



ULRICH KOLBE

Pittsburgh, PA

High School German Teacher

*Three-J-1 visa term German language exchange teacher
Texas and Pennsylvania*

The third time is a charm!

Having been a teacher for almost 24 years, including seven years in the U.S., I started my current teaching position at a public high school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in January 2011. As a German native, I teach the German language at various levels and absolutely love it here. The administrators at my school truly are of the highest caliber, and each and every one of the 134 teachers seems to be handpicked. Never have I seen such high standards, never have I experienced a work atmosphere like at this school. It's both efficient and fun-filled.

If possible at all, I can only compare it to the great job I held during my very first four years of teaching, before the German unity caused the institute where I had taught to close.



What I liked back then is what continues to be such a thrilling experience even today: teaching foreign languages to students from different countries, nationalities, and diverse backgrounds, making sure those languages no longer are foreign to them, relaying the simple message that people all over the world are the same and have like ideas, dreams, and interests. Languages can connect people. So I feel honored to teach at a school where this is understood by faculty, students, and parents. For the first time this school year, the German language students took the written part of their German language finals online. Authoring and programming these exams as well as online language practice sets throughout the

semester has been one of my additional activities for my students for the past 10+ years. They seem to like it and definitely benefit from this weekly enrichment.

Unfortunately, the position ends after one year, as I am replacing the German teacher who is on sabbatical. Currently I am considering a proposal to teach German in a school located in the German area of Texas near Austin.



My greatest reward? Frankly, none of those colorful teacher appreciation trophies and awards I was given over the years here in the U.S., which are, by the way, not quite that common in Germany (yet?).

No, just this year I was suddenly contacted by students who were among my very first group of graduates back in 1988, who now work in responsible positions in their home countries around the world. I had a student in Germany send me an e-mail last week because she felt compelled to finally thank me for teaching her English (ESL) course eleven years ago, which, according to her own words, made it possible for her to land her dream job.

More recently, parents of my students here in Pittsburgh must have bragged to my supervisors and administrators about this teacher from Germany. One family even treated my son and me to the Pittsburgh Symphony's season finale with pieces of German composers Braunschweig, Beethoven, and Bach. It was great to see how our work as exchange teachers gets recognized and appreciated by the community. Here in Pittsburgh, we get to experience a lot of great culture and enjoy it tremendously.

My current position also allows me to observe differences and variations to my previous teaching assignments in the U.S. I had taught Fifth grade through the German STEP-exchange program in Brownsville, TX from 1995 to 1998. The principal back there was very strict and right so, he had his elementary school with 1,600 students work like a clock and made it excel.

From 2007 through 2010 I taught German to elementary school students in West Texas, on a visa sponsored by the Cordell Hull Foundation. This position highlighted issues that may arise when foreign language programs do not have the full support of everybody involved or when potential benefits of such an endeavor get diminished by running several, possibly conflicting programs at the same school. Running a bilingual (e.g. Spanish/English) or even dual language program parallel to a world language program is a real challenge. Still, it was a very interesting experience, and one I would not want to have missed.

After all, Midland prides itself with being the home city to former president George W. Bush, and being there during the historic election of President Obama sure gave us some valuable insight into thought and belief patterns in this part of the country. After all, we are here not just to teach, but also to learn.

I enjoyed learning about the progressive traditions of some German immigrants to Texas, for example. Some of them founded utopian settlements after the failed German revolution of 1848, were abolitionists, and sided with the Union during the Civil War. Comfort, TX has a unique monument dedicated to those Germans killed for their beliefs. Of course, my son and I visited it but a field trip with my German language students was not approved. What an interesting chapter for both Americans and Germans!

Besides that, my son—soon to be a 9th grader—and I enjoyed hiking and biking tours, went up the tallest peak of Texas, Guadalupe Peak, once a year, joined the Friends of McDonald's Observatory and explored the Texas Gulf coast. I hold a U.S. private pilot's and instructor's license, so we also went flying a number of times.

I am grateful to the Cordell Hull Foundation for sponsoring my new J1. When things seemed tough and even hopeless on the job-front for a while, determination (and more refined resumes and cover letters – thanks to CHF!) will get you there.

Based on my own experience in 2007-2010 and comparing it to those of German or other foreign exchange teachers, I can verify that CHF genuinely cares about the success of the programs and every single participant. It is clear to me that CHF is not in the market to deliver numbers and statistics, but true international cultural exchange.

I am glad to be a part of it all!

Uli Kolbe