elementary school? Languages are learned most effectively at a very young age. Why don't we consistently expand bilingual instruction at our schools? And is it really far-fetched to send entire classes abroad for half a year and to have foreign students sitting at German school-desks for six months?

There is no place for provincial thinking, least of all in our universities. I know that a number of institutions of higher education have – for example – already made lectures in English part of everyday life and have established close networks with universities abroad. But there are still large islands of provincialism.

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Fourth, I would like a diverse education system.

The differentiated structure of our school system is exemplary. But we need to take advantage of this diversity! We must honestly ask: which schools best serve which children? It is not always the school that grants the highest degree. That's why our *Hauptschule* [i.e., a vocation-oriented secondary school] should not be allowed to devolve into a school for leftovers [who don't fit anywhere else]. It needs to prepare students for many professions by spurring practical inclinations and by offering practical instruction early on. Education policy needs to pay as much attention to those with hands-on aptitude as it does to those with academic talents.

My call for greater differentiation is aimed especially at institutions of higher education. If we were to ask what to expect from a given course of study, we would receive very different answers, depending on whether we were speaking with students, researchers, or businesspeople. But perhaps this simple fact will lead us to possible solutions. One person might expect a course of study to offer professional training in compact form; someone else might be more concerned with personality development. A gifted student might want to delve more deeply into a particular subject early on, whereas a less ambitious person might be more interested in overall knowledge and a fast path to professional responsibility. Some scientists say that excellent achievements in research demand greater specialization during the undergraduate years. Business owners, however, often find that college graduates today are already too old and have too little knowledge that can be applied in a professional context.

Neither of these views can be seriously contradicted; probably, it is precisely these differing expectations of the education system that make it so hard to reach a consensus on reform. But the answer to differing expectations can only be the greatest possible differentiation, also as regards educational options.

The institutions of higher education in Germany have a two-pillar structure. The universities constitute one pillar, the polytechnics (technical or applied science colleges) the other. Polytechnics have long since stepped out of the shadow of the universities, both in terms of student numbers and the quality of training. By offering many forward-looking, practical training programs with an international orientation, they have become attractive over time, also for the best high school graduates. Nevertheless, as compared with university graduates, graduates of technical colleges suffer a lifetime disadvantage in terms of salary. It is not easy for them to demonstrate their abilities by acquiring additional academic qualifications, such as doctoral degrees. The barriers between universities and polytechnics are still far too high; greater permeability is needed.

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This is not about renaming the intermediate exam a bachelor's degree and the *Magister Artium* a master's degree. Semantic cosmetics won't do any good! The new modular system must succeed in fundamentally reorganizing the structure of university study. With the clear goal of giving everyone a broad general education and a profound understanding of methodology in their introductory-level studies and of providing more opportunities for in-depth specialization to fewer students in a greater number of specific subject areas and to the few students who want to pursue research careers.

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Fifth, I would like an education system that promotes competition. If we want to encourage high performance, then we have to make differences in performance more visible. This starts in the schools. Let's give them greater responsibility once again! For example, why shouldn't they

participate in selecting the faculty? I have also never understood why teachers and professors have to be civil servants, why administrations have to be forced into the straitjacket of a government accounting system, why school principals have less decision-making power when it comes to materials and personnel than clerks in a screw factory do.

And why have we shied away from having our schools participate in comparisons that would promote competition? In the United States, President Clinton is in the process of introducing a national achievement test for schoolchildren, so that parents throughout the country know which schools are good and which are less good. Couldn't we also adopt that model? Couldn't that help turn good schools into models and encourage other schools to improve their offerings?

It is high time for institutions of higher learning, in particular, to abandon the myth of supposed equality. Usually this is nothing more than a fiction that has nothing to do with reality. Let's be realistic: nowadays no one will get a job in the private sector solely on the basis of a piece of paper with a grade on it. Everyone everywhere knows that there are great differences between individual academic departments and universities. This applies as much to research achievements as to equipment and personnel, course offerings, and grades. Many companies have already developed elaborate assessment procedures, because they know that there are great disparities in the training received by their applicants.

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We need to finally make quality differences transparent again, and we also need to ensure that high achievement is rewarded and bad achievement is censured by the withdrawal of resources. I know that the thought of rankings triggers fear and discomfort. But first of all we owe it to the students, who need to know, even before they begin their studies, where they should best invest their time and effort. And second, the institutions of higher education also owe it to their public sponsors. Third, rankings will come in any case: if universities refuse to accept rankings, then they will come from the outside, for example, from the media – and then the criteria will likely be dubious!

Universities need to be able to distinguish themselves through their faculty, curricula, and ideas more than they have up until now. As part of this, they also need to be involved in student admissions, and they need the option of giving greater or lesser weight to certain subjects tested in the *Abitur* [i.e. university qualification exam]. We finally have to accept that students have different aptitudes and abilities, even if they have the same overall grade on the *Abitur*, and that the relevance of individual subjects covered in the exam differs according to the student's desired field of study, be it German, medicine, or law. To be sure, the selection of students should not become an end in itself. The point is more to give students a clear sign: we want you and therefore wish to assume the great responsibility [of attending to you during] the most valuable period of your life. We will attend to your needs by giving you the best possible counseling and oversight from the outset.

If we say that the institutions of higher education should distinguish themselves through competition and should become more effective, then we also need to finally release them from external bureaucratic control. They must be given the freedom to structure themselves the way that the world's most successful universities do.

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Finally, sixth, I would like an education system that makes reasonable use of the resource that is time.

Personnel, state funding, and equipment will certainly be important criteria in all future strategies. The main resource here, however, is time: the time of university faculty members, who, through abundant workloads and excessive bureaucracy, are being prevented from doing at least part of what they're there for – namely, research and the transmission of their research findings. And the time of the students, who, in the prime of their lives, are prevented from applying what they have learned soon enough to gain self-esteem from their first successes. Not to mention the time that Germany is wasting compared to its competition throughout the world.

Once again, the length of study, in all fields, is too long here in Germany. Therefore, all sides are called upon to put an end to this waste of time. Children's talents already go untapped in preschool because they don't have sufficient advancement opportunities during their most formative years. We need thirteen years of schooling to impart the knowledge that other countries impart in twelve. We are wasting time with unnecessary waiting periods because high school graduation and college matriculation are often not coordinated. We are wasting time with overloaded university curricula. We are all bound by the knowledge that our lifespan is limited. So why don't we try, resolutely and jointly, to create time for all those involved and to optimize its use. Time is the most important thing that we need to mature, to learn, to conduct research, and to implement the findings of that research. As important as more money and more personnel may be, time is the resource that determines everything.

I am not saying that we have to succeed in one swift action that will reverberate far into the twenty-first century. On the contrary, we need the capacity for constant further development. Even our grandparents knew that a rolling stone gathers no moss. That applies especially to places where new discoveries are being made every hour. Up to now, we have been spending too much energy on a model that dams up massive reform pressure, which is then released in an earth-shattering major initiative, after which all innovation is again rejected. In the future, we need to make the continued development of the education system an ongoing task. Our education system was once exemplary throughout the world. But it needs to be developed further. The "better" is known as the enemy of the "good." Let us draw the necessary conclusions from that and create a model for the twenty-first century!

Let us create an education system that promotes achievement, excludes no one, spreads joy in learning, and which, as a learning system, is itself creative and capable of further development. Let us release new forces by breaking the chains of bureaucracy. Let us liberate our education system.

Source: Roman Herzog, "Aufbruch in der Bildungspolitik" ["A Fresh Start in Education Policy"], *Bulletin* (Press and Information Office of the Federal Government), no. 87, November 5, 1997, pp. 1001-07.

Translation: Allison Brown