

Research on Countermeasures to Optimize Teacher Staffing Management in Primary and Secondary Schools

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Abstract: Teacher staffing management is a highly policy-driven task within China's education system, reflecting the strategic needs of national educational development. While it has infused vitality into the process of building the primary and secondary school teaching workforce, it has also encountered certain challenges. To address these issues, the following countermeasures can be implemented: implementing overall quantity control and dynamic adjustments to teacher staffing; optimizing staffing allocation standards to cater to the diverse needs of schools; and fostering an environment that de-emphasizes the rigidity of staffing ("weak staffing") to fully leverage the role of the teacher appointment system.

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1. Introduction

Teacher staffing, as an institutional arrangement for determining and managing the size and structure of the teaching workforce,^[1] injects vitality into the nation's educational development on the foundation of China's vast student population, propelling the construction and advancement of the teaching corps, particularly within primary and secondary schools. However, the management of teacher staffing in these schools has long faced multiple challenges: an insufficient overall quota of teaching positions; a staffing management system detached from actual teaching realities; and staffing policy evolution mired in path-dependent rigidity, becoming locked in.^[2] These issues represent a deviation from the original intent behind the establishment of the staffing system and, to some extent, constrain the formation of a healthy educational ecosystem. Against this backdrop, this paper examines both the achievements and persistent problems in the current management of teacher staffing within China's primary and secondary school system. It aims to propose potential countermeasures for optimizing staffing management, seeking to enhance its effectiveness in the overall management of the primary and secondary school teaching workforce.

2. Achievements in Teacher Staffing Management for Primary and Secondary Schools

2.1 Ensuring Effective National Teacher Supply for Basic Education Development

One of the key factors in enhancing the quality of compulsory education is the necessity of establishing a teaching workforce that is sufficient in number, optimized in structure, and assured in quality. Serving as a powerful tool for the scientific management of teachers, staffing management for primary and secondary school teachers provides a policy basis for relevant state organs and government departments (such as staffing commissions at all levels). Operating within their constitutional, legal, and regulatory mandates, these entities utilize various means to control and stipulate the number of authorized positions, institutional setups, post responsibilities, and structural ratios in schools at all levels. This system has guaranteed the state's fulfillment obligation towards educational development,^[3] effectively secured the human resource foundation for national educational expansion from the founding of the PRC until the pre-reform era, actively mitigated the adverse trend of significant teacher attrition (brain drain) under market pressures, provided crucial teacher supply, particularly for advancing development in remote,^[4] impoverished, border, and ethnic minority areas, laid the groundwork for the development of the national education sector. During the 14th Five-Year Plan period, China's total number of teachers has increased to 18.85 million. The "teaching profession frenzy" and the "teacher qualification exam" have become prominent social topics, with competition for teaching positions intensifying yearly across the country.^[5]

2.2 Enhancing Teachers' Social Status and Ensuring Economic Benefits

The unified management of teacher staffing carries significant policy implications in China and guarantees corresponding welfare benefits. Since the founding of the PRC, teachers have been treated as “state cadres”, enjoying treatment nearly equivalent to government staff. This practice conferred relatively high social and economic status upon teachers throughout China’s prolonged transition from an agricultural to an industrial nation. The state has defined teachers’ political status, social status, and economic treatment through the Teachers Law, ensured teachers’ economic benefits and elevated their social status by adjusting staffing quotas and strengthening the salaries and welfare of in-post teachers, enhanced teachers’ sense of job security, professional stability, and honor. A series of policies based on staffing management have been introduced, transforming teaching into a widely recognized and sought-after profession, evident in the high demand during college entrance exam application choices and competitive teacher recruitment processes.

2.3 Improving the Overall Management Level of the Primary and Secondary School Teaching Workforce

Entering the new century, as the balanced development of compulsory education became a key focus of the Party and government, establishing a high-quality teaching workforce emerged as central to addressing this priority. In tackling this challenge, the government has leveraged staffing management to enhance teacher status and governance through measures such as teacher rotation, principal rotation, and school-district-based management (eliminating strict school-specific staffing ties). These initiatives have effectively ensured a relatively balanced distribution of teacher numbers and structures across regions and between schools, achieving dynamic balance in the teaching workforce’s composition regarding qualifications, age, and other factors, thereby optimizing its overall structure. Meanwhile, to maximize the effectiveness of teacher workforce development, local governments have freed up staffing positions previously allocated for auxiliary tasks like logistical support within schools. This has been accomplished through methods including outsourcing via public bidding, contract-based appointments, and labor dispatch services. Consequently, the limited teacher staffing resources are now fully dedicated to teaching and educational needs, enhancing staffing utilization efficiency and further promoting teacher professionalization.

3. Problems Facing Teacher Staffing Management in Primary and Secondary Schools

Although teacher staffing management, a core component of China’s personnel administration system, has become an invisible yet defining factor in teacher workforce management — determining the transition from quantitative expansion to qualitative improvement in the teaching corps — the current reality presents challenges. Against the backdrop of limited funding and strict staffing quotas, the supply of teacher resources is struggling to meet the new demands arising from policies like the “universal two-child policy”, rapid urbanization, and new curriculum reforms. The intertwined issues of staffing structure, scale, and quality form a complex and persistent dynamic reality, posing genuine difficulties for building a robust teaching workforce.

3.1 Staffing Management Hinders Teacher Growth and Professional Development

A joint survey by the China National Institute of Educational Sciences and the National Academy of Education Administration revealed that a majority of primary and secondary school principals identified teacher burnout as a major problem in their schools. While research acknowledges burnout is multifaceted, staffing management remains a significant contributing factor. Fundamentally, staffing management operates as a planned control mechanism. Its rigid configuration methods — whether based on student-teacher ratios or class-teacher ratios — strictly cap the number of teachers allocated. This inflexibility leads to adverse effects: teachers are consistently overloaded, making it difficult to balance family life or pursue professional development, potentially leading to social detachment; inadequate integration between staffing management and the teacher qualification/licensure system creates misalignments in teacher placement, which also restricts individual teachers’ professional growth.

3.2 Staffing Standards Fail to Accommodate Schools' Diverse Needs

As China's economy and industrial structure evolve, the functions and responsibilities of schools are broadening and deepening due to policy shifts and variations in geographical location and economic conditions. For instance, the July 2021 Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework Burden and Off-campus Tutoring Burden for Students in Compulsory Education mandated schools to "enhance after-school services to meet students' diverse needs", stipulating that "schools must fully utilize their resources to effectively implement various after-school educational activities, satisfying students' diverse learning needs on campus..." While aiming to strengthen schools' primary role, this policy also faces criticism for significantly increasing teacher workloads. Furthermore, tasks like maintaining school safety, managing boarding students, overseeing student meals, and organizing extracurricular activities all require teacher involvement or direct implementation. These demands exacerbate the teacher shortages already created by rigid staffing management.

3.3 Dual Pressures in Policy Formulation and Implementation

As a crucial state instrument for establishing and managing education, staffing management requires relatively uniform standards. However, this inherently conflicts with the current uneven development of education across China. The country's vast territory results in significant geographical and economic disparities, leading to varied educational development speeds and levels. Consequently, the impact of staffing policies also differs greatly: in densely populated urban areas, staffing management can be effective; in rural regions, economies of scale are often unattainable. Even with unified urban-rural staffing standards increasing rural teacher quotas, gaps persist relative to actual teaching, educational, and management needs. Simultaneously, policy implementation faces rigidity. Since each school's staffing quota requires approval from staffing and personnel departments, schools have limited flexibility to adapt to special circumstances. For example, with the introduction of the two-child and three-child policies, principals increasingly face situations where teachers take maternity leave with no available replacements, leading some units to resort to controversial measures like "queuing for pregnancy". This highlights the unresolved tension between the standardization inherent in staffing management and the practical demands of policy implementation.

4. Recommendations for Reforming Teacher Staffing Management in Primary and Secondary Schools

4.1 Optimize Regional Teacher Staffing Allocation: Implement Overall Quota Control with Dynamic Adjustment

Since staffing quotas are determined based on student-teacher or class-teacher ratios, and school sizes are relatively fixed, the number of allocated positions becomes rigid, struggling to adapt to actual school needs. Therefore, enhancing the flexibility of staffing management methods is a primary challenge.

First, establish a robust dynamic adjustment and mobility mechanism based on the "county-managed, school-based appointment" system. Gradually transition teachers' status from "unit-bound personnel" to "system personnel", expanding from smaller to larger administrative systems. Scientifically determine the total staffing quota for the entire education system based on student-teacher or class-teacher ratios. Create a "teacher rotational pool" to provide flexibility for situations like teacher absences due to illness, maternity leave, or other reasons. This ensures prompt replacements to maintain teaching continuity.

Second, establish a demand-based dynamic adjustment mechanism for school staffing. Teacher and student mobility is inherent in both urban and rural schools. Fixed quotas, if not proactively adjusted, lead to temporary overstaffing or understaffing. Therefore, education administrative departments should, leveraging the rotational pool, prioritize researching school mobility trends. Anticipate potential surpluses or shortages and adjust teacher allocations promptly. This dynamic approach ensures existing quotas are utilized effectively.

4.2 Optimize Staffing Allocation Standards to Accommodate Schools' Diverse Development Needs

Current staffing calculations rely heavily on student-teacher or class-teacher ratios. While some buffer positions exist to account for school complexity, the lack of clear policy guidance often renders them insufficient. Teacher allocation must therefore not only meet overall quantity needs but also address the diverse demands of individual schools.

First, optimize staffing design for small-scale schools. These schools, despite low student numbers, often have high operational demands, requiring teachers to wear multiple hats. While class-teacher ratios have been used recently, small schools vary greatly. Rural teaching points or schools with very few students still see teachers overwhelmed by non-teaching tasks. Thus, staffing for small schools requires further research. Develop more detailed allocation standards considering school size, location, and operational realities.

Second, optimize staffing based on specific teaching needs. Subjects like Physical Education and Art may have different class/hour structures compared to core subjects like Chinese, Math, and Foreign Languages. Sole reliance on aggregate ratios can create situations where staffing appears adequate or even excessive on paper, but is insufficient in practice. Consider transitioning in-post teachers with weaker teaching capabilities or unsuited for classroom roles into administrative positions, allowing them to contribute value elsewhere.

Finally, actively establish shared mechanisms with social organizations. Concentrate limited staffing resources on core educational needs by categorizing school activities. For instance, implement a model where school teachers supervise clubs and interest classes, while qualified social organizations deliver the content.

4.3 Foster a “De-emphasized Staffing” Environment to Fully Leverage the Teacher Appointment System

The teacher appointment system is a fundamental management tool, aiming to control entry and enable exit, creating a flexible, "able to enter, able to exit" teacher configuration for a high-quality workforce adapted to market mechanisms. However, the planned nature of staffing inherently conflicts with the flexibility sought by the appointment system. To unlock the appointment system's potential, a “de-emphasized staffing” environment is essential.

First, rigorously implement the “county-managed, school-based appointment” system. County-level education authorities should build an appropriately sized teacher reserve pool through staffing management and recruitment. Schools then conduct secondary hiring, activating principals' appointment authority and fostering teacher competitiveness. Teachers not placed initially receive a base salary while undertaking basic duties. Those consistently unplaced exit the reserve system. This bridges staffing and appointment, diluting the “iron rice bowl” effect of permanent quotas.

Second, gradually achieve coexistence of quota-based and non-quota-based teachers. Current demand shows significant numbers of non-quota teachers (non-bianzhi teachers) even in regions with strict quota controls. As schools typically pay their salaries, this often leads to unequal pay for equal work, hindering healthy teacher mobility. Governments should integrate non-quota teachers into management structures. Without increasing quotas, provide them economic security comparable to or slightly higher than quota teachers. This helps de-emphasize the quota status and lays the groundwork for rational teacher allocation.

Third, strengthen synergy between market mechanisms and staffing management. As noted, quotas play a vital role in ensuring teacher supply. However, they struggle to address “counter-flow” trends driven by regional educational disparities, often resulting in “retaining the person, but not the commitment”. Consider appropriately relaxing quota control rigidity. Enhance the guiding role of market mechanisms in teacher allocation to attract teachers towards regions and schools with weaker workforces. This allows staffing management and market forces to work synergistically, making greater contributions to education in underdeveloped areas.

5. Conclusions

This research underscores that while teacher staffing management has historically served as a vital institutional

framework for ensuring teacher supply and stabilizing China's primary and secondary education system, its inherent rigidity now presents significant challenges. Issues such as constrained professional development, misalignment with diverse school needs, and policy implementation gaps hinder the cultivation of a dynamic, high-quality teaching workforce. To address these, the study proposes a three-pronged reform approach: implementing dynamic quota adjustments, optimizing allocation standards for flexibility, and fostering a "de-emphasized staffing" environment to synergize planned management with market mechanisms. Embracing these recommendations is crucial for transforming staffing systems into responsive tools that effectively support educational equity, quality, and sustainable development.

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