

Summary Writing- 9

Reinventing Education: Berlin School Challenges Traditional Teaching

The Evangelical School Berlin Centre (ESBC) is reshaping education in Germany with a bold, student-centred philosophy that breaks away from conventional norms. At the core of its approach is the belief that students thrive when given autonomy, structure, and meaningful learning experiences. This progressive model has attracted attention for its radical departure from traditional schooling.

Unlike standard schools, ESBC eliminates grades until students turn 15, offering a learning environment where academic pressure is replaced by self-motivation. Pupils don't follow a fixed timetable or receive lecture-style instruction. Instead, they choose which subjects they want to study and decide when they feel ready to take an exam. This encourages independent decision-making and intrinsic motivation, skills that headteacher Margret Rasfeld considers vital for the modern world.

Only a few core subjects are mandatory—Maths, German, English, and Social Studies—while the rest of the curriculum includes abstract, experience-based courses like "responsibility" and "challenge." The "challenge" course is particularly unique: students between 12 and 14 receive €150 and must plan a three-week adventure independently. This could involve kayaking, farming, or traveling abroad, as one student, Anton Oberländer, did when he went trekking along England's south coast.

The idea is that modern students are shaped by rapidly evolving digital landscapes and job markets, and schools must evolve to match. Rasfeld argues that education should build self-confidence and adaptability, rather than produce obedient, passive learners. Many young children begin school excited and eager, but traditional systems, she says, often dampen their curiosity and self-belief. ESBC seeks to reverse that process.

The school's philosophy centres on purpose-driven learning. Students are encouraged to discover why subjects matter and how they apply to real life. This often involves replacing conventional assessments with creative demonstrations of learning—like developing a computer game to show mathematical skills instead of sitting a formal exam. Such methods foster deeper understanding and engagement.

ESBC is not without rules. While it promotes freedom, it balances it with clear expectations. For example, students who waste time in class must attend Saturday sessions known as "silentium" to catch up. Rasfeld emphasizes that with greater freedom comes greater responsibility, and the school enforces that balance to maintain academic and personal discipline.

The model has delivered strong academic results. Despite the alternative structure, ESBC students consistently perform among the best in Berlin's comprehensive schools (gesamt-schulen). Last year's graduates earned an average grade equivalent to a straight B (2.0 on the German scale), even though nearly half of them had been told they weren't suited for higher academic study before enrolling.

One of the school's greatest successes lies in its ability to build self-confidence. Anton Oberländer, now 14, exemplifies this outcome. His independence and communication skills were sharpened by the school's system, enabling him to persuade Germany's national railway to sponsor a camping trip and later deliver a motivational speech to 200 employees—an experience far beyond the reach of most teenagers.

Founded in 2007 with just 16 students, the school has grown rapidly and now serves 500 pupils, with long waiting lists for new applicants. Its popularity reflects a broader interest in more flexible, purpose-driven educational models that prepare students not just for exams, but for life.

In a country with a federalised education system that permits experimentation, ESBC has emerged as a model for how schools might adapt to 21st-century challenges—by empowering students, fostering independence, and embracing change, all while delivering academic excellence.

(a) Write a summary of the approaches The Evangelical School Berlin Centre (ESBC) adopts and how they would be of benefit to students in all schools. Write about 150 words.

(b) Imagine you are Anton Oberlander, you were a student at The Evangelical School Berlin Centre (ESBC) until your family moved away from Berlin last year. You are asked to speak to the principal of your new school where the main focus is grades and focus on the set curriculum (.i.e learning new languages)

Principal's Question: Do you think implementing the policies of ESBC would benefit our pupils here?

Oberlander's Answer: