



# Matching practices for childcare - Germany

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*These country profiles are part of a collective effort by network members to map matching practices across Europe*

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## Relevant country background

In Germany, policies concerning kindergartens and daycare are governed by federal and state law and implemented at the municipal level. Framework policies at the national level are laid out in Volume VIII of the Social Insurance Code (Achtes Buch Sozialgesetzbuch – SGB VIII) [1]. The legal framework is specified at the state level, meaning that each of the 16 states (Bundesländer) has its own state law for kindergartens and daycare (also known as “Kita-Gesetze”). Furthermore, each municipality is responsible for enforcing federal law as well as state law, but can decide for itself how to apply it.

The system distinguishes between daycare (Under-3) for children aged between one and three years, and kindergarten (Over-3), attended by children from the age of three until they enter elementary school – typically at the age of six. An important feature of the market is that daycare places become available throughout the year, while kindergarten places open up at a fixed date at the beginning of the school year. Early childhood education has never been compulsory but the right for each child to get such education has recently been established. Since 1996, children have had a legal claim to a kindergarten place and since 2013, a similar right applies to daycare places.<sup>3</sup> Places are heavily subsidized (e.g. monthly charges in the states of Rhineland-Palatinate and Hesse range between 0 to 400 EUR depending on income). The recent implementation of the legal claim to a daycare place combined with the subsidies and a low number of daycare facilities has resulted in large excess demand for such places.

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<sup>3</sup> See: § 24 SGB VIII – Anspruch auf Förderung in Tageseinrichtungen und in Kindertagespflege

According to the Federal Statistical Office (*Statistisches Bundesamt*), only 32.7% of children under the age of two attend daycare, whereas 93.6% of children aged between three and five attend kindergarten [2].

The offer of childcare is very diverse. Facilities are operated by different bodies – such as the Catholic or Protestant Church, youth welfare offices, etc. – with different pedagogical approaches, schedules and lunch options. The funding bodies are either private, public or clerical. For the state of Baden-Württemberg, of the 475,677 childcare places in 2015, 43.9% were in public facilities, 25.9% in catholic, 17.8% in protestant and 12.4% in private facilities.<sup>4</sup>

Facilities differ in the level of subsidies they receive from the state and from municipalities and therefore charge different fees.

*Admissions criteria* also vary across facilities. In general, they are constrained only by the SGB VIII law and state law. In the case of North Rhine-Westphalia, the state law (*Kinderbildungsgesetz* or *KiBiz*) states that no child should be rejected because of race, ethnic origin, nationality, gender, disability, religion or ideology [3]. Public facilities sometimes have transparent admissions criteria and prioritize children based on socio-economic status, siblings attending the same facility and their parents' occupational status. Written confirmation is also required for the limited number of places that include lunch. Private and clerical facilities, on the other hand, admit applicants based on additional criteria such as faith, membership of a church, and others [4].

As law does not dictate admissions procedures, they vary widely between municipalities. Decentralized admissions systems are common, partly because many private facilities do not wish to disclose priorities of applicants. Existing systems can be categorized in terms of their level of automation as well as their degree of co-ordination. The level of automation ranges from some municipalities where parents still have to inquire about vacant places at each kindergarten individually to the deployment of internet portals that provide an overview of all kindergartens and allow parents to apply online.

Overall, we can distinguish three generic admissions procedures. These were identified based on internet research and a survey we sent to the youth welfare offices (*Jugendämter*) in the largest German cities. While the low response rate to the survey does not allow us to draw conclusions about the prevalence of these mechanisms, the three case studies are still informative of the institutional practices in the country.

The first mechanism described in this country profile is a *decentralised version of the Boston mechanism*. It is commonly used in municipalities in the states of Baden-Württemberg and North Rhine-Westphalia. In the cities of **Soest** and Castrop-Rauxel, it is implemented using *Kita-cards*, where parents can rank up to three facilities [5]. Other cities, such as Weinheim, have automated the same procedure using an online portal [6].

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<sup>4</sup> These statistics were provided by the Kommunalverband für Jugend und Soziales (KVJS).

The second mechanism is a *decentralized uncoordinated system*. It is implemented in the city of **Münster** and many other municipalities in North Rhine-Westphalia and Germany. Parents can submit several applications through an online portal, without ranking the facilities. The system is referred to as “uncoordinated” because facilities do not coordinate on the order in which they submit offers to applicants [7].

The third mechanism is a *decentralised dynamic Boston Mechanism*: a variant of the Boston mechanism used for admissions throughout the year. It is for example implemented in the city of **Dresden** in the state of Saxony. As in the decentralised Boston mechanism, parents can submit a limited number of ordered preferences. The system is characterised as “dynamic”, as first, applications can be submitted at any time and second, facilities can respond to applications throughout the year [8].

## Summary box

|                                       |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| What is allocated?                    | Childcare places  |
| Who are the participants?             | Parents of children aged between one and six  |
| Stated objectives of matching policy  | Allocating as many children as possible while giving priority to certain groups of children   |
| Who's in charge?                      | Federal, state and local governments  |
| In place since                        | Legal claim for kindergarten places since 1996; for childcare places since 2013   |
| Timing                                | Varies across municipalities  |
| Information available to applicants   | Parents know procedures. Selection criteria not always transparent  |
| Restrictions on preference expression | Varies across municipalities (from three to unrestricted)   |
| Matching procedure                    | Varies across municipalities; decentralized variants of the first-preference-first mechanism are common   |
| Priorities and quotas                 | Federal government sets legal framework; states provide guidelines for acceptable priority criteria and quotas. Municipalities can implement further rules. |
| Tie-Breaking                          | Facilities can use one of the criteria or manual decisions as tie-breaker   |
| Further special feature               | Local variation in procedures and criteria  |

# Childcare admissions in Soest, North Rhine-Westphalia

## Background information on Soest

Soest is a city and district with a population of about 350,000, located in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia [9]. The city offers around 90 childcare facilities. Parents can choose between 25, 35 and 45 hours per week of childcare. To qualify for the 45 hours option, parents need to provide proof of full-time employment.

## Current practices

Soest uses a decentralized version of the first-preference-first mechanism (aka the Boston mechanism), implemented with *Kita-cards*. In October, the *Kita-card* is sent to each family with a child turning one within the next twelve months. It is also possible to order the card for younger children. Parents use these cards to rank their top three preferred facilities. They also provide personal information as well as the required hours of childcare. After filling in the cards, parents have to submit them to their top-ranked facility by the end of November, independently of their desired date of entry (see [5]).

The facilities keep the cards of children whom they can offer a place according to their capacity. Cards of children they cannot offer a place are sent to the facility listed next on the card. The receiving facilities again decide which of these new cards to keep and which to pass on. Overall, each card may be passed on three times, after which the youth welfare office contacts the parents to discuss alternatives (see [5]). It should be noted that it is not entirely clear whether some facilities pursue a deferred acceptance strategy instead of an immediate acceptance strategy when making their decisions in each round.

## Performance

According to the *Angebots- und Bedarfsplanung für die Tagesbetreuung von Kindern in der Stadt Soest 2015/16* (i.e. planning of supply and demand of childcare for children in Soest 2016/15) both parents and funding bodies endorse the use of the *Kita-cards*. In 2013, an evaluation of the experience highlighted several benefits of the system from the perspective of both parents and the city. Parents considered it as positive that the system uses a fixed application date, requires only a single application and provides information on the assignment procedure and time schedules. The city found the system particularly useful for improving its demand planning [10].

## Recent policy changes

The *Kita-card* was established in Soest in 2013. One of the intentions behind its introduction was to improve demand forecasting by allowing parents to specify their care requirements (e.g. hours of

childcare) on the card (see [5]). A previous policy change was the youth welfare committee's decision in 2009 to commit to an increase in childcare capacity to reach a coverage care ratio of 32% [11].

## Perceived issues

The mechanism in Soest suffers from the well-known problems of the Boston mechanism, exacerbated by the restrictions on the number of facilities parents can rank: it is not in the interest of parents to submit a truthful ranking of their first three choices (strategizing).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the final outcome may not be stable.<sup>6</sup>

There are also problems related to the specific design of the card system. Compared to a software-based procedure, card-systems like this one are considerably more time-consuming and prone to errors such as typos. In addition, every now and then there are cases of parents creating fake cards in order to receive more offers.

## Existing data

An adjusted demand plan is published every year by the district of Soest [12]. The youth welfare committee's decision (see [11]) and the legal texts containing all aspects concerning children and youth education in North Rhine-Westphalia can also be found online (see [3]).

# Childcare admissions in Münster, North Rhine-Westphalia

## Background information on Münster

Münster has a population of more than 300,000 and, like Soest, is located in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia [13]. It offers about 180 childcare facilities.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, consider a family whose preferred facility is kindergarten A and second choice is B, but who has high priority at B but not A. Both kindergartens are in high demand so to get in to either, the family needs to rank it first and also have high priority there. It would be best for the family to misrepresent their preferences and rank B first. The restriction of choices to just three facilities further exacerbates this strategic behaviour.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, consider the situation in the previous example (strategic behaviour above) and suppose the family decides to take a risk, puts A first, and then ends up at their third-choice school C. The outcome is not stable because the family has high priority at B and prefers it to C. Thus, this mechanism is unfair as it disadvantages families who do not know how to game the system.

## Current practices

The mechanism used in Münster resembles a decentralized version of the facility-proposing deferred acceptance algorithm. The city uses an online platform called *Kita-Navigator* that is widely used in North Rhine-Westphalia. The platform lists all childcare facilities and allows parents to search for facilities. The platform serves as a reservation system that allows parents to enter their personal information and make up to 12 reservations, without ranking them. The reservation adds children to the waiting list of their selected facilities (see [4]).

The decision regarding which children to admit is made by the facilities. Commonly used admissions criteria are published on the individual websites of the facilities in the *Kita-Navigator*. These include:

- sibling priority at the same facility,
- proximity of residence,
- age (younger children have higher priority in daycare facilities and older children have higher priority in kindergartens),
- parents' working hours,
- single parenthood.

Admissions take place between February 1 and March 31 for all children who made a reservation for the next kindergarten year (starting at the beginning of August). Parents have two weeks to accept or reject admission offers through the online platform but are asked to reject offers they are not going to accept as soon as possible if they receive several offers. Once their admission offer has been accepted, facilities enter directly into a contract with parents and parents applications are removed from the platform. Families whose child has not been accepted by any facility can place reservations for remaining places by early April.

Reservations can be made throughout the year, starting from a child's birth until the deadline on March 31. While early reservations are not generally prioritized, some facilities use the reservation date as a tie-breaking rule between applicants if other criteria are exhausted. The process is over by end of July, when the data of children who received a place are deleted from the online platform (see [7]).

## Performance

According to the Childcare Annual Report 2017/18 from the city of Münster (*Bericht zur Kindertagesbetreuung in Münster Zum Kindergartenjahr 2017/18*) the demand for daycare and kindergarten places is increasing due to a rapid population growth. At the same time, the city is trying to satisfy this demand by establishing more facilities and childcare places. Therefore, the rate of children per place has remained almost constant compared to the previous year (2016/17). Münster offers 8,087 kindergarten places for 7,744 children. Thus, the demand is met with a care ratio of 104.4% for kindergarten. In contrast, Münster only provides 3,781 daycare places for 8,763 children. With a realised care ratio of 43.1%, the city was not able to fully accommodate demand for daycare places [14].

## Recent policy changes

The online system *Kita-Navigator* was implemented in Münster in 2014. Before its introduction, parents had to make inquiries at each childcare facility individually [15].

## Perceived issues

**Stability:** Because offers can be made at different times, the resulting allocation is unstable if applicants, for instance, accept an early unattractive offer for reasons of security. This choice is effectively equivalent to rejecting all potentially more desirable offers.

**Congestion:** The mechanism also requires parents to behave strategically, which results in uncertainty and long waiting times. This problem arises because parents can hold several offers for up to two weeks and still wait for more attractive ones to come in. This uncertainty makes it reasonable for parents to defer the acceptance of an offer as long as possible. Through this rational behaviour, they prevent facilities from extending offers to other families which leads to further delays in the process.

**Other issues:** A common reason for complaints from parents is the lack of transparency that results from the autonomy of facilities to admit children according to their own (often non-transparent) criteria [16].

## Existing data and legal texts

In addition to the SGB VIII, the law governing childcare matters in North Rhine-Westphalia is the *Kinderbildungsgesetz* (KiBiz) (see [3]).

# Childcare admissions in Dresden, State of Saxony

## Background information on Dresden

Dresden is a city with a population of over 500,000 located in the state of Saxony, where childcare law is set out under the *Sächsisches Kita-Gesetz* (SächsKitaG) (for population statistics see [17] and for the Saxony law see [18]). Similar to the KiBiz in Münster, the SächsKitaG clarifies additional issues that are not addressed under SGB VIII. A feature that Dresden shares with several other cities is that it requires facilities to give priority to residents of the city. Furthermore, a decision of the council meeting mandated a 40:60 ratio between city-run and privately-run facilities [19].

## Current practices

The online childcare application system used in Dresden is called *Elternportal*. While participation to the system is voluntary for childcare facilities, almost all facilities are registered on the portal. Parents register on the portal to submit their childcare application. The online portal allows parents to search and apply for facilities [20]. They can submit up to five ranked applications. The earliest possible date to submit an application is immediately after a child's birth. Parents are advised to apply at least nine months before the desired starting date of childcare.

The mechanism used to assign places to applicants is a decentralised dynamic variant of the Boston mechanism. The top ranked facility receives the application first. The application is locked, however, until eight months prior to the desired start of childcare (the facilities can view the applications but are not yet able to respond). Once applications are unlocked, facilities can decide on their status. Selected applicants are invited for an interview. If parents accept the invitation, the submission of applications to further facilities is halted, until the outcome of the interview has been determined (meaning that either a contract is signed between the facility and the parents or one of the parties decides not to move forward).

If a facility rejects an application or does not respond within 14 days, the application is automatically passed on to the next facility on the applicant's ranking list. Thus, with each new application, facilities are aware that they are the applicant's best feasible option. Following this procedure, all facilities on the ranking list are unlocked step-by-step. For families that could not be assigned a place, the *Zentrale Beratungs- und Vermittlungsstelle* (ZBV, i.e. central counselling and mediation office) places the child on a waiting list for the facilities the family applied for. Six months before the desired start of childcare, these applications are again considered by the ZBV. At the end of the procedure, a case-by-case review is undertaken for any vacant places (see [8]).

## Performance

According to the data cited in the *Fortschreibung Fachplan Kindertageseinrichtungen und Kindertagespflege für den Zeitraum 2016/17* (i.e. follow-up plan for childcare facilities and childcare in 2016/17), privately-run facilities have a capacity utilization of 104% (meaning that the capacities were overbooked by 4%) while the figure for city-run facilities has reached 100% (numbers from July 2015) [21]. Hence, Dresden faces excess demand for childcare places.

In addition to the collection of demand planning statistics, the city of Dresden conducts surveys among parents on a regular basis. According to the 2012 survey, parents particularly value a facility's proximity to their home, responsive communication and pedagogical aspects, such as the promotion of physical activities.

The 2012 survey shows that 86% of parents applying for a daycare place were assigned to one of their top two choices (70% (916 of 1,313 children) received their first choice, 16% the second choice, while 14% received an alternative) [22]. These numbers should be treated with caution given the incentives built in the mechanism.

As the starting dates are flexible in the dynamic system, waiting times are an additional performance measure of interest to parents. 26% (242 of 916) of applicants who received their first choice, received the place at the desired start of child care. 47% (434 of 916) had to wait for 1 to 5 more months, while another 26% (240 of 916) waited for longer than 5 months. When interpreting these numbers, it should be noted that at the time of the survey in 2012 there was no legal claim for daycare places.

For kindergarten, 58% (909 of 1555 children) received a place in their first-choice facility, 24% in their second-choice, while the remaining 18% received an alternative. 51% of the families that received their first choice were able to start childcare on the desired date (464 of 909 children), while only 8% (77 of 909) had to wait for longer than 5 months. The majority of kindergartens places are freed up with the start of primary school in September.<sup>7</sup> Thus, waiting times primarily apply to parents who want to start kindergarten at other different months of the year.

In terms of the user-friendliness of the portal, while parents report that they find the *Elternportal* easy to use, facilities have experienced numerous problems since its implementation in 2013. These problems were related to the online portal's various functions, including the creation of invoices for parents and the planning of the staff's shift schedules. As a consequence, in 2016, the city decided to invest in a new version of the portal based on improved functionalities and recommendations from other cities [23].

## Recent policy changes

The *Elternportal* was implemented in Dresden in 2013. First applications were possible on September 1<sup>st</sup> of that year.

## Perceived issues

Besides the stability issues discussed with regard to the mechanism used in Soest, the time-dimension in the Dresden system introduces additional incentive issues that result in non-stable allocations. For example, a facility may not extend an offer in order to wait for higher priority applications. If only lower priority applications arrive, then the initial applicant's priority is not respected and the matching is unstable.

In comparison to the system in Soest, the introduction of a flexible start date in Dresden leads to further strategic behaviour. On the one hand, facilities need to decide strategically on how to fill their places over the course of the year. On the other hand, parents also need to strategize in terms of the optimal start date for childcare, taking into account when facilities have higher capacity and when there is less competition for places.

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<sup>7</sup> This information was provided via email conversations with Katja Pfohl at the Fachbereich Beratungs und Vermittlungsstelle Dresden (2012 was the last year in which these data were collected).

A final issue arises from the fact that not all facilities are registered in the *Elternportal*. If families apply for both, facilities that can be found in the online portal as well as facilities that only accept personal applications, a child may receive several offers. However, this should not occur too often, as almost all facilities participate in the online system.

## References

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[2] Statistics on care ratios are available at [https://www.destatis.de/DE/ZahlenFakten/GesellschaftStaat/Soziales/Sozialleistungen/Kindertagesbetreuung/Tabellen/Tabellen\\_Betreuungsquote.html](https://www.destatis.de/DE/ZahlenFakten/GesellschaftStaat/Soziales/Sozialleistungen/Kindertagesbetreuung/Tabellen/Tabellen_Betreuungsquote.html)

[3] The legal framework for early childhood education in North Rhine-Westphalia is the Kinderbildungsgesetz (KiBiz) which is available online (the Diskriminierungsverbot can be found under §7): [https://recht.nrw.de/lmi/owa/br\\_text\\_anzeigen?v\\_id=10000000000000000386](https://recht.nrw.de/lmi/owa/br_text_anzeigen?v_id=10000000000000000386)

[4] The *Kita-Navigator*, used in Münster, and descriptions of its use can be found at (further, information about the criteria of several facilities are available): <https://muenster.kita-navigator.org/>

[5] A description of the system used in Soest can be found at: [http://www.kreis-soest.de/familie\\_soziales/familie/betreuung/kita/kita\\_karte.php](http://www.kreis-soest.de/familie_soziales/familie/betreuung/kita/kita_karte.php)

[6] A description of the system used in Weinheim can be found at the city's website: <http://www.weinheim.de/,Lde/Startseite/Stadthemen/Vormerkverfahren+fuer+die+Platzvergabe+von+Weinheimer+Kindertagesstaetten.html>

[7] A description of the system used in Münster can be found on the city's website: <http://www.stadt-muenster.de/jugendamt/kindertagesbetreuung/kindertageseinrichtungen.html>

[8] Information on the *Elternportal* used in Dresden can be found at: <http://www.dresden.de/de/leben/kinder/tagesbetreuung/anmeldung/elternportal.php>

[9] Population statistics for the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (including statistics for Soest): [https://www.it.nrw.de/statistik/a/daten/bevoelkerungszahlen\\_zensus/zensus\\_rp9\\_juni16.html](https://www.it.nrw.de/statistik/a/daten/bevoelkerungszahlen_zensus/zensus_rp9_juni16.html)

[10] Angebots- und Bedarfsplanung für die Tagesbetreuung von Kindern in der Stadt Soest 2015/16, available online at: [http://www.soest.de/media/Kitaplanung\\_2015\\_16\\_.pdf](http://www.soest.de/media/Kitaplanung_2015_16_.pdf)

[11] Detailed information available online at: <https://politik.kreis-soest.de/bi/vo020.asp?VOLFDNR=352>

[12] Soest citizen information system: <https://politik.kreis-soest.de/bi/vo040.asp>

[13] Population statistics in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (including statistics for Münster): [https://www.it.nrw.de/statistik/a/daten/bevoelkerungszahlen\\_zensus/zensus\\_rp5\\_juni16.html](https://www.it.nrw.de/statistik/a/daten/bevoelkerungszahlen_zensus/zensus_rp5_juni16.html)

[14] Bericht zur Kindertagesbetreuung in Münster zum Kindergartenjahr 2017/18: <https://www.stadt-muenster.de/sessionnet/sessionnetbi/getfile.php?id=405984&type=do>

[15] Westfälische Nachrichten, 13.02.2014, available online at: <http://www.wn.de/Muenster/2014/02/1447856-Umfrage-unter-Eltern-Wie-gut-ist-der-Kita-Navigator>

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[17] Population statistics in the state of Saxony: [https://www.statistik.sachsen.de/download/010\\_GB-Bev/Bev\\_Z\\_Gemeinde\\_akt.pdf](https://www.statistik.sachsen.de/download/010_GB-Bev/Bev_Z_Gemeinde_akt.pdf)

[18] The legal framework for early childhood education in Saxony is the Sächsisches Kita-Gesetz (SächsKitaG) which is available online at: <https://www.revosax.sachsen.de/vorschrift/1079-Gesetz-ueber-Kindertageseinrichtungen>

[19] Information on daycare options in Dresden available at: <http://www.dresden.de/de/leben/kinder/tagesbetreuung/betreuungsformen.php>

[20] The *Elternportal* can be found at: <https://kita-anmeldung.dresden.de/elternportal/#{1}>

[21] Fortschreibung Fachplan Kindertageseinrichtungen und Kindertagespflege für den Zeitraum 2016/17: [https://www.dresden.de/media/pdf/kitas/Fachplan\\_2016-17.pdf](https://www.dresden.de/media/pdf/kitas/Fachplan_2016-17.pdf)

[22] Parental Survey conducted in the city of Dresden in 2012: [https://www.dresden.de/media/pdf/kitas/Broschuere\\_Ergebnisse\\_EB.pdf](https://www.dresden.de/media/pdf/kitas/Broschuere_Ergebnisse_EB.pdf)

[23] Sächsische Zeitung, 08.04.2015, available online at: [https://www.dresden.de/media/pdf/kitas/Fachplan\\_2016-17.pdf](https://www.dresden.de/media/pdf/kitas/Fachplan_2016-17.pdf)

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