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Evolution, Significance, and Implementation Principles of After-School Services in Chinese Primary and Secondary Schools Amid High-Quality Development

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Abstract

Building a high-quality after-school service system is of great significance for improving the public education service system, promoting the healthy growth of students, and addressing livelihood issues. This is specifically reflected in sharing educational resources, enhancing educational equity and quality; catering to students' diverse needs to create room for personalized growth; alleviating the burden on students' families, and boosting their sense of happiness and satisfaction. Shaped by both market dynamics and government guidance, after-school services have ultimately been implemented as a quasi-public good. Based on a clear definition of its attributes, China's after-school services must uphold the principles of inclusivity, voluntariness, and quality assurance to meet the demands of all parties and ensure their orderly and effective implementation.

Keywords: *After-school services, Public education service system, High-quality education, Burden reduction, 3:30 PM dilemma*

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1. Introduction

China has started a new journey towards realizing its Second Centenary Goal. Building a high-quality education system to meet the people's growing demand for education constitutes a major livelihood project, one that bears great significance for national development and the nation's future. In the new era, public expectations for education have elevated: society is no longer content with mere "access to education" but instead takes "access to quality education" as the core benchmark. A well-rounded public education service system serves as an effective safeguard for fulfilling this demand, an important indicator of a country's educational level, and a practical issue most closely related to people's lives. To address the "3:30 PM dilemma" that impacts millions of households, the General Office of the Ministry of Education issued the Guiding Opinions on Providing After-School Services for Primary and Secondary School Students in 2017, formally establishing "after-school services" as a specific component of the public education service system. In the subsequent period, various localities launched exploratory practices, while the governments introduced a series of supporting policies. Nevertheless, a host of challenges have emerged in the process of practical implementation. So only by clarifying the significance of after-school services, tracing their evolutionary trajectory, and precisely defining their

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implementation principles can the root causes of existing problems be identified and effective solutions be explored. This endeavor is also an urgent requirement for the comprehensive advancement and consolidation of after-school services in the current context.

2. Equity, Quality, and Livelihood: The Necessity of After-School Services

After-school services have emerged as a product of China's present stage of economic and social development, directly responding to two core challenges in education and livelihood. Beyond being a mere educational demand, they constitute a key public concern — one that bears profound significance for safeguarding social stability and harmony, optimizing the utilization of existing high-quality educational resources, advancing educational equity, improving education quality, facilitating students' personalized development, and addressing livelihood issues.

2.1. Sharing Quality Resources to Enhance Educational Equity and Quality

In China, off-campus tutoring institutions once served as a supplementary means to fulfill certain functions of the government's public education services. Surveys have indicated that the participation rate of students in extracurricular tutoring is significantly higher in urban areas than in towns and rural regions. Opportunities to engage in such tutoring are influenced by both external factors—including the number of tutoring institutions and qualified educators—and internal factors, such as families' educational payment capacity and educational expectations. Compared with their urban counterparts, students in towns and rural areas have less access to extracurricular tutoring, resulting in imbalances in the availability of supplementary educational resources (Pei *et al.*, 2018). Even within urban settings, high-quality extracurricular resources and tutoring services are predominantly concentrated among a minority with strong economic and cultural capital, leaving ordinary families struggling to provide effective academic guidance and talent development support for their children. This predicament is particularly acute for left-behind children and children of migrant workers, whose willingness and capacity to pay for high-cost extracurricular tutoring are notably lower. Reports indicate that in 2020, the number of migrant children receiving compulsory education reached 14.297 million (China News Network, 2021). According to relevant reports from the Ministry of Civil Affairs, by the end of the 13th Five-Year Plan period, there were about 6.436 million rural left-behind children nationwide (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Faced with such a large vulnerable group, developmental gaps stemming from disparities in educational expenditure are inevitably exacerbated by differences in family socioeconomic backgrounds. Against this backdrop, the Ministry of Education mandated that by the autumn semester of 2021, after-school services should achieve full coverage in compulsory education schools, with efforts to extend access to all students in need. The key objective is to leverage government-led after-school services to expand the supply of educational resources, establish an appropriate supplementary mechanism, and ensure equal access to after-school services across regions, urban and rural areas, schools, and student groups. By doing so, it aims to mitigate the educational starting-point inequities caused by family economic disparities, reduce the adverse impacts of insufficient after-school resources on students' long-term academic and personal development, and provide equitable growth opportunities for all students, thereby maximizing their potential for development.

In May 2021, President Xi Jinping, presiding over the 19th meeting of the Central Committee for Deepening Overall Reform, emphasized that schools must not transfer all responsibilities for students' after-school time to society, and that teachers should fully assume the responsibility for students' basic academic guidance. He further pointed out that the fundamental approach to reducing students' burden lies in comprehensively improving the quality of in-school teaching, ensuring the full coverage of required curriculum content, and consolidating the primary role of school education (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Schools and teachers fully fulfilling their educational responsibilities constitute a core strategy for optimizing the utilization of high-quality educational resources and enhancing overall education quality. Local governments have shifted their financial and institutional priorities toward constructing an inclusive public education service system. Within the framework of after-school services, schools play a pivotal role as the primary provider, addressing the practical needs of both students and parents. Meanwhile, parents share and subsidize the costs associated with after-school services. This model, which leverages existing school resources, reshapes the allocation pattern of educational resources and expands educational welfare. In the meantime, it capitalizes on schools' high-quality educational resources—including sound management systems, experienced educators, available venues, and structured curricula— by adopting a resource-sharing philosophy. This enables every family to access high-quality after-school services at minimal or no cost. Additionally, it avoids the inefficiency of expanding off-campus educational resources while leaving in-school resources underutilized. Ultimately, this approach maximizes the utilization of human, material, and financial resources, improves the efficiency of public educational resource allocation and supply output, and promotes the rational distribution and efficient operation of educational resources. In doing so, it achieves the dual goals of advancing educational equity and elevating education quality.

2.2. Meeting Students' Diverse Needs and Creating Space for Personalized Growth

Optimizing after-school services can fundamentally foster the healthy development of the educational ecosystem. Apart from addressing the “3:30 PM dismissal dilemma”, such services can fulfill children’s diverse developmental needs—an essential manifestation of educational equity. While off-campus after-school tutoring institutions have partially met students’ varied learning demands, they have also exhibited problematic practices: providing substandard services, delivering content beyond the official curriculum, advancing teaching schedules prematurely, and unilaterally prioritizing exam-oriented skills training. These behaviors have disrupted the sound operation of the educational ecosystem. In contrast, standardized school-based after-school services demonstrate distinct advantages: they enhance the efficiency and quality of students’ homework completion, and their fees are significantly lower than those of off-campus institutions. This not only effectively curbs the irregularities of unregulated off-campus tutoring providers but also fosters the standardized development of legitimate off-campus educational institutions.

After-school services embody educational temperature, providing space for students’ personalized growth and delivering tailored compensatory support. School education adheres strictly to curriculum standards, featuring planned, organized, and goal-directed learning of textbook content. In contrast, after-school services are not merely an extension of basic knowledge instruction; they also serve as a robust platform for enhancing students’ holistic competencies. In terms of content, after-school services foster students’ independent learning habits and capabilities through activities such as homework accompaniment, academic tutoring, and independent reading. Meanwhile, they cater to students’ diverse needs via a rich array of service offerings, including art, music, sports, film appreciation, interest-based clubs, and school-based activities. In terms of format, academic tutoring is organized based on original class units, while interest courses are delivered through combined-class sessions or open-enrollment classes—providing diverse participation modes. Students can make independent choices in line with their personal preferences. The “basic + characteristic” model balances attention to students’ common development and the cultivation of individual interests based on individual differences. This arrangement not only helps students develop sound learning habits and consolidate foundational knowledge but also facilitates the nurturing of their individuality.

2.3. Alleviating Family Burdens and Enhancing Sense of Happiness and Satisfaction

China’s family structure has tended toward miniaturization and simplification. In 2019, households with four or fewer members accounted for approximately 86.2% of the national total ([National Bureau of Statistics, 2021](#)). In China, the standard working hours for enterprises and public institutions typically end between 5:00 PM and 6:00 PM, which conflicts with the 3:30 PM school dismissal time. For students—including left-behind children—who are picked up by grandparents or have no one to collect them, the options are often returning home without homework guidance, attending off-campus tutoring institutions directly, or loitering near school premises. These scenarios expose them to potential risks related to traffic safety and food hygiene. Additionally, the educational gap stemming from intergenerational differences in parenting styles (notably the indulgent upbringing commonly practiced by grandparents) gives rise to numerous challenges. Faced with their own work and pressures, parents often struggle to provide effective homework tutoring for their children or nurture their interests. A survey jointly conducted by the Social Survey Center of China Youth Daily and Questionnaire Network, involving 1,998 parents of kindergarten and primary school students, revealed that 91.4% of respondents were frequently troubled by the need to pick up and drop off their children at school. Regarding specific difficulties, 70.9% of parents were still at work when their children finished school ([Du, 2018](#)). The small-scale, dual-income family structure exacerbates the challenges of childcare. Furthermore, in China, childcare responsibilities have traditionally fallen primarily on women: 63.15% of families identify mothers as the main caregivers, while the proportion of fathers assuming primary caregiving roles remains extremely low. However, with the popularization of gender equality and improved educational attainment among women, women’s sense of agency and participation has strengthened — leading to rising female employment rates and a gradual shift in their family roles. Regression analysis from relevant studies indicates that having infants or young children significantly reduces the likelihood of mothers being employed ([Song and Zhou, 2015](#)). Additionally, 42.9% of women experienced a wage reduction of more than 50% after giving birth ([The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2021](#)), which substantially increases the childcare costs borne by women. Moreover, the society holds dual expectations for women: on the one hand, they are expected to actively participate in the workforce to boost household income; on the other, they are tasked with fulfilling family caregiving responsibilities. This places an excessive burden on many working women, who must balance career and family obligations. Such dual pressures exert adverse physical and psychological impacts, ultimately reducing their satisfaction with family life, work, and marriage.

With the acceleration of industrialization and urbanization, China's demographic development has undergone a phased evolution — progressing from rapid expansion and slowed growth to an era characterized by severe aging and persistently low fertility rates. The Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Optimizing the Birth Policy to Promote Long-term Balanced Population Development, issued on July 20, 2021, underscored the profound significance of optimizing the birth policy to facilitate the long-term balanced population development ([The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021](#)). However, the current social welfare system remains inadequate in meeting people's evolving needs, and the supply of high-quality educational resources is insufficient. In particular, challenges related to childcare, schooling, and academic tutoring have led to excessively high parenting costs, which has emerged as a key deterrent to fertility intentions among many families. Surveys show that off-campus education expenditures account for a relatively high proportion of total family education spending during the compulsory education stage, reaching one-third of the total ([Wei, 2020](#)). The involutory (hyper-competitive) educational landscape has compelled nearly half of all families to seek supplementary resources in the educational market, with successive escalations in their investments. This phenomenon not only exacerbates students' academic burden but also imposes a heavier financial strain on families.

Non-instructional time for students necessitates adult supervision—particularly the “supervision vacuum” arising from the “3:30 PM dilemma”. This gap conflicts with prevailing social realities, such as the prevalence of dual-income households, shrinking family sizes, and an aging population. A series of chain reactions have been triggered by rapid economic development, shifting gender roles for women, the evolution of birth policies, rising parenting costs, and imbalances between the supply and demand of public education services. As a result, the “3:30 PM dilemma” has evolved into a pressing livelihood issue that demands urgent addressing. In response, schools have proactively assumed this responsibility. Non-profit-oriented after-school services not only reduce households' educational expenditures but also provide care support for children from dual-income families (where parents have late working hours or long commutes) as well as rural left-behind children. This, to a certain extent, safeguards women's employment rights and interests, enabling them to allocate more time and energy to their careers and daily lives. Simultaneously, such services contribute to promoting the physical and mental health of individuals and family harmony, enhancing sense of happiness, and unlocking family fertility intentions. In doing so, they provide guarantee and support for alleviating the impacts of an aging society and facilitating the long-term stable and balanced development of China's population.

3. The Outcome of the “Burden Reduction” Dynamic: The Evolution of After-School Services

Tracing the evolutionary path of after-school services reveals their essence as a form of “after-school childcare”, shaped by the interplay of forces surrounding “burden reduction”. This development emerges from the joint exploration by market competition and government intervention regarding the form of education and the structure of the public service system during this specific historical period.

3.1. The Gradual Emergence of Demand for After-School Care (1950s - 2003)

Since the 1950s, the central topic of “burden reduction” has frequently featured in major national educational discussions and policy dialogues. In 1955, the Ministry of Education issued the Directive on Alleviating the Excessive Burden on Primary and Secondary School Students, noting that students' excessive burden was primarily attributed to heavy academic workloads ([Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 1955](#)). On May 4, 1964, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council approved and transmitted the Ministry of Education's Report on Overcoming the Phenomenon of Excessive Burden in Primary and Secondary Schools and Improving Teaching Quality, emphasizing the need to address the issue of excessive academic burden and the mindset of one-sided pursuit of higher education enrollment. On January 17, 1966, the CPC Central Committee forwarded the Report on Issues Related to Reducing Student Burden and Ensuring Student Health submitted by the Party Group of the Ministry of Education. This document outlined the prevalence of excessive academic burden among students in primary, secondary, and higher education, analyzed its underlying causes, and proposed targeted measures ([Central Institute of Educational Sciences, 1984](#)). Following the resumption of the National College Entrance Examination in 1977, the issue of student burden resurfaced. The Regulations on School Health Work promulgated by the State Education Commission in 1990 re-emphasized that the daily study time (including self-study) for students should not exceed 6 hours for primary schools and 8 hours for secondary schools. It further stipulated that schools or teachers must not extend teaching hours or increase homework assignments for any reason, as this would exacerbate students' academic burden ([State Education Commission, 1990](#)). Against this backdrop, however, after-school care programs soon emerged, taking two primary forms: off-campus childcare services and school-based evening care classes for which schools collected nominal fees.

3.2. The Dominance of Off-Campus After-School Care Services (2004 - 2016)

In 2004, the Ministry of Education and other relevant departments jointly issued the Guidelines on Implementing the “Single-Fee” Charging System in Nationwide Compulsory Education Schools. To prohibit arbitrary fee collection by schools, the document mandated the one-time and unified collection of miscellaneous fees, textbook fees, and workbook fees from students on the basis of strictly verified standards (Ministry of Education, National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Finance, 2004). School-operated fee-based evening care classes were explicitly in violation of this regulation. Consequently, schools across the country successively suspended such programs, and off-campus tutoring institutions emerged as the sole form of after-school care during this period. In 2009, to standardize and regulate the management of primary and secondary schools, the Ministry of Education issued the Guiding Opinions on Strengthening the Management of Primary and Secondary Schools and Regulating School-Running Behaviors. The document required schools to scientifically arrange schedules to effectively reduce students’ excessive academic burden, with reasonable provisions for students’ rest time, in-school learning (including self-study) hours, physical exercise time, in-school activities, and homework assignments (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2009). In response, local education authorities implemented the “3:30 PM school dismissal” policy, imposing strict regulations on school hours. These “burden reduction” initiatives inadvertently created a gap in student supervision after school. To address this issue, local governments explored public-welfare after-school care policies, introducing measures such as “flexible school dismissal times”, “after-school care programs”, “second classrooms”, “delayed dismissal”, “community-based childcare”, and “school-based childcare”. These measures primarily took three forms— school-operated, off-campus institution-operated, and community-operated— with three development models: government-funded support, market-oriented operation, and public-welfare activities. In practice, however, the lack of top-level design led to problems such as ambiguous policy guidelines, insufficient funding, and unclear division of responsibilities between families and schools. These factors dampened schools’ enthusiasm for participation, often resulting in perfunctory implementation. Meanwhile, community-based public-welfare initiatives frequently existed in name only due to inadequate social support. Against this backdrop, profit-driven off-campus educational institutions— despite prevalent issues such as irregular operations and uneven service quality— became the preferred choice for many families seeking to resolve the “3:30 PM dilemma. Particularly under the combined influence of intensifying social competition and educational “involution”, off-campus tutoring institutions occupied this after-school “supervision vacuum” through a purely market-oriented model and achieved rapid growth.

The National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan Outline (2010–2020), promulgated in 2010, explicitly stated that “reducing the academic burden on students is a shared responsibility of the whole society. The government, schools, families, and society must work together, address both symptoms and root causes, and conduct comprehensive governance” (National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan Outline Working Group Office, 2010). This statement institutionalized the multi-stakeholder shared responsibility for burden reduction. To explore solutions, some cities leveraged government resources and collaborated with schools and families. Municipalities and provinces including Shanghai, Nanjing, Zhejiang, Beijing, and Chengdu successively issued relevant policies. While these policies varied in positioning and content focus, they generally framed after-school services as a livelihood initiative aimed at addressing the practical difficulties of families, with a focus on extracurricular activities and care provisions. However, due to irregular practices by some teachers, the Implementation Opinions on Regulating Education Fees and Curbing Arbitrary Education Charges in 2014, jointly issued by five national ministries and commissions, explicitly prohibited behaviors such as teaching core curriculum content in extracurricular tutoring and schools organizing or participating in fee-based tutoring programs (Ministry of Education *et al.*, 2014). This regulation directly restricted fee-based in-school after-service models, thereby creating opportunities for the expansion of off-campus tutoring institutions. The Survey Report on the Status of China’s Tutoring Education Industry and Tutoring Institution Teachers, released by the Chinese Society of Education in 2016, revealed that the industry’s market size exceeded 800 billion yuan, with over 137 million participating students and a tutoring institution teacher workforce that ranges from 7 million to 8.5 million. Nevertheless, the lack of unified professional standards resulted in a fragmented industry landscape, with significant disparities in the overall quality of the teaching workforce in tutoring institutions, giving rise to prominent challenges (Chinese Society of Education, 2016).

3.3. *The Return of After-School Services to Schools (2017 - Present)*

The original intent of the “3:30 PM school dismissal” policy was to reduce students’ academic burden by shortening in-school hours; however, it inadvertently triggered a series of problems. Firstly, it created pickup dilemmas for the majority of dual-income families, as their work schedules were misaligned with the early dismissal time. Secondly, it raised concerns about the quality and safety of off-campus tutoring services while substantially increasing families’ educational expenditure burdens. This situation effectively “forced” students into various off-campus training programs, transforming the original goal of “burden reduction” into an unintended “burden escalation”. Beyond causing work-life conflicts and financial strains for dual-income families, this phenomenon fostered the proliferation of unregulated, low-quality off-campus educational institutions, triggering a chain of adverse reactions and evolving into a pressing livelihood issue demanding urgent attention. In 2017, the General Office of the Ministry of Education issued the Guiding Opinions on Effectively Providing After-School Services for Primary and Secondary School Students, advocating that primary and secondary schools should fully exert their primary role in delivering after-school services. The document provided clear guidelines and requirements regarding the target groups, service content, and implementation approaches of after-school services (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2017). It was at this juncture that the formal concept of “after-school services” was established. In September 2017, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council jointly issued the Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Educational System and Mechanisms, emphasizing the need to establish and improve the after-school service system. It encouraged local governments and schools to explore flexible school dismissal policies and provide diverse, high-quality after-school services tailored to students’ physical and mental development and parents’ actual needs (General Office of the CPC Central Committee and General Office of the State Council, 2020). In 2018, the Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Regulating the Development of Off-Campus Training Institutions, while recognizing the legitimate role of off-campus training, highlighted critical issues: some institutions violated laws and regulations related to education and youth development, engaged in exam-oriented training, exacerbated students’ extracurricular burdens, increased family financial pressures, and undermined the healthy functioning of the educational ecosystem—eliciting strong public backlash. The document put forward a series of rectification measures (General Office of the State Council, 2018). By this time, schools in major cities such as Beijing and Nanjing had already launched pilot after-school service programs, with local governments summarizing practical experiences and issuing supporting policies. On February 23, 2019, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the Implementation Plan for Accelerating Education Modernization (2018–2022), emphasizing the priority of reducing the excessive extracurricular burden on primary and secondary school students and supporting the widespread implementation of after-school services in primary and secondary schools (General Office of the CPC Central Committee & General Office of the State Council, 2019).

Starting from 2017, the Chinese government initiated the implementation of school-based after-school services and imposed strict regulation on off-campus training institutions. Adopting a two-pronged approach to govern the educational ecosystem during the “supervision vacuum” following the “3:30 PM school dismissal”, it transferred the primary position of education back to schools. By the end of May 2021, a total of 102,000 compulsory education schools nationwide had launched after-school services, with 64.963 million students and 4.656 million teachers participating in related work. Among these, the coverage rate of after-school services in urban schools reached 75.8%, the student participation rate stood at 55.4%, and the teacher participation rate was 62%. Notably, the coverage rate of after-school services in some major cities exceeded 90%. On July 13, 2021, at a press briefing hosted by the Department of Basic Education of the Ministry of Education, which focused on the development of compulsory education after-school services and summer childcare services, specific requirements for after-school services were proposed. The first requirement was “comprehensive coverage”, stipulating that “local governments and schools should formulate and improve targeted implementation plans for after-school services based on local realities, adhering to the principle of ‘one school, one policy’”. It is mandated that full coverage of after-school services in compulsory education schools be achieved by the autumn semester of 2021, with efforts to ensure full access for all students in need” (Department of Basic Education, Ministry of Education, 2021). Shortly thereafter, on July 24, 2021, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council jointly issued the Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework Burden and Off-Campus Training Burden for Students in Compulsory Education (hereafter referred to as the “Double Reduction” policy). The document explicitly emphasized the need to alleviate the excessive homework burden and off-campus training burden on compulsory education students, with three core focuses: first, enhancing the quality of school-based after-school services to meet students’ diverse needs; second, comprehensively regulating off-campus training practices, including suspending the approval of new subject-specific off-campus training institutions targeting

compulsory education students and requiring the re-registration of existing subject-specific institutions as non-profit entities; third, vigorously improving the quality of classroom teaching to ensure that students can master required knowledge and skills sufficiently during school hours. Through these measures, the smooth advancement of the “Double Reduction” initiative was comprehensively guaranteed (General Office of the CPC Central Committee & General Office of the State Council, 2021). At this juncture, the return of after-school services to schools were fully implemented across the country.

It is evident that China’s currently implemented after-school services operate with an inherent evolutionary logic. From the founding of the People’s Republic of China to the early 21st century, education policy was primarily efficiency-oriented. Confronted with the disparity between large-scale economic construction and the scarcity of talent coupled with backwardness of education levels, the education sector gained prominent attention, driving rapid expansion in the scale of primary and secondary education. Under the influence of this efficiency-prioritized educational philosophy, the adoption and selection of compulsory education policy instruments were predominantly coercive. Curricula, textbooks, and teaching methods were uniformly designed in a planned and phased manner, giving rise to a mechanized educational model and intensifying academic advancement pressures. Furthermore, administrative burden-reduction measures focused narrowly on the quantitative dimension of academic time investment. Authoritative and mandatory directives—such as “not exceed 6 hours” and “no more than 6 hours”—were explicitly formulated. In-school time was equated with excessive academic burden on students, leading to restrictions on school hours, with early dismissal emerging as the primary burden-reduction measure. Amid the dual pressures of academic advancement and early dismissal, demand for after-school care programs gradually emerged. Entering the 21st century, the focus of China’s education policy shifted to balancing efficiency with equity: promoting the balanced development of basic education, advancing quality-oriented education initiatives at the compulsory education stage, improving the operational and governance systems of compulsory education, and implementing a management system featuring local government responsibility and hierarchical administration. The government adopted a more open attitude toward emerging policy instruments, comprehensively utilizing voluntary, coercive, and mixed tools. Governments at all levels leveraged their initiative to implement contextually tailored measures: coercive policy instruments were employed to regulate school behaviors, with the “single-fee system” pushing school-based after-school services toward two extremes—purely public welfare operation or outright cancellation. Meanwhile, market entities, voluntary organizations, and communities, acting as voluntary policy instruments, played a supplementary role in compulsory education, serving as a beneficial extension of school education. However, due to inadequate supervision and other factors, these entities occasionally deviated from their original objectives. During this period, mixed policy instruments—including appeals and incentives, public opinion advocacy, financial subsidies, and demonstration-based learning—urged schools and students to focus on the content and structure of academic time allocation, while highlighting the irrational internal time structure of academic tutoring provided by off-campus institutions. Entering the new era, China’s drive to build a great modern socialist country demands an upgraded version of educational equity—namely, equitable access to quality education. Reflecting on the half-century experience of burden-reduction reforms, each round has been accompanied by rebounds in market and individual demands, as well as the paradox of “the more burden is reduced, the heavier it becomes”. The spillover of “early school dismissal” into the off-campus tutoring space has proven detrimental to the goals of burden reduction, educational equity, and high-quality after-school services. Faced with governance challenges in the new period, the government has conducted a comprehensive reassessment, leading to an expansion in the target scope of after-school service policy instruments. After-school services, once dominated by market mechanisms, now take schools as the key provider while incorporating market dynamics, with policy targets extended to families and social groups. Specifically, families are encouraged to participate to foster after-school home-school cooperation; social groups are invited to join to enrich the forms and content of after-school services, thereby transforming the governance model into one that closely aligns with the needs of multiple stakeholders. Meanwhile, the balanced development of compulsory education has further expanded the coverage of policy instruments, ensuring that children living in rural areas, from low-income households, subsistence allowance recipients, of migrant workers, and those living in single-parent families (groups previously under served by after-school services) now have access to balanced and high-quality after-school services. Additionally, after-school services fully utilize integrated policy instruments to enhance the effectiveness of policy implementation and maximize its effects; the authority is assigned to local governments, which formulate context-specific implementation measures for after-school services based on local realities; autonomy is granted to schools to exercise self-governance and pursue sustainable development in terms of the funding and management of after-school services. By leveraging the role of policy experimentation and demonstration, pilot programs and trials of after-school services have been launched across regions, facilitating the rapid nationwide expansion of such services. Policies are continuously adjusted to avoid the ossification of service models, with strict supervision enforced, public opinions fully solicited, and public advocacy

conducted to enhance the participation and recognition of students, schools, families, and society at large. By deploying a “combination of policy measures”, the government leverages interests, needs, and economic rationality to achieve a more scientific, reasonable, and balanced allocation of students’ time, fostering a dynamic ecosystem of shared responsibility for education.

4. Inclusivity, Voluntariness, and Quality Assurance: The Implementation Principles of After-School Services

After-school services can be defined in both broad and narrow senses. In the broad sense, they refer to relevant services provided by organizations, institutions, groups, or adult individuals for students during non-instructional periods — including weekends, winter vacations, and summer vacations—subsequent to the completion of the school’s prescribed curriculum. In the narrow sense, after-school services specifically denote services offered to students by the aforementioned entities during the interval between the end of the school day and their return home (Cheng and Xiong, 2018). As a major public welfare initiative benefiting the entire society, the after-school service policy is firmly grounded in the principles of educational public welfare and inclusivity. By adopting mechanisms such as financial subsidies, reasonable service fees, or delegated charging, it addresses the practical challenge faced by parents of being unable to pick up their children promptly after school, safeguards student safety, fosters students’ individual strengths, and facilitates their healthy development. This policy also represents the state’s proactive response to prominent educational issues and difficulties, serving as a key measure to effectively meet public needs, promote educational equity, deepen the reform of educational mechanisms, and deliver education that satisfies the people. However, in practice, there exist widespread cognitive misunderstandings regarding after-school services. Therefore, only by clarifying its inherent essence and exploring the specific principles that should guide its implementation can the effective and sustainable development of after-school services be guaranteed.

4.1. The Principle of Inclusivity

Previously, schools generally required students to leave campus immediately after school, leaving students’ after-school time largely in a state of “management vacuum”. With China’s economic and social development, the government has gained the capacity to provide student care services through social procurement, with schools acting as the implementing entities. According to the definition of public goods proposed by American economist Paul Samuelson, after-school services exhibit characteristics of non-excludability while retaining elements of rivalry in consumption. They are non-compulsory in nature: government funding subsidies are provided; charging standards are uniformly determined by district- or county-level schools with discretion; teachers receive reasonable labor remuneration; and the marginal cost of adding new participants is not necessarily zero. Situated between public goods and private goods, after-school services do not strictly embody the non-excludability and non-rivalry that define pure public goods (Ma, 2005). Therefore, after-school services in primary and secondary schools constitute an educational extension closely related to compulsory education (Zou, 2020), falling under the category of quasi-public goods—specifically, preferential service products. This clarifies the question of whether such services should be charged for. After-school hours fall outside compulsory education time and coincide with teachers’ non-working hours; the provision of corresponding teaching facilities, logistical support systems, and operational conditions all require financial input. Currently, the allocation of educational funds is planned at the county level, largely dependent on local economic conditions. Given the disparities in economic development across regions, this directly impacts the capacity of county-level departments to undertake after-school services. Therefore, local charging standards can be formulated through a comprehensive assessment of relevant policies and local public service levels. In principle, fees should be significantly lower than those of off-campus institutions, with public welfare prioritized over profit motives, and no profit-making objective.

Therefore, after-school services can, to a certain extent, narrow the extracurricular education gap stemming from differences in family and socioeconomic backgrounds, while compensating for inadequacies in off-campus training, family education, and urban social environmental education. Funding for such services should be reasonably shared among the government, schools, and parents, with parental willingness to pay and teacher subsidies aligned with this cost-sharing framework. The cost-sharing model between parents and local public finance constitutes the primary funding mechanism for after-school services in most regions. Local governments are required to establish long-term and stable funding subsidy systems, clarifying sources of funding and contribution ratios. They should appropriately increase financial input based on local fiscal capacity for education, with government subsidies playing a leading role to ensure timely and full disbursement. This multi-stakeholder responsibility-sharing framework also includes partial parental contributions and supplementary social donations. Adhering to the principle of inclusive and non-profit charging,

authorities must clarify government subsidy standards and parental cost-sharing ratios, formulate detailed fee schedules, and establish a service fund supervision mechanism involving joint participation by the government, schools, and parents. This ensures funds are used efficiently, openly, and transparently. Procedural justice serves as the foundation for substantive justice and a guarantee for realizing public educational interests. Therefore, educational policies tailored to different groups represent a pragmatic and rational choice, preventing the emergence of a “new educational gap” and ensuring relative equity through “compensatory justice” (Hill, 2002). Compensatory education, in essence, involves redistributing educational resources, guided by the principle of maximizing the interests of the educated, respecting their right to education, and advocating for quality education. Influenced by the concentration of educational resources in “key schools” and “model schools”, public primary schools in remote or rural areas constitute the weakest link in China’s compulsory education system, often leaving disadvantaged students deprived of equitable knowledge and cultural access (Cao and Zhu, 2021). Furthermore, significant regional disparities in economic development and social resources, uneven inter-regional development, large household income gaps, and the limited reach of educational resources necessitate that county-level finances and social groups prioritize investment in educationally underdeveloped areas, in line with the principle of compensatory resource allocation. Students meeting specific criteria should be granted free access to after-school services, narrowing participation gaps caused by regional and household income disparities. Accordingly, the focus of educational reform and development should shift toward these under-resourced schools, with policy preferences extended to rural after-school services. Such compensatory support encompasses dedicated funding, improved facilities, teacher development, student support, increased teacher staffing, curriculum enhancement, and specialized internet resources, aiming to gradually diminish gaps in the public service delivery system. For students with special needs, schools should provide extended care services, with priority access and fee reductions or waivers for groups such as registered poor households, subsistence allowance recipients, migrant workers’ children, and single-parent families. Adhering to the principle of full coverage for needy populations fully embodies the inclusivity principle.

4.2. The Principle of Voluntariness

The target recipients of after-school services are primary and secondary school students (within compulsory education) and their parents who have a demand for such services. “Demand” thus serves as both the starting point and ultimate goal of this policy. In 1980, Grönroos further developed the concept of service quality, positing that it must be evaluated from a dual perspective: encompassing both the inherent characteristics of the service itself and the subjective perceptions of consumers (Joan and Karen, 2002). For after-school services, the consumers, i.e., the service recipients, are students and parents. Students, as direct beneficiaries, have their growth and developmental needs as the foundational basis of the service, while their willingness to participate serves as the criterion for engagement. They also retain the right to independently select service content based on personal interests and strengths, thereby stimulating and cultivating individual hobbies, with differences in developmental trajectories sufficiently respected. Parental practical needs also factor into participation decisions. Parents should base their choices on their actual circumstances, avoiding the vicious cycle of energy-draining competition and panic-driven comparisons. Consequently, after-school services must fully respect the opinions of students and parents, allowing them to make autonomous and voluntary choices from the options provided by schools. Under no circumstances should participation be forced or coerced.

Furthermore, after-school services are predominantly delivered by in-school teachers; however, the associated costs and responsibilities must not be borne entirely by teachers. Given that teachers already face excessive workloads, compelling their participation in after-school services would violate their labor rights, exacerbate their work-family conflicts, and undermine their physical and mental well-being as well as the quality of daily teaching. Therefore, the principle of voluntariness must also apply to teachers’ participation, with strict prohibition of moral coercion in any form. Flexible and comprehensive incentives should be implemented to encourage teacher engagement, alongside efforts to expand resource pools—alleviating teachers’ burdens and preventing responsibility shifting. At the same time, to enhance teacher motivation, relevant authorities should incorporate after-school service participation into performance-based salary calculations. Funding allocated for teacher subsidies in after-school services must be classified as an incremental component of performance-based pay, explicitly excluded from the base for determining the total performance salary quota in subsequent years. Teachers’ performance in after-school services should serve as a key criterion for professional title evaluation and appointment, commendations, awards, and performance-based pay distribution. The evaluation system for professional titles should be refined, criteria for commendations and awards clarified, and performance pay structures adjusted to fully account for after-school service contributions—effectively safeguarding teachers’ rights and interests while boosting their participation enthusiasm. Moreover, schools must uphold the principle of openness and transparency by publicly disclosing after-school service schedules, content, implementation methods,

supporting measures, and cost details, subjecting them to strict standardized management. They should proactively accept supervision from society and parents, prohibit profit-driven activities such as arbitrary fee collection and unethical practices, and strengthen oversight and evaluation mechanisms. In doing so, the voluntariness principle is safeguarded within an open and transparent service system, fostering a more standardized, human-centered, and equitable environment.

4.3. The Principle of Quality Assurance

China has now entered a stage of high-quality development, and education is no exception. The previous practice of evaluating whether students' "academic burden" was excessive solely based on the length of school hours was overly simplistic. To scientifically and reasonably set school hours, it is critical to explore how to fully and efficiently utilize students' available in-school time to enhance educational quality and effectiveness. Building a high-quality education service system should go beyond merely meeting the basic needs of student supervision and safety assurance. It should maximize the role of school education during this period, ensuring that "all essential content is comprehensively taught". This requires infusing the service with deeper educational connotations: addressing students' personalized development needs, fostering good study habits, enhancing practical and innovation capabilities, promoting social skills development, and supporting students with learning difficulties. Its starting point and ultimate goal are to facilitate holistic student development. Notably, after-school services must not be reduced to a mere extension of classroom instruction; instead, they should offer rich and diverse extracurricular activities. This not only reflects improvements in the quality of public education services but also embodies the aspiration to break existing interest distribution patterns through innovation and reform of the education system (Wen and Hu, 2007). After-school services should, on the basis of fully guaranteeing safety—through the utilization of school safety facilities and venues, the implementation of emergency response plans and disposal procedures, and the establishment of vetting systems for hiring professionals—adapt to local conditions and make full use of school resources.

To ensure the delivery of diverse, high-quality after-school programs, it is critical to accommodate the diversification of service providers and delivery models—fully leveraging the roles of government, market entities, non-profit organizations, and families. Fundamentally, this requires mobilizing all positive factors to enhance multi-level supply capacity and standards, optimizing policy instrument structures and synergies (Deng and Zhang, 2022), improving evaluation and supervision mechanisms, and balancing the diverse demands of stakeholders to meet students' varied needs. A teaching team should be established with school faculty as the core, supplemented by social volunteers or social service procurement models, attracting multi-stakeholder participation to ensure sufficient quantity, quality, and diversity in the teaching workforce. After-school services should actively engage public service systems, including community centers, work-study service centers, children's palaces, women's and children's activity centers, and science museums. Through service procurement, legally compliant, safe, and high-quality personnel from social institutions should be recruited to facilitate the sharing of high-quality educational resources between schools and society, fostering positive interactive development. Volunteers—such as education-oriented folk artists, retired teachers, university students, and responsible public-spirited citizens—should be mobilized to provide diverse on-campus after-school services, including traditional culture workshops, folk art classes, and psychological counseling, thereby enhancing service capacity. As schools' most reliable allies, parents require after-school service policies to align home-school relationships toward "shared vision, shared direction, shared action, and shared effort" (Liu, 2017). On a voluntary basis, schools can encourage parents to contribute their professional expertise through "Parents in School" activities, enabling their participation in multiple roles—lecturers, participants, managers, supervisors, or guardians—in after-school services. This not only strengthens home-school cooperation but also helps parents gain direct insight into the after-school services, thereby dispelling misunderstandings arising from perceptual biases and promoting effective implementation. In rural schools, while ensuring students' safe return home, after-school services should be tailored to local conditions: utilizing available time and resources to develop interactive learning activities rooted in local history, culture, natural landscapes, and living environments. District- and county-level school clustering models can be adopted, with leading schools facilitating teacher exchanges or leveraging online public education platforms to offer "dual-teacher classrooms" for after-school content tutoring—sharing high-quality educational resources to support the smooth implementation of rural after-school services. Amid efforts to promote pluralistic co-governance and resource sharing, addressing governance gaps in after-school services and improving supervision and evaluation systems is equally vital. Despite being quasi-public goods with inclusive characteristics, after-school services must not compromise on quality. Therefore, relevant supervision and evaluation mechanisms should be established, potentially incorporating third-party assessments to rigorously evaluate content arrangement, curriculum design, and implementation effectiveness—ensuring the efficacy of service delivery.

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