

INTERVIEW



Mathias Huebener is a Research Associate in the Department of Education and Family at DIW Berlin

SIX QUESTIONS TO MATHIAS HUEBENER

»Germany's G8 High School Reform Has No Impact on Graduation Rates«

1. Mr. Huebener, a new study conducted by DIW Berlin analyzes the different effects of Germany's G8 educational reform, which compresses the traditional nine years of academic-track secondary school or *Gymnasium* into eight. What approach did the study take and what is its aim? The public debate on the reduction in the length of *Gymnasium* schooling is currently dominated by personal experiences and primarily the subjective impressions of students and their parents. We have found that the empirical evidence does not provide comprehensive insights into the causal effects of the reform. The intention of our study, therefore, is to expand the empirical findings by using a solid data basis. Drawing on administrative data from the German Federal Statistical Office for 12 cohorts graduating from *Gymnasium* with *Abitur* – the school-leaving that serves as a qualification for entrance to university in Germany – this study analyzes the causal effects of the G8 reform on graduation age, grade repetitions, and graduation rates.
2. One of the key aims of the reform was to reduce the *Gymnasium* graduation age. How successful has it been in achieving this goal? Although the G8 high school reform's potential was to reduce the age of students graduating with *Abitur* by a full 12 months, our study shows that the reform has only reduced that age by an average of ten months. One reason for this is the increase in grade repetitions at *Gymnasium*, which automatically prevents the graduation age from being reduced by a full year.
3. What are the reasons for this increase in grade repetitions? Does the reduction in the number of school years place students under more pressure? There could be various reasons for the increase in grade repetitions, reasons which are not possible to ascertain in our study. First, the G8 reform reduced the length of *Gymnasium* education by one year, but the number of instruction hours students have to complete over their school career remains unchanged. As a result, students in the G8 system attend

more lessons per week covering more curriculum material. The increase in grade repetitions could therefore be an indication that those studying under the new system have more gaps in their knowledge and therefore must repeat a grade at some point. Interestingly, our study also shows that the increase in grade repetitions is greatest in the final years of *Gymnasium* or the *Oberstufe*. Since academic achievements in these school years count toward the final *Abitur* grade point average, this may mean that students are repeating a grade voluntarily to change their specialist subject choices or to improve their grade point average, for example.

4. What are the differences between boys and girls in this context? Similar effects are observed in both sexes although grade repetitions appear to be more prevalent among boys, meaning that the reform has had a stronger effect on the graduation age of girls than boys.
5. Has the reduction in the duration of schooling led to an increase or decrease in the number of students graduating with *Abitur*? One could assume that grade repetitions would result in fewer students obtaining *Abitur*. On the other hand, the fewer years of schooling might in fact encourage more students to opt for the academic-track schools, since they are not obliged to spend as many years in education and, despite staying on for *Abitur*, would enter the labor market earlier. Our analyses have shown, however, that the reform has not had any impact on the graduation rate.
6. In your opinion, what are the overall pros and cons of the G8 reform? A comprehensive evaluation of the G8 reform requires different perspectives and, above all, datasets which enable us to consider different outcomes for analyses. Given the current level of empirical knowledge, however, we are not in a position to make recommendations supporting either longer or shorter academic-track schooling. We believe that further empirical studies are needed because the only way to obtain greater insights into whether the G8 reform creates additional costs or yields additional benefits is to consider the many different facets of the reform.

Interview by Erich Wittenberg



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