

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

A return to Classical education

An effort is being undertaken to reverse the crisis arising from 30 years of liberalism in the education system.

In an initiative whose importance cannot be underrated, Annette Schavan, Minister of Cultural Affairs and Education in the state of Baden-Württemberg, has called for a return to the essential elements of the pre-1972 system of secondary and college-level education.

Schavan, a Christian Democrat whose remarks were covered in the leading German press on April 11, said that it is time to abolish the post-1972 system of specialized, fragmented *gymnasium* courses.

The "Brandt Reforms" of the early 1970s, sponsored by Social Democratic Chancellor Willy Brandt, changed the system of education, particularly the *gymnasium* phase (grades 10-13), which was designed to prepare students for university studies. The new system, with its bias toward sociology and environmentalism, was introduced with the populist slogan "freedom of choice," and has eroded education standards to such an extent that new university students, as well as their professors, for some years now, have felt incapable of sound, in-depth studies, because the basic knowledge required to conduct such efforts simply is not there.

"Freedom of choice" has produced students who are unable to master even their native language. The young citizens who come of voting age at 18 and enroll in universities, no longer know what a good citizen ought to know about history, statecraft, and philosophy.

Schavan said that it is time to restore the pre-1972 Classical core of five studies, along with the classic school class structure, which keeps a

group of students socially together in one class through their essential studies from grades 10 to 13. These core studies include the German language, mathematics, one foreign language, one of the natural sciences, and an elective from history, geography, or religion. In addition, a sixth core study, such as the history of science, in combination, for example, with chemistry, physics, and philosophy, has been proposed by Schavan.

"Our elites are sometimes really helpless, with all their specialized knowledge," Schavan said. With the present-day flood of information, it is necessary to return to essentials, such as "philosophy, where we have to get back to the standards for which the German school system has gained a reputation abroad."

The basic outline of Classical German education emerged from the period of the great philosophers, poets, scientists, and political reformers of the late-16th to late-18th centuries. It is the continental European complement of the republican movement in America that led to the founding of the United States. The German Classical tradition is epitomized in the slogan, "The best education for the whole nation," and was embodied in the reforms of Prussian cabinet minister Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early 19th century. The Classical system of the core studies for all students through the last three years of their *gymnasium* education, was developed out of the Humboldt design, and remained basically intact for 150 years, into the early 1970s.

However, the original Humboldt concept, to produce a republican citi-

zen who would contribute to ending the oligarchical era and to consolidating the industrial nation-state, was undermined early on. The republican movement in Germany failed, and the political "arrangements" between the industrial forces, and the landed oligarchy and financier-monetarist elites, meant the sacrifice of this very important republican aspect.

What survived was the core *gymnasium* studies, cleansed of their political threats to the oligarchy, but ideologized for the purposes of the ruling powers: the imperial era until 1918; the Weimar Republic, with its emphasis on "modernism" at the expense of the Classics; from 1933 on, the regime of the Nazis, with its emphasis on eugenics; after the war, from 1945 on, the system became one of the key conduits of Allied military occupation efforts to "re-educate the Germans." This took an extreme form in the British occupation sector, where the pressure on teachers to replace the German Classics with British liberalism, was immense. And, in the Soviet occupation zone, postwar education began with the firing of all except the overtly pro-communist teachers.

Through all this turbulence, however, core aspects of *gymnasium* education survived, due to the resistance of teachers. In postwar West Germany, an unabated inflow of teachers fleeing from the Soviet zone, before the Berlin Wall was built in 1961, neutralized the British re-educators somewhat.

But, the worldwide paradigm shift of the 1960s, and the generation of young teachers who entered school services in the late 1960s and early 1970s, destroyed the relics of the Classical system, introduced hedonism, ecologism, and the drug counterculture. To restore the Classical system is therefore a gigantic job, but an essential one.