

The Future Trend of Chinese Primary and Middle Schools

- No Private School Should Involve

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Abstract: One of the main challenges currently facing China's education system and the development of educational equity is the divergence between public and private schools in terms of resource allocation, student choice and school management. This article examines China's relentless efforts to eliminate the participation of private schools in the compulsory education system in order to promote educational equity and reduce social disparities. The article discusses the cultural and economic difficulties encountered in the transition from private schools and the policies implemented to address them, such as public-private partnerships, conversion of private schools to public schools, and conglomerate education reform. While these policies represent important advances, challenges remain in ensuring that the public system can accommodate all students without sacrificing the quality of education. The Government also needs to continue to reform the education system while clarifying the importance of investment in order to create a more equitable and efficient public education system in China.

Keywords: Private School, Public School, Chinese Education, Group-Based Education, Public-Private Partnership.

1. Introduction

China has long prioritized the equalization and balance of its educational system. At the beginning of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the department of education discussed the educational rights of different social groups and whether to implement elite education or mass education[1]. With continuous reforms and increasing financial investments, the country demonstrates its dedication to fostering an education system that is accessible and equitable for all. One of the key challenges in realizing this vision has been addressing the disparities between public and private schools in the compulsory education system. Despite substantial efforts to bridge the gap, inequities still persist, primarily in terms of resource allocation, student selection, and school management [2]. One of the most pressing issues in Chinese education today is the disparity between public and private schools. Public schools are typically funded and managed by the government, with student admissions based on the household registration system. On the other hand, private schools often attract more affluent students and offer superior facilities due to their ability to charge tuition and provide scholarships to high-performing students.

In light of these issues, a movement toward phasing out private involvement in compulsory education has gained momentum. This paper examines the current state of education in China, highlights the difficulties in transitioning away from private schooling, and evaluates policies aimed at creating a more uniform public education system.

2. The Current State of Chinese Education

2.1. Resource Allocation

The gap in resource allocation between public and private schools has created a significant imbalance. Public schools are reliant on government funding, which varies depending on local economic conditions, leading to significant regional disparities. In contrast, private schools benefit from tuition fees, donations, and additional private investments, allowing them to offer more advanced facilities and better teaching resources. Tuition fees charged for private middle schools are incredibly high in Hangzhou, Zhejiang, and all the tuition information can be found on the government website for moving from primary to secondary school. For example, Yungu Middle School and Lvchengyuhua Middle School respectively charged seventy thousand RMB and around eighty thousand a year for tuition and accommodation [3]. On the contrary, public middle schools only charge at most one thousand RMB for lunch money, which is only 1.4% of the total charge for private middle schools [3]. In this case, the average per private middle school student of tuition receivables around seventy thousand RMB is twice the average government grant per public middle school student for only thirty-five thousand RMB [4].

2.2. Student Selection

Public schools are bound by regulations that tie admission to the registered residence system, meaning students are admitted based on where their family is registered. Conversely, private schools can offer scholarships and other incentives to attract top students from a broader pool, further exacerbating the gap in academic outcomes. Society's reflection of a school largely comes from the quality of its graduates, except for the school itself, which depends a lot on the student's level and condition. The student source or the quality of students has a great impact on the quality of teaching and the results achieved by the school. For private primary and middle schools, as a profit-making institution, they would use the money to lure good students to study to establish a great reputation for the school for a lucrative future. Private schools have the financial capacity to build an institution of higher learning, and they consider these expenses as upfront investments. In this case, generally considering private schools are better than public schools, as social common reflection, is the outcome of the different origins of students [5].

2.3. School Management and Supervision

Private schools often enjoy more flexibility in hiring teachers, creating curricula, and implementing innovative educational practices. For example, private middle schools can have a smaller class capacity, which has a great impact on students' cognitive ability and school engagement [6]. However, this lack of government control can sometimes result in inconsistent standards and a lack of accountability, especially compared to the stricter regulations imposed on public schools. Without a uniform teaching specification, a higher standard of education will aggravate social cognition of educational disparity. Government supervision and management have certain advantages in junior education, such as supervision practices and teachers' satisfaction, which help promote teaching qualities [7].

3. Challenges in Changing the Status

3.1. Cultural Differences

Many parents associate private schools with higher quality education and are willing to invest heavily to secure a place for their children. Changing this perception requires a shift in the public perception of a 'good' education along with improvements in the quality of public schools. The most important factor in expanding the positive impact of private middle schools' reputations is the peer effect, as parents believe that good learning peers can have a positive impact on their children, and therefore worry about the academic abilities of their children's school peers [8]. Unlike public school enrollment, which is restricted by school districts, this cross-regional enrollment of a large number of high-quality students seriously affects the level of local educational ecology. The social stereotype of cultural differences between public and private schools is difficult to change. Considering the advanced facilities, high-quality teaching resources, and peer effects of private schools, the number of students in private schools has gradually increased within the compulsory education stage in China [9]. The banning of private schools will reduce parents' choices in selecting schools for their children, which may cause widespread dissatisfaction among most families.

3.2. Economic Conflicts

China's private education sector has also attracted significant domestic and foreign investment due to the high demand for quality education. Banning privately-run junior high schools may reduce future market investment in the education sector, which in turn may lead to capital flight and a reduction in related economic activity. Investors and private education companies, many of which are listed, could face significant financial losses, which in turn could affect the stock market and investor confidence. Without the support of market capital, the government is unable to fill the education funding gap within a short period of time, which in turn increases the financial burden on the government. Moreover, private schools employ a large number of educators, administrators and supporting staff. The banning of private schools will result in widespread unemployment and the staff concerned will in turn move to the job market. The saturated demand for talent in the public school system will be affected by the pressure of intense competition for jobs, which will increase the competitive pressure on the existing education staff, thus affecting the quality of teaching and the development of schools [10-11].

4. Current Policies and the Move Toward a Public-Only System

4.1. "Public-Private Partnership" Schools

Although public-private partnership (PPP) schools are ostensibly private schools, they actually operate under many of the same regulations such as adhering to government curriculum standards and restricting admissions to local students [12]. Actually, public infrastructure plays a crucial role in the presence of private schools in a community, as it could not only minimize the cost of production, but also ensure a high return on private investment [13]. PPP schools combine the advantages of public and private schools to provide public education services, aiming to improve the quality, accessibility and efficiency of education. Private investment will bring innovations in curriculum design, teaching methods and school management, new technologies, new education models and more flexibility in teaching practices. By partnering with private investment, governments can leverage private sources of investment to reduce the financial burden on public funds. Thus, government-involved private schools offer a balanced approach that combines the accountability and accessibility of public education with the efficiency, innovation, and resources of the private sector

[14]. These advantages make PPP schools a viable option for strengthening education systems, especially in areas facing budget constraints or rapid growth in student numbers.

4.2. Conversion of Private to Public Schools

In some regions, there has been a push to convert private schools to public schools, especially those that receive substantial government funding. This process aims to create a level playing field and improve consistency in the quality of education.

Hangzhou was one of the first cities to implement the policy of conversion of private to public schools, and one of the representatives was Wenlan Middle School. Wenlan Middle School was established in 1956 and was converted from public to private in 2010, but in 2021, the school is facing another situation of being converted from private to public [15]. As a private school, the school has long occupied the local public gymnasium and playground, which is unfair to other local students, as the school's admission method is selective, and not based on household registration of permanent residence. Non-Wenlan Middle School students are unable to use the public infrastructure occupied by Wenlan Middle School.

As a high-quality middle school, the conversion from private to public school can effectively improve the quality of education in the area, promote the equitable development of education, and is in line with China's pace of building a more equitable and cohesive education system [14]. This strategy addresses the problem of unequal educational resources by implementing consistent supervision across all schools, thereby improving overall educational standards and bridging the social divide caused by educational issues. It also reduces costs for families and allows public schools to learn from the advanced resources and practices of their former private counterparts. This transition is in line with broader educational reforms in China, which aim to improve the accessibility and inclusiveness of education and ultimately support the development of a more balanced and higher-quality education landscape.

4.3. Group-Based Education (Educational collectivization)

The development of grouping education is to encourage public schools with outstanding performance to share resources and best practices with underperforming schools, thereby improving the overall education level of the country [16]. The emergence of grouping education is a positive response to the contradiction between the pursuit of fairness and the need for high-quality education and the uneven development of high-quality education. The implementation of collectivization of education can form a large pool of resources, to achieve the sharing of educational resources within the region, and achieve a balanced level of education in a region, and the overall scale is larger than a single top private or public school. In addition, schools in a collectivization usually share the same educational philosophy, and in doing so, improve the teaching skills of all teachers in a balanced manner.

Qiusi group with public ownership in Hangzhou, is one of the first pilot schools to run collectivization, and it was established in 2002. Recent years, they began to establish new schools under the group to extend their collectivization [17]. Group-based education effectively enhances educational quality and equity by connecting high-performing schools with those needing support. By encouraging collaboration, resource sharing, and professional growth for educators, this model helps create a more balanced and inclusive education system. It strengthens school management, and fosters a cooperative culture among schools. In the long run, group-based education provides a scalable and sustainable approach to reducing disparities and driving broad improvements that benefit students, teachers, and communities [18].

5. Shortcomings and room for improvement

The transition from private to public schools has been slow, as some private schools have managed to continue operating with limited regulation and undermine policy goals by rebranding or exploiting loopholes. This intransigence has created barriers to the standardization of educational quality and access.

In addition, the rapid expansion of public schools to absorb many private school students has raised concerns about overcrowding, including larger class sizes, strained educational resources, and lower educational quality. At the same time, teachers are under intense pressure to provide adequate individualized attention to all students. To address these challenges, significant investment in teacher training and professional development is critical [19].

However, current funding shortfalls often prevent educators from receiving the support they need to adopt new teaching strategies or effectively manage the demands of the classroom, which in turn can lead to a poor learning experience for students [11]. In addition, improving public school infrastructure is also urgent. Many schools need modernization, including expanded facilities, upgraded classrooms and enhanced technology access. However, funding constraints, especially in rural or economically underdeveloped areas, make these improvements difficult to achieve.

In terms of social feedback, public perceptions complicate the transition from private to public schools. This is because many parents still perceive public schools as inferior to private schools, which prompts them to seek alternative educational options. This perception perpetuates existing inequalities and limits the impact of reform efforts.

To achieve the goal of educational equity, systemic changes are needed, including increased funding, strategic infrastructure upgrades, and ongoing teacher development. Public schools must not only be accessible, but also equipped to deliver a quality education. Efforts must be made to address these disparities in order to create a more balanced and inclusive education system that benefits all students.

6. Conclusion

While China has made significant progress in its pursuit of educational equity, the deeply entrenched divide between public and private schools continues to pose a significant challenge to its realization. Moving towards a public-only education system is a critical step towards levelling the playing field, ensuring that every student, regardless of background, is provided with consistent educational standards and opportunities. However, achieving this vision will require sustained reform to address the financial constraints and cultural attitudes that currently prevent true equality. Going forward, unwavering investment in public education, improved school infrastructure and support for teacher development will be essential to transform China's education landscape. Only through comprehensive and deliberate reform can China build a more inclusive and high-quality education system that enables all students to succeed.

However, there are some shortcomings in the analysis of this article. First, the analysis is mainly based on the education reforms in China's eastern coastal cities and provinces, and does not consider economically underdeveloped areas. Second, this article does not conduct social research in its analysis. In the future, the scope of research on China's education will be expanded based on the promotion of education reform, so as to improve the analysis and exploration of China's education.

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