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School Absenteeism in Germany: A Shift from Punishment to Support?

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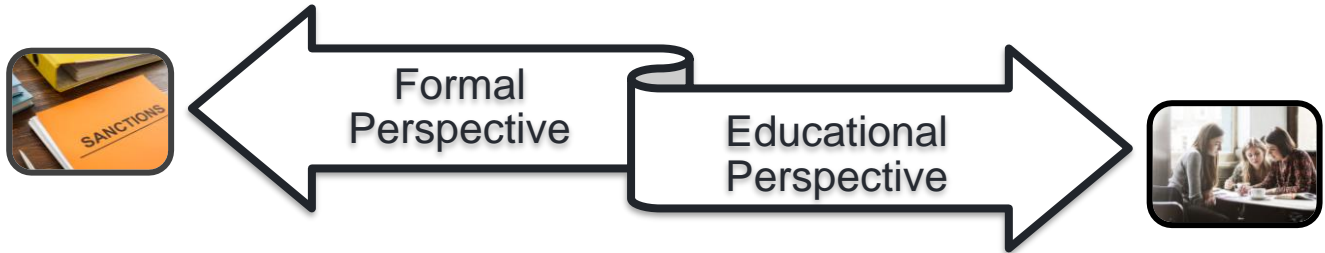
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Compulsory Education In Germany

In Germany...

- the **16 federal states** (*Länder*) are responsible for the organisation of school education,
- compulsory schooling from the **age of six until the age of 18**,
- **compulsory schooling laws** vary between the *Länder*,
- both parents and educational institutions are responsible for ensuring **school attendance** of all students!

Two Perspectives on the Issue of School Absenteeism

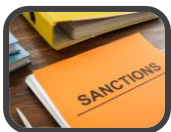


School Absenteeism as
Non-Compliance with Compulsory Schooling

→ Legal Administrative Procedures

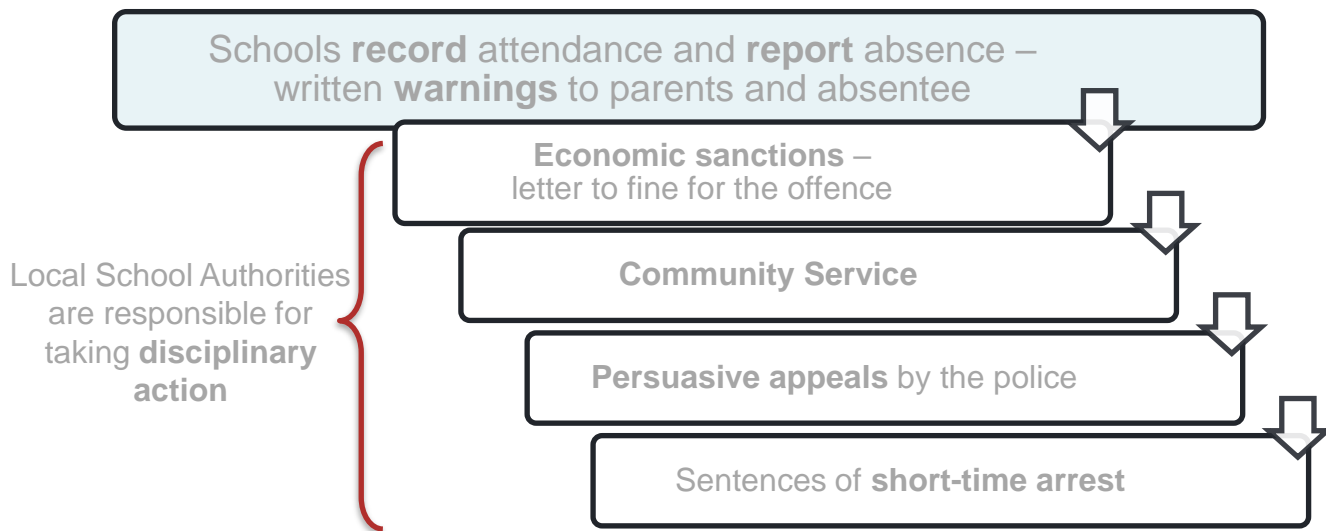
School Absenteeism as **Multidimensional Phenomenon with Multiple Causes**

→ School-Wide Management and Support



Legislative Framework in German Case – Non-Compliance with Compulsory Schooling

- Regulation of **legal or care proceedings** in the case of „*Schulpflichtverletzungen*“ within Education Acts
 - substantial differences between all 16 states!



Turn From Punitive Approaches To Support?

- The punitive approach has **limited effects** in reducing absence patterns and increasing attendance

(Ernst & Höynck, 2018; Pendon, 2016)



- Multidimensional understanding of school absenteeism



- **Shift towards school-wide structures of (multilevel) support with prevention, intervention and reintegration**

Turn From Punitive Approaches To Support?

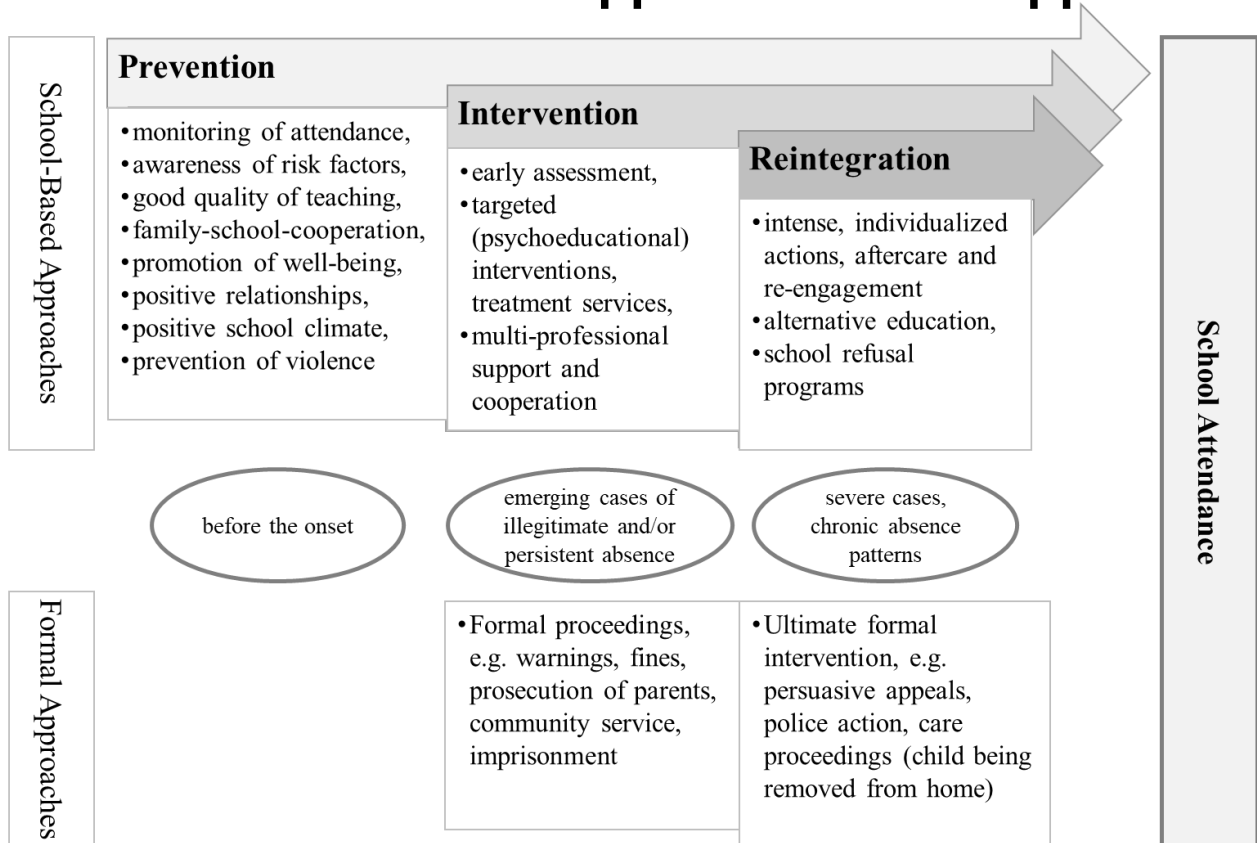


Figure created by authors: Enderle et al., 2023, p. 10.; based on Ricking, 2014; Seeliger, 2016

Aim and Research Questions



- ...to **compare** and provide insight into **legal and educational aspects** of guidance documents in German federal states concerning the support of school absenteeism.

RQ1: In what ways do **guidance documents in German federal states** make reference to **school legislation** (policies on formal administrative procedures) and **dimensions of school-wide support** to address school absenteeism?

RQ2: How does the **report from Schleswig-Holstein exemplify a case of shifting balance** from formal intervention to a more school-wide approach for multidimensional support at the federal state level?

Methodological Approach

- Document analysis (Hoffmann, 2018)
- Document types
 - manuals, handbooks, or similar guidance documents aimed at providing practical implications, recommendations, and strategies to address school absenteeism



School Absenteeism in Germany: A Shift from Punishment to Support?

Key Findings – Guidelines and regulations in 16 federal German states

Table 1. Guidelines and regulations for managing school absenteeism, as outlined in guidance documents published in federal states in Germany.

Federal state	Information on administrative Intervention – Regulations on the Initiation of legal procedures and fines (per day of absence)	Guidelines on prevention and promotion of school attendance	Guidelines on school-wide Intervention	Guidelines on reintegration activities	Source
Baden-Württemberg (BW)	Reference to regulations in school law, continuous absence, ~50–300€	In local districts, e.g., Lörrach "Fit for School": providing a series of strategies	General information, 5-step action plan approach, including class involvement and parental involvement	General indications on youth service involvement	Dieterle & Schick, 2015; Kultusministerium Baden-Württemberg, 2018; Schick et al., 2020
Bayern [Bavaria]	Guidelines for initiating offense procedures, around 5 days of absence, up to 1.000€	In state capital (Munich): short paragraph describing the relevance of attendance promotion	Description of concrete measures related to levels of escalation	Reference to school refusal projects ("2nd chance")	Staatliche Schulberatungsstelle Oberbayern-West, n.d.; Stadtjugendamt München, 2019
Berlin/Brandenburg	Reference to legal actions as last resort for intervention, 5 unauthorized days per school year, up to 2.500€	School-wide prevention strategies on tier 1–2 and best-practice examples from schools in Berlin	Description of step-by-step intervention plan, activities, school-wide support strategies and advice for communication	Separate section describing reintegration and cooperation strategies	Bibow, 2015
Bremen	Legal procedures as ultimate intervention measure, > 4 unauthorized days, 35€	Section with practice-based guidelines at system, school and classroom level	Detailed suggestions for school-wide strategies, Step-by-step guidance with joint actions, coordinated by multiple professions	Brief paragraph describing appropriate joint actions with counseling and social services	Müller et al., 2013
Hamburg	Concrete information about legal procedures, > 5 unauthorized days, ~150–200€	Implicit description of multi-professional prevention within multi-tiered systems of support	Guidelines describing practice-based approaches at the level of principals and teachers, based on improving school environment	Collaborative Approach: Suggestion of coordinated efforts with social services and persuasive appeals by police intervention	Behörde für Schule und Berufsbildung Hamburg, 2013; Speck et al., 2019
Hessen [Hesse]	Special section on legal framework and procedures, undefined number of unauthorized days and behavior remains unchanged ~100–150€	Pedagogical-psychological prevention strategies at school and class level	3-Step-action plan (monitoring, assessment, response), collaboration with stakeholders	Practical information about reintegration processes and involved professions	Adenaw et al., 2020
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern [Western Pomerania]	7-Phase model with reference to legal proceedings, 10 unauthorized days, up to 2.500€	7-Phase action plan, not implying the promotion of attendance, focus on early intervention	7-Phase action plan (standardized), relating to days of absence, responsibilities and educational measures	No information about reintegration activities	Ministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur des Landes Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, 2017
Niedersachsen [Lower Saxony]	Action plan implies legal intervention procedures, > 5 unauthorized days, up to 1.000€	In local district, e.g., manual for schools in Osnabrück, literature-based information about preventative activities at school, class and system level	(Standardized) step-by-step action plan for schools, differentiating between pedagogical intervention strategies and legal measures	Practice-based examples on how to reintegrate students after a long period of absence	MaArbeit KABR, 2021; School Act of Lower Saxony, 2023

QUA-LIS NRW, 2022

(continued)

School Absenteeism in Germany: A Shift from Punishment to Support?

Key Findings – Guidelines and regulations in 16 federal German states

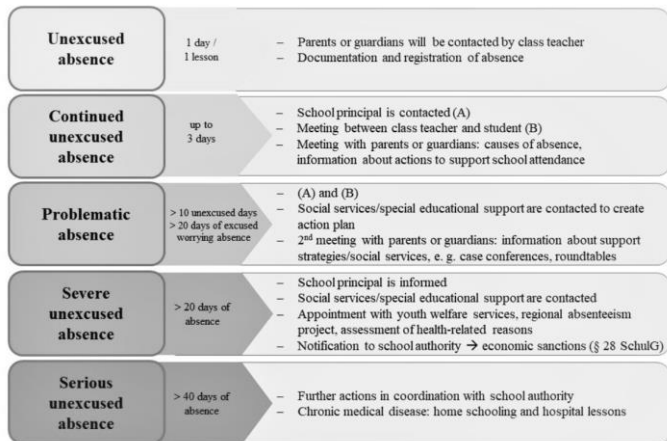
Table 1. Continued.

Federal state	Information on administrative intervention – Regulations on the initiation of legal procedures and fines (per day of absence)	Guidelines on prevention and promotion of school attendance	Guidelines on school-wide intervention	Guidelines on reintegration activities	Source
Nordrhein Westfalen [Northrhine-Westphalia]	Guidelines for initiating formal proceedings, > 20 unauthorized absence from lessons in the past 20 days ~80-150€	Description of aspects of school-wide prevention; detailed manuals in, e.g., Gelsenkirchen, Herne, Lippe, Wuppertal (...)	Actions regarding school-wide, collaborative intervention activities, such as counseling services, communication structures	Approach of reintegration alongside prevention and intervention	
Rheinland-Pfalz (RP) [Rhineland Palatinate]	Brief description of formal proceedings, detailed reference to school law and legal actions, 10 unauthorized days up to ~500€ in case of repeated absence	Step-by-step plan does not imply the promotion of attendance, focus on school-wide actions responding to absenteeism	Step-by-step plan, differentiates between actions in response to authorized/unauthorized absence, list of support measures	No information about reintegration activities	Pädagogisches Landesinstitut Rheinland-Pfalz, 2019
Saarland	Contains detailed information about legal procedures. Severe and repeated absence, up to ~500€ ¹	Depends on district, e.g., Saarkreis, St. Wendel	Step-by-step recommendations, including school-wide actions and support systems in collaboration with other agencies	Identification of relevant aspects for effective collaboration with other agencies in achieving reintegration	Saarpalz-Kreis, 2012
Sachsen [Saxony]	Reference to offense procedures as option to sanction unauthorized absence. 5 unauthorized days and behavior remains unchanged, up to ~1250€	School-wide, interdisciplinary prevention strategies, recommendations on developing a safe environment/bullying prevention programs	Step-by-step action plan, large collection of material/checklists for pedagogical support, suggestions for school-wide practices regarding school anxiety	Suggestions on promoting the return of absent youth	School Act of Saxony, 2002; Wiere, 2007
Sachsen-Anhalt [Saxony-Anhalt]	Stepwise action plan, including reference to formal proceedings, 5 unauthorized days, up to ~1000€	In state capital (Magdeburg): contains a brief overview of prevention measures	Stepwise plan on how to follow up on unauthorized absence, including responsibilities and general actions	List of reintegration programs and projects to consult	Hinz et al., 2019; Kultusministerium Sachsen-Anhalt, 2015
Schleswig-Holstein	Information on offense procedures > 20 unauthorized days, up to ~1000€	Description of school-wide multidimensional prevention, see example in this article	Step-by-step model on how to follow up on absence, recommendation regarding school-wide intervention	Reintegration activities targeting dropout	Ministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur des Landes Schleswig-Holstein (MBWK SH), 2022
Thüringen [Thuringia]	Stepwise action plan, including reference to legal procedures, 11 to 20 school days, up to ~1500€	General guideline on how to establish a positive learning environment (based on Sachsen manual)	Recommendation and guidelines regarding pedagogical support, general step-by-step plan in response to absence	Description of school's responsibility in preparing the students' return, including examples	Thüringer Ministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur, 2013

¹The fines shown in the table are averages. The amount of the fine varies not only by state, district, and municipality, but also by the frequency of the reported absence, e.g., a first-time reported absence may result in a lower fine than a repeated absence.

Key Findings – Report of Schleswig-Holstein 2022 (pp. 16-23)

Stepwise approach to address school absenteeism



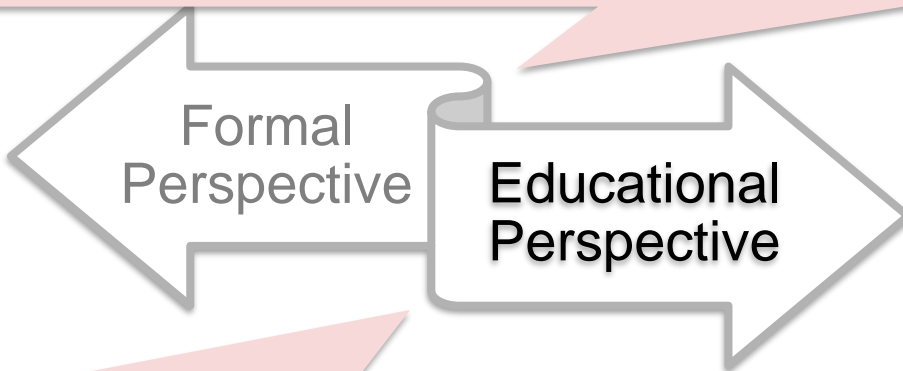
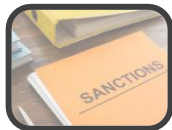
See figure in Enderle et al. (2023), p. 14, based on MBWK SH, 2022, pp. 18-19

Inhaltsverzeichnis

1. Einleitung.....	4
2. Begriffsdefinition und Unterscheidungsformen	7
2.1. Unterrichtsabsentismus	7
2.2. Schulabsentismus	7
2.3. Definition kritischer Fehlzeiten	10
2.4. Absentismus an Grundschulen.....	11
3. Schulische Dokumentation von Fehlzeiten.....	12
3.1. Anwesenheitserfassung im Einzelfall	12
3.2. Dokumentation in der einzelnen Schule	12
4. Schulische Maßnahmen	14
4.1. Prävention	15
4.2. Intervention	15
4.3. Wiedereingliederung.....	16
4.4. Netzwerkarbeit.....	16
4.5. Gestufte schulische Maßnahmen im Umgang mit Absentismus	17
4.5.1. bei unentschuldigtem Fehlen am ersten Tag/stundenweise	18
4.5.2. bei Fehlzeiten bis zu drei unentschuldigten Fehltagen	18
4.5.3. bei problematischen Fehlzeiten (>10 Tage)	18
4.5.4. bei gravierenden Fehlzeiten (>20 Tage).....	19
4.5.5. bei massiven Fehlzeiten (>40 Tage)	19
4.6. Unterstützung durch den schulpsychologischen Dienst	20
4.7. Qualitative Merkmale schulischer Absentismuskonzepte	20
5. Schulpflicht.....	24
5.1. Geltung der Schulpflicht.....	24
5.2. Erfüllung der Schulpflicht.....	24
5.3. Einzelne Pflichten	24
5.3.1. Anmeldepflicht	24
5.3.2. Teilnahmepflicht	25
5.4. Verfahren beim Schulwechsel	25
5.5. Berufsschulpflicht	26

Discussion and Conclusion

- Variations in content regarding educational dimensions
- Punitive actions as common element across guiding documents



- **Change and shift in focus** from a punitive approach to a more supportive one
- Focus on promoting well-being, participation, and social-emotional learning

Implications and Future Directions



- Guidance documents as **practical resources** for schools and practitioners
- Table of guidelines and strategies as framework for **comparative national and international research**

Reality?

- How do implications and recommendations translate into actual practice of schools and teachers? What intervention and prevention strategies are implemented?

References – for more see page 20 of the article

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**“Education is the most powerful weapon
which you can use to change the world”**

(Nelson Mandela, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate 1993)

THANK YOU!

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