

Towards Equality and Revitalization: Breaking the Dilemma of China's County-Level High Schools

Yuheng Zhou

Chengdu Foreign Language School, Chengdu, China
Email: 1441805677@qq.com

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Abstract

County-level high schools provide education to over half of China's high school students and are important pivots in bridging rural and urban China and allowing rural students to access higher education. In recent years, however, county-level high schools have been plagued by a collection of issues like student outflow, leading to deteriorating educational outcomes and public credibility, significantly undermining educational equality and the rural revitalization scheme. This phenomenon is called the county-level high school dilemma. Through analysis of a local county-level high school located in Heqing County, Yunnan Province, the present paper finds that the county-level high school dilemma is a combined result of student outflow, teaching quality deterioration, test-driven education, etc. The present paper provides an overview of the county-level high school dilemma and its background and explores its causes and policy implications to tackle the dilemma.

Keywords

County-Level High School, Rural Education, Rural Revitalization, Equality, Gaokao

1. Introduction

High school education in China underwent reform in the 1980s, marking the rising importance of public education and talent cultivation. The reforms initiated the implementation of compulsory education, the elimination of illiteracy, and the administrative structure of education. The reform has been extraordinarily successful; in 2022, the completion rate of nine-year compulsory education reached 95.5%, and the gross enrolment rate at senior high schools reached

91.6% (Ministry of Education, 2023). At the early stages of reform, education provided students from rural regions the access to education they needed, boosting equality. However, moving into the 21st century, efficiency in the allocation of educational resources became the new focus. Top resources are available to the top students and top schools, whereas equality, the equal access to education for underprivileged and average students, is neglected.

It was not until recently that policymakers started rethinking the future path of development of Chinese education; the keyword is “*county-level high schools*”. County-level high schools are brought into the Chinese public policy lexicon as part of the *Action Plan for Promoting Development of Regular Senior High Schools at the County Level During the 14th Five-year Plan*, which aims to rejuvenate county-level education as part of the rural revitalization scheme.

County-level high schools refer to ordinary high schools held by counties or county-level cities, which, together with rural regions, accommodate the majority of China’s population. The county-level high schools discussed in the present paper are those located in minor cities or rural townships that play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between rural and urban China, as they provide platforms of education to children from underdeveloped rural regions and allow for increased social mobility in low-income families. County-level high schools are an important pivot of China’s rural revitalization scheme since they promote county development and population retention. As of 2020, of the 14,200 ordinary high schools in China, over 51% are county-level high schools, and over 59% of Chinese ordinary high school students attend county-level high schools (Ministry of Education, 2021).

In recent years, however, county-level high schools have suffered from a series of problems; media and researchers in China have documented deterioration in county educational ecosystems, characterized by sharp outflows of teachers, underinvestment in average-performing students, cross-region enrollment of students, etc. Chinese media refer to this collection of phenomena as the “county-level high school dilemma” (*Xian Zhong Kun Jing*). The dilemma is the epitome of the greater rural decline in China under rapid urbanization, characterized by hollowing rural villages, crowded towns, and cities, and stagnated agricultural development. Given the importance and fundamentality of county-level high schools, the dilemma may develop into long-term stagnation of education qualities in rural China, exacerbating educational inequality and beyond. However, the issue has received surprisingly little attention from the academia. The purpose of the present paper is to bring attention to the county-level high school dilemma, explore and study its causes, and suggest policies for tackling the dilemma.

2. Research Context & Framework

Understanding the county-level high school dilemma is a vital step towards formulating policies to achieve greater educational equality in China but also

towards creating empirical reference of adjusting education systems to fit the broader context of urbanization; while nations face different challenges and conditions, the similarity in the need to address educational inequality and rural decline is shared. The United States, for example, is plagued by rural brain drain and the hollowing of America's heartland. Many issues like underinvestment in the "stayers" as Carr and Kefalas (2010) described in their book *Hollowing Out the Middle* are by no means limited to the United States or developed countries, growing economies will ultimately experience similar challenges. Thus, the present paper wishes to bring attention to rural education in the Chinese context.

Unlike the focus given to rural education in the United States, there is currently only a limited amount of study that directly addresses the county-level high school dilemma, all of which are works by Chinese scholars published in Chinese journals. Zou (2022) and Qiu (2022) provided overviews of the dilemma, including characteristics of the dilemma and potential solutions, but did not provide a specific case study of the dilemma. Other scholars worked on strategies to tackle the dilemma; Gao and Li (2023) explored the potential of incorporating information technologies in education to promote the sharing of educational resources, improve school management, and complete the school evaluation system. Wu (2022) examines how the *Specialized Program for Colleges and Universities* would reduce the plight of student outflow. These solutions, however, do not target the specific problems observed in a county-level high school scenario. The present paper fills the gap by identifying the causes and factors contributing to the county-level high school dilemma and suggesting corresponding policies targeting the identified issues.

2.1. Education Administration

The responsibility of education management in China is divided into two administrative levels: the provincial level and its subordinate county level. Provincial-level governments mandate and exercise their own education policies under the regulatory framework of the central government while county-level governments implement these policies (Luo, 2019). The provision and delivery of primary and secondary education as part of the Nine-Year Compulsory Education, are undertaken by county-level governments.

2.2. Education Consolidation

An important context behind the county-level high school dilemma is the education consolidation policies starting in 2001, during which smaller schools are combined and relocated to form a single, large school, allowing for increased teaching scale and efficiency. However, rural primary schools have reduced significantly in number in recent years as a result of school consolidation, in addition to the severe disadvantage school consolidation creates for left-behind children or children in remote regions who struggle to travel to central schools,

laying the foundation for the county-level high school dilemma and rural educational stagnation in general. The disappearance of Chinese rural primary schools is another topic that requires academic examination and policy support in the future. School consolidation also resulted in, in many cases, classes too large for school staff to adequately manage and educate.

2.3. Super High Schools

Super high schools refer to large secondary schools with strong-performance students, advantageous teaching resources, and thus high popularity (Hu, 2022). These schools are often located in megacities or provincial capitals, monopolize top teaching resources, and perform the best in Gaokao, in turn enhancing the Matthew Effect. Many super high schools are the product of China's establishment of "key" high schools, relative to "ordinary" high schools, since 1953, a set of policies aimed similarly to increase the efficiency of education and talent production. The cycle of super high schools attracting top students, and becoming even better, would ultimately weigh on ordinary county-level high schools, thus exacerbating the county-level high school dilemma.

2.4. Gaokao at County-Level High Schools

Higher education is viewed in China as an important, if not the only, way of changing one's social status and becoming more socially mobile; the purpose of middle or high school, thus, is believed to be solely helping a student graduate into a top university through the National College Entrance Examinations, or Gaokao, taken by nearly 10 million Chinese students annually. The public evaluates a high school through the number of students who graduate into Tsinghua University and Peking University (*Qing Bei*) or other first-batch universities (*Yi Ben*). This test-driven understanding of education will shape much of China's ordinary high schools, as this paper will elaborate on shortly.

Early literature around 2005 captures what is called the "county-level high school phenomenon" (*Xian Zhong Xian Xiang*), characterized by the concentration of a county's resources in the establishment of one or two key middle schools (Wang & Zhao, 2005). The "county-level high school phenomenon" is a manifestation of the school consolidation process, during which county-level high schools reached their highest level of student performance at Gaokao and public support due to the integration of teaching resources. In the meantime, county-level high schools evolved a mode of education that upholds stringent regulation of student schedules and education under the Gaokao-driven education system, known as the "County-level High School Mode" (*Xian Zhong Mo Shi*), or even further, the "Hengshui School Mode" (*Heng Shui Mo Shi*), where students have rigorous schedules, are required to practice large amounts of test-questions and are subject to rigid management. Students' weekends and holidays are often occupied by and used for extra lessons, leaving little time for family education or entertainment. Cao (2012) first expressed concern about this

“dilemma of moral education”, marking the earliest literature to look at components of the county-level high school dilemma.

2.5. Student Supply

Performance at the Senior High School Entrance Examination, or Zhongkao, determines which high schools a student would be able to enter. High schools enroll students based on their cut-off score; students who reach the score can choose to attend that school; this stream of incoming students is termed “student supply” (*Sheng Yuan*).

Thus, Zhongkao serves to separate the large middle-school student pool into different supplies of students based on their testing performance, who would enter different high schools (**Figure 1**). High schools with advantageous resources or established reputations can set higher cut-off scores to attract and select top-performing students. In this case, students with high testing performance to start with receive education at advantageous platforms, allowing for

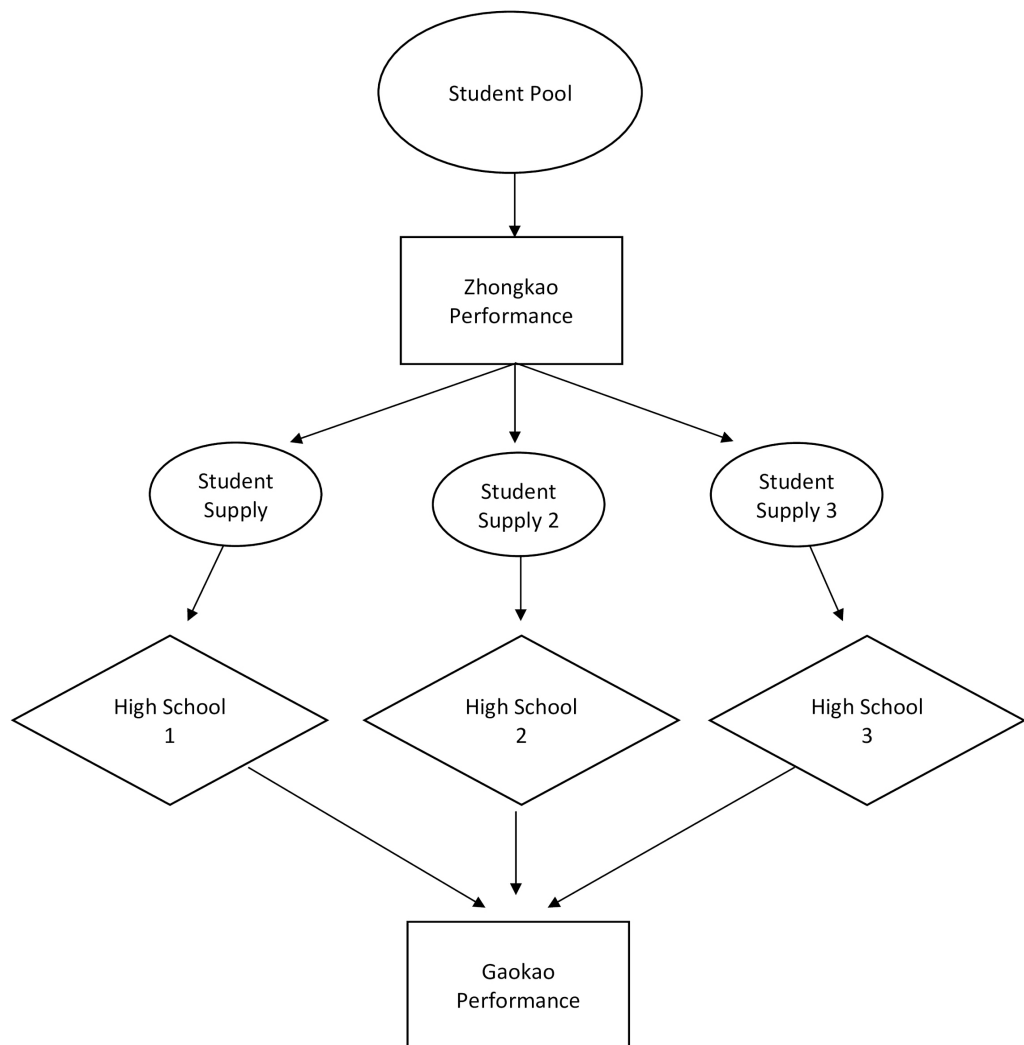


Figure 1. The student supply system.

high Gaokao performance in general, which further boosts the school's reputation, government funding, or private investments in future rounds of student enrollment. It is through this cycle that many super high schools, like the famous Hengshui No.1 High School (from which the "Hengshui School Mode" originated), emerged and evolved. Student supply plays an important role in the county-level high school dilemma as it determines a high school's future development, as the paper will address later.

3. Methodology

The present paper puts the dilemma in the context of a typical Chinese county-level high school, Heqing No.1 Middle School, located in Heqing County, Yunnan; a partial map is shown below for reference (Figure 2).

Questionnaires are delivered to teachers, a class of students, and their parents. The study design is shown as follows (Figure 3):



Figure 2. A partial map of Heqing.

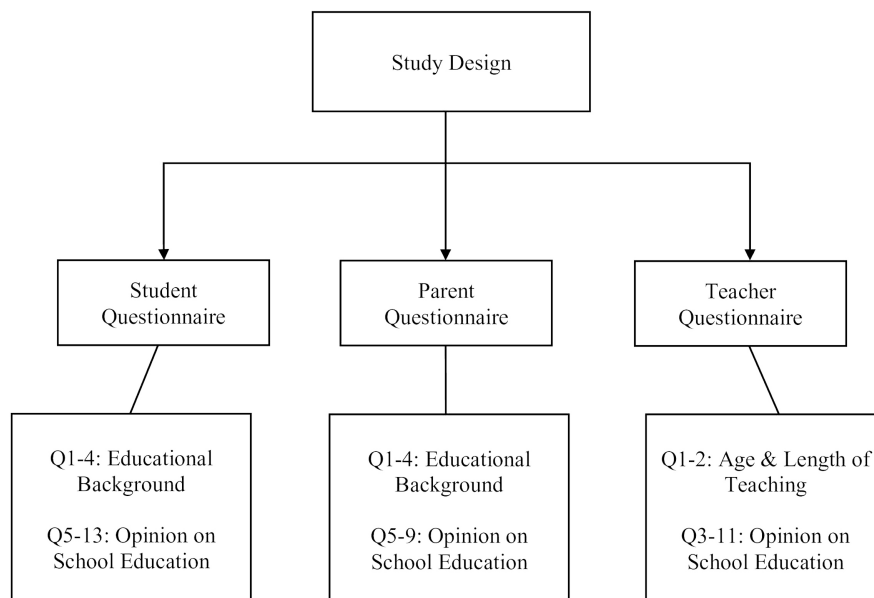


Figure 3. Study design.

A total of 48 out of 60 effective student questionnaires were collected, a total of 48 out of 60 effective parent questionnaires were collected, and a total of 8 out of 8 effective teacher questionnaires were collected. In addition, interviews were conducted with the school management team, including the school principal, to better grasp the county-level high school dilemma. The student questionnaire consists of 13 questions, designed to understand the change in educational quality of the school, the satisfaction level of the student, the educational background of the student, and suggestions for educational improvement from the student. The parent questionnaire consists of 9 questions, designed to understand parental educational expectations, the satisfaction level of parents, and suggestions from the parent. The teacher questionnaire consists of 11 questions, designed to understand the dilemma from the perspective of teaching staff.

The geographic composition of the students surveyed is relatively dispersed (Table 1).

Heqing No.1 Middle School is selected as the target school of the present study as it is the largest secondary school in the county, is representative of local high school students, and allows for understanding of changes in factors like government funding and student choices.

Results from the questionnaires and interviews are analyzed collectively in the rest of this paper with empirical data to arrive at a holistic profile of the county-level high school dilemma.

4. Case Area Introduction

Heqing No.1 Middle School is a complete secondary school (includes both a junior and senior secondary school) located in Heqing County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province. With a permanent resident population of

Table 1. Geographic composition of surveyed students.

Currently Live At	Count
Yunhe Town (County-town)	13
Caohai Town	5
Xingtun Town	6
Songgui Town	8
Longkaikou Town	3
Liuhe Yi Nationality Town	3
Others	10

243,031 (by 2020), Heqing has an abundance of mineral resources, and its industrial structure is dominated by manufacturing and secondary industries. There are only two local high schools at Heqing. No.1 Middle School is located in the county town, Yunhe Town, and stands as the best local secondary school (in terms of Gaokao results and popularity), relative to No.3 Middle School, which is located not far from No.1 Middle School, at Caohai Town. No.2 Middle School used to be a complete secondary school located far from No.1 and No.3 Middle School, but the school was later transformed into a junior secondary school during a long process as part of the education consolidation process.

In recent years, Heqing No.1 Middle School saw difficulties in school management and Gaokao results, its overall Gaokao performance being the lowest in the past four years. Poor performance reduces the credibility of the school and drives top students away. Competition from key high schools at provincial levels exacerbates the predicament. Although No. 1 Middle School is not a completely fallen high school, parts of it do show signs of stagnation that are worth examining.

5. Results and Analysis

We arrived at several key findings for causes of the county-level high school dilemma after our interview with the school principal. Results will be discussed in combination with evidence from other regions of China to arrive at a holistic conclusion.

5.1. Student Supply

The quality (in terms of Zhongkao performance) of student supply determines Heqing No.1 Middle School's Gaokao results, which further influences the next round of student enrollment. To secure the Gaokao results of at least a small group of top students, the school set up the "Class of Pearl" (*Zhen Zhu Ban*) and "Class of Eminence" (*Xing Jie Ban*), each including 50 top students selected through Zhongkao results. The Class of Pearl is open to a maximum of 20 students outside of the county and provides full scholarships and subsidies to the selected students. The Class of Eminence is similar in design but more dynamic

in practice, whereby students in the class will be evaluated annually and underperformers will be removed from the class to be substituted by others. Even with policies to secure and improve student supply quality, it is still a frequently mentioned phenomenon during our interviews. When asked why they believe Gaokao results at No.1 High School worsened in recent years, 5 out of the 10 teachers surveyed chose “student supply”.

5.1.1. Talent Drain

The outflow of high-quality student supply is what most significantly impacted Heqing No.1 Middle School. Heqing No.1 Middle School faces fierce enrollment competition from regional key high schools like Dali No.1 Middle School, Xiaoguan No.1 Middle School, and Dali National Secondary School, to which many local students flow every year. It is commonly held, and usually true, that provincial-level or key high schools have better educational resources and are better for Gaokao results; 47 out of the 48 parents surveyed selected “yes” when asked whether they are willing to send their children to “key high schools for education”; in this case, the educational mobility of students is determined by the income-level and wealth of the student’s family. Parents generally believe that provincial-level or key high schools provide higher-quality education and are better channels for higher education. Under this gravity, school policies to subsidize and retain students fail to achieve the desired effects, for parents view the benefits of improved education over subsidies or scholarships. When asked how they believe student supply quality at the No.1 Middle School has changed in recent years, 9 out of the 10 teachers surveyed have chosen “gotten worse”. More detailed examination and interviews have led the present paper to conclude the following causes of deteriorating student supply quality.

5.1.2. Trans-Regional Enrollment

The trans-regional enrollment of students is a common practice where key high schools enroll students who are not residents. It is usually through these enrollment practices that many super high schools can attract students from other counties or subordinate schools and divert student supply from ordinary county-level high schools. Recent policy guidelines specified in the 14th Five-Year Plan target and seek to limit the trans-regional enrollment of students, but the practice is still common in much of China. Trans-regional enrollment exacerbates the Matthew Effect of key high schools. Heqing No.1 Middle School is not subject to cross-region enrollment but is plagued by the outflow of students to schools at higher administrative units, like provincial schools. [Zhou and Yang \(2022\)](#) studied trans-regional enrollment and results show that advantaged schools are likely to accumulate high-quality student supply while disadvantaged schools are likely to have a deteriorating student supply. In the province of their study, the rate of graduating into first-batch universities increased by over 26% through cross-regional enrollment at the top local school while decreasing to zero at weaker schools.

5.1.3. Peer Effects

“With the top students gone, the average students have less competition, so they work less hard.” The outflow of top students reduces overall competition in the school environment; remaining students will be less driven by peer pressure, diminishing the Catfish Effect and thus performance at Gaokao. We found that the lack of peer effect primarily impacts top students, who face little to no competition from the rest. Average students tend to be less influenced as they still face competition from the majority of students. Students at Heqing No.1 Middle School are commonly aware of the importance of their education and strive for better scores. 47 out of the 48 students have educational expectations for themselves at or above a bachelor’s degree and 35 believe that their peers “attach importance” or “attach much importance” to learning and education. A positive correlation can be observed between the reported intensity of peer effects and education expectations of the students, likely because those who have high education expectations would be more sensitive to their surrounding competitions, which would impact their pursuit of higher education. School teachers, however, believe that students are less internally driven than before, which can impact the long-term development of the school despite that students are aware of the importance of Gaokao. Compared to students at No.1 High School, teachers generally hold more negative and pessimistic views towards the past and future development of the school.

5.1.4. Intra-County Competition

As part of the educational consolidation policy, No.2 Middle School was transformed into a junior middle school. In addition, No.1 and No.3 Middle School used to be parallel competitors with similar student composition and Gaokao results, however, as students and teachers flew into the county-town, No.1 Middle School became the local monopoly of top educational resources. The availability of school choice stimulates inter-school competition and raises school performance; hence, the reduction of competition in the local educational ecosystem reduced the need for the No.1 Middle School to improve its schooling quality to attract average and certain top local students, contributing to the fall in Gaokao results and student outflow.

5.1.5. Nepotism

There are only a few students who entered Heqing No.1 Middle School through nepotism and filiation with school staff, and while teachers expressed the need to resolve this issue, it did not appear to have impacted student supply overtly as did other factors. However, nepotism may be a prominent issue in smaller or more remote regions, where the local society is more compact and depends more on social relations.

5.2. Teachers

As the direct implementers of test-based education, teachers are an important component of county-level schooling. Teaching quality is a vital determinant of

the development prospect of county-level high schools. Although teachers do not contribute substantially to the county-level high school dilemma in the case of Heqing No.1 High School, we noticed several hidden dangers that may hit the school in the future.

5.2.1. Stimulus Mechanism

Quoting the principal “Yes, teachers can be driven by their sense of mission, passion, and love for education for one, two, or even three years, but ultimately they will become discouraged if you don’t stimulate them.” Teachers at Heqing No.1 Middle School lack a stimulus mechanism, that is, their salaries are independent of their teaching outcomes (performance of their students at the Gaokao), and older teachers who are close to retirement, who are likely qualified for and enrolled in China’s *Bianzhi* system, are even more secured to their jobs and thus lack any motivation to improve their teaching qualities. During interviews, teachers complained that their salaries are lower than those who teach at rural primary schools, who receive subsidies from the government and have far less workload, and 6 out of the 10 teachers interviewed believe that “raising salary” is the best way to improve the quality of teaching. Although not quantifiable at this point, the lack of vigor and improvements in teaching, the principal worries, would eventually lower overall student performance in Gaokao, which would harm the school’s reputation, especially among the top junior students who are choosing their high schools with care. In addition, the lack of thought put into class also results in a lack of individualized teaching, which is especially detrimental to students who are struggling to catch up with class content.

5.2.2. Regulation Enforcement

A bottom-out system is in place at Heqing No.1 Middle School to check and supervise the teachers; teachers are evaluated based on their teaching performance regularly, and underperformers will be replaced. However, such regulations lack enforcement, and bottom performers are often just orally admonished with no penalty given. “Only one or two teachers are dismissed every year.” The bottom-out system should have been an effective method to motivate teaching innovation and improvements, but the failure to enforce it reduced the vitality of teaching.

5.2.3. Brain Drain

The outflow of teachers is not evident in Heqing No.1 Middle School, likely because the county-town is relatively developed at Heqing and teachers are not subject to push factors like low income or undesirable living conditions that would otherwise be prominent in less developed regions and we urge scholars to pay attention to the outflow of teachers in future research.

5.3. Funding

According to the principal, inadequate funding has been a major contributor to Heqing No.1 Middle School’s fall. Talent retention with both students and teachers

would incur additional costs for the school and expenditures for the county. Public education struggles to compete in efficiency with private education which attracts more resources and investments. County-level governments, like that of Heqing, who are the undertakers of rural public education, are subject to fiscal strains and still recovering from the impacts of COVID-19. Central funding is often difficult to obtain, and municipal governments tend to tilt funding towards the key high schools. Redesigning the allocation of funds towards education and increasing public funding is a necessary step to secure the baseline recovery of county-level high schools.

5.4. Other Issues

5.4.1. Test-Driven Education

We deemed that the “county-level high school mode” is the act of county-level high schools attempting to fulfill social expectations under the test-driven environment, where Gaokao results are held as the only testification of educational outcomes. While this mode is the inevitable product of national standardized testing, we believe that it should be the center for reform in the future as the mode is inherently unsustainable at Heqing No.1 Middle School. Parents are more concerned with the management and moral education of students than before; when asked if they have suggestions for school improvement, 15 out of the 48 parents surveyed responded that the school should pay attention to the mental health of students and the academic pressures of students, and 10 believed that student management should be improved at the school. Through interviews, we learned that students who are stressed out under a test-driven environment are likely to seek escapism or comfort through smoking, violence, and dropping out. This, again, highlights the importance of family education.

Admittedly, test-driven education benefits a proportion of students who can move up the social ladder through Gaokao, but the more important criteria of education, such as the shaping of personality and nurturing of mental maturity, are often ignored in this process. More importantly, students who do not desire to participate in the fierce competition are not given an alternative, so they are left out of the current educational system. The chase for efficiency mandates that resources are devoted to the top students, whereas equality, the education of the average student, is neglected.

5.4.2. Family Education

Most surveyed students, and many students at Heqing No.1 Middle School, are not from the county town. In addition, 23 out of the 48 parents we surveyed are involved in agriculture with works primarily located in peripheral Heqing. Students at Heqing No.1 Middle School, especially 12th-grade students who are close to taking the Gaokao, leave school for less than a day every week; for the rest of the time students stay in school, and a request form is needed every time the student wishes to leave campus. Under this rigorous routine, and given the family context of students, family education is often lacking. Parents seem to en-

trust education fully to the school, as aforementioned, 25 out of the 48 parents suggest that the school manage students more tightly and pay attention to the mental health of students. We observed that parents who work in labor-intensive industries, such as manufacturing or agriculture, and have a low education background are more likely to suggest more strict management and moral education to the students. We infer that this is because these parents likely spend comparatively less time with their children, and are more educationally insecure, thus believing that the school should pay more attention and be the major player in the child's education. While the school plays an important role in providing the peer environment and knowledge-based education needs, family education must not be ignored. The lack of family education is likely a common issue across counties in China because of the school consolidation policies, where rural students must attend and board at schools in central towns, leaving little room for family time and parent-child activities.

5.4.3. Extracurricular Activities

The lack of extracurricular activities is a direct result of the test-driven environment, where a student's time is believed to be used efficiently only when it is spent on test preparation. While more policies are in progress to ensure and improve extracurricular activities, such as the "Opinions on *Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving School Health and Health Education in the New Era*" released by the Ministry of Education, which requires at least an hour of physical activity time every day, many schools, like Heqing No.1 Middle School, fail to meet these standards; the only physical activity at most county-level high schools are the fixed routine of morning exercises during the short recess, including jogging and fitness dance. Increasing extracurricular activities is the second most frequent comment we received when students are asked what they believe the school should improve on. We also received comments that the school schedule is too tight and rigorous. While testing is the most effective way to inspect education outcomes, education is not only a means to achieve better testing results, but also an end to the shaping of a well-rounded individual, which is supplemented by experiences outside the classroom.

5.4.4. Staff Attitude

Although this is not an issue that seems to directly contribute to the county-level high school dilemma, we believe it is worth mentioning. We received frequent complaints that the school staff, and housemasters, in particular, treat students abusively with common use of swear words. Schools should provide a belonging environment to their students, and housemasters, as the main supervisors of students outside the classroom, should play a guiding role to the students, which is a vital part of the personality shaping of students.

6. Policy Implications

The following section introduces several key policies we believe should be im-

plemented to tackle issues related to the county-level high school dilemma (Figure 4).

6.1. School-Level

Talent retention is already the focus of policymakers and school managers, so the present paper will primarily introduce new policy implications we found. Current policies seek to prevent student outflow by setting up enrollment restrictions. However, we believe the focus of educational policies under urbanization should be focused on how county-level high schools would survive and compete with key high schools in a scenario where student outflow is not preventable, the most likely case given the regional development disparities. We believe the path to future county-level education development is a smart reform, whereby schools incorporate management technologies, teachers utilize online educational resources, and students are managed over a comprehensive system. Schools should collaborate in the sharing of information and exchange experiences in smart education to remedy the urban-rural gap in educational resources.

Another important that current policies seem to fail to address is the attention paid to the “average students”. Under the typical Chinese perception, the “average students” and the academically “bad students” are often chastised by teachers for being indolent and not wishing to better themselves, thus under investing in these students. School managers need to rethink how they evaluate teaching

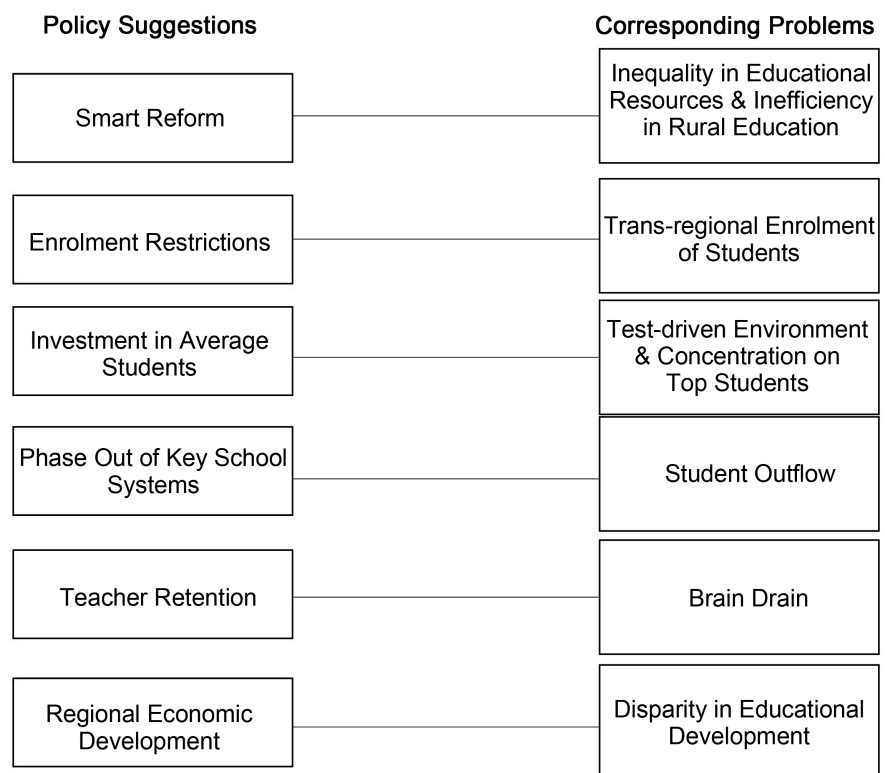


Figure 4. Suggested policies & corresponding problems.

outcomes; we propose that schools take student satisfaction and class atmosphere into consideration. The “average students”, as well as those who are not so adapted to the test-driven environment are individuals in need of education before they become stratified by their test results, who each require nurture, tendance, and personality guidance. Moral education and psychological counseling should be regular courses in any school’s curriculum.

6.2. County-Level

Education is not a private investment; county governments should reduce the proportion of risk-reward consideration in their decision-making when it comes to public education. Funding, resources, and favorable policies should not be tilted to the few municipal- or provincial-level schools. We propose that the key school system should be gradually phased out in contemporary China, where education equality should take priority over efficiency. In addition, the county government should actively support schools in the building of information and technology systems to improve schooling efficiency. In addition, county-level governments will play the main role in retaining and attracting teachers. We suggest that counties should set up more robust teacher-supportive policies, such as housing allowance, schooling provision for teacher’s children, etc.

With all said, the county-level high school dilemma, and the educational inequality it embodies, are symptoms of the regional disparity in economic development; all measures taken should be based on the progress of rural China revitalization.

7. Limitations

The present paper fails to examine the development of county-level high schools in economically underdeveloped regions, which may expose more issues associated with the county-level high school dilemma.

In addition, we were unable to obtain data from the county governments regarding its future fiscal plan on education expenditure, preventing us from drawing a comprehensive conclusion over whether the insufficiency in funding is temporary or long-term, and whether it will deteriorate in the future.

8. Conclusion

The county-level high school dilemma is the combined result of a series of student-, teacher-, and funding-related issues. In the case of Heqing No. 1 High School, deteriorating student supply and student outflow are the most significant contributors to its current plight as the result of attraction from provincial or key high schools and the transregional enrollment of students. The reduction in competition, between students and between local schools, also played an important role. While teacher-related issues do not currently contribute significantly to the dilemma, they will likely hinder the development of county education in the long run as the lack of stimulus mechanism and regulation enforcement

leads to unsustainable teaching quality and innovation. Funding insufficiency also plagues Heqing No. 1 High School, in addition to several other issues such as the test-driven environment, lack of family education, etc. To tackle to county-level high school dilemma, we propose a shift to a smart mode of education and management, the phase-out of key schools, and county-direct policies to retain and attract teachers, on the basis of rural revitalization.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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