

The Collectivité européenne d'Alsace and bilingual schooling

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The administrative map of Alsace has changed twice in the last decade. The territorial reform of 2015 merged the regions of Alsace, Lorraine and Champagne-Ardenne into a single large region, which took the name Grand Est in 2016 and has its seat in Strasbourg. Many Alsatians experienced the merger as a loss of identity, because the old Alsace region, with its strong regional consciousness and its cross-border networks, disappeared into a much larger unit whose centre of gravity lies partly in Lorraine and Champagne.¹ In response to this dissatisfaction, the state agreed to merge the two Alsatian departments, Bas-Rhin and Haut-Rhin, into a new authority with special competences. The Collectivité européenne d'Alsace came into being on 1 January 2021 under a law of 2 August 2019.²

The Collectivité européenne d'Alsace, which has its seat in Strasbourg and holds many of its assembly sessions in Colmar, exercises the competences of a French department and several additional powers. Two of them concern this chapter directly. The authority is responsible for drawing up a strategy for cross-border cooperation with the neighbouring regions in Germany and Switzerland. It also holds a specific competence to promote bilingualism, including the power to employ staff for the teaching of German and of the regional language alongside the national education system.³ Since 2021 the Collectivité has published action plans for the regional language, supported dialect courses for adults and invested in bilingual childcare. Political debate continues in Alsace about whether the region should leave Grand Est altogether and become a full region of its own. The government has so far rejected the idea.⁴

In the public schools, the bilingual stream with parity of hours between French and German is the most important instrument. According to the regional education authority, a significant minority of pupils in Alsatian

primary schools attend these bilingual classes, with higher shares in some districts near the German and Swiss borders. The proportion has grown since the 1990s but remains well below a majority.⁵ Alongside the public sector, an association founded at the beginning of the 1990s, ABCM-Zweisprachigkeit, runs associative schools that teach by immersion in German and Alsatian in the early years and later in parity with French. Its schools operate under contracts with the state and are among the institutions whose methods the Conseil constitutionnel's decision of 2021 placed in question.⁶

These efforts produce pupils who can read and write standard German at a respectable level. Employers in Basel and Baden nevertheless report that the bilingual pupils are not numerous enough to change the overall picture, and that the spoken competence needed for daily work in a German-speaking team often requires further training. For Basel, the bilingual schools are therefore one element in a broader strategy of the Upper Rhine authorities to strengthen language skills, which includes language courses for jobseekers, exchange programmes for apprentices and the trinational vocational training projects described below.⁷

1 Notes

1. Loi no. 2015-29 du 16 janvier 2015 relative à la délimitation des régions; décret no. 2016-1262 du 28 septembre 2016 on the name and seat of the region Grand Est. To be verified. ↩
2. Loi no. 2019-816 du 2 août 2019 relative aux compétences de la Collectivité européenne d'Alsace. The new authority was established on 1 January 2021. To be verified. ↩
3. On the competences of the Collectivité européenne d'Alsace in cross-border cooperation and bilingualism, see Articles L3431-1 et seq. of the General Code of Territorial Authorities (Code général des collectivités territoriales), as inserted by the law of 2 August 2019. Article numbers to be verified. ↩
4. On the political debate in Alsace about leaving the Grand Est region ("sortie du Grand Est") and the position of the government, see the regional press and the reports of the Collectivité européenne d'Alsace. Status to be verified. ↩
5. On the bilingual stream ("filière bilingue paritaire") in Alsatian public schools and the share of pupils enrolled, see the statistics of the Académie de Strasbourg and the Collectivité européenne d'Alsace. Figures to be verified. ↩

6. On the association ABCM-Zweispachigkeit, founded in 1990/1991, and its immersive bilingual schools in Alsace and Moselle, see its own publications. Date to be verified. ↩
7. On the evaluation of bilingual education in Alsace and its effects on the employability of young Alsatians in Germany and Switzerland, see the reports of the Upper Rhine Conference and of the Collectivité européenne d'Alsace. Status to be verified. ↩

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