

## School District System: A Realistic Way to Crack the Problem of Compulsory Education School Selection for Students in China

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### Abstract

Looking through “nearest school entrance” policy evolution in China for nearly 30 years, the inherent logic of its value pursuit should act as receive compulsory education equally, whereas neighborhood entrance is just a path to realize the equality. However, under the circumstance of huge gap between different schools in China, neighborhood entrance policy will not necessarily lead to education fair, but only a sub-optimal choice. School district system is a bold breakthrough of institutionalized “nearest school entrance” policy. Through building rational “students flow” system, it meets the individualized education demand of parents, and ensure education equality. Therefore, school district division standard should transform from adhering to convenient education administrative to the free, flexible and convenient choices for students to choose school. School district division should also stick to the coordination of three principles: “nearest school entering, student needs and school developments”. The policy should also be rooted in multiple school division on the basis of relevantly balanced school resource, appropriate promotion of students flow, exploration of scientific district management mode, changing from the “gap cooperation” to “difference cooperation”, so as to build a connotation development path.

**Key words:** Compulsory education; School selection; School district system; Realistic way; Scientific district management mode

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### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, China has promulgated a variety of governance policy on school selection management. But school selection is continually repeated and intensified, which becomes irritating dilemma for students and parents. The fundamental reason lies in relative lacking and uneven distribution of educational resources. But through analysis of the education system, “nearest school entrance” policy and its execution process presents loopholes one after another. Starting from basic education rights, school selection is not wrong in itself. It even has equal education significance, but the key is the problems appeared along school selection.

“Nearest school entrance” targets at compulsory education stage students’ entrance opportunity inequality according to study grades difference. Provisions of the policy proposes that school-age children and adolescents attending to nearest specified schools according to administrative planning district, which could avoid inter-district school selection, and effectively protect the basic equality of school entrance opportunity theoretically. But the reality is, “nearest school entrance” policy has been institutionalized and become goal oriented. It has deviated from the original value pursuit and evolves into educational administrative objectives. If mandatory emphasis on “nearest school entrance” is placed, greater injustice might be caused. Therefore, the primary strategy is to adhere to the principle of nearest school entrance, eliminate gray areas of school district division, and coordinate three major indicators of “balance, nearest school entrance and students flow”. Secondly,

overall coordinated planning should be emphasized. Put comprehensive consideration on the elements inside the school district, so as to achieve reasonable coordination of students flow. Share high-quality resources within the school district, change from “Gap Cooperation” to “Difference Cooperation”, create school connotation development mode, share regional spiritual and cultural resources, so that the school district could become a platform for school development.

## **1. THEORY ORIGIN: THE STANDING POINT FOR “SCHOOL DISTRICT SYSTEM” TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF COMPULSORY EDUCATION SCHOOL SELECTION**

“Nearest school entrance” policy is a breakthrough in using education law under the new situation to effectively solve the problem of school selection. Since “Compulsory Education Law of the people’s Republic of China” in 1986 has been issued, the policy of compulsory education enrollment has been made a clear definition in law. This policy has become the guarantee of compulsory education in China’s normal implementation, reducing social costs, convenience of school entrance etc..

However, the actual situation of “nearest school entrance” policy itself is even more flawed. The first flaw lies in the current inter-school gap between different regions across China, which leads to a result of children living beside high-qualified schools is granted access to a high-quality education, while children living beside poor-qualified schools have no choices but to accept poor-quality education. Requiring students to accept compulsory education of different qualities unconditionally is obviously unfair. The second flaw is that defining the area of neighborhood is not easy to operate. With the impact of school layout and scale, and other historical factors, “neighborhood” is quite difficult to quantify provisions, which prone to lead strange phenomenon of students being refused by qualified schools just a wall away. The equality of compulsory education reflected in “nearest school entrance” policy has been broke away by the reality of imbalanced educational resources.

Compulsory education “nearest school entrance” policy has placed its ideal aims at “everyone has the right to receive education”, “everyone has the right to receive high quality education” and “everyone has the right to receive ‘personalized’ education”. Under realistic conditions, “nearest school entrance” policy can only ensure that everyone has the right to receive education, cannot fully ensure every student receives high quality or “individualized” education. However,

current problems of school selection are heinous, more detrimental to education equality. Under the same premise of sticking to the principle of “nearest school entrance” policy, with the reality of compulsory education quality resource imbalanced distribution, how to coordinate the relationship between “nearest school entrance” policy and school selection, is an imminent problem to solve. “Nearest school entrance” policy can save children’s time at school, due to a reduction in physical and mental fatigue along the distant journey of coming to schools. From another aspect, this method is conducive to degree configuration for children by local education authorities, and reduces possible management confusion, so as to lighten the burden on students, and highlight the pursuit of educational equity.

But in the face of reality, the qualities of each school’s resources are not equal and reasonably distributed, while it is not humane to completely put a ban on school selection. Therefore, a necessary and reality choice must be the reform of School District System, getting rid of institutionalization in nearby enrollment policy, returning to its basic value rational reflection, and gradually establishing a “student mobility” policy with rational value pursuit of respecting citizens’ right to choose schools under education equality. Put full consideration on school district structure, division of the School District reasonably and flexibly, and allow appropriate student mobility in the area to prevent solidification. At the same time, set improving the quality of education as the guide, co-build characteristic school districts, looking for developing path of connotation, meeting the reasonable educational needs of parents and students, and achieve the goal of quality and balanced development of compulsory education.

## **2. VALUE RECONSTRUCTION: PROMOTING THE GOAL OF BALANCED DEVELOPMENT OF REGIONAL COMPULSORY EDUCATION**

The State long term educational reform and development plan of China (2010-2020) has put forward that by 2020, the goals of comprehensively improve the level of education popularity, and comprehensively improve the quality of education, the basic realization of regional balanced development, ensuring that school-age children to receive high-quality compulsory education should be realized. Visibly, balanced development has become the top priority of Chinese compulsory education, while the balanced development of compulsory education is between urban and rural areas, between regions, between schools, groups and other levels.

Starting from the reality, on these multiple levels, it is imperative to take the lead in achieving quality balanced

development in the inner region, especially within the scope of the county (city, district). A variety of practical path to achieve high quality and balanced development of compulsory education in the region, in the region of the balance between schools variable to balance school district, is a realistic choice. The balanced development of compulsory high-quality education has given school district a new concept and functions, so that school district has become a new educational management, teaching and research activities and resource allocation unit. School district system has become a unique path to promote the balanced development of compulsory education in the region (Hu, 2012). As a regional education management intermediary between administrative district and school, school district emphasis on the school district school resource sharing and unified management, and committed to promoting quality balanced development across and inside the school district.

Although management levels have been increased between the school and the regional education authorities, but these levels are not administrative levels. They have provided equal, efficient and stable platforms for resource sharing, cooperation and exchanges, and promoted communication across different school stages and different types of schools to meet the educational needs of different students and parents. Therefore, quality balanced development of regional education is not only the power to promote the district reform, but also the realistic choice on the balance of nearby school entrance and school selection and the lofty strategy in the implementation of the compulsory education equality.

### 3. PRACTICAL DILEMMA: THE REALITY SITUATION IN SOLVING SCHOOL SELECTION DILEMMA BY SCHOOL DISTRICT

In 2014, Ministry of Education in China has released a document *Implementation Opinions on Examination Deprivation in Junior School Enrollment*, this document focuses its work focused on 19 major cities. Chinese government recently issued *Notification on Further Examination Deprivation in Junior School Enrollment of Key Urban Cities*, and it carried out a comprehensive plan in realizing compulsory education. But in the actual promotion process, “district division” has become a key link. Under the background of high-quality educational resources shortage, how to coordinate and allocate educational resources, reasonably divide enrollment area, put compulsory exemption enrollment policy into reality, has become a test of the wisdom of the masses (Ye, 2014). Of course, school district system is not a simple copy of nearby enrollment policy, and not an unconstrained imagination deviated from main chord,

but the optimal selection through history and reality contest. Therefore, it is necessary to face up to the difficulties encountered in implementation of the school district system at present.

#### 3.1 The Division of the School District Is Not Reasonable

The division of school district is based upon primary and secondary schools distribution, school enrollment capacity and relevant student population distribution. According to the division of the regional management of the residence of students, students attend school in provided school district. The purpose of the school district division is to facilitate students to the nearest schools, and the convenience of school administrative management. And the nearby school enrollment policy is based on existing school district division policies, and policy provisions stated that students should attend the schools according to nearby residence areas instead of admission determined by students’ test results (Ren & Hu, 2010).

But as there is a gap between the schools, education equality presented by nearby enrollment policy has been broken down by unbalanced education resource reality. At present, there are some parents concerned about “how to ensure that the school strict division be scientific and reasonable,” whether the division standard be administrative division or regional residence division, quality education balance of supply and demand is difficult to achieve. Therefore, “nearest” is not the guideline in school district division, but should be the principle to follow. School district division needs to consider local schools distribution, geographical location, administrative jurisdiction area, community and school admission age, and other comprehensive factors, not a simple one size fits all. At present there are three district division forms: single school dicing, multiple schools scribing and nine school years helicopter. The existing main problems at present would be, with the enrollment being visible step by step, original school selection by parental choice, now changes to buy school district room. The hot primary residences of school-age children has been beyond the number of school enrollment plan for several years, especially old city center or center school bustling areas where gathering high-quality resources, the geographical position be superior and with deeper historical and cultural heritage and other advantages. Conversely, new city center or the weak schools areas is not favored.

In short, the phenomenon of school district room occurred mainly in unevenly distributed schools and nine-year school helicopter resource advantages. Secondly, there still exist problems of unbalanced developmental gap between different districts and junior schools. Unreasonable schools allocation and inadequate admission in some schools while overcrowded in some

other schools. At last, the key to examination deprivation in primary schools entering junior schools lies not in “nearest”, “examination deprivation”, “balanced”, but in narrowing the gap between schools. Only by building characteristic schools, can parents abandon inner motive of deviating from the nearest schools and coming to further while high-qualified schools. In a nutshell, district division should put the admission standard on students’ school census instead of household census register. Put high-quality junior schools inside multiple school district admission, which will be welcomed more by students and parents. From this perspective, if junior high schools are not too far away, then scribing across multiple schools is considered as the main form will be more reasonable. At the same time, scribing across multiple schools sometimes is very difficult to balance the number of junior high school freshmen enrollment and primary school graduates. The overflow of elementary school graduates should be allowed to enter school enrollment in adjacent areas.

### **3.2 School District Management Is Not Scientific**

At present, school district management is still in the process of exploration and construction while the process is not steady. From the local school district management policy and practice, the school district functions, organizational structure, operating mechanism and effectiveness are also different from each other. The implementation of school district management should be emphasized, so that the educational resources in the school district can flow from “school” into “all”, the scope of the balanced allocation of quality education resources could be achieved. But from the perspective of balanced development of compulsory education quality, school district management is also missing in the concept and practice. Quality balanced development not only focuses on the starting point of opportunity equality, but also the quality of education resources sharing or equal allocation. Universal compulsory education is at a low level equilibrium stage. At present, China has entered the equal stage to achieve educational resources, and balanced, reasonable configuration is the main purpose. Currently, many areas of school district management exploration are mainly for the hot issue of school selection, the main policy design and policy implementation are still limited in terms of quality education resource sharing. Regardless of the starting point of the system design and the actual results, the school district management is still in the stage of primary equilibrium pursuit. Therefore, the balanced development of school district in compulsory quality and balanced education should be given more functions, should pay more attention to the balanced allocation of cultural and spiritual resources, promoting school cooperation in the school district from the “cooperation of gap” to “cooperation of difference”.

## **4. OPTIMIZATION MEASURES: COMPULSORY EDUCATION SCHOOL DISTRICT SYSTEM STRATEGIES TO CRACK THE PROBLEM**

In the conditions of quality gap between schools, to solve the problems of school selection, perspectives of relevant problems and reasonableness, reality and long-term development should be seen. We want to eliminate the problems occurred in school selection rather than school selection. We can solve the reality problem of admission equality.

### **4.1 The Rational Division of School District**

#### **4.1.1 School District Division Basis**

Compulsory education of the nearby enrollment policy provisions states that school-age children and adolescents receive compulsory education, according to domicile positions, instead of inter district school selection. This policy is very good in promoting the realization of educational equality, but this policy also has some blind spots (Wu, 2010). The nearby enrollment policy in rural areas, especially two administrative bordering regions would encounter embarrassment: the contradiction between regional “nearest” and administrative division. The actual meaning of nearest school admission is that school-age children and adolescents receive compulsory education according to residence location nearest to the designated administrative planning school district, while cross district school selection practice shall not be allowed. The primary intention of administrative division was set for convenience of students and parents coming to nearby schools and free choices to enter schools in inner district. Therefore, school district division should focus on reality place, students, teachers and resources. Comprehensive consideration should be put on school distribution, geographical location, traffic conditions and other factors. School strength, quality coordination, students’ needs of each school age need all to be considered. The community background should be understood, while district classification should be scientifically done. Meet the needs of students and parents, and make sure students, parents, schools and government are satisfied.

#### **4.1.2 School District Division Principle**

To achieve reasonable strict division, first of all, should be clear what “reasonable” is. The first meaning of “reasonable” is the principle of the nearest school in “compulsory education law”; the second meaning is to mobilize schools improvements actively, which is advantageous to the heritage of the school culture and to promote middle and primary schools in the balanced development in the area; the third meaning is to meet the needs of the parents and students, each area should have high-quality schools, the overall educational level in each area should be roughly the same, at or close to

the combination point. At present, district division across schools is most popular and has a good momentum of development. This research mainly discusses four principles in district division across schools. The first one is joint zoning principle. The implementation of joint enrollment to primary school graduates requires two or more school districts combining into a big district, for joint enrollment. The second one is school admission guarantee principle. In the admission process, ensuring that corresponding elementary school graduates should all implement their studying enrollment rights, so each graduate can enter junior high schools. At the same time, reasonably and lawfully solve the problems of the migrant workers children's education. The third one is free choice principle. According to the school site and teachers condition, the Education Bureaus compile junior high school enrollment plan. Primary school graduates can freely fill in intention table of enrollment and choose appropriate two junior schools. The fourth principle is nearest school entrance. Schools should not carry out any form of entrance examination, to ensure the education rights of each student.

#### 4.1.3 School District Division Form

From the perspective of parents' school selection rights, to further promote the perspective of educational equity, the most suitable form for the current situation should be joint admissions. After years of trials, the effect is very good and the masses are very satisfied with the way of enrollment. Schools are not too far away, while joint junior high schools have their own characteristics respectively, which provide the possibility to choose for students and parents. Therefore, inner school strict division is a basic approach to implementing nearest school admission policy, while strict division across schools is a more benign approach to ensuring the rights of students and parents' school selection. Specifically, due to historical reasons, for old city centers where high-quality resources are concentrated in, the strategy of coordination and cooperation of strong and weak junior and primary schools should be taken into action. As to new city centers where resources are gathering, the collocation form of strong and weak junior schools should be adopted. That is to say, as to old city centers where primary and junior schools are more intensive, it is difficult to simply implement strict division for single schools. Therefore the implementation of school strict division across schools is a more realistic and reasonable way. While the numbers of junior schools in suburban areas or new city centers are smaller, it is possible to implement strict division for single schools.

#### 4.2 The Scientific Management of School Districts

First of all, the school district should be given and perform more functions. At present, school districts in China are mainly responsible for the resource sharing

and the cooperation exchange functions. Drawing lessons from the school district management system of the United States, France and other countries, education authorities should reduce their intervention of school affairs, and give more management functions and rights to school district organizations, such as financial and personnel rights. At the same time, school district organizations should take the initiative to undertake the school education in the overall planning, actively absorb community, parents and experts in education, participate in decision-making, advancing management specialization, and build good relationship with the community.

Secondly, pay attention to the balance of culture and spiritual resources. At present, the sharing across school districts of human resources, knowledge resources, cultural and spiritual resources is relatively lacking. It is difficult to form strong core competitiveness. Therefore, it is necessary to take a breakthrough in connotation construction and cultural construction as the school district is relatively weak in the process of improvement (Shao, Zhong, & Zheng, 2011). Focusing on the creation of the school culture inside the district, promoting cultural exchange, school teaching and research within the school district, sharing knowledge resources, curriculum culture resources are important strategies. Formation of the cultural atmosphere of equality and mutual trust, win-win cooperation and enhancing social identities of teachers, students and parents of the school district are also necessary paths to be taken. Moreover, promote school district cooperation from "gap cooperation" to "different cooperation". In regional compulsory education, gaps between schools inner and inter school districts are much more reflected in school running level and education quality. Cooperation between high-quality schools and low-quality schools is a "gap cooperation", in which strong ones could offer more living resources output while weak schools' personalized resources are not fully respected and effectively developed. Therefore, school district management should change cooperation from "gap cooperation" to "difference cooperation", pay attention to the features of the school development, change individual differences between schools into public resources (Wu et al., 2010), so as to achieve high level equilibrium within the school area.

Finally, design school district assessment by the standard of educational quality. As to school districts, avoid defining graduation rates and test scores as sole indicators of quality education or overwhelming indicators, and pay attention to students' quality development. Promote integration of school district assessment, implement school district education quality of "bundling" assessment, attracts parents, students and other stakeholders in the community to participate in the evaluation, and finally realize the organic unity of the school district quality and balanced development.

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