

# Challenges in After-School Services under the Background of “Double Reduction” Policy

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## Abstract

In the process of building a strong nation through education, the “Double Reduction” policy is a crucial measure to uphold the original intent of moral education, ensure that education serves the people, and achieve the goal of strengthening the nation’s educational system. It is imperative to continue promoting the comprehensive implementation of the “Double Reduction” policy. Currently, educational anxiety, the new demands of educational development, and the expanding functions of schools have led to a contradiction between the supply and demand of after-school services. To achieve the sustainable and healthy development of after-school services, it is necessary to shift the paradigm of service provision: from “basic supply” to “high-quality supply”, from “one school, one case” to “regional coordination” and from “four points” to “rigorous guarantees”. Furthermore, it is essential to enhance the after-school services guarantee mechanism through digital innovation, resource-sharing coordination, and the establishment of a sound system.

**Keywords:** “Double Reduction” Policy; After-School Services; Basic Education.

## 1. Introduction

What does education mean in the context of building China into a strong nation? In this process, basic education, as a fundamental element, plays a vital role in laying the foundation and nurturing future generations. To achieve the goal of strengthening the country through education, it is essential to firmly grasp the public welfare aspect of basic education, ensuring that the benefits of its development are shared more equitably among the vast majority of the population. The 2024 National Education Conference emphasized that consolidating the achievements of the “Double Reduction” policy, improving the quality of classroom instruction, enhancing after-school services, and establishing a robust guarantee mechanism for after-school programs are key tasks in deepening the policy’s impact. Since the release of the “Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework and Extracurricular Training Burden on Students in the Compulsory Education Stage”(Referred to as “Opinions” policy) in July 2021, issued by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council, governments at all levels—from provincial to municipal to county—along with educational departments and schools, have made significant strides in implementing the policy, yielding positive outcomes. However, in recent years, new challenges have emerged, such as rising anxiety over public education and ongoing reforms within the education system. These developments have exacerbated the imbalance between the supply and demand of after-school services. Therefore, it is of both theoretical and practical importance to thoroughly assess these challenges, redefine the concept of

after-school services guarantees, and propose reforms to consolidate the successes of the “Double Reduction” policy, laying a solid foundation for building a strong educational system in China.

## **2. New Challenges Faced by After-School Services**

As a key educational resource, after-school services are in demand by students, parents, and society at large. Factors such as student population, education system reforms, changing family structures, evolving parenting philosophies, shifting social roles, and national priorities all influence the overall demand for these services. On the supply side, the implementation of policies, school size and distribution, faculty capacity, resource allocation, curriculum reforms, and the expanding functions of schools collectively shape the availability of after-school services. In recent years, the dynamic changes and adjustments to these factors on both the supply and demand sides have introduced new challenges to the after-school services guarantee mechanism, highlighting the need for more responsive and adaptive solutions to ensure equitable and high-quality service delivery.

First, educational anxiety has made it more difficult to address the diverse needs for after-school services. Educational anxiety refers to the stress caused by the competitive “inner volume” (a term used to describe excessive academic pressure) and the “theater effect” in education, where parents become anxious about their children's academic performance and future career prospects. The introduction of the “Opinions” policy aims to cultivate a healthier educational environment, effectively alleviate parental anxiety, and promote the well-rounded development and well-being of students. Research has shown that satisfaction with after-school services is directly and negatively correlated with levels of educational anxiety—meaning that as the satisfaction with after-school services increases, parental anxiety decreases. In other words, the better after-school services meet the diverse needs of students, the more they help alleviate parents' concerns about their children's education. However, educational anxiety also directly impacts after-school services. In China, changes in the school-age population, educational evaluation systems, talent selection mechanisms, and employment conditions have contributed to heightened anxiety over public education. Currently, after-school services in China are still in an exploratory phase and cannot fully meet the varied needs of all students. For example, dual-working and single-parent families face different demands, as do students with academic difficulties compared to those with special talents. Additionally, large families often struggle to reconcile parents' and students' schedules, while single-parent families may need more flexible after-school services hours to close the academic gap between their children and their peers. Furthermore, the implementation of after-school services varies by region and school, with inconsistent policies affecting their overall effectiveness. Expanding the scope of after-school services to cater to a wider range of students, and ensuring that all students benefit from these services, are key challenges that still need to be optimized in the policy's implementation.

Second, the quality of after-school services is constrained by economic disparities and resource imbalances. Due to differences in the allocation of resources such as funding and personnel, the education gap between urban and rural areas continues to widen, leading to significant imbalances in policy implementation. After-school services have been actively rolled out in major cities and developed coastal regions, where they have formed distinctive models. However, in central and western regions, especially in remote rural areas, the implementation of after-school services remains challenging and underdeveloped due to poor teaching conditions. Survey results indicate that children in economically developed eastern and central regions report higher satisfaction with after-school service policies, while satisfaction is notably lower in the western regions. The gap in economic development and the variation in implementation models

contribute to this disparity. In some areas, there is still no unified funding benchmark, leading to fragmented local investment. Additionally, some regions lack proper oversight, and although local education departments coordinate after-school services, there is often insufficient participation from both internal and external stakeholders.

Third, after-school services contribute to widening the actual income gap between teachers in different types of schools and regions. This disparity is primarily due to differences in the day-school system and boarding school arrangements. With the rapid development of new urbanization, the school-age population in rural areas has decreased and become more dispersed, making the issue of “long-distance schooling” increasingly prominent. Establishing boarding schools is a key measure to address this issue. However, compared to non-boarding schools, boarding schools have additional responsibilities, such as supervising morning and evening self-study sessions, providing all-day care, and organizing extracurricular activities. Under the relevant provisions of after-school services, boarding schools are not required to offer after-school care and are prohibited from charging parents additional hosting fees. However, teachers in boarding schools must care for students during night classes, work longer hours, and face greater labor intensity, but they do not receive extra compensation for this. This creates a significant gap between day schools and boarding schools, particularly in the case of the nine-year compulsory education system, where the internal contradictions within schools become more pronounced. Additionally, there is a growing income gap between teachers in rural and urban areas. Previously, rural teachers were given subsidies, which made their average income around 1,000 yuan higher per month than that of urban teachers. However, in counties, the total income of urban teachers tends to surpass that of their rural counterparts. Rural schools, particularly boarding schools, also require teachers to work longer hours than their urban counterparts. Despite the longer working hours, rural teachers do not receive additional compensation, creating income instability in these regions. In some areas, as part of county-level school management, rural middle school teachers have expressed a desire to transfer to primary schools, and boarding school teachers wish to be reassigned to day schools, highlighting the growing disparity and dissatisfaction.

### **3. Transformation of the After-School Services Guarantee Mechanism**

As the most critical component in building a strong education system, the high-quality development of basic education is both a significant and challenging task. It requires after-school services to respond promptly to both external changes in the educational landscape and the evolving internal demands of students and parents. However, under the current after-school service policy, fully ensuring the operation and quality of these services remains difficult. The service model, based on “basic supply” fails to meet the needs of anxious parents; achieving regional resource balance through the “one school, one case” approach is challenging; and sustaining the long-term development of after-school services remains a struggle. To support the effective implementation of after-school services and enhance the scientific, rational, and efficient functioning of the after-school service guarantee mechanism, an urgent transformation of this mechanism is necessary.

#### **(1) From “basic supply” to “high-quality supply”**

In the current educational context, parents' demands for after-school services have evolved beyond simple childcare and homework tutoring. They now seek higher-quality educational resources and more comprehensive training opportunities for their children through these services. As a result, after-school services must transition from “basic supply” to “quality supply”, offering richer, more diversified, and targeted content.

It is essential to deeply understand the actual needs of both students and parents. Feedback can be gathered through surveys and focus group discussions to ensure that the services align with students' realities and meet parents' expectations. For unreasonable demands, schools should help parents develop a scientific understanding of education, emphasizing the benefits of diversified after-school services. This includes addressing concerns related to off-campus tutoring and helping parents manage anxiety caused by the “prisoner’s dilemma” and the “theater effect”. For reasonable demands, schools should design service offerings that balance costs and meet students’ academic and interest development needs. At the same time, schools should leverage their unique characteristics and resource advantages to develop distinctive after-school services, such as those focused on scientific innovation, artistic achievement, and physical fitness, providing students with a wider range of choices.

In addition, the construction of a skilled after-school service teaching team must be strengthened. By introducing external professionals and enhancing in-house teacher training, schools can improve the professional quality and teaching abilities of their staff, thereby ensuring the quality of after-school instruction. Additionally, supervision and evaluation of after-school services need to be reinforced. A comprehensive supervision system should be established, covering service content, teaching quality, safety management, and other aspects to ensure standardization and safety. Regular evaluations should also be conducted to identify problems and implement corrective measures, ensuring the continuous development and quality enhancement of after-school services.

## **(2) From “one school, one case” to “regional coordination”**

Under the current after-school service management system, the “one school, one case” model places individual schools as the primary entities responsible for implementing after-school services. This creates a relatively isolated framework in which teacher allocation, funding, and management are handled independently by each school. As a result, disparities in school resources lead to significant differences in the content and quality of after-school services, hindering the balanced development of basic education. Additionally, the income gap between teachers at day schools that provide after-school services and those at boarding schools that cannot charge for such services has caused internal tensions. While after-school services meet the needs of most parents and students, they also increase the workload for schools and teachers, diverting time and energy away from lesson planning and educational research. The capacity of individual schools is often insufficient to meet the diverse needs of all students and parents. Therefore, it is necessary to shift from the single-school management model of “one school, one case” to a more diversified and collaborative approach of “regional coordination”.

This transformation calls for the reintegration and optimization of educational resources across regions, enabling resource sharing and complementing each other’s strengths. Local governments should take the lead in facilitating an “ecological allocation” of resources, including funding, technology, and systems, to create a more supportive environment for after-school services. Through regional coordination, the resource gaps between schools can be effectively narrowed, improving the overall quality of after-school services and promoting balanced development in basic education.

Under the regional coordination framework, a unified after-school service platform can be established to handle the planning, management, and evaluation of services across the region. While schools can still offer distinctive after-school programs based on their unique characteristics, they must adhere to regional standards to ensure consistency in service quality and content. The education department can also play a leading role in integrating schools, families, communities, and social institutions, clearly defining the processes for after-school service provision, including content, service formats, and funding mechanisms.

This transformation would allow for better allocation and sharing of teaching staff across regions, alleviating teacher shortages in some schools and reducing funding constraints. It would also improve teachers' salaries and benefits, helping to bridge the income gap between different types of schools. Such a transformation not only enhances the standardization of after-school services but also ensures fairer distribution and more effective use of educational resources. Moreover, it would lighten the load on schools and teachers, giving them more time and energy to focus on teaching and research, ultimately improving the quality and efficiency of education.

### **(3) From “four points” to “rigorous guarantees”**

Currently, the financing method for after-school services follows the “four points” model, where funding is sourced from four areas: limited government financial input, a small share from public school funds, contributions from social organizations, and some financial responsibility shouldered by parents. However, this financing approach presents several challenges. On one hand, government investment is insufficient to meet the overall demand for after-school services. On the other, public school funds are often too tight to support extensive after-school programs. Additionally, funding from social organizations and individual parents is fraught with uncertainty and instability.

To ensure the sustainable development of after-school services, it is essential to transition from the “four points” financing model to a “rigorous guarantees” mechanism. Specifically, the government should take the lead in financing after-school services by incorporating these funds into the financial budget, thereby ensuring a stable and sufficient funding source. Furthermore, the government should establish clear standards and a supervision mechanism for fund allocation, promoting rational and efficient usage. Building on the rigorous guarantees, the government can encourage social groups and enterprises to contribute to after-school services through policy guidance and incentive measures, thereby creating diversified funding channels that provide a more robust financial foundation for these services.

Additionally, a dynamic adjustment mechanism for after-school services funding should be established to allow for timely modifications in the proportion and amount of funds raised, based on service content, quality, participant numbers, and other relevant factors. It is also crucial to develop a management system that clearly defines the scope and standards for fund usage, ensuring compliance and transparency. To strengthen oversight, regular audits of fund usage should be conducted to promptly identify and rectify any issues, preventing waste and misuse of resources. By implementing these measures, the scientific, rational, and effective nature of the after-school service guarantee mechanism will be enhanced, providing a strong foundation for the successful implementation and sustainable development of after-school services.

## **4. Recommendations for improving the after-school services guarantee mechanism**

At this new stage of development, to promote the high-quality advancement of basic education and support the goal of building a strong educational nation, it is essential to align with the new trends in population changes and educational development. We must systematically advance the reform of the after-school service system based on the new concept of after-school services, ensuring a balanced alignment between the supply and demand for these services.

### **(1) Adopting the digital supply and demand diagnostic mechanism for after-school services**

To meet the diverse needs of schools across various levels and types, after-school services should be categorized based on their guarantee functions, organized into a modular structure of “basic after-school services and additional after-school services”. Basic after-school services focus on homework completion and review, while additional after-school services cater to students' interests, special talents, and personal

characteristics. By collecting and analyzing data, we can precisely adjust the service structure to improve the alignment between supply and demand. A digital platform can track and analyze homework completion, offering personalized teaching suggestions for educators, thus enhancing teaching effectiveness. For additional after-school services, schools can leverage big data to evaluate external educational resources, assess students' interests, specialties, and parents' needs, and organize various club activities. This approach enriches the after-school service content, meets the diverse needs of students and parents, and fosters students' learning motivation and innovative spirit. A connection scheme between the service structures should be implemented to meet the personalized needs of different students. Basic after-school services, such as homework tutoring, address the public's "urgent and anxious" expectations and are an effective way to improve educational quality. Scientific standards for basic after-school services should focus on the completion of homework and high-quality tutoring, with reasonable time allocations to ensure that students can finish most of their homework at school, thus easing the burden on families. Through digital technology, homework completion is monitored and displayed for teachers conducting after-school services, enabling them to provide targeted guidance. For students who haven't completed their homework during basic service hours, additional services can be extended. Students who finish their homework can participate in additional services based on their own or their parents' preferences. Additionally, improving the efficiency of after-school services is key to enhancing parent satisfaction. Digital technology can help accurately identify students' actual needs and provide an efficient platform for home-school communication. For example, the United States has established a national after-school service support system, where after-school policies, curriculum development, and resources are readily accessible on designated websites, along with charitable funds and research reports. Data analysis allows schools to allocate teaching resources flexibly, ensuring that every student receives adequate attention and guidance. It also helps parents track their children's learning progress and after-school activities in real-time, enhancing trust and cooperation between home and school, and ultimately improving parent satisfaction with after-school services.

### **(2) Implementing the resource sharing and coordination mechanism for after-school services**

Given the regional disparities in educational resources, the first step is to establish a cross-school resource-sharing platform that encourages schools to open up their resources, including teaching staff, facilities, and extracurricular activities. This will help improve the overall quality of after-school services through complementary advantages. Secondly, government and educational departments should increase support for underfunded schools by improving their infrastructure and attracting high-quality teachers, thereby bridging the gap with more developed schools through financial allocations and special funding. Simultaneously, social forces should be encouraged to participate in after-school services, such as through corporate sponsorships and community support, to provide additional resources. Finally, a robust evaluation and feedback system should be established to regularly assess the quality and effectiveness of after-school services in the region. This will allow for timely identification of problems and the implementation of improvements to ensure the sustained provision of high-quality educational resources and services for students.

### **(3) Establishing the rigorous guarantee mechanism for after-school services**

First, it is essential to improve the funding guarantee mechanism. Education, human resources, social security, finance, and other relevant departments should enhance coordination to streamline the verification, payment, and oversight of performance pay for after-school service teachers. Funds should be managed separately and included in teacher performance evaluations as increments to total performance pay, thereby motivating teachers' enthusiasm and initiative. Second, It is important to strengthen the feedback

mechanism. Regularly solicit opinions and suggestions on the development of after-school services through various channels. Establish a closed-loop communication system for collection, feedback, and rectification. Strengthen the application of feedback results, dynamically adjust service offerings, and involve NPC deputies, CPPCC members, and parents in supervising after-school services. Third, It is necessary to improve the care mechanism for teachers. In the initial evaluation phase, guide teachers to transition from a focus on “requirements” to a more proactive approach. Implement comprehensive arrangements for “flexible commuting” and provide additional support for female workers, those with significant family responsibilities, and individuals commuting from distant locations through initiatives like micro-wishes.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the success of after-school services hinges on the effective implementation of comprehensive mechanisms that ensure their quality, sustainability, and responsiveness. Establishing a robust evaluation and feedback system enables continuous monitoring and timely improvements, allowing services to adapt to the evolving needs of students. A solid guarantee mechanism is crucial for long-term development, providing stable funding, addressing feedback, and supporting educators. This approach not only maintains the quality of after-school services but also incentivizes and retains skilled teachers. Ultimately, integrating these strategies will ensure that after-school services consistently deliver high-quality educational resources, fostering students' holistic growth and well-being.

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