

# A Comparative Reflection between U.S. No Child Left Behind Reform and Educational System Reform in China Since the Reform and Opening Up: With a Focus on Vocational Education

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**Abstract:** Since the launch of the Reform and Opening Up policy in 1978, China's educational system has undergone sustained and far-reaching transformation. From rebuilding educational order to universalizing compulsory schooling, promoting quality-oriented education, advancing educational equity, and implementing the "Double Reduction" policy, educational reform in China has evolved in response to shifting national priorities and social demands. This article reviews the major stages of educational system reform in China since 1978 and examines both its achievements and areas for further improvement. It argues that China has made substantial progress in expanding access to education, strengthening legal and institutional frameworks, and improving educational equity. Meanwhile, the examination-centered selection mechanism, uneven distribution of high-quality educational resources, and gaps between policy design and local implementation continue to influence reform outcomes. To deepen the analysis, this article draws on the experience of the United States' No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), a policy that similarly aimed to improve educational quality and equity but brought about unintended results due to heavy dependence on standardized testing and accountability metrics. The comparison highlights a central lesson: educational reform can achieve better effects when policy goals, assessment systems, and institutional incentives are well aligned. The article concludes that educational reform in China may focus on systemic coordination among admissions reform, evaluation reform, school quality improvement, and a development of vocational education.

**Keywords:** Educational Reform, China, Reform and Opening Up, Quality-oriented Education, Educational Equity, Double Reduction Policy, No Child Left Behind, Policy Implementation.

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## 1. Introduction

Education has occupied a central place in China's modernization strategy since the beginning of the Reform and Opening Up era. As a key mechanism for human capital development, social mobility, and national renewal, education has been repeatedly identified as a foundation of economic growth and social progress. Over the past four decades, China has pursued a series of educational reforms designed to restore institutional order, broaden access, improve quality, and address inequality. These reforms have transformed the structure and scale of Chinese education and have significantly expanded educational opportunities for millions of students.

At the same time, some reforms have witnessed gaps between policy intention and practical effect. For example, while there has been growing emphasis on holistic development, quality-oriented education, and burden reduction in relevant discourse, the daily reality of many students remains closely tied to test-centered selection mechanisms, intense academic competition, and persistent family anxiety.

This article aims to provide an integrated review of educational system reform in China since 1978 and to offer a constructive reflection on its current direction. It synthesizes the historical account of China's educational reforms with insights from international reform experiences, particularly the implementation issues associated with the U.S. No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and their relevance to China's "Double Reduction" policy. Although China and the United

States operate within different political and institutional contexts, both cases indicate that reforms designed to improve quality and equity may face unexpected challenges when implementation relies excessively on narrow metrics or when structural causes of educational pressure remain unaddressed. The central argument of this article is that while reforms such as "Double Reduction" have alleviated visible pressures from excessive academic competition, they may achieve more sustainable effects when combined with improvements in assessment systems, admissions mechanisms, school quality, and social views of success. A sustainable path forward requires not merely burden reduction, but a deeper transformation of the educational logic that governs schooling, competition, and talent selection.

## 2. Historical Evolution of Educational Reform in China

### 2.1. Reinstitution of the Educational System, 1977–1984

The first stage of educational reform after the Reform and Opening Up policy was primarily one of reconstruction. China's educational system suffered severe disruption, and many schools lost their normal teaching function. In this context, the restoration of educational order became an urgent national task. One of the most significant turning points was the resumption of the national college entrance examination in 1977, which restored merit-based selection and reestablished education as a legitimate channel of social mobility and national talent cultivation (Li, 2014) [6].

This period laid the foundation for subsequent reform. Deng Xiaoping emphasized that economic development depended on science, technology, and education, thereby making education an essential component of modernization strategy (Li, 2014) [6]. At the time, China still faced serious educational underdevelopment. According to She and Dan (2018), when the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, approximately 80% of the population was illiterate, and school enrollment rates were extremely low [8]. Although the country had made progress before the Reform and Opening Up era, the educational system by the late 1970s still required institutional recovery and capacity rebuilding.

Thus, the main objective of this stage was not yet comprehensive innovation, but reinstitution. Schools needed to be reopened, administrative order restored, academic standards reestablished, and basic confidence in education rebuilt. In historical perspective, this stage was indispensable because it created the institutional base on which all later reforms were built.

## **2.2. Exploration of Educational System Reform, 1985–1992**

The second stage marked the transition from restoration to systematic reform. In 1985, the Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of the Educational Structure formally initiated educational system reform on a national scale (She & Dan, 2018) [8]. This policy sought to decentralize parts of educational administration, increase local responsibility, and allow schools greater flexibility in management.

A central priority during this period was the expansion of basic education. In 1986, China promulgated the Compulsory Education Law, establishing nine-year compulsory education as a legal commitment of the state. This was a milestone in Chinese educational history because it transformed basic schooling from a limited social opportunity into a universal public responsibility. The reform reflected the recognition that educational modernization could not proceed without a broad foundation of basic literacy and compulsory schooling.

By the early 1990s, educational reform was increasingly linked to national development goals. The 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of China stressed two important tasks: the eradication of illiteracy among young and middle-aged adults and the broad implementation of compulsory education. These objectives reflected the reality that, at this stage, educational equality primarily meant access. Before focusing on refined issues of quality and governance, the state first had to address insufficient educational provision and uneven participation.

## **2.3. Promotion and Expansion of Reform, 1993–2002**

The third stage was characterized by accelerated reform and institutional expansion. During the 1990s, China made major progress in extending compulsory education and reducing illiteracy. According to She and Dan (2018), by this period illiteracy among young adults had fallen to below 5%, and compulsory education had been implemented in more than 85% of the country [8]. These achievements marked an important transition from limited access to broad educational coverage.

At the same time, the state developed a more diversified educational financing system. In addition to direct government investment, compulsory education was

supported by local funding mechanisms, social donations, and other channels. The government also encouraged educational provision by social organizations, private actors, and Sino-foreign cooperation, thereby expanding educational resources and institutional diversity.

However, this stage also revealed the characteristics of an examination-dominated system. As educational participation increased and competition intensified, schools and families became increasingly concerned with test performance. In response, the 1999 National Conference on Education promoted quality-oriented education (*suzhi jiaoyu*), signaling an important shift in reform discourse from narrow score achievement toward the all-round development of students (Fan, 2019). Curriculum reform, textbook reform, and reform of evaluation systems followed, indicating that educational reform had begun to move from system expansion toward changes in talent cultivation models.

This stage was therefore significant for two reasons. First, it consolidated the gains of access expansion and institutional development. Second, it initiated a conceptual adjustment to the growing influence of exam-oriented education, even though the practical role of examinations remained deeply embedded.

## **2.4. Equity-Oriented Reform, 2003–2012**

The fourth stage of reform placed educational equity at the center of policy. By the early twenty-first century, broad access to compulsory education had largely been achieved, but disparities across regions, urban and rural areas, and schools remained substantial. Reform thus shifted from the question of whether children could attend school to the question of whether they could receive a fair and meaningful education.

Several major developments illustrate this shift. First, compulsory education became increasingly free of charge, reducing direct financial barriers to school attendance. Second, the revised Compulsory Education Law in 2006 strengthened legal guarantees for balanced development. Third, the state increased fiscal support for rural areas, poor regions, and ethnic minority areas. Fourth, financial aid systems and student loans were improved in order to support students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (She & Dan, 2018) [8].

This stage reflected a more mature understanding of fairness. Educational opportunity was no longer defined only by enrollment, but also by the quality of schooling and the distribution of public resources. Yet certain inequalities persisted. Families with greater economic means were able to purchase homes in desirable school districts, secure access to higher-performing schools, or invest in supplementary education. As a result, formal equity in access did not automatically translate into substantive equality in educational experience.

## **2.5. Comprehensive Reform and the “Double Reduction” Era, 2013–Present**

Since 2013, China has entered a stage of comprehensive educational reform. This phase has aimed to deepen reform in talent cultivation, examination and admissions, school governance, educational management, and support systems. The National Outline for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020) had already emphasized modernization, fairness, and quality, and subsequent reforms continued to build on these goals (State

Council of the People's Republic of China, 2010) [9].

One of the most prominent developments in this period has been the 2021 "Double Reduction" policy. Issued jointly by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council, the policy sought to reduce both excessive homework and off-campus tutoring for students in compulsory education (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & State Council, 2021) [2]. The policy responded to growing public concern about student stress, parental anxiety, educational commercialization, and the unequal effects of the shadow education industry.

The "Double Reduction" policy represented an important shift in governance strategy. Rather than merely guiding the reduction of academic burden, the state directly intervened in the off-campus tutoring market and required schools to improve after-school services. Yet the policy also reflected the complexity of contemporary reform.

### **3. Major Achievements of Educational Reform in China**

China's educational reform since 1978 has yielded substantial and historically significant achievements. The first and most obvious achievement is the dramatic expansion of educational access. Over several decades, China moved from a system marked by widespread illiteracy and limited educational participation to one in which compulsory education is nearly universal. This transformation has altered the social structure of opportunity and contributed significantly to national development.

A second major achievement lies in institutional and legal construction. Through the enactment and revision of laws, policy plans, and administrative systems, China has established a more complete governance framework for education. This has increased state capacity, clarified responsibilities across levels of government, and strengthened the legal basis for educational rights and obligations.

Third, educational reform has progressively improved educational equity. Free compulsory education, increased fiscal support for disadvantaged areas, and enhanced student aid systems have reduced some of the most obvious barriers to schooling. Although significant disparities remain, it would be inaccurate to overlook the extent of redistribution and policy commitment that has occurred.

Fourth, the promotion of quality-oriented education represented an important normative shift. It challenged the idea that educational success should be measured solely by exam scores and broadened the official understanding of talent cultivation. Creativity, moral development, physical health, practical ability, and aesthetic growth were increasingly recognized as legitimate educational aims (Fan, 2019) [4].

Finally, recent reforms have demonstrated a stronger willingness on the part of the state to address the social consequences of excessive educational competition. The "Double Reduction" policy, despite its room for improvement, signaled a recognition that education policy must also respond to student well-being, family pressure, and marketized tutoring.

## **4. Persistent Problems in China's Educational Reform**

### **4.1. The Enduring Dominance of Examination-Centered Selection**

One of the most prominent challenges in Chinese education is the central role of the examination system, especially the gaokao, in determining educational and social opportunity. Although quality-oriented education has been promoted for more than two decades, the practical behavior of schools, students, and families is still strongly influenced by test-centered selection mechanisms. This is because educational selection remains closely tied to academic performance on standardized examinations.

As a result, there is a structural gap between policy goals and institutional incentives. Policymakers advocate all-round development, but students know that exam scores remain decisive. Schools are encouraged to reduce pressure, yet they are often judged by progression rates and academic outcomes. Parents are told to value holistic development, but they continue to worry that any relaxation may influence their children's later competition. Thus, the examination system exerts a wide influence on the entire educational process. Therefore, meaningful reform requires adjustments not only in classroom practice but also in the broader logic of talent selection.

### **4.2. The Gap Between Formal Equality and Substantive Fairness**

A second prominent issue is the gap between formal equality and substantive fairness. China has made considerable progress in making compulsory education widely accessible and publicly funded. However, equal access to schooling does not necessarily mean equal access to high-quality schooling.

Families with greater economic capital can still purchase school district housing, access private educational services, or mobilize cultural resources to support their children more effectively. This has created a situation in which inequalities reappear through informal channels even as public systems become more equitable in formal terms. The popularity and high price of housing in desirable school districts provide a clear example of how educational competition is often displaced into other social fields. This suggests that the realization of educational fairness requires more than universal access. It also requires the balanced distribution of teaching quality, school resources, and development opportunities across schools and regions.

### **4.3. Weaknesses in Policy Implementation**

A third issue relates to policy implementation. While China's educational reforms have often set forward-looking goals, some detailed implementation arrangements have yet to be fully developed and refined. For example, policies promoting burden reduction may be implemented in ways that formally reduce homework while increasing in-school supervision or testing. Similarly, policies promoting quality-oriented education may lead to the addition of symbolic activities without reducing examination pressure. In such cases, reform shows positive results on paper but has limited impact on students' actual experiences. As Fan (2019) argues, educational reform should be based on objective analysis rather than idealized policy language alone [4]. Reform

succeeds not only because goals are admirable, but because institutions, incentives, and implementation mechanisms are aligned.

## **5. Comparative Reflection: What China Can Learn from the U.S. No Child Left Behind Reform**

The experience of the United States under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) offers an instructive comparative perspective. NCLB, implemented from 2002 to 2015, aimed to improve educational quality and equity by requiring annual testing in reading and mathematics and holding schools accountable for student performance. The policy particularly emphasized that disadvantaged groups, including students living in poverty and English language learners, should not be left behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2008) [10].

At the level of intention, NCLB reflected a strong commitment to equity. It sought to identify achievement gaps and encourage schools and states to pay attention to students who had previously been neglected. However, the design of the policy also had certain limitations. Because accountability was heavily tied to standardized test performance, schools often narrowed instruction to tested subjects, especially reading and mathematics. This led to curriculum contraction and increased pressure on both students and teachers (Ravitch, 2010) [7].

Moreover, as Jorgensen and Hoffmann (2003) noted, the responsibility for defining and implementing “proficiency” rested largely with the states [5]. Since schools faced sanctions if too many students failed to meet performance targets, states had incentives to lower standards or design easier assessments. In this sense, the apparent success of the policy was sometimes influenced by the adjustment of measurement criteria. Subsequent research found that while NCLB may have produced some gains in mathematics, its broader effects were mixed, and its accountability structure often encouraged compliance rather than deep educational improvement (Dee & Jacob, 2011) [3].

NCLB demonstrates that reforms based on narrow and high-pressure metrics may influence educational practice, even when they are motivated by a genuine desire for fairness. This lesson is highly relevant to China’s current reform environment. Just as NCLB risked transforming education into test preparation, some aspects of Chinese reform may maintain examination logic beneath new policy language. If schools are still fundamentally judged by measurable academic outcomes, then policies advocating burden reduction and holistic development may be implemented superficially. The key lesson from NCLB is therefore not that reform should avoid accountability, but that accountability must be designed carefully, using diverse indicators and realistic support systems.

## **6. The “Double Reduction” Policy: Promise and Contradiction**

### **6.1. Policy Goals**

The “Double Reduction” policy was introduced to address two highly visible problems in compulsory education: excessive homework and off-campus tutoring. It responded to widespread public concerns about student exhaustion, household spending on tutoring, and the growing commercialization of education. The policy aimed to restore

the central role of schools, protect students’ physical and mental health, and reduce educational anxiety (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & State Council, 2021) [2]. In normative terms, the policy was highly significant. It acknowledged that excessive competition had become socially influential and that educational reform should not be judged only by access or academic results, but also by the quality of children’s daily lives.

### **6.2. Gains Achieved**

The policy has brought about several positive effects that have permeated multiple aspects of basic education. Most notably, it significantly reduced the formal scale of for-profit off-campus tutoring in core academic subjects for compulsory education students, with many unqualified tutoring institutions shut down or transformed into non-profit entities. This not only weakened the visible expansion of the shadow education sector but also effectively reduced one major source of educational commercialization, which had long distorted the educational ecology by overemphasizing test scores. Schools were also required to comprehensively improve after-school services, extending service hours and optimizing service content so that students could complete homework and receive targeted additional support within the public education system, eliminating the need for excessive off-campus tutoring.

As a result, many students gained more leisure time for physical exercise, hobbies, and rest, which not only helped ease their long-standing academic stress but also supported their healthy physical and mental development, fostering a more balanced growth environment. More broadly, the policy stimulated widespread public debate about the true meaning of educational success and the hidden costs of excessive academic competition, including the strain on family finances and students’ physical and mental health. In this sense, it played an important agenda-setting role in reshaping social educational values and promoting a more rational, holistic attitude toward academic achievement and student growth.

### **6.3. Burden Reduction or Burden Redistribution?**

However, the implementation of “Double Reduction” has also revealed certain challenges. In some cases, the reduction of tutoring outside school has been accompanied by increased pressure inside school. Students may spend more time on campus in after-school programs, evening self-study, or supervised sessions that function as extensions of academic instruction. Some after-school services are educationally meaningful, but others are of uneven quality and lack sufficient professional guidance.

This phenomenon may be described as a shift from off-campus burden to in-school burden. When the demand for academic competition remains high, restricting tutoring institutions does not automatically reduce total pressure; it simply changes where and how that pressure is organized. In practice, some students continue to spend long days in academic environments, while teachers shoulder additional responsibilities for extended supervision and instruction. The situation also places teachers under strain. Schools are expected to provide after-school services and maintain academic quality, yet they often lack additional staff, time, or support.

## 6.4. Why Anxiety Persists

The persistence of parental anxiety under “Double Reduction” reveals the structural nature of the problem. Many parents worry that without tutoring institutions, they themselves lack the time, knowledge, or educational background to support their children’s learning. Others fear that educational competition has not disappeared, but merely become less visible and more unequal. If some families still have access to informal tutoring or high-quality private resources, then the regulation of the formal tutoring market may not reduce competition so much as alter its form. This widens the gap between families with different social and economic capacities, further influencing the original goal of educational equity.

This concern aligns with research on shadow education, which shows that supplementary tutoring tends to reappear in new forms when high-stakes selection remains intact (Bray, 2009) [1]. Therefore, “Double Reduction” can only be fully effective if it is linked to deeper changes in the mechanisms that generate competitive demand in the first place. Without reforming the exam-dominated college and senior high school admission systems, single burden-cutting policies can hardly resolve the root causes of long-standing educational anxiety.

## 7. Future Directions for Educational Reform in China

The preceding analysis suggests that China’s next phase of educational reform may move beyond isolated policy interventions and adopt a more systemic approach. Several priorities deserve particular attention.

First, reform of the examination and admissions system is essential. As long as high-stakes examinations remain the overwhelmingly dominant mechanism of talent selection, policies aimed at reducing burden will face structural resistance. This does not mean abolishing examinations, which still play an important role in ensuring procedural fairness. However, it does mean that student evaluation and admissions criteria should become more diversified, credible, and compatible with the goals of quality-oriented education.

Second, school quality must be strengthened if dependence on off-campus tutoring is to decline in a substantive way. The public school system must be able to provide differentiated instruction, remedial support, enrichment opportunities, and meaningful after-school services. Without such capacity, the reduction of private tutoring may simply leave unmet demand or transfer academic pressure into less effective forms.

Third, teacher support must become a central dimension of reform. Teachers’ workload, evaluation systems, and professional autonomy often remain misaligned with those goals. Sustainable reform requires adequate staffing, compensation, professional development, and an evaluation system that values more than test outcomes.

Fourth, the pursuit of educational fairness should focus not only on access but also on quality distribution. The state should continue investing in rural schools, ordinary public schools, and under-resourced areas, while also reducing symbolic and material disparities among schools. If there remains a significant gap in quality between schools, competition for a small number of high-quality schools may continue to intensify family anxiety and lead to uneven distribution of educational investment.

Finally, educational reform requires a broader change in social attitudes. Educational reform is a systematic project,

and the shift in social attitudes stands as one of its most challenging yet far-reaching components. Further vigorously developing vocational education can not only address the problem of educational imbalance and ease parental anxiety about education, but also inject sustained momentum into China’s industrial upgrading and economic growth. When the whole society abandons prejudice and respects every type of education and every path to success, and when vocational education truly becomes a voluntary choice for more people, our education system will grow more sound, talent cultivation more diversified, and social development more dynamic.

## 8. Conclusion

Since the Reform and Opening Up policy, China’s educational system has undergone profound transformation. From reconstruction to universal compulsory education, from quality-oriented education to equity-focused policy and “Double Reduction,” the reform process has reflected the changing relationship between education, development, and society. These reforms have produced major achievements in access, legal development, institutional capacity, and equity.

At the same time, the reform process has been influenced by enduring structural contradictions. The examination-centered system continues to shape educational behavior; high-quality resources remain unevenly distributed. The case of the United States’ No Child Left Behind reform further demonstrates that educational reform may generate unintended consequences when it relies too heavily on narrow metrics and insufficiently considers implementation dynamics.

China’s “Double Reduction” policy has effectively mitigated the prominent issues of excessive academic competition, especially the overheated off-campus tutoring sector. While the policy has delivered tangible outcomes in easing students’ academic burden, the deep-seated institutional and social drivers behind pervasive educational pressure have yet to be fully resolved.

The long-term success of China’s educational reform hinges on the coordinated advancement of academic burden reduction, admissions system reform, school quality enhancement, teacher support mechanisms, and a wider social shift in the perception of educational success—among which the high-quality development of vocational education is an indispensable and core component.

In this context, the future of China’s education lies not only in further optimizing regulatory measures and reducing excessive academic tasks, but also in reshaping the core orientation of education: shifting from an exam-competition-centered system to one that prioritizes all-round student development, educational equity, and sustainable national growth, with vocational education playing a pivotal role in building a diversified talent training system. Integrating vocational education development into the overall educational reform layout, improving the quality of vocational education, enhancing its social recognition and attractiveness, and promoting the coordinated development of general education and vocational education will further consolidate the effects of the “Double Reduction” policy, enrich the connotation of educational reform, and advance the high-quality development of the entire education system.

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