

# China's public education system in decay

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China's public education system, once hailed by the Beijing regime as among the greatest achievements of the 1949 Revolution, is in chaos and decay due to lack of funding. Not only is the education of millions of children being compromised, their health and even their lives are being placed at risk by crumbling infrastructure, overcrowding and inadequate staffing levels.

Over the past decade, as the government has fought to attract foreign investment with tax concessions and subsidies, the percentage of China's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) devoted to education has fallen to just 2.4 percent, far lower than the average 4.1 percent in other developing countries. The national government's education budget is mainly spent on urban universities and colleges, rather than the 204.7 million students attending the country's primary and secondary schools. Since the mid-1990s, lower tiers of government have been expected to shoulder the lion's share of these education costs using their own locally-raised taxes.

Many areas of regional and rural China, however, have been unable to attract investment and have been hit by the closure of state-owned industries, rising unemployment and falling farmers' incomes. Local governments are crippled by debt and on the verge of bankruptcy. According to the *Chinese Newsweekly*, a magazine affiliated with the China News Service, the debts of the 50,000 counties and towns amount to 200 billion yuan (\$US24 billion), affecting economic development and functioning of services like education.

According to Zhou Yuxian, an education expert at Beijing Normal University: "The funding gap [on education] between city and country is huge. In some rural areas the average annual spending per child is less than a dollar." In poor counties, education can eat up to half the annual budget, most of it going to pay teachers' salaries. Authorities have responded by neglecting maintenance, employing unqualified teachers on lower rates of pay, increasing class sizes and levying an array of fees. Though education is supposed to be free, parents say they are expected to pay for everything from their

children's paper and report cards through to the electricity bill.

A Ministry of Education report in June revealed some of the consequences of the deteriorating state of China's schools. On average, 40 students die in school-related accidents every day. Last year, the toll was 14,400 deaths.

Of these, a staggering 1,400 were killed when their school buildings collapsed on top of them. In June, a 16-year-old youth was killed and 14 other students were injured, when a cement ceiling beam collapsed at a high school in Ninghai, a city in Zhejiang province. The students were in a third floor classroom of a four-storey building. A local police official blamed shoddy construction and the poor quality of the cement.

Other common causes of death raise questions of understaffing and lack of supervision. Over 3,600 children drowned during school hours, while traffic accidents claimed more than 2,400 children's lives. Deaths were also caused by food poisoning, the inhalation of carbon monoxide from leaking gas heaters, and fires. In June, 13 toddlers died when their kindergarten caught fire, reportedly because staff placed burning mosquito coils too close to the children's beds while they were sleeping.

The central government's strategy for overcoming the chronic underfunding of education has been in line with its drive to restore the capitalist market in every area of Chinese society. It has encouraged schools to go into business. In 1999, school-run businesses raked in \$US15 billion, nearly equal to the state's entire education budget.

Besides assembling toys and producing small handicrafts, schools in rural areas have been known to put children to work in mines, on pig farms and into other forms of intensive and dangerous labour. In March, the results of this policy were exposed to the world when 50 children and four adults were killed in a catastrophic explosion in Fanglin village, Jiangxi province. The children were assembling fireworks in their classroom for a local business, in order to raise money for the school.

In the cities, schools are renting out space. In a case reported by state television, a classroom was let out as a

gambling den. Other enterprises operating out of schools include restaurants, taxi fleets and markets.

Yet even as schools hire out their buildings to businesses, many are plagued by massive overcrowding. A report in the *South China Morning Post* detailed the emergence of “sparrow” schools, where students are crammed into buildings and play areas far too small for their safety and health.

At the Peoples Road primary school in Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong province, 820 children are squeezed into two small buildings with a total area of just 1,700 square metres. The only playground is a small basketball court. The students take turns using it to do morning exercises, while the rest of the students stand behind their desks and are instructed to wiggle to disco music. Seven nearby primary schools are even worse off. Children at the Minxingli primary school, for example, do their morning exercise on the pavement.

Of the 323 primary and secondary schools in Guangzhou, 96 are classified as “sparrow schools”, meaning they have an area of less than 2,000 square metres for primary schools and 4,000 square metres for secondary schools. An area of 2,000 square metres is equivalent to a strip of land just 100 metres long and 20 metres wide.

Guangzhou’s Number 100 Secondary School is a “super” sparrow school, with 1,000 students sharing just 1,700 square metres of space. The school’s running track is just 22 metres long. Foam padding has been placed at the far end of the track to cushion the blow when students crash into a wall at the end of their sprints. The physical and mental costs of these conditions are great. Cai Dachang, the head teacher of a sparrow school in Liwan, told the *South China Morning Post*: “Go to any primary school basketball game, and you will see that players on Liwan district teams are shorter and thinner than those on suburban school teams.”

To dodge responsibility for the cutbacks in education funding, authorities blame overcrowding on the massive growth of China’s urban population. In one of the largest migrations in history, an estimated 120 million people have moved in the last 20 years from China’s rural towns and villages to find work in the cities.

Many schools, however, have been forced to give up ground for municipal works or teachers’ housing. In newer districts, real-estate developers have ignored regulations requiring them to build one 6,500 square metre primary school and one 8,000 square metre secondary school once the population of the area reaches

10,000 people. There are no laws to punish developers who violate the regulations.

Furthermore, China’s residency system, which strictly limits the ability of people to move from their place of birth, has meant that many of those who have moved to the cities have no permanent residency status. With only temporary residence permits, they are not entitled to the services provided by the municipal government, which includes education.

Because of the residency laws, migrant children are either barred from local schools or kept out by the high fees levied on them. To overcome this discrimination, Li Sumei, a migrant to Beijing from rural Henan province, founded the Xingzhi Migrant School in 1994, initially in a vegetable patch. The school charges fees of between 600 yuan and 1,000 yuan (\$US72 to \$120)—less than a third of the fees at regular Beijing schools. The school has grown from just nine pupils to over 2,000 and is now staffed by 100 teachers. Such migrant schools, totally self-funded by the teachers and parents, have sprung up across China.

Although Beijing is home to at least 100,000 migrant children ranging in age from seven to 15 years, the city government has refused to grant legal status to any migrant school. They are at the mercy of officials, who have the power to close schools if their buildings are needed for other purposes or on any other grounds. According to the *South China Morning Post*, the Xingzhi School has been forced to relocate five times in its seven-year history.

For China’s new class of businessmen and managers, the solution to the decay of public education has been to enrol their children in elite private schools or send them overseas to be educated. For the mass of the country’s workers and peasants, who have no such options, it has become another in their steadily mounting list of grievances against the Beijing regime and its pro-capitalist program.



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