

## A Look at China's Efforts to Promote Education Equity and Reduce Academic Pressure on Students and Their Families

Our Center at UCLA has the good fortune to involve the talents and experiences of a variety of students. Included in the group this year was Jin Wen, an international student coming from China. She brought us up-to-date on her country's recent changes in education policy.

**P**ast government policy and the social norm for Chinese families has been to put great emphasis on children's academic achievement. As Jin reported to us: "Chinese kids are involved in the fierce competition of entering good colleges from the first day of school. This popular social norm is called *Involution*. Many people use this term to describe peers competing for limited resources in ways that result in a decline in the individual's benefit-to-effort ratio."

Here is how *Involution* is discussed on the website for the Oxford China Review:

*In 2020, Chinese netizens widely popularized a once-obscure academic term: neijuan, or involution. Frustrated by never-ending competition over limited opportunities and working lives with little perceivable value, people from all walks of life interpreted the concept according to the various pressures in their own lives. From university students failing to find employment to mothers struggling to keep up with their children's educational rat races, neijuan resonated with a nation contending with decelerating economic growth and massive inequalities.*

<https://blog.oxchina.net/seminar-introduction-involution/>

Jin further reported that:

"Parents' anxiety about their children being out-competed by other children due to limited high quality education resulted in the rapid expansion of the private tutoring industry. In recent years, thousands of after-school institutions emerged with the help of the internet (especially online tutoring after COVID), and families felt it was almost a necessity for children to attend such institutions to avoid falling behind in academics. A constant bombardment of advertisements for tutoring exacerbated parents' anxiety.

The explosive growth of the tutoring sector created a vast market, forcing many families to invest in tutoring training either willingly or under peer pressure. The educational cost of raising children has become so high that most families have only one child, creating problems now that the government wants parents to have more children to relieve the challenges of a rapidly aging population.

Along with an overemphasis on test scores, the demands of heavy schoolwork and tutoring have raised concerns about students' physical and mental health. As a result, the government has implemented multiple education policies, with a hope of freeing families from the economic burden of educating a child, protecting the physical and mental health, and enhancing equity. A major example is the powerful and aggressive recent *Double Reduction* policy. It is just under implementation throughout the country."

### **The Double Reduction Policy**

On July 24, 2021, the General office of China Central Committee of the CPC and the General Office of the State Council jointly issued new educational guidelines named the *Opinions on Further Reducing the Burdens of Homework and Off-campus Training for Students During the Period of Compulsory Education*. It is widely referred to as the "double reduction" policy.

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\*The material in this document builds on work done by Jin Wen as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2021.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

Here's how the *echineselearning* website described the policy on Sep. 8, 2021:

*How Will China's "Double Reductions" Affect Students This Year?*

<https://www.echineselearning.com/blog/how-will-chinas-double-reductions-affect-students-this-year>

In China, this year's back-to-school preparations are looking a little different.

1. China's New "Double Reduction" Policy – Just like in years past, on the first day of school in China this year students will be required to submit their summer homework. Also, parents and head teachers will start to chat in WeChat groups and make sure everyone is clear on class requirements. In the past, much of this discussion focused on helping children arrange after-school remedial classes. However, that is changing this year.

Recently the Chinese government issued a new education policy, the "double reduction" policy. This policy calls for reducing students' amount of homework, and for effectively banning (or at least drastically reducing the number of) after-school training classes. What does this mean, practically, for Chinese students?

-Reduced test pressure – China's school system is notorious for an emphasis on examinations. That changed, however, when final exams for primary school Grades 1 and 2 were removed this year, and examination standards were implemented for other grades, meaning that students are only tested on what they are taught according to the standard curricula of standard difficulty. Additionally, exam results are not publicly ranked and published, and parents and students will be informed more privately of results.

-Average workloads will be reduced – In addition to forbidding homework to be assigned to first and second-year primary school students, the average amount of written homework assigned from third to sixth grades of primary school is not supposed to exceed 60 minutes, or 90 minutes for junior high students.

-Schools cannot set up "advanced" classes – Compulsory education schools will not be allowed to set up "advanced" classes under any name, nor can they adjust students' classes or seats according to examination results.

2. Why were these changes made? The Chinese government hopes that by reducing the emphasis placed on exams overall, and written homework at young ages, students will be free from pressure to place all their focus, time, energy, and money on simply getting grades. Hopefully this will help them develop healthier lifestyles by getting more sleep and exploring more activities, as well as reduce the pressure on parents to pay for classes for their kids to keep up with everyone else academically. There's no telling how things will turn out this year, but with all that's going on in the world students are excited about trying something different!

In an article in the *International Education News*, Bian (2021) summarized the key points of the double reduction policy as follow:

- Reduces the amount and time of school homework (specific time limits for written homework were listed for different grades).
- Provides after school care for students by requiring schools to offer after-school services (such as extracurricular activities and evening self-study) to keep students in school until parents get off from work.
- Strictly regulates private tutoring, including banning tutoring during weekends and winter/summer breaks, forbidding tutoring companies from going public, and preventing school teachers from providing any tutoring service.
- Outlaws frequent formal exams and rankings in schools.

Jin reported that: “The official statement made by the Chinese government explained that the double reduction policy was intended to free students from pressure to place so much of their focus, time, and energy on achieving good test scores. By reducing the emphasis placed on homework and exams, students are expected to get more sleep and explore more activities. The government also touched upon reducing economic burdens for parents to pay for after-school classes as a necessity for keeping up with everyone else academically.

Beside reducing financial burdens, it also is anticipated that the policy will reduce problems such as parent-child conflicts about homework, student anxieties, difficulties related to picking up and dropping off children, and more.

Some critics of the policy have suggested the government has a hidden agenda, ‘an underlying wish of nudging up a lagging birthrate with reducing the cost of child-rearing’, therefore promoting the change from a one-child to the ‘multiple children policy’ (Bian, 2021).”

### **Some Reported Observations after the First 100 Days**

Jin found and shared the following reports (see reference list):

“To ensure enforcement of the policy, local governments have been encouraged to report violations and infractions. This has caused some conflicts among local stakeholders, but the evidence is that the policy has been effectively enforced over the past months.

In an interview, a high school teacher in Shanghai indicated the view that students' pressure has been reduced significantly since the policy took effect. Why? The amount of homework for junior high school students has been significantly reduced. The after-school services in most schools are divided into two levels. During the first-level after-school service, students can basically complete 70% of their homework. The second-level after-school service arrangements in some schools also fully reflects the ‘Comprehensive Development policy,’ which offers activities involving arts, sports, science and technology, and labor for all students. After returning home from school and on weekends, many students have more time and space of their own, and can choose to develop their own hobbies, participate in voluntary services, and spend time with family and friends.

Reports in the press indicate that many parents say that their children are happier than before, and communication with them is easier. At the same time, fierce competition remains for acquiring the best scores, the best schools, and the best educational supports and resources, and the demand for after-school tutoring unabated. Parents are anxious about risking their children's future.

With students no longer going to training classes after school, the number of training institutions is plummeting. In Beijing, for example, the reduction rate of offline discipline-related unlicensed institutions is 98%, and the reduction rate of original training institutions is 60%. The number of compulsory education training institutions in Shanghai was reduced by 21.73%, and the number of employees was reduced by 35,000 (Minnews, 2021).”

## Related Policies Implemented to Enhance Education Equity

Jin emphasized that several other policies have been involved in the government's efforts to enhance educational quality and equity: (1) a policy that changed who could enroll in local schools, (2) a policy for how students are chosen for enrollment in a school, and (3) a policy for rotating principals and teachers to different schools.

(1) *Designated School Districts.* Prior to the double reduction policy, a policy was implemented designating that only residents of houses in circumscribed neighborhoods could send their children to schools in that locale.

Jin notes that *the policy brought on a buying spree for "school district houses," with families spending exorbitant amounts to move to locales with the best schools.*

(2) *Student Enrollment.* To counter the ensuing inequities produced for poor families by the rush to purchase houses in districts seen as having the best schools, the government implemented a "random draw" law for enrollment.

Jin notes that, as the random draw law goes into effect, *families that paid for expensive houses face the conundrum of whether to relocate if they were selected for another school far away. If many do, the heavy traffic which the policy was meant to relieve would again come back. Also, house prices that were inflated because they were located in "good school districts" will be depressed. Since few families who bought significantly inflated properties were exceptionally rich, many went into debt because they just wanted their children to get the best education. The result is that many middle-class families are experiencing greater stress and financial burden.*

(3) *School Staff Rotation.* The government also has moved to mitigate public discontent over the amassing of the "best staff" at the "best schools." Under the rotation policy, teachers and principals are required to move to other schools so that students in different areas of the city have equal access to high quality education from experienced educators. Li Yi, the deputy secretary of the Beijing Municipal Education Commission and a spokesperson for the Municipal Education Commission in Beijing announced that all principals, vice principals, and teachers who are more than 5 years away from retirement and who have served in the same school for 6 years should be rotated to a different school.

Jin notes that *the rotation policy will be stressful and burdensome for those affected. She points out that many staff live close to their assigned schools and often their own children attend the school. Thus, staff relocation will separate them from current colleagues and affect their families. In addition, it will increase commute times and traffic costs.*

### Concern About Teacher Overwork

The "double reduction" policy is designed to make schooling better for students, but *what about the teachers?* Jin reports: From morning self-study to the end of after-school service, some teachers' working hours at school are close to 12 hours, and their workload is rising linearly. They are in a state of overload every day. Jin's view is that teachers also need a "double reduction" policy – to reduce working hours and to reduce excessive tasks aside of teaching, "because we need to distinguish teachers from baby-sitters."

## Jin's Concluding Comments

“The sole purpose of the China's double reduction policy is to achieve education equity and improve the quality of education and teaching in schools. The policy also was intended to reduce the financial burden of parents.

On the bright side, the policy is having a positive impact by freeing students from the burden of too much written homework and the pressure of examinations. Students have more free time to develop their own hobbies and extracurricular activities. With innovative courses added, students are able to choose courses based upon their personal interests and so are more engaged. With the implementation of after-school services, homework can be completed while at school, and immediate consultations with teachers are available. This reduces the pressure on parents with respect to tutoring their children.

For primary school students, the policy implements transitional courses to facilitate admissions and emphasizes development of good study habits and active learning. All this is well and good.

However, for middle and high school students facing tremendous pressure to enter higher education, the question remains: *How will their grades be affected when off-campus training is cancelled?* Parents are worried that without the guidance of after-school institutions, students' grades will decline. They want a balance between educational equity and their child's advancement.

Moreover, it appears pressure on teachers is increasing. For example, the after-school services require teachers to work longer hours and spend more time and energy innovating courses. To counter this, schools may have to offer flexible working schedules and reduce unessential tasks.

In addition, the earlier “Zero-starting point teaching” policy has increased the pressure on elementary teachers. The policy states that all teaching should assume first grade students begin at zero proficiency; this is intended to make kindergarten a more positive experience. At the same time, from 1<sup>st</sup> grade on, elementary teachers are expected to ensure students finish elementary school well prepared for the demands middle school and beyond.

So, it is clear more work has to be done to enhance the quality and equity of our schools. As the current policies are evaluated, the focus needs to be on continuous improvement that enhances the positives and minimizes the negatives to the benefit of China and its people.

We still have a long way to go and much to learn.”

Note: Compulsory education in China includes six years of primary school education, typically starting at the age of six and finishing at the age of twelve, followed by three years of junior secondary education (junior middle school).

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While it doesn't have updates beyond June, 2021, the presentation of *Education in China* provided by the China Education Centers does offer a useful overview –  
<https://www.chinaeducenter.com/en/cedu.php>

Also not up-to date but useful is Wikipedia's presentation of *Education in China* –  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education\\_in\\_China](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_China)