



Exploring High-Quality and Balanced Development of Urban and Rural Basic Education in China

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Abstract: The high-quality and balanced development of urban and rural basic education is an important guarantee to realize the strategy of strengthening the country with talents, an effective way to achieve harmonious development of society, and an inevitable choice to achieve urban and rural integration. At present, basic education in China has a major mission to cultivate talents and improve the quality of the whole nation. with the rapid development of economy and the popularization of compulsory education, the conditions and teaching quality of urban and rural basic education have witnessed obvious improvement. However, there still exists an imbalance between urban and rural basic education in terms of government funding, school-running conditions, development scale, teachers' professional levels. Through the analysis of the causes of the imbalance, it can be found that the causes are mainly reflected in two aspects: insufficient government functions and imperfect management system of rural schools. To improve the current situation of urban and rural basic education in China and promote the high-quality and balanced development of urban and rural education, it is necessary to strengthen the top-level design and build a blueprint for high-quality and balanced development on the one hand, and to change the development concept and forge a reliable path for high-quality and balanced development of urban and rural basic education on the other hand.

Key words: basic education, urban-rural gap, high-quality and balanced development

1. The significance of high-quality and balanced development of urban and rural basic education in China

1.1 An important guarantee to realize the strategy of strengthening the country through talents

In today's world, the competition of comprehensive national strength is essentially the talent competition, in other words, the competition of educational heritage and educational strength. The 150-year history of humiliation in modern China always warns us that backward education means that we will always be in the position of being exploited and invaded. As the saying goes, a country prospers if its education prospers. All levels of education, including basic education, vocational education, higher education and adult education, carries the future of the country and the expectations of the people.

As the cornerstone of the education system, the fundamental purpose of basic education is to provide everyone with the minimum knowledge, views, social norms, and experience shared by all people. Therefore, whether the foundation of basic education is solid directly affects the cultivation of talents and restricts the development of follow-up education. Only by laying a solid foundation for basic education can we provide sufficient nutrients for the development of talents, an important guarantee for the development of the national economy, and solid support for the realization of the

Chinese Dream.

1.2 An effective way to realize harmonious social development

Harmonious society is inseparable from fairness and justice, and social fairness and justice is the premise and basic condition for harmonious development of society. Education, as a strategy of priority development, is a major policy that Chinese government has put forward and adhered to for a long time. As an important part of social equity, educational equity not only carries the new mission of fully implementing the Party's educational policy and improving the modernization level of education, but also shoulders the historical responsibility of building a harmonious socialist society.

Promoting high-quality and balanced development of basic education in urban and rural areas can let every child bathe in the sunshine of balanced education together, so that every family can enjoy the nourishment of quality education. Only when we comprehensively promote fairness in basic education, narrow the gap between urban and rural education and the gap between social classes, can we realize the harmonious development of individuals and the society.

1.3 An inevitable choice to achieve integrated urban and rural construction

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the urban-rural dual structure system was gradually formed due to the different emphasis on industry and agriculture at that time. With the development of secondary and tertiary industries, the urban and rural household registration barriers and resource allocation differences brought about by the urban-rural dual structure system have seriously hindered the growth of China's current economy and hindered the historical process of common prosperity.

To narrow the gap between urban and rural areas, China vigorously promotes the policy of integrating urban and rural development and coordinates their economic and social development. High-quality balanced development of urban and rural basic education helps to integrate educational resources, realize the coordinated development of basic education, promote the integration of urban and rural education, and break the bondage of urban-rural dual economic structure. It also helps to build a good ecological environment for basic education, which enables rural children to enjoy high-quality basic education, reduces the farmers' education expenditure, and accelerates the process of rural urbanization, thus improving the level of rural urbanization and eventually realizing the integration of urban and rural development.

2. The current development of urban and rural basic education in China

China's basic education includes early childhood education, primary education, and general secondary education (including junior middle school and senior high school), which undertakes the major mission of cultivating talents and improving the quality of the whole nation. Since the reform and opening-up of China, a series of documents, such as *the Decision on the Reform of the Education System* and *the Outline of China's Education Reform and Development*, have pointed out the direction for the development of basic education in China. Since the beginning of the 21st century, China has continuously carried out educational reform. Therefore, China's basic education has gradually formed a management system of "local responsibility, hierarchical and county-based management" under the macro-level guidance of the nation. In 2008, free compulsory education in urban and rural areas was steadily promoted. With nine-year compulsory education fully popularized, the number of years of education per capita was significantly increased, and the conditions for running basic education was greatly improved.

China's basic education system has been constantly improved with the continuous advancement of the quality education reform and the wider acceptance of the quality education concept. The State Council issued *Notice as to Further Perfecting Funds Guarantee Mechanism of the Urban and Rural*

Compulsory Education in 2015, to further the balanced allocation of overall urban and rural education resources and to promote the sustainable and healthy development of education. It is required to establish a unified urban-rural compulsory education fund guarantee mechanism with a special focus on compulsory education in rural areas and unify the benchmark quota of public funds per student in urban and rural compulsory education schools in accordance with the “two exemptions and one subsidy” policy. In July 2021, the Ministry of Education, the National Development and Reform Commission and the Ministry of Finance jointly issued *The Opinions on Deepening the Improvement of Weak links and Capacity Improvement of Compulsory Education*, to boost the quality and balanced development of basic education and boost urban-rural integration.

To effectively promote the fairness of education, and continuously promote the quality and balanced development of basic education, Henan Province has carried out the “Year of Basic Education Funds” for three consecutive years since 2018 to urge municipal and county governments to further implement basic education investment responsibility and ensure the healthy development of basic education. Beijing Municipal Party Committee and Government give full play to the coordinating role of municipal transfer funds, tilting them towards educationally disadvantaged areas such as the distant suburbs, continuously promoting the continuous expansion of the coverage of quality education resources and striving to narrow the gap between schools and regions. Other provinces and cities are also innovating ways and means to promote basic education reform, narrow the gap between urban and rural education development, and promote the healthy development of basic education.

3. The major manifestations of the imbalance between urban and rural basic education in China

China’s basic education system is constantly enriched with its guarantee mechanism constantly improving and the connotation of basic education constantly developing. However, the following deficiencies can be found if we examine the development trend of urban and rural basic education in China.

3.1 Uneven funding

The economic base determines the superstructure. The development of education is inseparable from the investment of educational funds. For a long time, due to the distribution of natural resources and socio-economic development, the eastern coast of China has the highest level of scientific and technological development and the most developed economy, and therefore invests more in basic education than the central and western regions. Similarly, the economic development of cities in the same region is much higher than that of villages, and the municipal governments can invest relatively more money in basic education. Funding for basic education in rural areas generally comes from county-level financial allocations. From the perspective of the proportion of national financial resources allocation, county-level finance undoubtedly belongs to the vulnerable group (Sun, 2016). Although it can bear the burden of managing basic education in the region, it is still very difficult for it to bear the main responsibility of investing in basic education in rural areas. Therefore, there is still a gap between the investment in basic education in rural areas and that in urban areas, with the latter being much greater than the former.

3.2 Uneven school-running conditions

During the 13th Five-Year Plan period, the continuous promotion of standardized campus construction, focusing on schools in central and western China and rural areas, has led to a significant improvement in the conditions of schools in rural areas. The floor space of school buildings and sports halls has gradually increased, and the number of sports equipment, music equipment, art equipment and science laboratory equipment that meet the standards has also increased year by year. However, due to the low starting point of basic education in rural areas, it is difficult to match the conditions of urban basic education in a short period of time, even after continuous reform and upgrading. In some

remote areas and extremely poor areas, schools still suffer from inadequate infrastructure, insufficient instruments, books and cultural and sports equipment, and inadequate campus network services. The improvement of basic education conditions in rural areas and the reasonable allocation of various teaching resources still need the further support of the state and governments at all levels.

3.3 Uneven scale of development

With the development of economy and the improvement of living standards, parents are paying more attention to the teaching standards and school environment and have an increasingly strong demand for quality education resources. To make their children better educated, some rural parents who are financially well-off would rather choose private schools which are far away from their homes and even charge higher tuition fees. Due to the accelerated urbanization, more and more rural migrant workers enter urban schools, which makes the scale of urban basic education increase. Rural schools, on the other hand, suffer from lack of students. Some rural school buildings are idle, and the educational facilities and resources are not effectively used, resulting in the waste of educational resources. Due to the lack of students in rural schools, there is a shortage of classes. Some rural school buildings are left idle and educational facilities are not used effectively, resulting in a waste of educational resources.

3.4 Uneven teacher deployment

At present, the unbalanced provision of teachers in basic education in China is not only reflected in the quantity of teachers, but also in the quality of teachers. As the saying goes, people go to the top, water flows to the bottom. To build a team of excellent teachers, schools should pay their staff reasonably as well as provide teachers with a broad platform for development so that they can attract and retain talents. Therefore, large and medium-sized cities with developed economies have a large number of experienced teachers, even backbone teachers, subject specialists, or master's or doctoral students from prestigious institutions. In contrast, teachers are a scarce resource in less economically developed rural areas. Although the state has implemented the “special post teacher” recruitment plan to guide and encourage college graduates to engage in basic education in rural areas, it still cannot meet the current needs of rural basic education.

4. Causes of the imbalance between urban and rural basic education in China

4.1 Insufficient government functions

4.1.1 Objective reasons

(1) The disadvantages of stratified schooling and hierarchical management have become increasingly prominent

To change the backwardness of China's education and the disadvantages of the education system, the CPC Central Committee and The State Council issued the *Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Education System Reform* in 1985, which established the principle that basic education should be run by local governments and managed in a hierarchical manner and pointed out a clearer direction for the development of basic education. The Decision proposed that the management of basic education belongs to the localities, which to a certain extent mobilized the enthusiasm of localities to run schools, but due to the different degrees of economic development of different localities, it also indirectly caused the disparity in the running of basic education between different localities and between urban and rural areas.

In recent years, the state has introduced a series of policies, require governments at all levels to establish, perfect the basic education funding guarantee mechanism, constantly increase investment to improve rural basic education conditions and narrow the gap between urban and rural areas by means

of adjusting the fiscal system and spending structure, increasing transfer payments and so on. However, due to the weak foundation and thin base of rural basic education, it is difficult to reach a level comparable to urban education in a short period of time.

(2) The dualistic economic structure between urban and rural areas is a serious obstacle

Although the dualistic economic structure between urban and rural areas had a positive impact on social development at the time and enabled the rapid development of the urban economy, the impediments to the development of the rural economy were also evident. The two different resource allocation systems and the household registration barriers between urban and rural areas have led to a widening gap in development between urban and rural areas. Since the reform and opening-up of China, a series of reform initiatives and policy measures aimed at promoting the coordinated economic development of urban and rural areas have been implemented to steadily promote the integrated development of urban and rural areas, but it is undeniable that disparities between urban and rural areas still exist. These disparities are reflected in the fact that quality educational resources, quality teacher resources and quality student resources continue to converge on the cities and that the development of rural basic education lags.

4.1.2 Subjective reasons

(1) Failure to fulfill their duties properly

In China, government functions mainly include economic regulation, market supervision, social management, and social public services. Among them, the social public service function is an important basic function that revolves around people's livelihood, safeguarding and improving their livelihood, and is also the key to building a socialist harmonious society at present. Basic education is an important cause related to people's livelihood, and therefore should also fall under the scope of the government's social public service duties. Under the principle of "economic construction as the center", the government attaches more importance to economic functions than to other functions, and the principle of prioritizing development has suppressed the government's social and public service functions (Hong, 2017). The government's failure to fulfil its public service responsibilities has also made basic education in rural areas, which is already inherently inadequate, even more difficult. The lower the level of education, the more obvious its public goods attributes, and the greater the government's responsibility.

(2) Lack of comprehensive planning

Social development cannot be separated from education, likewise, national prosperity and the success of children cannot be separated from education. Therefore, the government should make more efforts to co-ordinate the development of basic education in urban and rural areas. It should co-ordinate the financial investment required for the sustainable development of basic education, the resource allocation required for the balanced development of basic education, and the institutional guarantee required for the high-quality development of basic education in urban and rural areas. However, judging from the current development of urban and rural basic education, high-quality balanced development still lacks scientific and systematic planning for the long-term sustainable development, although the reform of urban and rural basic education has been greatly developed and the basic construction of rural basic education has basically been solved.

(3) Inadequate supervision and feedback

Yang (2007) contends that the implementation of any concept, policy and work includes three links: decision-making, execution, and supervision. The development of basic education needs not only the guidance of policies and the guarantee of systems, but also the strong supervision of relevant departments. Since the reform and opening-up of China, the state has introduced a series of important

policies and laws and has implemented a series of policies such as free compulsory education, a national financial aid system for students from poor families, funding for village primary schools and teaching centers, and renovation of weak schools, which have promoted educational equity in basic education. Governments at all levels are also actively implementing measures to narrow the gap between urban and rural basic education. Governments at all levels have also actively implemented various measures to narrow the gap between urban and rural basic education. However, as most of the policies and decisions on basic education in China are mostly top-down, there is no clear measurement standard for the implementation process and results, so it cannot get timely and accurate feedback to achieve specific analysis of specific problems. At the same time, the imperfect mechanism of information disclosure and transparency makes it difficult for the people to exercise their right to monitor the balanced development of basic education.

4.2 Inadequate management system of rural schools

4.2.1 The school philosophy is not clear

The school philosophy is the basic idea and core values of a school and is a deeper reflection on what kind of school to run and how to run a school well, including the direction, purpose, and goals of the school. It is an important guarantee for the sustainable and healthy development of the school. Looking at the current situation of basic education, urban and rural schools have different levels of attention and understanding of the school philosophy. Some schools have the problem of blindly following the trend and deviating from the actual school philosophy, while others have misunderstandings about the school philosophy and do not put forward a clear school philosophy. There are also many rural schools that still present the limitations of relying on administrative directives to run the school and managing according to the experience of the headmaster. These problems have led to a homogenization of basic education and even a deviation from the fundamental direction of educating people, which has seriously hindered the development of rural basic education.

4.2.2 The characteristics of running a school are not obvious

School-running characteristics is an important symbol to measure the level of running a school and the quality of talent training, and an important means for a school to maintain a leading position in the increasingly competitive education market. The characteristics of running schools should be based on the actual situation of the school, which should not only give full play to students' subjectivity, but also show the development of teachers' personality characteristics. While carrying out quality education, some urban schools should strengthen art education for students to promote their development in various aspects. Some schools have made certain achievements in teaching reform and scientific research, optimizing their teaching staff, improving the quality of teachers, and developing their special skills. However, for rural schools, their characteristics are not obvious enough, and they have not thought deeply enough about curriculum reform, teaching management, scientific research, and deep education, and are only able to complete basic educational and teaching work. In addition, education with special features is based on the support of resources from various sources, and rural schools do not yet have the basic conditions for this.

4.2.3 Educational functions are not comprehensive

Education is rooted in and serves the local area. China's rural areas are in a special period of revitalization and development, and the main force behind the construction of the new countryside should be the local people. The main force in the construction of the new countryside should also be rural people who are born and raised in the countryside, understand the local reality and are willing to work for the revitalization of their hometown. The aim of basic education in rural areas is not only to improve the quality of all people, but also to provide the talents needed for rural development.

At present, rural basic education tends to be urbanized in terms of management mode,

knowledge system and curriculum. It is not closely integrated with the development of agriculture and rural economy and is detached from rural reality. Schools aim to further their studies, and parents and students aim to escape from the countryside. This kind of education does not effectively train students' concepts of work, hands-on skills, innovation, and entrepreneurship in the process of acquiring knowledge.

5. Countermeasures and suggestions for high-quality and balanced development of urban and rural basic education in China

5.1 Strengthen top-level design and build a blueprint for high-quality and balanced development

5.1.1 Establish a new concept of high-quality and balanced development of basic education in both urban and rural areas

Basic education is the foundation project of national quality education and a solid foundation for the long-term development of the country and the nation. In the face of the people's demand for quality and diversified education, and the new demand for talents in the face of industrial transformation and urban development, basic education must fundamentally establish the idea of overall development of urban and rural education, change the current emphasis on urban education instead of rural education, and adhere to the integrated development of urban and rural areas. In accordance with the "unified planning, unified standards, unified supervision, unified acceptance" requirements, the development of rural basic education should be regarded as a impetus to improve the overall quality and level of basic education, thus promoting the high-quality development of rural basic education and formulating an integrated construction pattern characterized by joint construction, governance and sharing. Two-way flow and integrated development of urban and rural resources should be advocated to effectively promote educational equity, ultimately realize the high-quality balance between urban and rural basic education, which helps to create an education that satisfies the people and accelerate the construction of a harmonious society.

5.1.2 Create a new layout for the high-quality and balanced development of basic education in both urban and rural areas

To promote the quality and balanced development of basic education in urban and rural areas, it is necessary to constantly adjust the pace of education development and to plan the new layout of schools scientifically, with quality and balanced development as the center. The layout of primary and secondary schools should be adjusted to consider the needs of urban development and the actual situation in the countryside, while also drawing on the experience of other cities in the layout of basic education. The new layout should provide sufficient space for the development of preschool education, which complies with the national policies --"implement a new round of preschool education action plans, accelerate the construction of inclusive preschool education resources in rural areas through multiple channels"(Chinese Ministry of Education, 2022). In addition, it should aim to consistently promote the coverage of inclusive kindergartens, and comprehensively improve the quality of preschool education. On the other hand, a special plan for the layout of primary and secondary schools should be formulated to adjust the distance between densely distributed primary and secondary schools in accordance with the growth in demand for school places and future trends in educational population growth, gradually increase and expand the number of schools, and steadily improve the average student floor space. When planning primary and secondary schools in rural areas, factors such as service radius and service capacity should be taken into account, and schools and teaching points should be set up in a reasonable manner to ensure full coverage of the educational service capacity of schools in the planned villages, so as to actively and steadily promote the adjustment of primary and secondary school layouts as a whole.

5.1.3 Create a new mechanism for high-quality and balanced development of basic education in both urban and rural areas

In March 2021, General Secretary Xi Jinping visited members of the education sector who attended the annual meeting of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. He stressed that "the direction of socialist schooling and the principle of public welfare in education should be adhered to, so as to build a high-quality and balanced basic public education service system, and a high-quality education system." (Xinhuanet, 2021)

It is more important for the government to focus on deepening the governance structure and system of public services for urban and rural basic education, thus implementing action of co-construction of high-quality and balanced urban and rural basic education. First, we should promote the legislation of local education laws and regulations, improve the legal system of local education, and provide a fundamental guarantee for the high-quality and balanced development of basic education. Second, we should establish and improve the education supervision index system of school supervision, evaluation, and testing. Supervisory duties should be performed in accordance with the law, which will effectively guide schools to run schools in a standardized manner and provide precise guidance for the improvement of education quality. Third, the reform of the teacher management and guarantee mechanism should be put in place to gradually alleviate the shortage of teachers in less developed areas and enhance the management service level of the teaching staff. We should deepen the reform of teacher development to cultivate a high-quality, professional, and innovative teaching staff and build a solid foundation for the construction of a high-quality education system.

5.1.4 Build a new platform for the high-quality and balanced development of basic education in both urban and rural areas

To achieve common prosperity, farmers should keep up with the times and obtain high-quality and balanced development of basic education. Villages should keep pace and play a chess game of balanced education. As a government department, on the one hand, it should actively build a platform for sharing basic education resources and introduce high-quality education resources in urban education, so that rural students can enjoy high-quality education like urban students without leaving home and have access to high-quality basic education resources. At the same time, we should also combine the development characteristics and different needs of basic education in various urban and rural areas and give classified guidance to give full play to the resource endowments of different regions. On the other hand, the government should also establish a sound mechanism of counterpart support as well as a bundled assessment system through policy guidance to mobilize the enthusiasm of urban schools for counterpart support, promote the continuous strengthening of communication and exchange between urban and rural schools, and help rural schools to improve comprehensively in various aspects such as teaching management, curriculum development and teaching standards, so as to finally realize the comprehensive improvement of teaching quality in urban and rural basic education and better meet people's demand for high-quality basic education.

5.1.5 Perfect the new financial system for the high-quality and balanced development of basic education in both urban and rural areas

Investment in education is a basic and strategic investment to support the long-term development of the country, and is the material foundation of education, as well as an important function of public finance. The central government keeps increasing the investment in basic education, ensuring that the public budget expenditure on education per student increases year by year. Governments at all levels should also further optimize the structure of the financial expenditure, clarify the share of financial responsibility to ensure that the financial investment in basic education is put into good use.

While guaranteeing sufficient capital investment, the problem of unbalanced resource

distribution should also be thoroughly solved. Resources urgently needed for the development of basic education in rural areas, such as sports equipment and network services, should be prioritized and guaranteed to “help poor areas share quality educational resources and continuously expand the coverage of quality educational resources.”(Chinese Ministry of Education, 2021). Investment should be increased in poor areas and weak schools to improve the software and hardware, narrow the unreasonable gap between urban and rural areas, and lay a solid material foundation for the realization of high-quality and balanced development of basic education in urban and rural areas.

5.2 Transform the concept of development and promote the high-quality and balanced development of basic education in urban and rural areas

5.2.1 Clarify the concept of school running and adhere to individual characteristics of development

With a distinctive philosophy, an organization can be long lasting and stable, shape a quality organizational culture, gather an organizational consensus, and become a quality organization that can share the common values (Huang, 1997). Both urban basic education and rural basic education need to further clarify the school orientation and development goals and establish a clear school-running philosophy. With a core value system of school philosophy, the action synergy can be formed from the principal down to the teachers and students. With all the above as basis, the sustainable development of basic education must also be rooted in the reality of the region and integrated with regional construction. In that sense, schools must stick to the principles such as people-oriented, creating a school culture with individual characteristics, considering the comprehensive development of all students as well as the development of students as individuals, which helps to ultimately form a unique school-running mode with distinctive characteristics and achieve the goal of high-quality cultivation of talents.

5.2.2 Carry out teaching reform to promote the improvement of teaching quality

The key to high-quality and balanced development of basic education lies in the overall improvement of the quality of education and teaching. In some provinces, schools choose to change their own education methods as an entry point to improve teaching quality or adopt innovative education and research models to deepen curriculum and teaching reforms to improve the quality of education and teaching. No matter in what way, both urban and rural schools should make greater efforts in education and teaching reform, scientifically formulating teaching plans and curriculum standards that are in line with students' reality while ensuring the full and complete implementation of the national curriculum. Meanwhile, schools should innovate education and teaching methods to promote the general improvement of knowledge, skills, and abilities of all students. In addition, schools should make greater efforts in the development of school-based curriculum, combining school characteristics with students' personality development to promote the continuous improvement of students' core literacy.

5.2.3 Improve school-running conditions and promote the continuous optimization of the education environment

At the present stage, the central government and local government departments and education management departments at all levels adopt the way of key support and special investment for basic education, especially in poor areas, and continuously increase the financial investment in urban and rural basic education to raise the standard of average public expenditure per student, and continuously improve the conditions of school operation. However, schools should not just rely on government financial allocations, but also expand channels to attract more private capital to invest in the construction of schools and achieve multi-directional investment in education funds.

Schools can take the initiative to contact the local government and call on caring enterprises to

donate to the school through various forms such as holding seminars and issuing initiative letters. Through measures of Party building, they can also bring together people who are enthusiastic about public welfare, set up a special education fund, and hold annual education donation activities every year to provide continuous financial support for the development of basic education. On the other hand, they can encourage successful alumni to donate as a way of back-feeding.

5.2.4 Improve the reform of the evaluation mechanism and realize the true return of basic education

The reform of basic education evaluation mechanism is mainly aimed at the improvement and development of teacher evaluation system. Xiong (2017) argues that the teacher evaluation system should not only respect the differences of all teachers in the process of professional growth, but also consider the uniqueness of their respective disciplines". By introducing multiple evaluation subjects and adopting various evaluation methods, the teacher's educational process, educational results, and the teacher's own growth are comprehensively evaluated, and the direct linkage of evaluation results to the teacher's interests such as promotion, bonuses, and appointments, so that teachers can devote themselves to the practical work of education and teaching, and make students' growth and teachers' development the ultimate goal, and comprehensively improve the quality of education and teaching. In addition, to ensure the fairness and impartiality of the evaluation, schools can also invoke third-party evaluation agencies to conduct qualitative and quantitative analysis of school evaluation indexes, to continuously improve the scientific, rigorous and comprehensive nature of the evaluation indexes.

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