

On the policy structure and orientation of governing the school choice problem in China's basic education

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Abstract: The paper analyzes the nature of the basic education, and points out that the scarcity, disparity and exclusiveness to a certain degree form the inner reasons of school choice in China. In review of the policy evolution of governing the school choice problems, and analyzing the policy framework of the current stage, the paper holds that expanding public expenditure is the basis of providing adequate, fair and quality compulsory education and high school education, and the role of social forces should be brought into full play so as to promote the diverse ways of delivering educational services. In reality, the significant institutional guarantee to govern the problem of school choice in China is to transform the government function and build the government more public service oriented, implement the government accountability system and build transparent public debate sphere.

Key words: basic education; school choice; policy structure; policy orientation

School choice in China's basic education is a hot topic of the whole society. As early as the beginning of 1995, the State Education Commission put forward for the first time to deal with the "high charges in choosing schools" in the compulsory education, and governing school choice has become an educational policy agenda at the national level. So far, after ten years of efforts, there is still a long way to eradicate the problem, and school choice remains a concern of the public, mass media and other stakeholders, and arouses sharp debates.

At present, the major policy issues existing in the implement of school choice policy are: there are many such phenomena when primary school graduates enter the junior middle schools; some high schools take upon themselves to enlarge the enrolment proportion, lower the admission mark, and there is even an inversion of the ratio of students enrolled through choosing school and ordinary channel; in some places, the school choice fees exceed the economic affordability of the local parents, or the schools charge extra fees beyond the limit amount. Besides, the local governments have the impulse to build "demonstration schools", which further intensifies competition for choosing schools. From the view of the policy report of the national educational administrative departments (Ministry of Education), media report and public response, there are many complaints and dissatisfactions about these problems, which require further adjustment of the public education policy to solve.

According to the view of the theory of public policy system, the education policy in essence is the authoritative distribution and redistribution of the resources and interests within the educational field, and the established education policy choice is usually the result of the conflicts and balance between values and interests (Easton, 1953). The paper plans to explore the issue of school choice in the basic education stage from the

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perspectives of policy value, interest integration and policy choice.

1. The nature and school choice of the basic education

In the basic education stage, compared to the demand of the school-aged youth to enter school and the social development demand, the educational resources are scarce. Meanwhile, it is generally admitted that due to the factors of historic development and the available social resources, there are differences in school running level and teaching quality between different schools, and the differences will exert substantial influence on the students' development in school and in the future. In the sense of public choice, the educational services of the basic education stage can be regarded as economic goods with a certain degree of public interest. Out of the limited social resources, the access and enjoyment of the educational services is exclusive to some degree, and the occupation of the limited quality educational resources by a part of people means that the others are deprived of the opportunity to use. Therefore, the scarcity, disparity and exclusiveness to a certain degree of the resources determine that the educational services provided by the primary and middle schools are competitive, and students are competing sharply to be qualified for higher quality schools. According to the basic theory of microeconomics, the access of competitive goods means the existence of selective behavior (Varian, 1997).

Since there is competition, is it possible to distribute the resources of basic education among students in line with the rule of free choice on the market? In terms of the existing literature over the past 10-odd years, despite the discussion of pros and cons of school choice or the legitimacy of policies and measures, the researchers all mention that school choice through parents selecting can promote the competition between schools and improve education quality. However, from the perspective of policy orientation regarding the restrictions on school choice, the academic research and policy-making vary a lot. The policy-making does not follow the market orientation, but lays more emphasis on the input and supervision responsibility of the governments in the basic education. This is due to the following reasons: first, the simple transplant of economic theory, experience-based discussion or emotion-based judgment cannot provide solid knowledge foundation for the policy choice. What's more, compared to other public policies, despite of belonging to the category of public policy, the education policy is unique in terms of social welfare and interest distribution, particularly for the basic education (LIU, 2003). In most countries, the public welfare of the basic education is mainly delivered by non-profit educational organizations to offer non-commercial educational services; meanwhile, the distribution of enrolment opportunity in the basic education is mainly embodied in the distribution of the opportunity of mental and physical development for the children and youth. The fair and effective resources distribution is essential for the delivery of equal rights to access to education prescribed by the China's Constitution and for the students' lifelong development. The formulation, implementation and evaluation of the policies regarding the school choice should take into full consideration of the justification of the policies.

The justification of the policy relates to both the nature of the service or the goods and the micro consumption behavior. Ideally, if the competition is sufficient, and the enrolment opportunity is distributed strictly in line with the academic achievement and interests, then in the context of scarce resources, the result of competitive school choice will be that the most excellent students enter the schools of highest quality, i.e. the enrolment opportunity is fully distributed in accordance with the competency, and the school education can effectively meet the diverse demands of the students. In selecting the local public goods such as basic education, parents can choose schools in a manner of "vote-by-foot" based on the education quality of the schools, so as to

promote the competition between schools. This is the basic points of Tiebout Model about the supply of local public goods (Tiebout, 1956). Under this circumstance, the micro school choice behavior will promote the equity of basic education and social justice. But that is not the way it works. Due to the influence of family background, social power structure, and schools' profit-pursuing practice, the procedural justice based on competency selection and meeting diverse demands cannot be fulfilled, as rich parents or those in authority tend to have more rights to choose educational opportunity for their children. School choice is a complex problem, relating to many educational policy stakeholders—students, parents, schools, governments and the public. The policy analysis, formulation and implementation in this regard should take the complexity of stakes and multi-sources fully into account (Kingdon, 2004). In the era with diverse interests, any policy making about school choice cannot get rid of the practice of school running and educational administration, or without considering the existed pattern of interest distribution. The gap between the ideal objective and the real environment of the policy is normal in the educational policy process. The pure academic research could completely discuss the ideal state, but the educational policy must discuss the justification of the policy based on the reality and integrate interests so as to choose appropriate policy programme.

2. The policy structure of governing school choice

Since 1995, the policy trend of governing school choice at the national level falls into three phases: (1) In the first phase (1995-1997), it mainly tackles high charges for school choice in the compulsory education. (2) In the second phase (1998-2000), it deals with the school choice issue in the whole basic education stage, fighting against one-sidedly pursuing enrolment rate and increasing students' course burden through constraining school choice and competition between schools. (3) In the third phase (2001-), it governs school choice and transforms disadvantaged or weak schools by increasing the government input and identifying the government responsibility, calling for a lull in converting state-owned schools into private, promoting the restructure of schools and realizing the educational balance (WU, 2006). At present, at the national level, according to the newly-revised Compulsory Education Law and the Eleventh Five-Year Plan for National Education, the policies and measures governing school choice in the basic education stage can be summarized as the following three categories: (1) establishing fund security mechanism for the compulsory education, carrying out the principle of entering a school nearest to one's home, and primary and middle schools are prohibited to enroll students from other localities and paying high fees; (2) when high schools admit the above-mentioned students, schools should abide by the "three limits" policy, namely "limiting the score, number of students and amount of fees"; (3) public schools are not allowed school choice practice, and it is the private schools that receive such students. These measures, together with establishing publicity system, public hearings, making school affairs public, accountability system and improving government input, form the policy framework of governing school choice in the basic education stage. The core orientation of the policy framework is to prohibit and limit school choice, and implement comprehensive governance over the issues of school choice and arbitrary educational charges.

In a longer policy vision, marked by the *Directions of Improving and Developing Middle School Education* issued by the State Council in 1954, the basic education of China has long adopted the policy orientation of establishing key schools by plan. The policy orientation of key primary and middle schools and the long-term insufficient educational resources supply lead to the existence of school choice. However, it is not until the 1990s that school choice became a common concern, and the governing of it became a national educational policy issue.

Since the 1990s, with the rapid expansion and deepening of the market-oriented system reform, the division in social interest has been intensified, high charges for school choice have far exceeded the economic affordability of the ordinary families, and the educational inequity has gone beyond the social tolerance, so governing the high charges for school choice has become a major appeal of the public and the public media. Incorporating school choice into the government agenda is the direct response to the appeal.

From the perspective of policy evolution regarding school choice, in terms of policy choice, the policy makers basically hold the competency-based principle, which is manifested by choosing schools according to examination score in case of examination-oriented education. In the long-term planned system, the school that a student could be admitted to mainly depends on one's academic record. Although there was also privilege, school choice did not arouse common concern at that time. Probably it relates to two factors: first, there was few act of school choice based on privilege, so the society could tolerate it; second, the public governance structure at that time did not provide relatively tolerant discourse sphere for public discussion over such problems. The standard of competency-based principle basically guaranteed the just procedure of choosing school. However, in a diversified social structure, the distribution of social resources including money and power is unbalanced. The advantaged group in terms of money and power can access the opportunity of occupying and enjoying quality educational resources via channels beyond competency standard, such as domiciliary transfer, paying higher fees for school choice, and money-power deal. The reality of school running is that the public education funds have been severely inadequate for long, primary and middle schools faced too many financial difficulties, loopholes existed in the school financial management, and the schools were motivated to increase income by providing opportunity of school choice. The collusion of power and money caused the division of quality educational resources by the advantaged group, the neglect of competency-based principle either intentionally or unintentionally, and apparent social injustice beyond the tolerance of the society.

In policy-making, can school choice be totally banned? Let's first view the standard of choosing the policy program. In the public policy analysis, the comparison and choice of the alternatives is mainly based on the following four standards: (1) the efficiency of resources allocation; (2) social justice; (3) administrative feasibility; and (4) the maximum of social benefits (Weimer, 2003). Only all things considered, can the maximum of social benefits be achieved. Therefore, the policy-making must be the process of interest integration. At present, the governments try to promote the balance of educational resources in the compulsory education and ensure the equal opportunity of education through increasing education input, entering a school nearest to one's home, teachers' rotation and dispatching by computers. The orientation of compromises between competency-based and non-competency-based policy is apparent in high school. The Ministry of Education promulgated the "three limits" policy for high schools, namely, (1) limiting scores, prohibiting admitting students whose scores are lower than the minimum passing marks for admission; (2) limiting the number of enrolment, prohibiting the surpass of the state-prescribed class number and the proportion of school-choice-students. For example, the prescribed proportion for public high school in 2006 was no more than 30% of the total enrolled students by the schools; and (3) limiting the amount of money, the charging standard is proposed by the educational administrative department together with other departments concerned, and approved by the government at the provincial level before making public to the society, and schools should not increase the standard without authorization. It is forbidden to squeeze the planned enrolment quota and charge extra contributions or school building fees. Besides, it only stipulates that it is not allowed to choose public schools, excluding private schools. The limited policy orientation considers the existence of school choice, instead of completely building on the ideal state, so as to ensure the flexibility of the

policy and represent the administrative feasibility of the policy-making, and try to maximize the education equity within the current policy framework.

From the perspective of the policy guidance regarding school choice, it mainly aims to restrain school choice and gradually eradicate the problem. It is obviously different from the policies in this regard of the western developed countries. School choice policies of European and American countries originated in the 1960s and 1970s, with the neoliberalism and the third road as their theoretical basis, emphasizing education equity, school competition and realizing parents' right of choice. Over the past three decades, a series of institutional arrangements of expanding the opportunity of school choice, such as magnet school, education voucher, charter school, open enrolment and family school, have entered the policy agenda of the national and local governments, promoting the parents to choose schools within and across school district and state (county). In the view of policy practice, the school choice policy has achieved good results in terms of parent satisfaction and parent involvement in school education, but the influence on students' performance is uncertain. Meanwhile, school choice has exacerbated the social differentiation. There has long existed great argument over policies of school choice among the European and American countries (Teske, 2001). Despite that the domestic researchers have carried out a lot of discussions over education voucher and charter school, etc., the market-oriented policy of school choice is only confined to a small area, and not completely spread out as imagined. For example, in the US, the number of charter school only accounts for 2% of the total, and the number of students in such schools only accounts for 1% of the total; the education voucher that receives great popularity in China is just carried out in a handful of schools in California, Florida, Minnesota and Pennsylvania (Fusarelli, 2003). The reason is that while expanding the choice rights of the parents and promoting school competition, the government responsibility of the western countries has not been weakened. From the trend of the reform of basic education worldwide, there is a return from market orientation to government responsibility. Most countries have realized that intensifying government input in public education and supervision is the effective way to guarantee the public welfare of the basic education. Over the past decade, China's basic education reform also followed the same policy path. After experiencing the education commercialization, converting state-owned schools into private, famed schools running private schools, introduction of share holding system in education and charging fees for choosing school, people began to rethink seriously whether market competition can truly solve the problem of welfare of the basic education, and how to ensure the public nature of the basic education. With unceasing reflections, the government responsibility is revived and placed on a prominent place.

3. The transfer of policy orientation and government function

The Eleventh Five-Year Plan for National Education gives a basic judgment to the current development of China's basic education. It holds that the basic education has entered a new phase of consolidating the universalization of the nine-year compulsory education and promoting the balanced development of high education. The report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the ruling party (Communist Party of China) has demonstrated clearly to "promote balanced development of compulsory education, move faster toward universal access to senior secondary education". In this context, what kind of policy orientation and institutional arrangement should be adopted to solve the problem of school choice in the compulsory education and high school education?

There are mainly two reasons for the existence of school choice: (1) the irrational distribution of educational

resources and scarcity of quality educational resources; and (2) the unequal access to quality educational resources. The practices home and abroad show that in such circumstance, the rush introduction of market mechanism to allocate educational resources is not a good solution to educational problems, instead, it may cause severer problems of social justice and supply failure of public educational resources, then impairing the public interests of the whole society. At present, China's social and economic system has seen a profound transformation, the governments have constantly withdrawn from the competitive economic areas, and more attention has been paid to introduce the market mechanism to solve problems in resources allocation. However, can the governments withdraw completely from the public service areas including education undertakings? The answer is definitely no. According to the basic theory of the New Public Management, in the process of educational resources allocation, the functions of the governments can be divided into three categories: first, supervision and management. It is the basic function of the State in macro education management, based on the mandatory national power, including formulating educational policies and laws, educational administrative management and financial payment transfer, creating sound institutional environment for education development and ensuring equal opportunity of education; second, providing educational services with the nature of pure public goods, including compulsory education and special education, to guarantee citizens rights to receive education; third, providing some educational service with the quasi-nature of public goods, for example, running universities, high schools and vocational schools (Lane, 2004). Therefore, in the field of public educational services, the establishment of market economic system does not necessarily mean the weakening of the public service function of the governments; instead, it places greater demands on building the public service-oriented governments.

The experience of OECD shows that the educational development needs powerful support of public financial expenditure, and promoting the balanced development of education between regions and within regions needs to be backed up by the strong national economy and establishment of improved public financial system. In June, 2006, the Joint Declaration of G8 Education Ministers' Meeting in Moscow put forward that a significant way to improve education quality and promote education equity is to make good use of public resources. In the basic education stage in China, if the educational resources, particularly the effective supply of quality educational resources cannot increase rapidly, the problem of school choice will not be effectively mitigated. Therefore, increasing the public expenditure on education has long been a tough issue that the education reform and development must face. At present, building public service-oriented governments and expanding the government educational expenditure has become a consensus and been included in the newly revised Compulsory Education Law and the Eleventh Five-Year Plan for National Education. The core issue that needs to be solved is that while ensuring the financial budget and account in line with the required increases of educational funds prescribed in the Education Law, it should establish the rigid budget system that ensures the financial educational fund, and ensure that the financial account and the excessive revenue is invested in education in line with the same ratio of budget (ZHANG, 2006). More importantly, efforts should be made to ensure that the governments shoulder the full responsibility of compulsory education input, and governments at various levels strengthen the guarantee for basic education funds and balancedly allocate the education funds, to ensure the equal access of compulsory education to all the school-aged students.

At present, the compulsory education in China has not been extended to the high school education, but accelerating the popularization of high school education has become an important policy orientation in the future for a long time. In terms of the real economic attribute, the high school education is selective and shows diversified development patterns. In this circumstance, who should run the high school education? The Eleventh

Five-Year Plan for National Education points out that “the high school education mainly depends on government input”. On this premise, efforts should be made to improve the system of cost sharing and fund raising through multiple channels. It is a common practice to share cost around the world, meanwhile, this policy also takes China's basic national conditions into account. The primary aim is to guarantee the public welfare of education, so it is unimaginable to completely put the high school education on the market, and it is not practical. In reality, the core link to solve school choice in the high school stage is to guarantee the equal enrolment opportunity, establish and improve the cost accounting standard of high school education, strictly implement the “three limits” policy and carry out the competency-based principle in enrolment. The ultimate goal is to gradually narrow the gap between different schools and reduce the proportion of school-choice students beyond the competency-based principle. At present, compared to the number of junior middle school students and university students, high school has become a bottleneck of the national educational development. The current scale of public high school cannot meet the diversified educational needs, so giving full scope to the social forces and encouraging the diversification of high school educational services has become a practical policy choice orientation. In this policy choosing process, the governments mainly serve the functions of supervision and management, and ensure the quality of high school education and education equity.

It should be noted that the effective implement of the policy needs a series of institutional arrangements as the foundation. When clearly requiring the establishment of publicity system, public hearings system and accountability system, standardizing the government behavior is decisive to govern the school choice issue. To govern the school choice issue, it should not only effectively supervise the behaviors of school running, but more importantly, supervise and constrain the government action. It has become commonly accepted public educational policy principles to increase government input, promote the rapid and sound development of private education so as to increase the option of educational opportunity and ensure education equity. But how to effectively carry out these principles and really establish the government accountability system in public policy during the process of specific policy-making and policy supervision is a problem that calls for immediate solution.

4. Extended discussion

In China, the transparency of public policy has increasingly become a concern for the decision-makers and the public (Stiglitz, 2002). The report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the ruling party points out that “power must be exercised in the sunshine to ensure that it is exercised correctly”. At present, the diversified social opinions, controversial views and interest compromise have become normal phenomena that the policy makers must face. As a process of interest balancing, the justification of school choice should be build on the full expression and rational integration of various stake holders and policy appeals as well as on the procedural justification basis. Recent years, in the real policy process, many policy stake-holders, such as researchers, officials, school administrators, parents and the public, play a key role in promoting the school choice in the basic education to become a hot issue and enter the national policy agenda, by taking the advantage of mass media, the Internet and other public mechanisms. Meanwhile, the discussion itself about this public agenda reflects the process of political civilization and the tolerance of the society to some degree.

But we also notice that at present, although the academic researchers, officials, school administrators, parents and the public explore the issue from different angles and levels, the educational policy discourse picture of school choice is complex. There has not established an effective mechanism of opinions collecting and

communication in the aspect of academic research, policy decision and public opinion; it is quite common that different policy stake holders just give a one-way pitch; and there is lack of effective communication between policy discourse, academic discourse and public discourse. All these form a liability in promoting policy communication, building policy identification and promoting policy implement. At the same time, in the process of policy-making, how to fully consider the interest appeal of the vulnerable group, and how to open rational interest expression channels and provide relatively tolerant expression sphere remain issues to consider before or in the process of policy decision? In the sense of interest expression and interest interaction and balance, in the practice of policies governing the school choice, building a transparent public educational policy and implementing mechanism, carrying out the government accountability system and ensuring the realization of the universal benefits of the basic education will play significant roles in improving the transparency and credibility of the public educational policies.

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