Anton Oberländer is a persuasive speaker. Last year, when he and a group of friends were short of cash for a camping trip to Cornwall, he managed to talk Germany’s national rail operator into handing them some free tickets. So impressed was the management with his chutzpah that they invited him back to give a motivational speech to 200 of their employees.

Anton, it should be pointed out, is 14 years old.

The Berlin teenager’s self-confidence is largely the product of a unique educational institution that has turned the conventions of traditional teaching radically upside down. At Oberländer’s school, there are no grades until students turn 15, no timetables and no lecture-style instructions. The pupils decide which subjects they want to study for each lesson and when they want to take an exam.

The school’s syllabus reads like any helicopter parent’s nightmare. Set subjects are limited to maths, German, English and social studies, supplemented by more abstract courses such as “responsibility” and “challenge”. For challenge, students aged 12 to 14 are given €150 (£115) and sent on an adventure that they have to plan entirely by themselves. Some go kayaking; others work on a farm. Anton went trekking along England’s south coast.

The philosophy behind these innovations is simple: as the requirements of the labour market are changing, and smartphones and the internet are transforming the ways in which young people process information, the school’s headteacher, Margret Rasfeld, argues, the most important skill a school can pass down to its students is the ability to motivate themselves.

“Look at three or four year olds - they are all full of self-confidence,” Rasfeld says. “Often, children can’t wait to start school. But frustratingly, most schools then somehow manage to untrain that confidence.”

The Evangelical School Berlin Centre (ESBC) is trying to do nothing less than “reinvent what a school is”, she says. “The mission of a progressive school should be to prepare young people to cope with change, or better still, to make them look forward to change. In the 21st century, schools should see it as their job to develop strong personalities.”

Making students listen to a teacher for 45 minutes and punishing them for collaborating on an exercise, Rasfeld says, was not only out of sync with the requirements of the modern
world of work, but counterproductive. “Nothing motivates students more than when they discover the meaning behind a subject of their own accord.”

Students at her school are encouraged to think up other ways to prove their acquired skills, such as coding a computer game instead of sitting a maths exam. Oberländer, who had never been away from home for three weeks until he embarked on his challenge in Cornwall, said he learned more English on his trip than he had in several years of learning the language at school.

Germany’s federalised education structure, in which each of the 16 states plans its own education system, has traditionally allowed “free learning” models to flourish. Yet unlike Sudbury, Montessori or Steiner schools, Rasfeld’s institution tries to embed student self-determination within a relatively strict system of rules. Students who dawdle during lessons have to come into school on Saturday morning to catch up, a punishment known as “silentium”. “The more freedom you have, the more structure you need,” says Rasfeld.

The main reason why the ESBC is gaining a reputation as Germany’s most exciting school is that its experimental philosophy has managed to deliver impressive results. Year after year, Rasfeld’s institution ends up with the best grades among Berlin’s gesamtschulen, or comprehensive schools, which combine all three school forms of Germany’s tertiary system. Last year’s school leavers achieved an average grade of 2.0, the equivalent of a straight B – even though 40% of the year had been advised not to continue to abitur, the German equivalent of A-levels, before they joined the school. Having opened in 2007 with just 16 students, the school now operates at full capacity, with 500 pupils and long waiting lists for new applicants.

Given its word-of-mouth success, it is little wonder that there have been calls for Rasfeld’s approach to go nationwide. Yet some educational experts question whether the school’s methods can easily be exported: in Berlin, they say, the school can draw the most promising applicants from well-off and progressive families. Rasfeld rejects such criticisms, insisting that the school aims for a heterogenous mix of students from different backgrounds. While a cross adorns the assembly hall and each school day starts with worship, only one-third of current pupils are baptised. Thirty per cent of students have a migrant background and 7% are from households where no German is spoken.

Even though the ESBC is one of Germany’s 5,000 private schools, fees are means tested and relatively low compared with those common in Britain, at between €720 and €6,636 a year. About 5% of students are exempt from fees.

However, even Rasfeld admits that finding teachers able to adjust to the school’s learning methods can be harder than getting students to do the same.

Aged 65 and due to retire in July, Rasfeld still has ambitious plans. A four-person “education innovation lab” based at the school has been developing teaching materials for schools that want to follow the ESBC’s lead. About 40 schools in Germany are in the process of adopting some or all of Rasfeld’s methods. One in Berlin’s Weißensee district recently let a student trek across the Alps for a challenge project. “Things are only getting started,” says Rasfeld.

“In education, you can only create change from the bottom – if the orders come from the top, schools will resist. Ministries are like giant oil tankers: it takes a long time to turn them around. What we need is lots of little speedboats to show you can do things differently.”
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