

# A Policy Analysis of the Development of Balanced Compulsory Education in Chinese Counties

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**Abstract:** *The development of balanced, high-quality compulsory education is a national strategy of China. County-level education serves as the building block of its basic education. The nation's realization of equitable compulsory education largely depends on its endeavors at the county level. The Chinese government has issued a series of educational policies to support developing balanced compulsory education in counties. This article focuses on studying governmental policies on this issue and examining them in detail according to their distinct purposes.*

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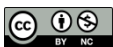
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**C**OMPULSORY education is public-funded national education mandated by legislation in China (State Council of China, 2021). Educational policies are tools in the form of texts used by governmental authorities to solve educational issues and achieve specific educational goals (Gao, 2022). Policies on developing balanced compulsory education manifest the state's commitment to public education, which is a basic requirement for a service-oriented government. The development level of equitable compulsory education depends on the maturity of the policy framework in this regard and represents the state's education governance capability (Lai, 2006).

According to *The Strategic Plan for the National Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development 2010-2020* (Ministry of Education of China, 2010e) and *Opinions of the State Council on Intensifying the Development of Balanced Compulsory Education* (State Council of China, 2012a), the Chinese compulsory education system emphasizes county-dominated management, with the county-level government and educational authorities held responsible for promoting the development of balanced compulsory education between urban and rural areas and among all schools within the county. To develop an even compulsory education at the county level, it is necessary for the local government to allocate compulsory education resources in a balanced manner to schools within the county, providing them with unified educational conditions and standards, teacher staffing and quality standards, and equal educational quality, so that every student is guaranteed a development opportunity (Liu, 2021). Specifically, there are three main aspects to the development of balanced compulsory education. First, improve the basic operational conditions of disadvantaged compulsory education schools in impoverished areas, advance the standardized construction of compulsory education schools, promote the sharing of educational resources, and allocate educational resources in a balanced and judicious manner to achieve a rudimentary balance in education investment, educational facilities, teacher supply, and student source distribution between schools within the county and between urban and rural areas. Second, allow special groups such as disabled children, children of migrant workers, and left-behind children equal access to compulsory education. Third, implement competence-focused education and improve school management to enhance the overall quality of education (Shan, 2015).

In the transition from unbalanced to rudimentarily balanced compulsory education in Chinese counties, the government has introduced a series of policies and mandated nationwide implementation of them. **Table 1** includes the state-level strategic policies on compulsory education formulated in the past two decades, from the 1999's *State Council of China's Decision on Intensifying Educational Reform and Advancing Competence-focused Education* to the 2019's *The Implementation Plan for Accelerating the Mod-*

**Table 1. Strategic Policies on Developing Balanced Compulsory Education.**

| <b>Years</b> | <b>Policies</b>   |
|--------------|---|
| 1999         | State Council of China's Decision on Intensifying Educational Reform and Advancing Competence-focused Education (State Council of China, 1999)  |
| 2001         | State Council of China's Decision on Basic Education Reform and Development (State Council of China, 2001)  |
| 2001         | The Tenth Five-year Plan for National Education (Ministry of Education of China, 2001a)   |
| 2003         | State Council of China's Decision on Further Strengthening Rural Education Work (State Council of China, 2003)  |
| 2004         | Notice of the State Council on the Approval of the "Ministry of Education's Education Revitalization Action Plan 2003-2007" (State Council of China, 2004)  |
| 2005         | Several Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Further Driving the Development of Balanced Compulsory Education (Ministry of Education of China, 2005)  |
| 2006         | Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China (Revised at the 22nd Meeting of the Standing Committee of the 10th National People's Congress on June 29, 2006) (State Council of China, 2006) |
| 2007         | Notice of the State Council on the Approval of the Ministry of Education's 11th Five-Year Strategic Plan for the Development of National Education (State Council of China, 2007a)                        |
| 2008         | The Chinese Government's Decision on Several Major Issues Concerning the Promotion of Rural Reform and Development (State Council of China, 2008)   |
| 2010         | Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Implementing the Scientific Development Theory and Further Promoting the Development of Balanced Compulsory Education (Ministry of Education of China, 2010d)    |
| 2010         | Strategic Plan for the National Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development 2010-2020 (Ministry of Education of China, 2010e)  |
| 2010         | Notice of the Ministry of Education on Issuing the "Work Priorities of the Ministry of Education in 2010" (Ministry of Education of China, 2010b)   |
| 2011         | Striving to Advance Rural Education: A Speech by Wen Jiabao at the Rural Teachers' Conference (State Council of China, 2011b)   |
| 2012         | Opinions of the State Council on Intensifying the Development of Balanced Compulsory Education (State Council of China, 2012a)  |
| 2016         | Several Opinions of the State Council on Supporting the Integrated Reform and Development of Compulsory Education in Urban and Rural Areas of Counties (State Council of China, 2016a)                    |
| 2016         | Accelerating the Development of Balanced Compulsory Education in All Localities (Ministry of Education of China, 2016)  |
| 2018         | State Council's Report on Promoting the Integration of Urban and Rural Compulsory Education and Improving the Quality of Rural Compulsory Education (Chen, 2018)  |
| 2019         | Emphasizing Policy Implementation: A Speech at the 2019 National Conference on Education Work (Chen, 2019)  |
| 2019         | "The Implementation Plan for Accelerating the Modernization of Education 2018-2022" Issued by the State Council's General Office (State Council of China, 2019a)  |

*ernization of Education* 2018-2022 issued by the General Office of the State Council.

National education policies offer guidelines for the division of power and responsibilities and management methods in developing compulsory education. Policy tools such as mandatory measures, publicity, and incentives have been utilized to support policy execution to achieve the goal of compulsory education (Fan, 2015). In implementing these policies, the county-level government moderates the relationships between all educational stakeholders and actively addresses issues such as educational resource limitations, inter-school competition, school picking, and underprivileged groups,

**Table 2. Financial Policies on the Development of Balanced Compulsory Education in Counties.**

| Years | Policies   |
|-------|--|
| 2005  | Notice of the State Council on Intensifying the Reform of the Guarantee Mechanism for Rural Compulsory Education Funding (State Council of China, 2005a)   |
| 2005  | Notice of the State Council's General Office on Circulating the Opinions of the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Education on Accelerating the Implementation of the "Two Exemptions and One Supplement" Policy in Targeted Counties Listed in the Nation-level Poverty Alleviation Program (State Council of China, 2005b) |
| 2006  | Urgent Notice of the Ministry of Education on Implementing the New Mechanism for Securing Funds for Rural Compulsory Education (Ministry of Education of China, 2006f)   |
| 2007  | Notice of the Ministry of Education on Further Advancing the Reform of the Guarantee Mechanism for Rural Compulsory Education Funding (Ministry of Education of China, 2007a)  |
| 2007  | Report on the Execution of the "Two Basic Educational Goals" Program for Western China 2004-2007 by the Ministry of Education, National Development and Reform Commission, and Ministry of Finance (Ministry of Education of China, 2007c)   |
| 2011  | Opinions of the State Council on Further Increasing Financial Investment in Education (State Council of China, 2011a)  |
| 2015  | Notice of the State Council on Optimizing the Guarantee Mechanism for Urban and Rural Compulsory Education Funding (State Council of China, 2015b)   |
| 2015  | Decisions on Unifying the Funding Mechanism for Urban and Rural Compulsory Education to Promote the Equalization of Public Services in the Field of Education at the State Council Executive Meeting Presided Over by Premier Li Keqiang (State Council of China, 2015a)   |
| 2018  | Opinions of the State Council's General Office on Further Adjusting and Optimizing the System to Improve the Efficacy of Educational Funds (State Council of China, 2018c)   |

with the aim of meeting the educational needs of the vast majority of people and thus optimizing fairness in the distribution of educational resources (Xie, 2021). In addition, policies on developing balanced compulsory education over varying periods have been reflecting the constant adjustment of national education goals and requirements to suit the changing educational needs of the public (Ren, 2019). Driven by national education policies, compulsory education at the county level has achieved substantial advancements.

## **Financial Policies on the Development of Balanced Compulsory Education in Counties**

The mandatory, universal, and public nature of Chinese compulsory education determines that its main sponsors are the state and government. As a public good, compulsory education mainly relies on financial support from the central and local governments. Financial policies on compulsory education not only represent the government's commitment to this public service but also serve as important tools to direct educational investment at all levels of government (Li, 2009). In 2001, the State Council of China issued the *Decision on the Reform and Development of Basic Education*, proposing building a management system for rural compulsory education that is led by the

State Council and hierarchically managed by local governments with the county-level government as the main actor. County-level governments are thus primarily responsible for rural compulsory education.

### ***Policies for Securing Investment in County-Level Compulsory Education from All Levels of Government***

To actualize more equal compulsory education, the Chinese government has issued a series of financial policies concerning national education investment, educational expenditures, and the division of financial responsibilities between the central and local governments since 2005 (**Table 2**) (Liu, 2021). The purposes of these policies include:

- To clearly define the responsibilities of governments at all levels to secure investment in rural compulsory education. The provincial government must evaluate the financial status of all counties within its administrative region, balance its financial resources, and increase transfer payments to financially disadvantaged counties. The county-level government is obligated to increase investment in compulsory education and incorporate all expenditures on rural compulsory education in its budget.
- To emphasize the financial investment in rural compulsory education as the priority of governments at all levels.
- To establish and optimize mechanisms for securing funds for rural compulsory education. The level of public funds should be progressively increased according to the development needs of compulsory education and the growth in financial capability of the state and the regions (Xie, 2015).

### ***Preferential Financial Policies for Underprivileged Groups***

The uneven distribution of educational resources is the root cause of the unbalanced development of compulsory education (Gao, 2014), which at the county level is revealed by issues such as urban vs. rural inconsistency in school construction standards and school infrastructure and facilities; exacerbating problems with compulsory education for left-behind children and children living with their migrant worker parents; and large-size classes in urban schools vs. closure and merging of rural schools (Bai & Wang, 2018). In order to address these issues and safeguard the right to a fair and high-quality education for school-age rural children, the Chinese government has made a series of specialized financial regulations since 2002 (**Table 3**), with key components highlighted as follows:

**Table 3. Financial Policies on Regulating the Operation of Rural Compulsory Education Schools for the Interest of Underprivileged Groups.**

| Years | Policies  |
|-------|---|
| 2003  | Notice of the Ministry of Education on Several Issues Concerning the Management of Basic Education School (Ministry of Education of China, 2003)  |
| 2006  | Notice of the National Development and Reform Commission and the Ministry of Education on Rectifying and Regulating Charges of Schools of Changed Ownership (National Development and Reform Commission of China, 2006)   |
| 2006  | Notice of the Ministry of Education on Reasonably Adjusting the Deployment of Rural Primary and Secondary Schools (Ministry of Education of China, 2006c)   |
| 2007  | Notice of the State Council's General Office on Circulating the Opinions of the State Council's Rural Comprehensive Reform Working Group on Carrying out the Pilot Work of Clearing off the "Nine Year Compulsory Education-induced Debts" in Rural Areas (State Council of China, 2007b)                 |
| 2009  | Guidelines Issued by the Ministry of Education on Strengthening the Management of Primary and Secondary Schools and Standardizing their Operation (Ministry of Education of China, 2009b)   |
| 2010  | Guidelines Issued by the Ministry of Education on Addressing the Issue of Improper Charge Induced by School Picking at the Compulsory Education Level (Ministry of Education of China, 2010a)   |
| 2012  | Opinions of the State Council's General Office on Regulating the Adjustment of Compulsory Education School Deployment in Rural Areas (State Council of China, 2012b)  |
| 2012  | A State Council Executive Meeting Presided Over by Premier Wen Jiabao on Advancing Balanced Development of Compulsory Education, Regulating the Adjustment of Compulsory Education School Deployment in Rural Areas and Approving "Regulations on Education Supervision." (State Council of China, 2012c) |
| 2016  | Ten Major Measures of the State Council to Promote the Integration of Urban and Rural Compulsory Education Including Eliminating Large-size Classes and Reforming the School Enrollment of Children of Migrant Workers (State Council of China, 2016b)  |
| 2018  | Guidelines Issued by the State Council's General Office on Strengthening the Construction of Small-sized Village Schools and Township Boarding Schools (State Council of China, 2018a)  |

- To reasonably adjust the number and deployment of compulsory education schools in urban and rural areas, give additional support to rural and disadvantaged schools, and set uniform standards of school construction and equipment for urban and rural schools.
- To establish an effective financial backing system for rural, underprivileged students at the compulsory education level. Governments at all levels must deploy specialized funds to enable schools to exempt students with financial difficulties from miscellaneous expenses and to provide living subsidies for boarding students from impoverished families.
- To create a compulsory education guarantee mechanism for the children of migrant workers and provide the children of economically disadvantaged migrant workers employed in urban areas with support in school enrolment by offering scholarships, reducing their miscellaneous fees, and providing free school supplies (Xie, 2015).

## **Policies on Balancing Teacher Supply for County-Level Compulsory Education**

**Table 4. Policies on Balancing Teacher Supply for County-level Compulsory Education.**

| <b>Years</b> | <b>Policies</b>   |
|--------------|---|
| 2006         | Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Encouraging the Employment of Urban Teachers in Rural Areas (Ministry of Education of China, 2006e)  |
| 2006         | Notice of the Ministry of Education on the Implementation of “Special Position Program” in Rural Compulsory Education Schools in 2007 (Ministry of Education of China, 2006b)   |
| 2006         | Notice of the Ministries of Education, Finance, Personnel on the Implementation of the “Special Position Program” for Rural Compulsory Education Teachers (Ministry of Education of China, 2006d)   |
| 2006         | “Notice on Engaging College Graduates in Education, Agriculture, Medicine, and Poverty Alleviation Work in Rural Areas” Issued by the Central Organization Department, Personnel Department, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Health, Poverty Alleviation Office, and the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League (Ministry of Education of China, 2006a) |
| 2008         | Guidelines on Strengthening the Performance Assessment of Compulsory Education Teachers Issued by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education of China, 2008a)   |
| 2008         | Notice on Revising “Ethics and Norms for Primary and Secondary School Teachers” Issued by the Ministry of Education and the National Committee of the China Education, Science, Culture, Health, and Sports Union (Ministry of Education of China, 2008c)   |
| 2008         | Notice of the Ministry of Education’s General Office on Publishing the “National Training Program 2008 for Primary and Secondary School Teachers” (Ministry of Education of China, 2008b)   |
| 2009         | Notice of the Ministry of Education on Further Augmenting the Supply of Primary and Secondary School Teachers (Ministry of Education of China, 2009c)   |
| 2011         | Striving to Advance Rural Education: A Speech by Wen Jiabao at the Rural Teachers’ Conference (State Council of China, 2011b)   |
| 2014         | Opinions on Promoting the Rotation of Compulsory Education School Principals and Teachers within the County (District) (Ministry of Education of China, 2014)   |
| 2015         | Notice of the State Council’s General Office on the Release of the Rural Teacher Support Program 2015-2020 (Ministry of Education of China, 2015)   |
| 2018         | Opinions of the State Council on Deepening the Reform of Teacher Education and Training in the New Era (State Council of China, 2018b)  |
| 2018         | Notice of the Ministry of Education and Other Four Departments on Issuing the “Action Plan for Revitalizing Teacher Education 2018-2022” (Ministry of Education of China, 2018)   |
| 2019         | Opinions of the State Council on Deepening Education and Teaching Reform and Improving the Quality of Compulsory Education (State Council of China, 2019c)  |
| 2020         | Opinions on Augmenting Rural Teacher Supply in the New Era (Ministry of Education of China, 2020)   |

Teacher staffing disparities are one of the main factors in the imbalance of compulsory education development between regions, between urban and rural areas, and between schools in China (Lai, 2011). The overall teacher quality in developed eastern regions is higher than that in western and central regions. The higher level of economic development a region has, the more professional and competent its teaching staff are (Meng, 2021). The teacher supply differences between urban and rural areas within a county have also been significant: The former have had a sufficient supply of teachers with high professional competence, whereas the latter have been faced with a variety of teacher staffing issues such as staff supply shortages, low qualifications of teachers, weak awareness of professional development in teachers, and low salaries and perks for rural teachers (Lin, 2019). In addition, there are staffing disparities between schools within the same area (Peng & Chang, 2022).

To achieve the balanced development of compulsory education in Chinese counties, the Chinese government has released a succession of policies on balancing teacher supply for urban and rural compulsory education (**Table 4**). These policies cover a wide range of aspects such as teacher staffing, training, rotation, salaries, and pre-service education (Liu, 2021), with highlights summarized as follows:

- Offer rural teachers preferential treatment in terms of performance-based salaries, professional title appraisal, professional rank promotion, and award granting.
- Increase rural teacher supply through a variety of measures, such as the Special Position Program, Intra-county Principal and Teacher Rotation Program, Targeted Peer Support Program, and teachers with key urban schools holding concurrent positions in rural schools.
- Promote rural teachers' professional development (Liu, 2021).

## **Policies on the Supervision and Evaluation of Compulsory Education Equalization at the County Level**

The development of compulsory education is a long-term, progressive process involving the execution of a wide range of policies from the top to the bottom. In this process, obstacles to the effective implementation of educational policies may emerge, compromising their efficacy. As a result, it is necessary for the state to establish monitoring mechanisms for spotting and tracking problems arising in the course of policy enforcement (Li, 2022). Article eight of the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China stipulates that educational supervision institutions of the government are obligated to monitor the implementation of compulsory education law and regulations, the quality of compulsory education, and the progression of compulsory education equalization, and to make their supervisory results public to society (State Council of China, 2006).

Policies on the supervision and evaluation of the equalization of compulsory education (**Table 5**) have played a vital role in advancing balanced basic education. Through supervision and evaluation work, county-level governments can take effective and pertinent actions to improve local compulsory education and advance its equal development. The supervision and evaluation programs include specific indicators for balanced compulsory education, providing local governments and education authorities with guidelines on promoting equalized compulsory education. In addition, regulatory authorities can utilize the variances in coefficients of indicators to direct local governments to address weak links in the development of balanced compulsory education (Tao, 2014).

**Table 5. Policies on the Supervision and Evaluation of Compulsory Education Equalization in Counties.**

| <b>Years</b> | <b>Policies</b>  |
|--------------|--|
| 2007         | Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Further Strengthening the Inspection and Supervision of the Work on the “Two Basic Educational Goals” at the Provincial Level (Ministry of Education of China, 2007c) |
| 2012         | Notice of the Ministry of Education on Issuing the “Interim Methods for the Supervision and Evaluation of the Development of Balanced Compulsory Education in Counties” (Ministry of Education of China, 2012) |
| 2013         | Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Promoting the Reform of Comprehensive Evaluation of Primary and Secondary Education Quality (Ministry of Education of China, 2013a)                                   |
| 2013         | A Speech at the On-the-spot Meeting for the Supervision and Evaluation of the Development of Balanced Compulsory Education in Counties by Yuan Guiren (Ministry of Education of China, 2013b)                  |
| 2017         | Notice of the Ministry of Education on Issuing the “Supervision and Evaluation Methods for the Development of Balanced, High-Quality County-level Compulsory Education” (Ministry of Education of China, 2017) |
| 2017         | Notice of the General Office of the State Council on Issuing the “Methods for Evaluating Provincial Governments’ Performance in Fulfilling Educational Responsibilities (State Council of China, 2017b)        |
| 2021         | Notice of the Ministry of Education and Other Five Departments on Issuing “Guidelines for the Evaluation of Compulsory Education Quality” (State Council of China, 2021)                                       |

**Table 6. Policies on Enhancing the Quality of Compulsory Education.**

| <b>Years</b> | <b>Policies</b>  |
|--------------|--|
| 2001         | Notice of the Ministry of Education on Issuing the “Guidelines for Basic Education Curriculum Reform (Interim)” (Ministry of Education of China, 2001b)  |
| 2009         | The Fifteenth Announcement of the List of Counties that Have Realized the Basic Popularization of Nine-Year Compulsory Education and Basic Elimination of Illiteracy among Young Adults by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education of China, 2009a)                       |
| 2010         | Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Deepening the Reform of Basic Education Curricula and Further Advancing Competence-focused Education (Ministry of Education of China, 2010c)  |
| 2013         | Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Promoting the Comprehensive Evaluation of Primary and Secondary Education Quality (Ministry of Education of China, 2013a)   |
| 2017         | Notice of the State Council’s General Office on Consolidating the Retention Rate of Compulsory Education Students (State Council of China, 2017a)  |
| 2018         | A State Council Executive Meeting Presided Over by Premier Li Keqiang on Strengthening the Construction of Small-sized Village Schools and Township Boarding Schools to Provide Equitable and High-quality Compulsory Education for Rural Children (State Council of China, 2018d) |
| 2019         | Opinions of the State Council on Deepening Education and Teaching Reform and Comprehensively Improving the Quality of Compulsory Education (State Council of China, 2019c)   |
| 2019         | “Modernization of Chinese Education 2035” Issued by the State Council (State Council of China, 2019b)  |
| 2020         | “Overall Plan for Deepening the Reform of Education Evaluation in the New Era” Issued by the State Council (State Council of China, 2020)  |
| 2021         | Notice of the Ministry of Education and Other Five Departments on Issuing “Guidelines for the Evaluation of Compulsory Education Quality” (State Council of China, 2021)   |

## **Policies on the Equalization of Quality Compulsory Education at the County Level**

The fundamental purpose of developing balanced compulsory education is to enhance the quality of education. The compulsory education policies of earlier years placed an emphasis on the even distribution of educational resources, mainly the equality of educational funding and facilities. A transition to quality enhancement took place after the realization of the rudimentary balance of resources (Xue, 2013). The release of *Supervision and Evaluation Methods for the Development of Balanced, High-Quality County-Level Compulsory Education* marked the establishment of “equality of quality education” as the goal of the new era’s compulsory education (Ministry of Education of China, 2017). A higher order requirement, namely, student all-round development, was raised for balanced compulsory education.

Policies on enhancing the quality of compulsory education (**Table 6**) focus on:

- Advancing competence-focused education by modifying educational concepts, revising compulsory education curricula, reforming the test and evaluation system, and so on.
- Establishing an evaluation framework for the quality of primary and secondary education based on the requirements of competence-focused education.
- Adjusting the deployment of rural primary and secondary schools, increasing regulation on schools for migrant workers’ children, and maximizing the retention rate of compulsory education children.

## **Conclusion**

A balanced basic education has been recognized as being crucial for social development across the world. In China, county-level governments act as the providers and distributors of resources for compulsory education as well as the supervisors of education and teaching quality. This necessitates systematic frameworks of rules and policies to clearly define their responsibilities and regulate their behavior. Currently, there still exist problems with county-level governments’ execution of national policies on compulsory education equalization, such as a lack of specific, workable measures and accountability mechanisms, immature educational management, and a paucity of measurable criteria for local educational officials’ work. To close disparities between urban and rural compulsory education and between advantaged and disadvantaged schools, it is essential for the central government to optimize the institution of compulsory education and for the local governments to rig-

rously enforce national education policies and, in the meantime, make necessary adjustments according to grassroots circumstances.

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