

Developing Equitable and Balanced Compulsory Education in Chinese County Regions: Achievements and Challenges

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Abstract: *The balanced development of county-level compulsory education is of vital significance for realizing quality and equity in education in China. This article expounded on the accomplishments China made in developing equitable compulsory education at the county level in terms of educational input, staffing, and educational quality. It also displayed the challenges and complications the country faces in this area, using facts and data from a number of counties as evidence.*

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EDUCATION is one of the fundamental civil rights as well as the groundwork for a nation's prosperity. Educational equity is critical to social fairness and justice, ensuring equal opportunity for personal development. The equity of compulsory education (in China, compulsory education officially includes primary and junior secondary schooling) is deemed to be of the greatest importance as it is the "outset" of formal education. In recent decades, China has prioritized educational development, particularly compulsory education development, in promoting its socioeconomic advancement. In 2001, the "Decisions of the State Council on the Reform and Development of Basic Education" were issued, stipulating that the county-level government is the main actor in compulsory education management and bears the key responsibility for the development of local compulsory education (State Council of China, 2001). To further improve rural basic education, the "Decisions of the State Council on Further Strengthening Rural Education Work" was released, reiterating that the county-level government accounts for the management of basic education in terms of education development planning, fund distribution, and human resources in its jurisdiction (State Council of China, 2003). The 2006 revision of the *Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China* marked legislation for the development of balanced compulsory education. It explicitly stressed that governments at and above the county level must judiciously allocate educational resources and prioritize improving the operational conditions of disadvantaged schools to support the even development of compulsory education (State Council of China, 2006).

Major Achievements of China's Development of Balanced Compulsory Education

By 2011, all provincial administrative regions (autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the central government included) in China had realized the universalization of "nine-year compulsory education" (State Council of China, 2012a). All school-age children have been provided with the opportunity to attend school, and as a result, the overall quality of the nation has been significantly enhanced. Over the years, the state has attached increasing importance to the development of balanced compulsory education and proposed higher requirements for compulsory education, namely, the transition from the "equity of education" to the "equity of quality education."

Increased Investment in Compulsory Education

To improve the quality of compulsory education and narrow the regional disparities in this sphere, the central educational authorities introduced uni-

form standards for the construction of schools. The overall operational conditions of compulsory education schools have been greatly ameliorated as a result of the implementation of the “*Construction Standards of Regular Primary and Secondary Schools in Rural Areas*” (Ministry of Education of China, 2008), “*Opinions of the State Council on Intensifying the Balanced Development of Compulsory Education*” (State Council of China, 2012a), “*Opinions on Further Improving the Basic Operational Conditions of Disadvantaged Compulsory Education Schools in Impoverished Areas*” (Ministry of Education of China, 2015), and other policies. By the end of 2021, all 2,895 counties in China had passed the national evaluation in terms of the rudimentary balanced development of compulsory education (Education Inspection Office of the Ministry of Education of China, 2022).

Increased Expenditure on Education

Due to the ongoing improvement of its overall national power in recent years, China’s expenditure on education from central, provincial, and municipal governments has shown an increasing share of its overall investment in social development, giving powerful impetus to the development of equitable and high-quality education. According to relevant statistics from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance, China’s investment in education has significantly increased between 2012 and 2021. Its national fiscal funding for compulsory education rose from 1.17 trillion CNY to 2.29 trillion CNY, accounting for more than 50% of the total state expenditure on education. The yearly state expenditure on each primary school student was elevated from 7,447 to 14,458 CNY, while that on every junior high school student increased from 10,218 to 20,717 CNY (Wei, 2023). In 2022, China’s gross domestic product was 121 trillion CNY, and its aggregate social expenditure on education was 6.1 trillion CYN, representing 5% of the GDP, with compulsory education’s share being 2.68 trillion CYN (Ministry of Education of China, 2023a).

Significant Improvement of Facilities in Compulsory Education Schools

As of 2022, among all Chinese average primary schools, 97.07%, 93.52%, 96.81%, 96.79%, and 96.62% of them reached the national standards for the school’s area of sports venues, sports equipment, music instruments, art equipment, and science experiment instruments, respectively. Among ordinary junior secondary schools, the percentages were 95.68%, 98.08%, 97.88%, 97.88%, and 97.75%, respectively, all of which experienced growth compared to the previous year (Ministry of Education of China, 2023a).

Advancements in Digital Education

As a result of the execution of a succession of policies, all Chinese primary and secondary schools (including teaching sites) had attained access to the Internet by the end of 2022. Over 4 million schools, representing 99.5% of them, had multimedia classrooms, with 87.2% having full coverage of multimedia teaching equipment. There is a rudimentary framework of educational resources and public service in place in China (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2023b).

China's national smart education platform, consisting of the "Smart Primary and Secondary Education of China," "Smart Vocational Education of China," and "Smart Higher Education of China" platforms, was run on the principle of "prioritizing application, service, efficiency, and safety". In 2022, the Ministry of Education conducted two rounds of platform application pilot projects in various areas and schools. The platform has gathered 44,000 pieces of primary and secondary education resources, 1,295 teaching resource banks for vocational education, and 27,000 top-tier MOOCs for higher education, aiming to serve 529,000 schools, 18.44 million teachers, 291 million students, and a wide range of social learners across the country (Ministry of Education of China, 2023b).

Augmented Teacher Labor Supply and Quality for Compulsory Education

To universalize compulsory education, China has implemented a series of teacher supply augmentation programs in recent decades. In 2007, the State Council issued the *Measures for the Implementation of Free Education for Students of Teachers' Universities Affiliated to the Ministry of Education* (Ministry of Education, 2007), requiring the six teachers' universities affiliated to the Ministry of Education to provide free education to their students. By 2017, approximately 101,000 free education pre-service teachers had been recruited under this program by teachers' universities, and roughly 70,000 of them fulfilled their prescribed employment agreements, of whom 90% taught in primary and secondary schools in central and western provinces. Since 2021, initiatives such as the "High-quality Teacher Education Program" and "Targeted Education Program" have been implemented to increase the supply of teachers with a university degree in 832 impoverished counties as well as those in central and western border areas, with a special focus on alleviating the shortage of teachers on subjects such as music, sports, and art to ensure a comprehensive and complete basic education curriculum for students in disadvantaged areas (Li, 2020).

Since the 2013 initiative of “Supervision and Evaluation of Balanced Compulsory Education at the County Level,” 1.72 million more teachers were recruited nationwide, and there were 2.43 million teachers and principals participating in inter-school rotation programs, thus significantly alleviating the teacher shortages in underdeveloped areas. According to the “National In-Service Teacher Training Program” Blue Book (2010-2019) by the Teacher Education Centre under the auspices of UNESCO, the Chinese government invested 17.2 billion CNY in the program between 2010 and 2019, supporting the training of approximately 16.8 million teachers from 31 provincial administrative regions, including teachers from all impoverished counties. It also established specialized projects for rural school principals from remote and underdeveloped areas, providing training for 13,900 rural kindergarten and primary and secondary school principals to guarantee the successful operation of all rural schools (UNESCO TEC, 2020).

Furthermore, several teacher support policies have been released to bolster teacher recruitment and retention. In 2017, the central government increased financing for subsidies to rural teachers in impoverished areas, which considerably improved their quality of life. As of 2020, this subsidy policy was implemented in 725 counties in 22 provinces, covering approximately 80,000 rural schools and benefiting 1.325 million rural teachers (Ministry of Education of China, 2020).

In addition, recent years have witnessed a remarkable elevation in education levels among compulsory education teachers. Currently, there are 6.6294 million full-time primary school teachers in China, with 99.99% of them having a qualified education background for their positions and 98.90% having a junior college degree or above; there are 4.0252 million full-time junior secondary school teachers, with 99.94% of them qualified for their positions regarding education levels and 91.71% holding a university degree or above. In the meantime, the age structure of compulsory education teachers shows a trend toward becoming more desirable. The majority of them are young and middle-aged (Ministry of Education of China, 2023a).

Enhanced Quality of Compulsory Education

According to the Statistical Report on China’s Educational Achievements in 2021, the average net enrolment rate in primary schools was 99.96%, and the average gross enrolment rate among junior high schools was 102.5% in 2020. The progression rate in primary school graduates is 99.5%, and that in junior secondary school graduates is 94.6%. These rates are on par with the levels of high-income countries in the world (Ministry of Education of China, 2022).

In 2012, *the 12th Five-Year Plan for the Development of National Education* introduced the concept of “retention rate of compulsory education

students” as an additional parameter for the quality of compulsory education (Ministry of Education of China, 2012a). Subsequently, the dropout prevention mechanism has been strengthened, especially in those areas with high dropout incidence, resulting in a steady rise in the student retention rate. By the end of 2022, nationwide compulsory education had a retention rate of 95.5% (Ministry of Education of China, 2023).

China initiated the “Rural Compulsory Education Student Nutrition Improvement Program” in 2012 to enhance the nutritional and physical conditions of primary and middle school students in impoverished areas (Ministry of Education of China, 2012b). As of 2020, the program engaged 131,600 rural compulsory education schools in 1,732 counties in 28 provinces, benefiting 37.9783 million students. Surveys in the pilot areas showed that the program has significantly positive effects on students’ nutritional state and learning capacities (Ministry of Education of China, 2021).

Challenges in Developing Balanced Compulsory Education in China’s County Regions

In the wake of the 2012 launch of “Interim Measures for the Supervision and Evaluation of the Even Development of Compulsory Education in Counties”, the Ministry of Education of China began to assess the equality in compulsory education development in counties across the nation. Nevertheless, factors such as the vast territory of the country and uneven socioeconomic levels among regions have been obstacles to more productive compulsory education development at the county level (Qi, 2019).

Urban vs. Rural Disparities in Student Sources

Since the reform and opening up, the acceleration of urbanization has led to the expansion of the urban population. With the heightened level of urbanization, an increased number of parents prefer to have their children educated in urban areas of the county or even in other developed regions. As a result, a new imbalance in county-level compulsory education emerged: packed urban schools as opposed to rural ones with shrinking scales (Ministry of Education of China, 2015).

Large-Size Classes in Urban Schools

As of 2011, the Chinese urban population increased to 51.27% of its total population (Wang, 2012), marking a significant change in China’s demographic structure and triggering a substantial adjustment in the distribution of basic education resources. In sharp contrast to the decline of rural schools,

urban schools underwent rapid expansion, thus producing numerous large-size classes in the latter, with most of them in urban areas of counties in central and western China (Wu, 2019).

A normal primary or secondary school in China typically has 40-45 students. However, the expedited universalization of nine-year mandatory education led to a drastic increase in the demand for compulsory education. In the meantime, the growth of urbanization, the increasing demand of the public for high-quality education, severe shortages of educational resources in certain regions, the large and continuous influx of children from migrant workers, and inadequate teacher supply, among other reasons, all contributed to the expansion of the class size in urban basic education schools (Huang, 2020). As the Statistical Report on China's Educational Achievements in 2022 revealed, there were approximately 2.8605 million primary school classes in China, including 32,100 large-size classes with 56-65 students each and 923 super-large-size classes with 66 or more students each, while the number of junior secondary school classes is roughly 1.0734 million, including 12,500 large-size classes with 56-65 students each and 225 super-large-size classes with 66 or more students each (Ministry of Education of China, 2023a).

According to a survey in Fenxi County of Shanxi Province, which was listed among the targeted counties in the nation-level poverty alleviation program, 80% of primary school students and 90% of middle school students in this county were enrolled in urban primary and junior secondary schools (Fan & Zhan, 2016). From a national standpoint, three-quarters of the large-size classes in China are concentrated in urban areas of central and western counties; in some central and western provinces, the proportion of large-size classes even exceeds 20% (Qi, 2019).

A Steady Outflow of Rural School-Age Children

Amid the progression of industrialization in China, a large number of rural children have moved from their original school districts based on their registered residence to schools in urban areas where their parents work as migrant laborers. As per the *Statistical Report on China's Educational Achievements in 2022*, there were approximately 13.6468 million rural compulsory education students who outflowed with their migrant worker parents (Ministry of Education of China, 2023a). Consequently, the school and class size in urban areas is in constant expansion, while that in rural area is shrinking due to the reduced number of residents and school-age children. For instance, a teaching site in Taohuajian Village, Damu Township, Xianning City, Hubei Province, was once a nine-year school built in the 1960s with more than 300 students in its prime. In the 1980s, it became a sole primary school with over 200 students. It was reduced to a teaching site by the end of the 1990s with

only 43 students and 3 teachers, covering only the first three grades, as a result of the advancement of urbanization and the outflow of students to urban schools. This is also the situation at C Primary School in Tuanfeng County, Hubei Province. The school was reduced from a nine-year central school to a teaching site, with a sharp decrease in the number of students from a few hundred to 47 (Fan & Zhan, 2016).

Relevant investigations found that rural parents generally had low recognition of the educational quality of rural schools because of the disproportionate concentration of high-quality educational resources in urban schools. Those rural parents who cannot afford to send their children to urban schools tend to think that the kids have grim prospects for academic advancement and that it is more practical for them to seek employment at a young age rather than to “waste time” in schools. That increases the risk of dropping out among rural students (Wang, 2016).

The *Report of Rural Education Development in China 2020-2022* by Northeast Normal University’s Chinese Rural Education Development Research Institute revealed that in 2021, 79.15% of primary school-age children received education in urban areas, and 87.85% of middle school-age teenagers were educated in urban schools. On average, 81.91% of compulsory education students had schooling in urban areas (Wang, 2023). The student source disparities between urban and rural schools impede the even development of compulsory education at the county level. The influx of rural students to urban schools poses an excessive burden on the latter. Consequently, urban schools in the county must substantially increase the number of classes to accommodate additional students from rural areas, which significantly decreases their overall education quality. Also, the frequent move on the part of children of migrant workers is a complication to the urban schools’ management; the discrepancies of academic levels among them add complexities to teachers’ instruction (Ding & Wu, 2015). In the meantime, the outflow of rural students causes the waste of rural educational resources. The reduction of student sources results in a corresponding decrease in the number of rural school classes and, worse yet, in the closures of certain schools. The deserted campuses and facilities are a severe waste of educational resources (Zhang, 2013). In addition, class reductions and school closures in rural areas lead to a relative surplus of rural teachers. The drastic decrease in the number of rural students also means an unreasonable increase in the per capita share of educational resources among the remaining students, which is another form of waste of educational resources (Fan, 2019).

Existing Gaps in Facilities between Urban and Rural Schools

First off, despite the universalization of nine-year mandatory education in China, the issue of deficient school operational conditions still exists in county-level compulsory education in certain regions. A survey of 50 county-level primary and secondary schools in Hubei Province showed the status quo of their school conditions. In terms of school buildings, ordinary classrooms needed to be renovated, and library rooms needed to be expanded. Student living environments, including dormitories, canteens, and toilets, should be significantly improved. Regarding sports venues, the expansion of the playground area was a pressing issue, and the absence of basketball and volleyball courts was common. School equipment to be added included teaching aids and experimental instruments; apparatuses for PE, music, health, and art lessons; multimedia devices with recording and video conferencing functions, as well as computers for teachers' lesson preparation; books and computer networks for the library; and routine life-related items such as heating, drinking water, and cookware (Xiang et al., 2021).

Furthermore, there are considerable disparities in infrastructure and facilities between urban and rural compulsory education schools in western China. In contrast with their relatively modernized urban counterparts, rural schools are faced with issues such as insufficient funds, outmoded infrastructure, a lack of advanced digital equipment, and inadequate sports facilities. According to an investigation by Guo (2017), the average expenditure on teaching equipment for each primary school student in extremely impoverished counties in A Province in western China was 1,290 CNY, which was 1,008 CNY less than that in non-extremely impoverished counties. Every 100 primary school students in extremely impoverished counties had 10.70 computers for teaching purposes on average, whereas their counterparts in non-extremely impoverished counties had 20.40 ones.

Even though the reasons for the uneven development of compulsory education within a country are many, the fundamental one is its underdeveloped economy. China's compulsory education is directly managed by the local governments, who are in charge of allocating educational funds to primary and middle schools in their jurisdiction. In economically underdeveloped counties, the local governments often choose to prioritize investment in key and central schools in urban areas over that in rural compulsory education schools due to their financial limitations (Jiao, 2014). This preferential treatment of urban schools further exacerbates the imbalance of county-level compulsory education.

The Imbalance in Staffing between Urban and Rural Schools

Disparities in Education Levels between Urban and Rural School Teachers

In county-level compulsory education institutions, teachers in urban schools typically have higher education levels than their rural counterparts (Zhou, 2018). In Shilin Yi Autonomous County in Yunnan, for instance, the percentage of full-time teachers with a bachelor's degree or above in urban schools was 79.97% in 2022; 90% of the county's "excellent teachers" work in urban schools, while rural schools only serve as the "springboard" for excellent teachers' future careers in urban schools (People's Government of Shilin Yi Autonomous County, 2023).

In certain remote rural schools, teachers may have to teach subjects that do not match their educational backgrounds. There are plenty of Chinese, mathematics, and English teachers in these schools, but they may not have enough music, PE, and art teachers. Consequently, "all-mighty" teachers emerge who need to conduct instruction for various disciplines and grades (Wang, 2023). Even though they can become qualified for their "additional positions" through self-education or in-service training, it is not a professional way of managing compulsory education.

Differences in Age Structure between Urban and Rural School Teachers

A 2020 survey of 21278 teachers from counties in 31 provinces across China found that young teachers under the age of 29 accounted for 22.2%, 21.3%, and 16.1% of the entire teaching staff in village, township, and urban schools, respectively, with a 6.1% gap between the shares of young teachers in village and urban areas. On the other hand, the percentages of teachers aged 55 and above were 8.8%, 4.5%, and 3.3% in village, township, and urban schools, respectively; Village schools had 5.5% more older teachers than urban ones. It is noteworthy that there also exists an unbalanced age distribution among teachers at the provincial level. In those counties that have not implemented the "Special Position Program" (sponsored by the central government to hire college graduates to work in rural compulsory education institutions), the proportion of young teachers under the age of 29 was less than 10%, whereas that of teachers aged 55 and above was as high as 33.8%, and even exceeded 50% in certain areas (Wang, 2023).

High Turnover of Rural Teaching Staff

Due to regional differences in economic levels and teacher salaries, the flow of talented teachers to major cities has become a prevalent issue throughout

China. As data from the Ministry of Education of China revealed, from 2012 to 2019, approximately 510,000 teachers were recruited under the “Special Position Program” in central and western provinces of China. They have played a crucial supportive role in rural compulsory education. However, after their minimum service period in rural schools was fulfilled, some of the program participants opted to apply for civil service positions, some were seconded to urban schools in the county, and some were selected and recruited by city schools, resulting in low retention rates of these “special position” teachers. Relevant data indicated that the turnover rate of this category of teachers in some areas could be more than 50% (Zhang, 2023).

According to the “Free Education Program” policy, public-funded graduates of teachers’ colleges and universities should work in rural schools for at least two years before they can move to urban ones. Nevertheless, monitoring results of the program revealed that some of these graduates managed to be employed by urban high schools right after graduation rather than being assigned to rural schools, where teaching staff shortages have been the most severe (Yan, 2015). This is evidently an impediment to the establishment of a balanced compulsory education system in China.

Conclusion

Developing balanced compulsory education is a fundamental policy of education as well as a key national strategy. Equitable compulsory education, a steppingstone to an equal society, benefits every citizen. Despite the universalization of compulsory education in China, the discrepancy in education quality between urban and rural schools remains significant. As the county-level government is primarily responsible for managing rural primary and secondary schools, a balanced compulsory education at this level is of fundamental significance for the fulfilment of overall educational equity and equality. Due to current limited educational resources and incomplete educational regulations, China still has a long way to go before it attains the balanced development of compulsory education within its counties. To make breakthroughs in this regard, it is necessary to learn from global practice of educational reform and in the meantime, make thorough evaluations of the basic conditions of the national education.

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