

Panel 6: Religious Education

Opportunities and limitations of denominational religious education in Germany: Insights into current developments and debates

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The international context broadens our perspectives: While in the Netherlands, as recently as 2017, the 80% of religiously affiliated private schools predominantly offered religious instruction from the student's own denomination, in Sweden a state system dominates, with students having been taught together for approximately 60 years (Bertram-Troost 2017, Klintborg 2022). The situation is different in Germany: since the 1960s, state schools have predominantly offered denominational religious instruction. Quite apart from the difficulties arising from secularization, the model established in the Basic Law (Section 7(3)) in 1949 leads to (organizational) difficulties, insofar as students have to be separated for religious instruction. Class structures are being dissolved, and learning groups are being temporarily reorganized.

These difficulties are being addressed in various ways: While alternative, sometimes interreligious, models have been developed in some city-states such as Hamburg, Bremen, and Berlin, as well as in Brandenburg, interfaith teaching has been introduced in some federal states for about two decades, and where possible, Islamic instruction is also provided. Recently, there has been a growing call for a further model that, for pedagogical and socio-political reasons, advocates a combination of denominational and co-curricular teaching. Often called for theoretically, this form of interfaith teaching is only practiced in a few schools. This is partly due to the legal situation. Using a few selected examples, this article discusses the didactic scope, as well as the (religious) theological opportunities and limitations of interfaith teaching. The focus is on two schools in North Rhine-Westphalia.