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ABSTRACT

Education in Germany has historically been a matter for the individual states rather than the central government. In Prussia in the 1920s, elementary education was segregated by religious denomination, while the upper grades were divided according to occupational specialty. The Social Democratic Party was the only party which proposed to change the system, calling for the secularization and integration of the schools. When it unexpectedly found itself in power in November 1918, the party's commitment to its program was tested. While the leadership continued to affirm its support for educational reform throughout the 1920s, it did little to introduce any changes.

Admittedly, the Social Democrats did not rule alone; they had to share power with middle-class parties. Maintaining good relations with its coalition partners naturally entailed compromise. A greater obstacle to educational reform, however, was the lack of consensus within the party. Intra-party disagreement did not concern merely peripheral details, but reveals profoundly different views on the proper role of religion in modern society and the place of the individual.

Since party platforms tell us little about actual socialist attitudes towards education, we must turn to educators in the party. Kurt Löwenstein believed that religion was an anachronism in the modern age; he called

for the complete secularization of education by completely excluding religion from the schools. Another educator in the party, Paul Oestreich, focussed on the problem of integrating the post-elementary schools in order to ensure that all students were afforded equal opportunities. Not all socialists, however, either rejected religion or insisted on the complete uniformity in the upper levels of the schools. Adolf Grimme represents this group of more moderate socialists. All three reformers developed arguments to support their positions.

The leadership of the party declined to choose among these very different programs. Lack of coordination by the party's leadership meant that nothing was done to reform Prussian schools, which remained essentially as they had been in Imperial Germany. Inactivity in educational reform is an indication of Weimar Social Democracy's inability to define concretely its goals and act decisively.