

Projektdokumentation und -reflexion  
 zum Projekt

**School Spirit in the United States and Germany**  
**How is it created and how can it be improved at Grashof Gymnasium?**

angefertigt im Rahmen von CertiLingua

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## **1. Introduction**

During the school year 2010/2011, which I spent at Parowan High School in Parowan, UT, USA, I learned a lot about the mentality of the Americans and how their lifestyle, including freetime activities, work and school, differs from the one I am familiar with from Germany. Especially their tight connections within the student body amazed me, I had never met anyone more open-hearted and welcoming than the members of PHS. When it came to choosing a CertiLingua project, I remembered that the topic of school spirit had fascinated me, so in summer 2012 I came back to Parowan to do an internship, to reconnect with friends and my host-family there and to do the project. Coming back to a place I had spent quite a while at triggered my memory and helped me to ask just the right questions to the right people. Quickly, I knew what I wanted to focus on and who would help me to get a closer inside into the school's daily life. During my stay I noticed great differences between the American's and the German's ways to identify with their schools in both academic and extra-curricular contexts. Once again surprised by how proud the students and staff were to be a part of Parowan High, I spent those 7 weeks observing and trying to find out what this love for the school was based on. Furthermore, I wanted to know whether or not it is possible to adapt certain aspects of Parowan's community life to my school in Germany in order to increase the school spirit at Grashof Gymnasium.

### **1.1 Description of the Project**

With my project I want to find out what this school spirit is based on, how it can be possible that so many different cliques and individuals get along so well with each other. Which measures can schools take to make students feel enthusiasm for their school and enjoy spending time there? In times of a G8 school system it is important, especially for the younger students, to make sure that school is not only a place of pressure, homework and class tests, but also a place to have fun. Students should be challenged but not overwhelmed with work. In order to take a break from the work in the classroom, it is necessary to have a healthy and well-working communitiy within the student body. The students should enjoy to spend some free-time with each other. With the project I do not only want to find reasons for school spirit, but also point out ideas about how current situations can be improved.

In order to come to a conclusion, I observed the students' and staff's everyday life, both as a student and as an alumni of Parowan High, handed out a survey and gathered some opinions of German students that spent some time abroad and are familiar with the phenomenon "school spirit".

## 1.2 Personal View on the Project

During my 10-month stay I got into contact with students all the way from kindergarten to the graduating class of the High School, as well as teachers, staff members, parents and other community members. Each of them was different: age, gender, occupation, interests, and several other aspects, only one thing united them: they were all a part of Parowan High and the surrounding town community. Each Friday night the whole town was out by the football field cheering on the football team, whether they were losing or winning. When it came to fundraisers everyone was willing to donate baked goods or volunteered to spend some time selling items so the money could be used for the away-trips of the drama club.

This sort of identification, in the following called “school spirit“, was rather uncommon to me, as in Germany most students and staff members avoid spending too much time on campus, because it is only considered a place to learn at, and not so much to live at. I was very surprised about the people’s efforts they put into making everyone feel welcome at the school, both inside and outside the classroom. I wondered whether this was a situation which was unique at Parowan High School or if this sort of community also existed at other American schools. Also, I wanted to find out why this sort of school spirit is very rare at German schools and, if existent, usually is expressed differently from the way US schools do. What are the crucial differences between German and US-American schools and how could these disparities be overcome? Being a student and soon-to-be alumni of schools in both countries, I have a good insight into the daily routines, what problems come up, how they are dealt with and what aspects of community life each school focusses on. My expectation is to find out and to extract the positive aspects from both sides, and to find out how they can be applied to any school in order to improve their status quo. Is there something Americans can learn from Germans and vice versa?

Having entirely different histories, especially concerning World Wars I and II, America and Germany have different starting-positions when it comes to developing pride. It is a lot harder to say „I am proud to be German!“ than to say „I am proud to be American!“, which often shows in the people’s daily lives. Americans and Germans grow up to have different attitudes towards pride, patriotism and identification. Already as a child, Americans are taught to sing the national anthem and to express pride for their homecountry, even before they even understand what it means.

Whether or not this attitude is good depends on everyone’s personal opinion, I am not in the place to judge anyone about their attitude towards their country, but one thing is for sure: Once you learn how to identify with something and to be proud, this can be applied to many things quite easily, also to your school. So is school spirit rooted in the strong patriotism the majority of Americans have? Germans tend to be more careful with expressing pride, which is understandable, as Germany’s history of the 20th century is hardly anything to be proud of, yet does this really have something to do with German schools in the 21st century or is this non-existent pride rather a habit? And despite all the negative aspects from German history, can Americans be a good example to Germans when it comes to cherishing the good aspects? Germany also has people, events and inventions to be

proud of, in some situations we should not forget about that and act with a little more pride, a little more American, yet without forgetting about the negative sides of our history. Fascist persecutions are not allowed to ever happen again, we always need to remember this, no matter how proud we are of our countries.



I especially want to focus on what the student body itself can do, not so much on what the principal or the teachers can do. The staff decides about how classes take place, the coaches plan the sports practices, thus I think the student body, which is the numerical majority anyways, needs to have some sort of contribution to the daily school life itself. Depending on interests and given conditions, several projects and ideas can be turned into important parts of the community life and give each school a certain personality. Each student, each school is different, and so are their projects and ways to express their school spirit.

Internationally, both German and American school systems have a certain reputation.

German schools are considered to have comparably high academic standards giving the students a solid base of knowledge before they enter university or the job market. Social aspects such as team sport activities, clubs and study-groups are usually ranked second behind academic success. This, of course, cannot be generalized, as also in Germany there are schools with an extraordinary program, but those ones usually are private schools. In public schools everything depends on the engagement of the students and the teachers. My school, Grashof Gymnasium, has a strong focus on musical and

dramatic performances, as well as language knowledge including field trips and class trips to nearby cities or countries all around Europe, along with annual plays and choir, band and dance recitals. In those projects students from all classes, as well as teachers and parents, interact and put together a performance that brings fun to everyone. Sometimes classes are cancelled so rehearsals can take place, but still no one forgets about why people attend school: to get an education and to graduate. Also the financial means of a school play an important role, as schools with student with a less fortunate financial background are unlikely to have parents chip in if money is tight.

Public schools in the United States on the other hand attach great importance to being successful in sports competitions, putting together complex drama productions and having a great variety of extra-curricular activities while usually having a lower academic standard than most European schools. A good example is math topics that are considered to be hard for American Seniors are taught in 9th and 10th grade in Germany. Much knowledge that is required to graduate from German high schools is only taught at American universities, not yet in high school.

The fact that in Germany there is a difference between Gymnasium, Realschule, Gesamtschule and Hauptschule, while there is only high school in America shows that education in Germany is far more specified and differentiated.

In both systems there is room for improvement. With this project I want to point out some ideas that can help any school to improve their school spirit.

### **1.3 The Project's Academic Context**

Since school spirit is mostly influenced by activities outside the classroom, it is difficult to connect the project to any specific class or subject. Theoretically it would be possible to start a „school spirit club“ but since passion about something hardly comes from only joining a club, it is better and more genuine to let the students live their everyday life and let them add ideas they have directly to their way to spend their time. This way the community life at school is more vivid, more personal and less planned.

## **2. Conduction of the Project**

### **2.1 Factual Description of the Project's Development**

#### **2.1.1 Definition of School Spirit**

School spirit varies from school to school and consists of a great variety of aspects. For the main part school spirit is the feeling of identification and pride, pride of being part of something bigger than oneself, pride to be a member of the school's football team and pride to represent the school in all academic, athletic and extra-curricular contexts. There are several ways to express this feeling of affiliation, such as attending games, wearing the school colors and joining clubs.

### **2.1.2 How I Conducted the Project**

As already described under 1.1 Description of the Project, I spent several months in Parowan, UT, USA, where I, both as student and alumni, observed the people's behavior inside and outside of the school.

During my time as a student of Parowan High I noted down in a diary everything that seemed worth remembering, whether it was special events taking place in school, extraordinary classes that could be taken, the tremendous support for each other within a sports team, the dedication to success or the incredible politeness of the Americans. After returning to Germany, I noticed so many differences that I had not realized before and started to wonder what could be done in Germany in order to increase the school spirit in German schools. When I went back to spend the summer in Parowan, UT, a year after I had left, I tried to focus on the people from my former class that now had graduated and so had a certain distance to the school's everyday life. It was one of my goals to figure out if their attitudes towards PHS had changed or if their school spirit was just as strong as it was back in high school. To also gather ideas and opinions from a variety of high school and college students, as well as parents, I put together a survey, which can be found in the appendix of this essay.

## **2.2 Personal Experiences During the Project**

### **2.2.1 Evaluation of the Survey**

When handing out the survey, my first impression on the feedback I got was very positive. The people in America always were very helpful, so the cooperation I was faced with was just what I had expected. Within a short amount of time I received completely answered surveys, often with the offer to help if I needed further information. This politeness and helpfulness delighted me because I knew that their input was an essential part of my project. Also the content of the people's answers was surprisingly good, as they all responded in full sentences, and not in keywords like most people would do. They all elaborated on their thoughts, named examples and drew comparisons to experiences I had made when I was a student of Parowan High, which was just what I had hoped for.

What surprised me most about the survey's results was that the people from the same age group tended to give similar answers. For example, college students have different ideas and suggestions on how to improve school spirit than people currently attending high school have. Still, the overall opinion on what was needed to create a feeling of unity in school, and how to improve the existing school spirit, was basically the same.

All interviewees are, in one or another way, connected to Parowan High School, yet their opinions on what makes their school amazing and unique were just as different as the interviewees themselves. What the current high school students love most about PHS is the close knit atmosphere because most of the students have been attending school together since kindergarten, so they all know each other really well. Parowan High being a comparably small school, only around 400 people in grades 7-12, also adds to this aspect and allows involvement in several activities such as sports, drama, choir, business clubs and many others. Students of the graduating class of 2012 give credit to the town community as local businesses take part in school events and with this show



their support. Parents rather focus on the traditions PHS had for decades, such as the celebration of Parowan's birthday or the annual Veteran's Day Assembly. To them it is especially important to mention that it isn't just the teachers forcing things down the kids' throats, the kids themselves really care about keeping PHS traditions as well.

Even though the interviewees' answers on what makes their school unique vary quite a lot, they all agree on one thing when it comes to the creation of school spirit. To create school spirit you need emotions. A positive attitude, enthusiasm for ongoing events, pride, excitement and passion are essential to create a sense of community where the students feel like they are an important part of the school. Children and teenagers want to feel loved and cared about, so it is important that they feel at home at their school and know for sure that their opinions and actions matter. Both the students and parents state that they have two ways to express their school spirit: by attending/taking part in games and events and by wearing the school colors. From my own experiences as a student I know that the teachers are very supportive when it comes to letting students miss class so they can cheer on their sports teams. When the Boys Basketball Team was playing for the Utah State Basketball title, around 70 people, mostly students, travelled for several hours to a gym in Northern Utah simply to cheer on the boys and support them to win the title. The school administration even organized a bus to drive up north so the student body could travel together. Also the home games are always very popular as a way to spend a Friday night. The students dress up in their school colors, the pep band plays the school song, during half-time the drill team or the cheerleaders perform and everyone cheers and yells, and is surprised that they don't lose their voices by the end

of the night. Some students, especially the older ones, as I realized to my surprise, do not only wear jerseys and t-shirts in their school colors but even paint their faces in matching colors. Even though they think they look like an idiot dressed up like this, they do not mind all too much and simply enjoy the good atmosphere that is being created by such expressions of school spirit. Another popular occasion of dressing up are Homecoming Week and Winterfest Week, in which every day has a certain motto such as Christmas Characters, Blue and Gold Day and Ugly Sweater Day. Even though not the entire student body votes on the mottos, nobody complains, which shows how much the students and staff enjoy those special traditions and that they do not care about whether or not they look their best.



On the question how school spirit can be improved in any school the answers were quite different again. While the younger students rather put a focus on winning and rewarding the people with the greatest school spirit, the older high school and college students believe that spirit cannot be created unless the students themselves want it to be created. If a school wants to improve their school spirit, they must somehow get the students to participate. The students have to make it happen. Their suggestions are pep rallies as well as school spirit clubs, which everyone can join. To prevent that only the best athletes and greatest actors get the support from such clubs and groups, it is important for everyone to know that their support is still just as important as the players on the field. Also, in times of defeats it is important to still have the teams back and to cheer on them as this creates a stronger idea of unity. The students need to have faith in each other's abilities. It is not only about supporting the heroes but about supporting everyone. Additionally, a variety of possibilities needs to be available at school so everyone gets a chance to participate. A school that only focusses on athletic success will never realize that a great poet and writer is among the students, while a school putting much effort into their fine arts might never discover a second Usain Bolt or Michael Jordan. Variety is the key to student involvement because every student has his or her own talents that need to be developed.

### **2.2.2 Observations**

During my time in Parowan I took a closer look at the people's daily routines and behaviours in connection with their school and noticed aspects that most likely seem normal to any American so that they do not even bother thinking about it.

One essential aspect I observed was the great rivalry between the neighboring schools. Parowan High School's archrival, for example, is Beaver High School which is located around 35 miles north of Parowan. Each year, the night before the two schools play each other in football, the away-team plays a prank on the home-team. Once, some Parowan students drove up to Beaver and changed the B, which is built out of concrete on a hill in Beaver, into a P to demonstrate that the city now was „Parowan Territory“, since the PHS team would win the football game. When I asked where this rivalry came from, no one could really give me a reasonable answer. It is simply all about pride and confidence, to show that the students are proud to be a part of PHS.

Within the sports teams the relations are also incredibly close. Not only the athletes themselves were absolutely dedicated to their practices and competitions, but also the coaches. No one ever complained about having to be in school at 5.15 am for cheer and drill team practice, and even when the coaches were sick, they found their way to the school because they wanted their athletes to be in perfect shape and excellently prepared. But they were not only the people to push us



athletes to our limits, but they were also our people of trust. Whether it was family issues, problems in school or anything else, the coaches were a confidant we could confide in. They helped us out if possible, listened or gave advice. I will never forget how I went to a cross country practice a year after I had left PHS and all the coaches remembered me, even though I never gave them any

accomplishment worth remembering. I was very bad at running, yet Coach Mom (It took me a while to find out that her real name is Karen because everyone just calls her Mom, since she is basically the „mother of the team“) was very happy to see me, hugged me and told me she was glad that I was back in the States. I was surprised by this enthusiasm because most German coaches usually keep a certain distance to their team, mostly to ensure the necessary respect and authority. American coaches on the other hand have a way with teenagers and know exactly how to motivate them, and even if the students are not talented whatsoever, the coaches still make playing sports fun. Especially the seniors, who are the students from the graduating class, play a special role in the beginning of the season because it is their responsibility to design the warm-up shirts the team will wear during the entire season. This way, it is ensured that firstly the students feel that their opinions

matter and they are wanted to bring their own personality and creativity into the team, and secondly, unitary clothing supports the feeling of community and togetherness.

Parowan High's School Spirit Club Rambunctious has a great influence on the school's daily life. Not only do the members of the club attend every home-game and most away-games, but they also dress up, paint their faces, sing the school songs and make sure everyone is in a great mood and cheering the team to the win. During my year at PHS, the Rambunctious Club organized something very special: When Julie, the school's secretary, was diagnosed with breast cancer, the club organized so-called „Breast Cancer Awareness Games“. The revenues from the games' tickets were

donated to a breast cancer treatment center and everyone was asked to be dressed in pink, which is the color of breast cancer awareness. I think this is school spirit used in the best context it could possibly be used, as it gave Julie hope and strength to fight the battle against cancer. It showed her that the entire student body and faculty



stood behind her and that she was loved and everyone cared about her. In my opinion, giving love and support during hard times is the most important thing anyone can do, and next to that, cheering on athletes in games should always be ranked second after giving strength to carry on with life.

When the student body was told about Julies passing away in December 2010, it was a great shock for everyone, but it showed me another characteristic of school spirit that I had never experienced before: The entire school was absolutely silent. No one spoke, not because we were asked to be quiet, but because the student body wanted to have a while of silence, wanted to have time to remember Julie. It showed me what an incredible person she must have been (I hardly knew her since I started to attend PHS just 3 months earlier) and how much she was loved. Julie was more than just a staff-member or a co-worker, she was a friend. I believe, this is the way a community in school needs to be: people should not be limited to only their profession and tasks in school but they should be seen for who they are as a person.

During the next weeks, all students that felt the desire to talk to someone about Julie were given the possibility to talk to the teachers, the principal and the counselor about their feelings, which I think was a good way to handle her passing. It brought the people in school even closer together, no one was given the feeling of being alone, and the teachers had the possibility to help, if necessary. I

think this good and honest connection between students and teachers is important because we do not only attend school to obtain knowledge, but also to be prepared for life with all its personal relations.

Another important aspect are the parents of the students, and their function as role models. The parents of the girls on the cheer team call themselves „Cheer Moms“ and are proud to wear the same team hoodies as their daughters, only with the little difference that they have „Cheer Mom“ on it instead of „PHS Cheer“. If parents were needed to take the team to an away-game, they were always willing to drive the car for several hours to make sure the team arrived safely. If the team needed help selling items to raise money, the Cheer Moms were there to provide assistance. This, of course, can be quite time-consuming but also shows dedication. That way the girls see that everyone’s involvement is important to achieve a goal and at the same time is a lot of fun and makes great memories.



In Germany, class trips are an important part of the time in school and are always popular. It gives the students a chance to bond with each other and also to get to know their teachers in a non-academic context. Especially younger students often see their teachers only as a person to give them homework and exams to do, and absolutely forget that they are human as well. On a trip, students and teachers often get to know each other better and learn more about the people’s character traits, goals, hopes and wishes. These connections improve their relationships. Class trips, next to showing the students a little part of the world, bring the school together, as they create life-lasting memories.

### **3. Reflection and Review**

With this project I tried to outline the differences between school spirit in Germany and in the United States and how it is created in order to figure out measures that could be taken to improve it. After several hours of observing daily routines and behaviours, evaluating surveys and talking to people I came to a conclusion:

The key to great school spirit is emotions. The students need to care about each other, their school, their traditions, their environment, their future. They need to stand together in good times as well as in hard times and they need to feel passion for their activities. And what is most important: The

people need to be proud of their school and themselves and display this feeling. They need to want school spirit themselves. Passion about something has to come from the students themselves, not from the staff trying to make people participate in clubs they do not want to attend. Forcing people into liking something subsequently triggers the opposite emotions, so the students need to feel the wish to be connected to their school in order to improve and to change the school spirit. A good way to establish the desire to be a community in school is by having parents, teachers, staff-members, students and community-members be good examples to each other. Especially younger students look up to the older ones, consider them to be worth copying and by this natural behavior, as long as the older students are good examples, school spirit and pride can be ensured.

In theory, this is really easy to apply to any place in the world, but in reality it is a lot harder.

Germans and Americans have entirely different mentalities, which lead to differences in behavior.

Germans are considered to be accurate, reliable and hard-working, yet rather humorless, while Americans are often called open, friendly and creative, yet superficial. These clichés obviously do not apply to every citizen, and there are quite big regional differences in both countries as well, but they are often the basis on which people act. It is not possible, and also not desirable, to entirely copy the Americans' lifestyle, as every country has its own charm that cannot be faked, but there are certain aspects Germans can apply to their daily lives: Life is not only about efficiency but also about fun and being happy, so sometimes we need to stop focussing on work and be happy with the little things in life like a won soccer match or a chat with the neighbor at the cookie-selling booth.

In return, Americans sometimes need to realize that they cannot make a living with scoring baskets and touchdowns, and that education needs to play a bigger role in many people's lives. I am not asking for every American to be fluent in 3 languages and to have extensive knowledge in anatomy, computers and geography, but knowing proper spelling is essential. Many high school students do not know the difference between „they're“, „their“ and „there“, which is a pathetic display of the level of some english classes. In those areas Americans need to step it up and „be a little more German“, while Germans sometimes need to „be a little more American“ and enjoy what they have and do not always want to achieve more.

In school we learn more than just about grammar, formulas and historical events, we learn for life. This sometimes means to make compromises and plan our time efficiently, and when teachers are being supportive, this gets a lot easier. Essentially, classes are not unimportant, they are the foundation of our knowledge but school needs to be a combination of striving for academical success and having fun.

My German school set a good example when the upper classes bought a table soccer, which is loved by everyone. It does not matter whether anyone is a good player or not, we just enjoy the time we get to spend together in between classes or during the 20-minute breaks. Some people even stay in school after classes to play, which is, in my opinion, a sign of school spirit: We do not only see the school as a place to learn at, but we like being there and spending extra-time in school.

Another measure to improve school spirit is by ensuring that the people get along well within their own class and with the other classes. If people fight, they do not like spending time together, but friends and good acquaintances easily give the impulse to spend time with each other instead of simply going home. The best measure to make sure that a lot of the students know each other and become friends is to mix classes from an early age on. Additionally, group work within classes brings people together, that normally would not talk to each other, but suddenly find out in a group work that they get along quite well.

Next to friendship, variety is very important. Every school has athletes, writers, religious people, actors, multi-lingual people, musicians and so many more, and to meet all their needs many different clubs, groups, programs and offers are necessary. Schools easily run the risk of focussing on only one aspect, whether this is athletics, fine arts or something else, because this might be the field they are best at. A better solution is to offer a broad variety of different activities to create a vivid and happy community that everyone can participate in.

Most people attend school for 12 or 13 years, which is a great share of their lifetime. No one wants to look back with regret and a lack of connection to their school community, which is why school needs to be an inclusive environment with the intention to bring out the best in every student and staff-member. At some point of one's life everyone is affected by school spirit, so students should make the best of it.

Looking at the project today, it was far more complex than I expected it to be at first. I was confronted with several things, such as the tremendous support I received from both American and German students, I had not expected, but I am happy with the way it turned out. It gave me much to think about, for example what activities could take place in my German school to make my class' last days of school unforgettable, and a conclusion I can apply to my daily life.

#### 4. Outlook

I think this project is beneficial to all aspects of my future life. I learned a lot about the input that is necessary to make a place feel welcoming and about what brings people together. Even so close to graduating from high school, it is still important to have a sense of community in our class, and once I start going to university it will be new people and a new place but the same situation: A sense of community is needed.



One day, when I have a family and maybe own a company, I can still apply the things I learned about school spirit to my life then, because the basic thought does not change. People always want to be loved, cared about, supported and feel close to each other. With the results of my project, I can make these feelings in many aspects of my life.

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## 6. Appendix

### Survey About School Spirit

1. Age

- Junior High School
- High School
- College
- Teacher/Parent

2. How long have you been connected to Parowan High?

- since kindergarten/elementary school
- since junior high/high school
- due to my job/my children

3. What do you think makes Parowan High School unique and amazing?

4. What do you think is the most important aspect that creates school spirit?

5. How do you express your school spirit?

6. What measures can be taken to improve the school spirit in any school?

## **7. Selbständigkeitserklärung**

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