All I Ever Needed to Know About Bike Safety I Learned in Germany

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StadtRAD Hamburg - the city's bike rental service (Credit: rvdh via Flickr)

Guttentag!

Five years ago, in preparation to lead USGBC's green school efforts, I spent three months working alongside a wonderful born and educated German, Anja Caldwell, who at the time was the green building program manager for Montgomery County Public Schools. In this field, Anja was a pioneer and visionary, and she never missed an opportunity to remind me that all she really needed to know she learned in Germany.

On days when Anja was feeling particularly homesick, she would pull from the shelf one of her many books on German school architecture, pointing to photographs of lush green roofs, breezy classrooms with ample daylight and sprawling solar installations. She would say "See, now that is a green school. In Germany, we've been doing this for years."

You can imagine my delight when I received an invitation from the World Green Building Council to join them in Stuttgart for their annual congress. I received one of the distinguished Chairman's Awards for the work that I and the rest of the Center for Green Schools team have been doing to transform the places we learn today, creating sustainable leaders tomorrow.

I took a few hours away from the conference to wander aimlessly in and around the city of Stuttgart to see if I could stumble upon these world-class schools that I had heard so much about. And sure enough, I didn't have to go far – every school that I encountered on my 10+ mile walk had large windows, plenty of open spaces and in every way sent a clear message about the importance of investing in the places where our children learn.

But the most delightful discovery of the day was the tree-shaded park I found on the outskirts of town. At first glance, I was confused – the park was made up of a series of tiny little roads with stop signs, yield signs and traffic lights. It wasn't until I saw the little boy no more than three years old teetering on his balance bike with his papa at his side, that I realized the parks sole purpose was to teach children how to ride their bikes safely and obey the rules of the road.

On the edge of the park, there were two classrooms filled with posters reminding students to wear their helmets and to look both ways when crossing the street, and a teeny tiny bike share with eensy weensy bikes.

My hometown of Washington, D.C. just got its first community bike share, which has become both instantly popular and instantly terrifying. I rarely see a commuter on those trademark red bikes wearing a helmet or following the basic laws of traffic. And it really made me wonder if it might be different if this has been part of our education.

I know it will please Anja, my friend and mentor, that I found one more thing to add to the list of what we can learn from what other countries are doing to keep their kids healthy, safe and strong.

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