

Let the schools keep social life in the villages!

School is a central pillar of youths' education. In addition, schools are a significant part in the social network. They are places of encounter and exchange; they are enriching cultural life and overtake an important role in rural life. Thus, school has a significant share in the conservation of liveable and sustainable rural areas.

The German KLJB (Katholische Landjugendbewegung) represents the interests of young people in rural areas. The personal development of youths and the sustainable development of rural areas are the main concerns of our association. We see the current development of the choice of schools with increasing worries and fear serious consequences, particularly for the rural population. It has to be an important aim of school policy to preserve attractive perspectives to live and stay in rural areas and to organise them in a sustainable way.

There are to tendencies of the current school situation in rural areas:

1. The present choice of schools in rural areas and thus the guarantee to go to a school nearby is endangered by the decreasing number of children and youths. Schools are more and more closed and centralised in towns. By now, students in rural areas often have to accept long distances to school; when visiting higher schools at the latest. But already elementary school students must go to schools several kilometres away. This gives rise to the fact that the choice of schools is limited for reasons of accessibility. At present already, this situation is particularly evident in sparsely populated regions such as the North-East of Germany. The decisions on school closings are mainly based on economic reasons. And it is not considered the pedagogical problem: what will such a reorganisation mean for the students and which consequences can have the closing of schools also for the social development of rural areas.
2. At the same time, school demands more and more of children and youths by the reduction of school time until school leaving examination and the expansion of all-day schools. Early decisions on the school career and increasing pressure to perform intensify students' stress.

Both tendencies have numerous consequences for the personal development of children and youths as well as for the development of rural regions.

Consequences for children and youths:

Students spend a large part of childhood and youth in school buildings, in the bus or with their homework due to the extension of daily school time, increased stress by everyday school life and long distances to school. Their free time is more and more determined and limited by these factors. Therefore, there are reduced opportunities to organise free time and adapt personal initiative, creativity and social competences. Additionally, the students socialise less in the villages. The students' circle of friends depends strongly on the type of school. But just in the free time after school children and youths learn important competences for their personal development. They need freedom and have a right to self-determined time.

Consequences for equal opportunities:

Long distances to school can result in the fact that children and youths in rural areas make their decision for a type of school on the base of vicinity rather than on school achievements. The lacking choice of schools reduces attractiveness of regional areas for young families. The migration into cities of young families orientated towards education is imminent. People in precarious situations and people with less chances stay in rural areas. And the closing of schools in rural areas reinforces the inequality of educational chances between youths in urban and rural areas.

Consequences for social environment in rural areas:

Societies and associations make a significant contribution to the integration in a village and deliver essential modules for the development of a local identity; they have a high ranking in everyday life of youths, especially in rural areas. By limited time resources youths do no longer have the possibility to be involved on an honorary basis in local societies and associations after school. This has serious consequences for social life in villages which degenerate into dormitory villages. Additionally, local schools are culture bearers and deliver important infrastructure. Without schools, not only rooms are lacking but also potential personnel for village life. Schools establish networks, also between employers and future apprentices which enhances transition between school time and employment. Therefore, school is also an important location factor for the local economy. It is more likely that youths leave the region for apprenticeships and jobs when they are not rooted in the village. But if employees and apprentices can not be recruited locally, the local economy will be weakened.

We demand: Schools must stay local!

In order to promote the personal development of children and youths, to assure equal educational chances in urban and rural areas and to preserve liveable rural areas, we demand schools located nearby.

From our point of view, the place of residence or the distance to school must not be a criterion for or against a graduation. All graduations – even intermediate and higher ones – have to be assured in rural areas nearby. There must be no gaps in the comprehensive choice of higher graduations - they have to be filled.

Necessary all-day institutions must be oriented to the needs of the families and should also be offered nearby. The vicinity offers more time and provides the opportunity for learning after school and for engagement in local societies and associations. In general, school has to be designed as an integrative educational and cultural space in social life.

In order to guarantee good learning and professional perspectives for all children and youths, the centralisation of schools must not proceed. Therefore we need diverse, flexible and creative solutions particularly for rural areas. Concepts meeting future requirements have to be designed, as for example the extension of common school time in elementary school, comprehensive solutions across the different type of schools, educational co-operations of different schools or their authorities and learning in groups of heterogeneous age. And the concepts must provide individualised promotion and distinction.

We need action, not reaction!

Due to the demographic development we regard it as absolutely essential to design basic concepts for adapted regional solutions. We challenge all responsible persons in the field of children's and youths' education and rural development to act in an efficient and cross-departmental way.