

Operation Mechanism and Evaluation of “County High School Education Model” in the Context of Chinese College Entrance Examination System

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Abstract: *The “county high school phenomenon” of Chinese rural high school education to pursue higher education has attracted much attention from the education field and society. Earlier studies were mostly from the perspective of education and believed that the “county high school education model” was contrary to education’s essence because it emphasized test-oriented education and restrained students’ nature and should be discarded. However, this model is surprisingly persuasive for rural families, and it is also a reflection of the rural students’ desire to achieve upward mobility through education. This paper analyzed the county high school education model’s connotation, expounded its operating mechanism, and systematically demonstrated and analyzed the “county high school education model” from multiple angles. It aims to find a way out for the future development of the “county high school education model” to promote education equity between urban and rural areas and the harmonious development of high school education ecology.*

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Introduction

DUE to contemporary Chinese society's relative stability, social structure changes, and social mobility caused by system changes have decreased significantly, and relative social mobility has also slowed down. Among them, education and further studies have long been regarded by farmers as an essential way for their children to achieve upward mobility. Therefore, the county high school, which has concentrated the best educational resources in rural areas, has become a bridge for rural children to realize their class change dreams. However, under the background of extremely uneven economic development in Chinese urban and rural areas, at this stage, China's insufficient investment in rural education and relatively backward conditions for running schools have severely restricted the development of rural education effectiveness (Liu, 2009). In this context, the "county high school education model" with the primary goal of pursuing college entrance examination and closed management as the main feature came into being. In the past few years, the county high school education model has achieved brilliant teaching results, and the county high school has gradually become synonymous with "great school for the college entrance examination." Simultaneously, due to its suppression of human nature, neglect of students' physical and mental health, and comprehensive quality training, this education model has aroused heated discussions in society.

The first hot discussion on this phenomenon came from a report in 2004 entitled "*Questioning the Pain of College Entrance Examination in Nanjing.*" According to the report, as the capital of Jiangsu Province, it has concentrated the highest quality educational resources in Jiangsu Province. However, it has lost its reputation in the competition with other cities, counties, and cities in the college entrance examination. With the increase in the number of college entrance examinations, the number of undergraduate students in Nanjing in 2004 was only 4,700, and the number of admissions was 600 less than the previous year, ranking the last first in the province (Yu, 2004). When public opinion criticized Nanjing education, many parents cited the county-level high schools in northern and central Jiangsu with outstanding college entrance examinations. They advocated that Nanjing's famous schools were not as good as some county high schools in college entrance examination performance (Wu, 2004). Therefore, the "county high school education model," which was initially only famous in some regions, has gradually favored society. In the education field, attention and discussion about the "county high school education model" are raging, and the trend of extracurricular supplementary lessons in high schools is also becoming increasingly popular. Although

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Nanjing urban high school education has successfully reversed this situation after years of hard work, the discussion triggered by the county high school education model is still going on.

The current view is partly based on education and urban perspectives. It is believed that the county high school education model ignores the cultivation of students' physical and mental health and comprehensive quality and should be discarded. From the perspective of social structure, it is found that the county high school education model responds to the government's demand for educational performance and rural families' desire to move upward through education. Bearing the people's ardent expectations in the county, we must go deep into the actual analysis. "County high school education model" is undoubtedly a mirror for us to see and understand contemporary education. A comprehensive review and serious consideration of the county high school education model will help us reflect on the current education system. Find the balance between ideal and reality under the current college entrance examination system. This paper will comprehensively analyze and comment on the connotation, influence, and evaluation of the county high school education model and seek an improvement direction that is more adaptable to student development law under the advanced education system.

The Concept and Characteristics of "County High School Education Model"

The county high school education model is widespread in county high schools, among which key county high schools are the most typical. It is mainly implemented in county-level high schools. It uses a lot of time investment as the appearance, prompting teachers and students to use their best in a closed space; through research and response to college entrance examination, the only goal is to obtain adequate college entrance examination (Li, 2008).

There are different explanations around the characteristics of county high school's educational connotations. Wang (2013) believes that shaping the "county high school education model" includes the following institutional features: using high schools with high enrollment rates as a template to reorganize resources; centering on college entrance examinations for teacher training, and motivating teachers and students based on test results; Class competition and closed management are based on the high score of the exam. Fu (2005) stated that the county high school education model's character is mainly reflected in the closed management of space, which maximizes students' time, keeps students in a state of high tension competition, and makes the college entrance examination score the only measure. Therefore, the county high school education model's composition is inseparable from closed management, a large amount of time investment, professional teaching staff, and "all teaching activities and the starting point

of the current system are the major prerequisites for effectively improving students' enrollment rate.”

Based on the previous research, we summarize the connotation of the “county high school model” as follows:

Based on Time Supervision and Habit Training

Cultivating students' study habits, behavioral norms, and time concept is the basis for county high schools to mobilize students. In many high schools that implement this model, the number of time teachers and students invests in teaching activities is the most intuitive indication. Teachers and students often start to get up at around five in the morning and leave the classroom at around ten in the evening. They continue to work and study for fifteen or six hours a day. To ensure such sufficient time, it is necessary to implement closed militarized management to receive training in examination skills without any interference. Under the “county high school model,” students cannot walk out of the school without permission. Only in this management mode that is almost isolated from the outside world can students have sufficient learning time and a focused learning attitude (Xu, 2013).

To Motivate Students to Learn As the Core

Stimulating and cultivating a sense of competition is an essential content of school life, and it is also a part of the cultivation of student subjectivity. Under the “county high school model,” teachers mainly use examinations and moral education to stimulate students' competitive motivation and improve students' learning enthusiasm. Students are divided into several districts and branches in many county high schools, and student activities are quantified. They rank school districts according to the quantitative results of students and even rank seats in the class. In this way, the students are always in a competitive atmosphere of catching up with each other and spontaneously maintain a strong fighting spirit not to lag.

In addition to examinations, the school will also use moral education to stimulate students' motivation for struggle, allowing students to internalize the spirit of struggle. Specifically, the cultivation of this kind of spiritual power is integrated into the students' running exercises and daily teaching activities. For example, in the running exercises, they shouted out the inspirational slogans “Dare to fight, brave to fight,” “Pursue excellence, always strive for the first,” etc., using positive psychology to eliminate helplessness and anxiety (Ye, 2015).

Guaranteed by the United Efforts of Teachers

The excellent performance of the county high school is inseparable from the hard work of the teacher team. They are diligent in research and have a strong sense of cooperation.

They can refine each test site of the college entrance examination into specific explanations and training and advance them layer by layer from the shallower to the deeper. Just as the regional model of the “county high school model,” the director of the Nantong City Education Bureau in Jiangsu said, “Teachers largely make the college entrance examination results in Nantong.” Regardless of the subject, the teacher often corrects the test paper overnight after the test and counts the blind spots of the whole class for targeted enhancement. Teachers at county high schools always take students as graduate students, and it is natural for the college entrance examination to get good results.

Aim to Achieve Excellent Results in College Entrance Examination

Under the “county high school model,” the school improves college entrance examination scores and college entrance examination acceptance rate as the leading educational goals, and teaching arrangements and student management around this goal. Through quantitative results, all evaluations, promotions, and bonuses in the school are based on test results. In terms of curriculum settings, content that has nothing to do with college entrance examination have significantly been reduced, and many schools have even begun to divide subjects from the first year of high school and have entered a state of intense preparation for the countdown of college entrance examination in advance.

The “county high school education model” is a self-rescue for schools with weak educational resources under the current college entrance examination system. It takes teachers and students more time and energy as a representation, based on strict learning time and habit management, fully mobilizes teachers and students and stimulates the motivation of both work and learning in competition and collaboration. These high schools use this to improve teaching efficiency and quality and strive to obtain higher education opportunities.

Operating Mechanism of “County High School Education Model”

Based on clarifying the characteristics and connotation of the “county high school education model,” we tried to summarize its operating mechanism.

Reorganize Resources Based on Performance

For a long time, the effect of stratified teaching has been demonstrated by many scholars from different perspectives (Shi et al., 2020). Under the “county high school education model,” it is an important measure to divide the key and regular classes to develop hierarchical teaching. Among them, the fundamental class is the concentration of high-

quality educational resources within the school. By establishing critical classes, the school combines excellent teachers with high-quality students, laying a foundation for achieving a higher enrollment rate.

Conduct Teacher Training Centered on College Entrance Examination

Teacher training is centered on supervising and guiding teaching activities to ensure that the teacher's teaching in the classroom can be carried out closely around the college entrance examination. Every year, newly recruited teachers undergo pre-job training before they take over their posts. The school selects room-teachers and class teachers with excellent work performance to impart experience to the new teachers and give play to the old teachers' guiding role to quickly adjust and position their roles and adapt to high school teachers' jobs. Eventually, a teaching classroom with direct access to the college entrance examination was quickly constructed.

Under the "county high school education model," the school rapidly improves teachers' professional level through school-based training, advanced overseas studies, expert lectures, teacher competitions and exchanges, and establishment of standards and reviews. Also, a famous teacher selection system must be implemented to select "chief teachers," "backbone teachers," and "teaching experts." These ensure that teachers are qualified to guide students to win in the college entrance examination (Wang, 2013).

Motivate teachers and Students Based on Test Results

The school rewards teachers for their outstanding work performance and students' outstanding achievements. For senior high school students, the powerful spurring force comes from the institutionalization of daily examinations called the college entrance examination training for each class, day, week, and month. Look for the omission of knowledge and strengthen the ability to adapt to the exam. After the exam, weekly or monthly lists will be published to commend those who have performed well to urge and motivate other students. For example, the monthly star's selection is to publish a list of top students' photos in the third year's monthly unified examination. At the same time, this kind of incentive also exists between classes, and the test results can quickly create an atmosphere of class competition.

The most typical reward for teachers is the annual high school teaching performance award. The awards' specific rules are closely integrated with the number of college entrance examinations and the number of people admitted to prestigious universities.

Closed Time Management

Under the “county high school education model,” students and teachers’ schedule is almost harsh. According to a school that implements the “county high school model,” the school teachers must implement a class system. From Monday to Sunday, only one night on Sunday can be absent from work. For the rest of the evening, even if there is no arrangement for lectures or self-study tutoring, teachers must go to school on duty. Therefore, on average, teachers work about 10 hours a day.

For students, the schedule is stricter. Many schools have schedules for getting up at 5:50 in the morning and turning off the lights at 10:30 in the evening. Excluding the 7 hours of nighttime sleep, 2 hours of lunch break, and 3 hours of break time, students have about 10 hours per day for study. For students in the third grade, they tend to take up more rest time for study. Besides, students applying for leave must go through a multi-level process. After the students write out the written request for leave, they must first be signed by the room-teacher, then signed by the grade director, and finally handed over to the school’s security department for their release. There are stubs of the leave from in the grade department, class teacher, and security department.

The reorganization of school space resources, teacher training, teacher-student incentives, class competition, and time management together constitute the operating mechanism of the “county high school education model.” Through this mechanism, teachers and students of county high school in response to college entrance examination have shaped their unique teaching methods and constantly solidified them into a model.

Evaluation of “County High School Education Model”

Regarding the influence of the “county high school education model,” discussions have never stopped. The main reason for this heated discussion is that the influence of the “county high school education model” has its pros and cons.

Evaluation from the Perspective of Education Equity

Educational equity has always been a critical topic of widespread concern. Educational equity in the county is an integral part of the entire educational equity and the cornerstone of maintaining social stability. With the advancement of urbanization, educational resources are inevitably concentrated in big cities, and education in rural areas is becoming more and more declining. In response to this phenomenon, in China’s “*Government Work Report*” in 2020, it is proposed to “strengthen the construction of township boarding schools and county schools” and “let educational resources benefit all families and children” (Li, 2020).

Under China’s dual economic system, the gap between urban and rural areas is relatively apparent, reflected in the inequality of educational resources and educational opportunities. In a sense, the college entrance examination is a competition between urban and rural education. In the context of the uneven distribution of educational resources between regions and between urban and rural areas, key county high schools

represented by county high schools have become “super high schools” built by many counties with the power of the whole county. Such schools concentrate on the county’s highest quality students and educational resources and carry the county’s educational expectations. Under the county high school model, the school assumes the primary responsibility for education and implements refined management. They guide students’ learning and stimulate their motivation to learn. The improvement of student performance is mainly related to the personal effort of the student during school. Educational competition is manifested in the competition between individual students. In this way, the role of family resources in students’ academic performance is weakened, social equity is promoted, and the family’s educational burden is also reduced.

Evaluation from the Perspective of Social Mobility

Will there be class consolidation in Chinese society? This is a problem that many people have paid more attention to in recent years. Among the factors that promote social class mobility, individual, family, and social factors all have an essential impact on individual social class mobility; among them, education level has a more profound impact on personal development (Blanden & Macmillan, 2014). Le & Yin (2020) analyzed China’s comprehensive social survey data and found that since the reform and opening up, education has kept China at a relatively high intergenerational mobility level in an absolute sense. However, urban and rural education’s gradual differentiation has slowed down the relative mobility between social levels.

The county high school model is a management model formed in response to the current college entrance examination system for schools in areas with insufficient educational resources. The current college entrance examination is based on scores. The score is positively correlated with the test taker’s effort. This is consistent with the rural families’ hope that their children will realize class mobility through education, and it is consistent with the actual lack of family education, economic, and social capital. At present, most of the various criticisms of the “county high school education model” are based on the urban context and the objective position of quality education. This top-down perspective often ignores the “silent majority,” that is, rural school principals, rural students, and parents’ opinions. Most rural parents undoubtedly support the “county high school education model,” which is based on considering the function of education to promote social mobility.

The county high school adjusts its management model to improve the quality of education and increase enrollment rate under the external pressure from rural families and social expectations, the pressure from the government’s assessment, and the internal pressure of its development. Fully mobilize teachers and students, stimulate teachers’ teaching subjectivity and initiative, stimulate students’ learning subjectivity and motivation, provide policy support to students from disadvantaged families, and improve teaching efficiency and quality of education.

Evaluation from the Perspective of Education Reform

At first glance, the “county high school education model” is inspired by the fierce competition for further studies in the Chinese exam-oriented education system. However, from a fundamental point of view, the utilitarianization of education caused by traditional concepts, the employment system based on academic qualifications, and the college entrance examination system for selecting elites for universities is the real underlying reasons (Qian, 2000).

In China, education has always been positively correlated with an individual’s income level and professional status. Educational practice has been simplified as a talent training process based on knowledge learning, test scores, and high-quality academic qualifications. The “county high school education model” is one of the concrete manifestations of educational utilitarianism in the high school stage. In advancing education reform, it is difficult to comprehensively evaluate students’ quality, which has always been challenging to reform China’s college entrance examination. It is also the real source of the “county high school education model.” Bailing Hu, the principal of the Central Plains of the Southern Normal University of China and a special-grade physics teacher in Jiangsu Province believed that the reason for the seriousness of exam-oriented education in China today is the education evaluation system that is not compatible with the education policy, especially the unreasonable college enrollment system (Lu, 2005). The national education policy requires the comprehensive development of morality, intelligence, and physical fitness. However, the only criterion for college admissions students is the score of the only entrance examination. Therefore, the basis for evaluating the quality of a school is naturally the enrollment rate.

Professor Xiulan Yu from the Department of Educational Science and Management of Nanjing University also believes that the college entrance examination system gave birth to the county high school education model: “Good universities are always a scarce resource in China, and China’s population is huge. The market economy is characterized by competition, and the competition in China is particularly fierce, so schools, students, and parents have no choice but to be in it. For the vast majority of children, if they fail to enter the university, it means a loss of opportunity” (People’s Daily Online, 2005). Although some media have proposed that an admission system that combines admissions examinations, graduation examinations, and comprehensive quality assessment can be implemented so that universities can understand how students grow up in high school. However, it is difficult to assess the “comprehensive quality” of a high school student within three years, and it is even more impractical for the university to send someone to each middle school to observe each student in-depth.

Evaluation from the Perspective of Individual Development

Xu (2013) pointed out that the county high school education model exists to pursue a high school enrollment rate. The school deliberately “grasps the best and let go of the poor,” neglects to teach students per their aptitude, and lacks supervision, leading to severe unhealthy trends, advocating “totally closed militarized management,” weekends and holidays make up classes to improve performance. Long-term implementation of this kind of education will undoubtedly cause severe harm to students and teachers’ future.

● ***“County High School Education Model” Is Not Conducive to the Individual Development of Students***

Under the county high school education model, the teaching activities closely revolve around the center of “examination,” leading to simple and repeated mechanical training. The tendency to focus on details and seek perfection in examinations draws students’ attention to the details too much, drives students to be cautious and neglects the mastery of the overall structure of knowledge, and cannot even understand the overall structure of knowledge use knowledge flexibly. This ultimately resulted in narrowing students’ interests, reading range, and knowledge (Wang, 2002).

Besides, from the perspective of talent training, the “county high school education model” mostly adopts over-learning and intensive training. This model confines learning within the textbooks’ scope so that students have no time to participate in extra-class activities to broaden their horizons and further contribute to their cognitive limitations. This model can easily cause the negative impact of students’ high scores and low ability, which is not conducive to students’ healthy development in the future.

● ***“County High School Education Model” Is Not Conducive to the Professional Growth of Teachers***

With the continuous advancement of education reform, teachers’ education and professionalization have been continuously emphasized and strengthened. From Stenhouse’s “Teachers Become Researchers” to Elliott’s “Teachers Become Action Researchers,” and then to Kemmis’s “Teachers become emancipatory action researchers, the professional development of teachers has become an important way to promote the growth of teachers and improve the level of education.” Under the “county high school education model,” the working hours of teachers have been significantly increased, and the health and professional development problems that this brings with” follow (Li, 2010).

With the massive expansion of the “county high school education model,” the county high school model has been naturally brought into the principal schools in the eastern or central developed regions. Many outstanding teachers in rural areas have been introduced to urban schools, while the remaining teachers have to take on more

difficult teaching tasks. Under increasing pressure, many teachers leave or change careers, and the brain drain in the education field is getting worse (Zhang, 2017).

Conclusions and Perspectives

Due to the imbalanced distribution of educational resources between urban and rural areas and the differences in urban and rural families' educational capabilities and resource acquisition capabilities, this has resulted in differences in rural and urban students' knowledge and capabilities before entering high school. However, both rural and urban students have to face the competition of unified college entrance examination, which requires county high school teachers whose primary source of students is rural students to devote more time and energy to guide students. Facing the fierce competition of college entrance examination, "all-round development" is a complete luxury for rural students. Therefore, the county high schools, which are weak in the urban-rural structure, cannot tolerate too much romanticism. The county high school, which bears the majority of rural families' trust and expectation, takes the improvement of college entrance examination scores and college entrance examination acceptance rate as the leading educational goals under limited resources, and teaching and student management around this goal is reasonable and makes sense. However, because the county high school education model has also caused severe harm to students' growth, this model's long-term development will undoubtedly harm China's education endlessly.

Therefore, with the competition of college entrance examinations becoming fiercer than ever, the high school learning process cannot be so easy under pressure. The high-intensity learning of county high school students is not the result of the model itself but an inevitable phenomenon under fierce competition. There is also room for improvement in county high school management, making management more efficient and more humane; making education more in line with quality education requirements.

With the continuous advancement of education reform, some schools have tried to combine the "county high school education model" with the "urban high school model" (compared to the lack of rural education resources, it means the abundant educational resources and advanced Teaching methods and concepts). For example, Nanjing No. 9 Middle School and Nanjing No. 13 Middle School, under the "New Urban High School Model," emphasize that schools should have rigorous management, but more importantly, students should be given time for their arrangements. It attaches great importance to students' behavior and habits and fully considers students' needs in the management system (Huang, 2020).

Compared with urban schools, rural schools with limited resources have also begun to look for a new "county high school model." For example, Huaibin High School in Henan Province and Shimen Middle School in Foshan City in Guangdong Province set "people" as the center and explore new paths of "simple education," turning county-level high schools into high-quality schools in the new era (Lin, 2019; Wang, 2020).

We can see that in the continuous exploration and promotion of education reform, China's education reform is developing towards a diversified educational path. Proceeding from their conditions, each school makes full use of local resources to provide children with more educational choices while the college entrance examination is still highly selective and profitable. Exam-oriented education represented by the college entrance examination is no longer the only indicator of school education success. Strengthening educational ideals and balancing the contradictions between ideals and reality are also our expectations for educational reforms and are also a useful direction for us to practice educational reforms..

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