The Historical Evolution of County-Level Secondary Schools in China and an Analysis of Contemporary Revitalization Paths for County High Schools

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Abstract: County middle schools connect rural society, county public services and the national talent training system. Their development is jointly shaped by the education system, urban-rural relations and resource allocation methods. Using the methods of historical analysis and document analysis, the evolution of county middle schools is summarized into four stages: institutional foundation, system expansion, competitive differentiation, and collaborative revitalization. The study believes that the dilemma of contemporary county high schools stems from the tension between cross-regional resource competition and county-level support capabilities, which are mutually reinforced through the flow of teachers and students, curriculum supply, and evaluation incentives. Revitalization should use municipal coordination to stabilize the supply of public education, restore school capabilities through teacher development and curriculum improvement, ensure the growth of ordinary students through classified evaluation, and form a county education governance system with a continuous feedback mechanism.

Keywords: County Middle Schools; Historical Evolution; Educational Equity; County Revitalization; Municipal Coordination

1. Question raising and analysis perspective

County middle schools are an important place for rural students to receive secondary education, and they are also an institutional window for observing urban and rural public services. The term "county middle schools" in this article covers middle and high schools, while the term "county middle schools" in contemporary policies mainly refers to county general high schools. Use the formation of the secondary education system to explain the historical background, use ordinary high schools to analyze the revitalization path, and It avoids applying the compulsory education guarantee mechanism to high schools.

Existing research suggests that the growth of education scale is not synchronized with equality of opportunity. Xiang and Stillwell's spatial analysis shows that inadequate investment and shortages of high-quality teaching resources remain pronounced in some rural middle and high schools, so expanded provision does not automatically remove rural–urban inequality [1]. This shows that it is difficult to judge whether the county has truly improved the educational opportunities for disadvantaged families by only counting the number of schools and the total number of admissions to higher education. Based on this, this article conducts an analysis from three levels: institutional function, resource allocation, and student development. It does not equate the rise and fall of individual prestigious schools with the common trajectory of counties across the country.

County-level issues should be examined in the context of county education ecology and regional population mobility: changes in enrollment boundaries affect the student source structure, financial and staffing systems determine resource supply, teacher career opportunities shape team stability, and family education choices react on student flow through school reputation. The above factors are not independent of each other, but have a cumulative effect in the evaluation of further education and cross-regional competition. Therefore, this article takes "institutional change -

resource flow - school capabilities - student development" as the analytical chain to examine how historical evolution is transformed into contemporary governance constraints, and based on this, discusses a collaborative path for county revitalization.

2. Historical evolution of county middle schools

2.1 Modern transformation and the foundation of local education system

After the implementation of the new academic system in the late Qing Dynasty, middle schools became an integral part of the modern education system. Some places have developed secondary education through academy restructuring and local financing, but inter-county construction is uneven and a county-wide network with universal coverage has not yet been formed. In the Republic of China, local middle schools were responsible for preparing for higher education and cultivating talents, and running schools was subject to financial, war and transportation constraints. The county school thus has the dual attributes of national institutions entering local society and local forces participating in running schools.

2.2 System expansion after the founding of New China

After the founding of New China, secondary education adjusted and developed under a unified institutional framework, and county schools gradually entered a hierarchical management and public supply system. The school not only undertakes the task of transporting students to colleges and universities, but also trains workers with cultural foundation for local construction. There are significant differences in the expansion speed and teaching order in different eras. Therefore, this stage should be understood as a tortuous system construction rather than a sustained and balanced growth. Differences in urban and rural educational resources also accumulate with institutional arrangements. The location of the school and the student's household registration jointly affect the educational experience. Guo and Li's urban-rural comparison shows that migration, regional policy adjustment and hukou reform jointly shape the changing geography of educational development, while disparities between regions remain evident [2].

2.3 Competition differentiation after reform and opening up

After the resumption of the college entrance examination, county high schools have become an important channel for rural students to achieve higher education mobility. With the expansion of high school education, population migration and the agglomeration of urban educational resources, the competitive boundaries of the county gradually extend beyond the county. Family economic conditions, residential choice and school reputation jointly affect the distribution of students. Some schools maintain their attractiveness through intense competition for admission, while others are affected by the flow of teachers and students. Li et al.'s analysis of 16 million college applicants shows that an English-listening requirement in the national entrance examination widened the rural-urban gap in college access, indicating that seemingly uniform selection rules can have unequal effects on students with different educational backgrounds [3]. As a result, the problem in the county has further shifted from a lack of academic degrees to an uneven distribution of high-quality opportunities.

2.4 Policy shift towards coordinated revitalization

The 2021 "Action Plan for the Development and Improvement of County High Schools during the 14th Five-Year Plan" emphasizes standardizing enrollment, stabilizing teachers, and improving school conditions; the 2025 "Action Plan for Revitalizing County High Schools" deploys resource expansion, teaching quality improvement, and digitalization actions. The policy has shifted from making up for shortcomings at individual schools to regional coordination and education reform. The development of various places is not synchronized, and counties with population inflow and outflow need differentiated allocation of resources.

3. The formation mechanism of dilemmas in contemporary counties

3.1 Mismatch between resource competition and fiscal responsibility

The primary tension faced by counties is that educational needs and the flow of teachers and students exceed county boundaries, while funding guarantees and school operations are still highly dependent on local governance capabilities. Even if weak counties increase investment, it may be difficult to offset the comprehensive advantages of urban schools in terms of career opportunities, living conditions and social reputation. Fan et al. found that higher local education expenditure is associated with lower educational inequality, although the effect varies with local fiscal autonomy [4]. Therefore, family choice cannot be explained in isolation from the public supply environment, and the responsibility for revitalization cannot be placed solely on school administrators.

3.2 Interaction between personnel mobility and school capacity

The flow of key teachers destabilizes subject teams and affects curriculum development, training of young teachers, and the inheritance of teaching and research. Parental concerns about the stability of teaching may drive student exodus, changing class composition and school reputation. However, student source scores and school average scores are affected by enrollment selection and cannot directly prove the decline in teacher ability. Confusing the two will subject weak schools to punitive evaluations, inducing a squeeze on rest time and concentrating resources on cultivating top students.

There are also resource imbalances within counties. County schools absorb the superior resources of township junior high schools, which may weaken township education in exchange for improvement in county-level performance. Revitalization should strengthen academic communication and teaching cooperation between middle and high schools to prevent the pressure of competition in high schools from being transmitted to compulsory education.

3.3 There is a gap between family burden and learning support

Entering high school involves not only tuition, but also accommodation, transportation, time arrangements, and expectations for further studies. Wang and Teng's county-level study shows that rural families may relocate an adult caregiver with a child to gain access to urban schooling, turning school choice into a combined burden of residence, care and household resources [5]. This evidence concerns educational migration rather than a single fee item, so it should not be interpreted as the isolated effect of tuition or mechanically generalized to all counties. The practical implication of this evidence is that financial aid and academic support should be integrated into student services, rather than simply attributing learning difficulties to insufficient personal effort.

4. Collaborative implementation paths for county revitalization

4.1 Establish a municipal coordination and classification guarantee mechanism

The provincial government clarifies basic school guarantees and enrollment supervision rules, the municipal level coordinates the flow of cross-county resources, and the county level implements daily supply. Counties with population inflows should predict degree demand based on junior high school students and migration trends, and simultaneously arrange school buildings, staffing, and funding; counties with population outflows should ensure necessary scale and weak disciplines, and avoid merging schools based solely on short-term per-student costs. Financial support should be matched to student needs, taking into account financial gaps, boarding needs and course costs.

Enrollment governance should unify plan release, admission procedures and accountability for violations, reduce the resource imbalance caused by cross-regional illegal selection, while retaining room for student selection that complies with the rules. Urban-rural pairing and group

school running should clarify the responsibilities for joint lesson preparation, curriculum sharing and teacher training, and prevent only exporting school names or concentrating high-quality teachers and students into central schools. Figure 1 summarizes the functional relationship between revitalization measures: the system guarantees the improvement of student development through school capabilities, and the evaluation results are fed back to resource allocation. Arrows represent the governance logic proposed in this article and do not represent verified causal effects.

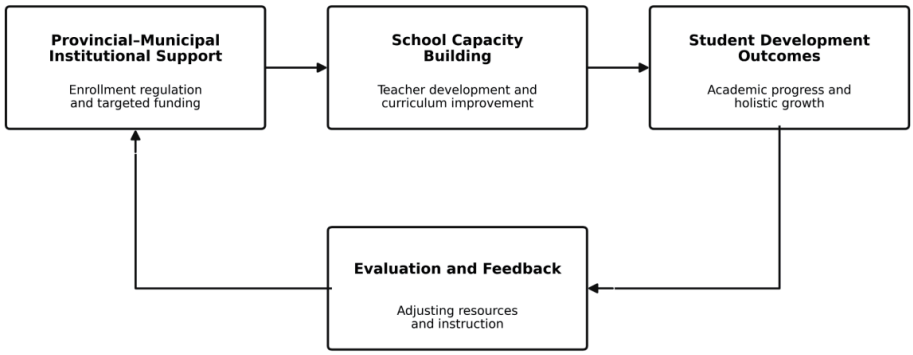


Figure 1 Synergy and feedback mechanism of county revitalization

Municipal-level coordination should focus on cross-county enrollment, teacher shortages, and public teaching and research that are difficult to solve in a single county. County-level departments should assume verifiable funding and service responsibilities, and clarify matters, subjects, and results records.

4.2 Transform teacher supplementation into sustainable team development

Teacher policies need to answer questions about whether they can be recruited, retained and grown at the same time. Cheng et al. found that welfare allowances, emotional support and working conditions can substitute for one another in strengthening rural teachers' intention to stay, while professional identity remains a core condition [6]. This finding comes from research on rural teachers and needs to be combined with the characteristics of the school stage when applied to county schools. The county can establish a supplementary list of in-demand subjects, assign subject tutors to new teachers, incorporate training time into work arrangements, and improve rotational housing and basic life services to form support that connects salary guarantees with career development.

External assistance should be carried out continuously in subject groups and form reusable results around unit design, homework diagnosis and experimental teaching. The success depends on whether local teachers can independently teach and research, undertake courses and train young teachers, rather than the number of dispatched teachers and the number of open classes. Principal evaluation should focus on team stability and curriculum implementation, and reduce the interference of frequent job changes and short-term commitments to further studies.

4.3 Connect equity and quality through curriculum implementation

County high schools should develop national curricula in full, develop elective courses based on teachers' qualifications and academic profiles, and supplement the supply of individual classes with joint course scheduling and shared experimental resources. Urban classroom live streaming cannot replace the school's teaching responsibilities. Digital resources must be transformed into learning opportunities through academic screening, interaction and feedback. The quantity of access does not equal the quality.

For students with weak foundations, bridging courses and layered counseling should be arranged based on the admission diagnosis, and psychological support, career guidance and financial aid should be included in daily services. Local history, ecology and industrial surveys can be integrated into research studies, but local characteristics cannot limit the choice of further studies.

Revitalization should enable students with different backgrounds to receive appropriate education.

4.4 Form evaluation and accountability that can correct errors

Table 1 corresponds to implementation responsibilities and observation indicators. The evaluation should comprehensively analyze the curriculum, teacher stability, student growth and burden, and analyze changes in students in the same class based on family background and enrollment basis. Annual monitoring identifies problems, and stage evaluations adjust investments to avoid determining resources based on a single ranking. Set degree, team and course improvement priorities by county type, disclose indicators and rectification progress, and reduce incentives for screening students to improve their book performance.

Table 1 County revitalization implementation responsibilities and evaluation priorities

Key Area	Primary Responsibility	Key Indicators
Resource Provision	Provincial and municipal coordination with county-level implementation	Alignment between school-place supply and demand; availability of funding
Teacher Development	County authorities and schools	Subject staffing and team stability
Curriculum and Instruction	Schools and regional teaching-research institutions	Curriculum provision and student learning progress
Student Support	Schools and financial aid departments	Aid coverage and students' physical and mental well-being

Implementation should first verify school building safety, curriculum gaps, and teacher gaps, then determine cross-school collaboration projects, and adjust plans based on evidence of student growth. Necessary collection and authorized access of student data should be implemented, and privacy should be protected when the public summary results are disclosed to avoid labeling weak students.

Fair evaluation should distinguish between admission opportunities, academic completion and knowledge and ability. The improvement of the three may not be synchronized, and a single enrollment rate is not enough to summarize the quality of the county. For out-of-town students, normal migration and illegal selection should be distinguished, and family needs and system disorder should be responded to respectively, so as to avoid viewing restrictions on mobility as a revitalization achievement. Establish a parent feedback channel, incorporate student experience into evaluation, and correct implementation deviations.

5. Conclusion

The historical evolution of county middle schools reflects the continuous interaction between local talent cultivation, expansion of educational opportunities, and allocation of urban and rural resources. Contemporary county high school revitalization should take regional coordination as the institutional basis, teacher teams and curriculum implementation as the focus of school capacity building, and the continuous growth of ordinary students as the basis for evaluation. Only through the interconnection of municipal coordination, classified investment and process feedback can new resources be incorporated into daily teaching and the erosion of educational equity caused by school competition can be alleviated. Path effects need to be tested based on county type, population changes and execution conditions.

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