

# ***Leveraging Off-Campus Tutoring Institutions to Improve the Quality and Efficiency of After-School Services under the “Double Reduction” Policy --A Case Study of X Primary School in N County, Ningbo City***

**Qinyi Zhao**

*Ningbo University, Ningbo, China*  
*1024050693@qq.com*

**Abstract:** The participation of off-campus training institutions in school-based after-school services represents an important initiative to optimize the educational ecosystem under the background of the “Double Reduction” policy. Taking X Primary School in N County, Ningbo City as a case study, this research, through in-depth interviews and field investigations, reveals the current challenges facing after-school services and potential paths for improvement. The study finds that issues such as insufficient in-school teaching staff, an imperfect financial support mechanism, the absence of selection standards for off-campus training institutions, and deviations in policy understanding among educational stakeholders restrict the quality of after-school services. Although the involvement of off-campus training institutions can help alleviate the shortage of teachers and enrich the supply of courses, problems such as the conflict between their profit-driven nature and the public welfare orientation of education, as well as the lack of course supervision, still warrant caution. Based on stakeholder theory, the study proposes a multi-party collaborative governance strategy: the government should strengthen financial support and regulatory responsibilities and establish a scientific selection mechanism; schools should optimize course design and management processes and build communication bridges among families, schools, and communities; families should shift their educational perceptions and participate rationally in after-school services; and off-campus training institutions should adhere to a public welfare orientation and improve course quality. The research indicates that only through multi-party collaborative governance can the quality and efficiency of after-school services be enhanced, truly achieving the goals of the “Double Reduction” policy and promoting the comprehensive development of students.

**Keywords:** after-school services, off-campus training institutions, stakeholders, primary school, “Double Reduction”

## **1. Introduction**

After-school services refer to “educational service activities, distinct from regular classroom teaching, conducted with the joint participation of schools, families, and society after the designated dismissal time from Monday to Friday, aiming to protect and promote students’ development [1].” Initially proposed to address the problem of parents being unable to pick up their children after school due to

late working hours, after-school services have now been implemented in China for eight years. Through continuous exploration and practice across various regions, after-school services have gradually become more standardized and diversified. However, a range of difficult issues have also emerged, highlighting the urgent need for the state to formulate clear and specific implementation guidelines for after-school services, along with corresponding supporting policies and measures.

In July 2021, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-campus Training for Students in Compulsory Education (hereinafter referred to as the “Double Reduction” policy). The policy emphasized the need for multi-party collaboration to improve the quality of after-school services and meet students’ diverse needs. The release of the “Double Reduction” policy not only set new requirements for after-school services but also injected fresh momentum into their development. This move sparked widespread attention across society and elicited diverse opinions. Some scholars believe that improving mechanisms for social forces to participate in after-school services and building a service team led mainly by these forces are key measures to enhance the quality of after-school services [2]. Other scholars, however, express skepticism about the feasibility and value of involving off-campus training institutions in after-school services. Recently, voices calling for the cancellation of after-school services have been growing louder, once again placing the issue under intense public scrutiny.

This paper discusses whether the participation of off-campus training institutions in school-based after-school services can enhance the quality and efficiency of the “Double Reduction” policy and promote students’ overall development. It aims to examine the practical issues surrounding such participation under the “Double Reduction” background, clarify the meaning of collaborative governance among stakeholders, and provide insights of significant importance for improving the quality and effectiveness of after-school services and fostering students’ comprehensive growth.

## **2. Analysis of the current situation of off-campus training institutions participating in after-school services**

In 2021, Ningbo City issued the Implementation Opinions on Effectively Carrying Out After-school Services for Schools and Childcare Services for Kindergartens at the Compulsory Education Stage, jointly released by nine departments including the Ningbo Municipal Education Bureau. Guided by the “Double Reduction” policy, Ningbo took the lead in introducing supporting policies for after-school services, striving to improve them according to new requirements and facilitate the implementation of “Double Reduction.” The policy explicitly required the integration of educational resources from the entire society and the establishment of an after-school service team composed mainly of on-campus teaching staff and supplemented by external professionals.

Against this policy backdrop, this study selected X Primary School in N County, Ningbo City, as the research object. As one of the first schools in the county to introduce off-campus training institutions into its after-school services and boasting a distinctive set of after-school programs recognized by numerous honors, X Primary School serves as a highly representative case. Through case analysis and interviews, the researchers identified the following current situations and problems.

Under the influence of the “Double Reduction” policy, after-school service mechanisms have undergone positive adjustments. To align with the new demands for high-quality educational development, schools have focused on providing diverse and personalized services during after-school hours. At the same time, by introducing off-campus training institutions to expand interest-based courses, schools have sought to support students’ all-around development. Nevertheless, despite some positive outcomes, schools’ after-school services still face several issues and challenges. Based on interview records, the following four aspects are summarized from the perspectives of government, schools, off-campus training institutions, and parents.

## 2.1. Insufficient government support

Firstly, financial support remains inadequate. According to the China Educational Finance Statistical Yearbook, although the absolute amount of education fiscal expenditure has continued to grow across provinces, the proportion relative to total fiscal expenditure has shown a downward trend in some provinces. This trend becomes even more evident when examining the average proportion of education expenditure across the country over the years [3].

School funding mainly relies on county-level fiscal allocations. Generally, schools with sufficient professional teaching staff capable of handling interest expansion courses independently will have in-house teachers assume these responsibilities. However, when internal capacity falls short, schools may collaborate with off-campus training institutions. Yet, as private enterprises driven by profit, these institutions inherently conflict with the public welfare nature of compulsory education.

Following the principles of public interest and low cost, Ningbo has established a cost-sharing mechanism supported by government funding, with reasonable contributions from families and society. Nevertheless, this approach has sparked some disagreements. Due to financial constraints, X Primary School replaced most of its “X” interest courses in the “1+X” model with homework tutoring. Teachers reported that similar situations exist in many peer schools. Additionally, there is a lack of clear standards for selecting training institutions. While Zhejiang Province emphasizes the need to introduce high-quality, non-academic off-campus training institutions, the “black and white lists” established in Ningbo City mainly assess institutions based on compliance with regulations on academic training and fees, rather than on the quality of their teaching staff, course content, or training outcomes. Consequently, X Primary School mainly selects institutions based on their formal status and reputation, with little scientific evaluation of their teaching quality.

## 2.2. Shortage of in-school teaching staff

Since the introduction of the “Double Reduction” policy, after-school services have faced new challenges, evolving from simple custodial care to a dual focus on homework guidance and interest expansion. Frontline teachers are now burdened with greater missions and responsibilities. In primary schools, a teacher often handles one to two classes, each averaging 45 students. With the implementation of after-school services, teachers are required not only to fulfill their regular teaching duties but also to undertake after-school instruction and supervision, leading to overwhelming workloads. Furthermore, the shortage of teachers in arts and sports exacerbates the situation. X Primary School has only two music teachers, two art teachers, and five physical education teachers, who are collectively responsible for delivering interest-based after-school courses to the entire student body—an unrealistic expectation. Moreover, providing after-school services has become a task where effort and reward are disproportionate. Teachers have reported that their working hours have been extended by two to three hours compared to before, dampening their enthusiasm for participating in after-school services. As a result of insufficient teaching resources and low teacher motivation, the school struggles to independently manage its after-school programs.

## 2.3. Policy misunderstandings among stakeholders

The participation of off-campus training institutions in after-school services is not widely recognized. More than half of the parents are unaware that training institutions can be involved in school-based after-school services. Additionally, there are significant misconceptions regarding policy among parents. Surveys reveal that most parents support after-school services, primarily because they believe it helps children complete their homework at school. After-school services are designed to provide on-campus services during non-teaching hours for families facing difficulties in picking up their

children after school, leveraging school facilities, resources, and staff; however, this does not imply unlimited responsibility on the part of schools [4].

Some parents still subconsciously believe that educating and managing children is the sole responsibility of schools and teachers, neglecting the role of family education. Parents involved in education-related professions vaguely refer to interest expansion courses as “club activities,” while those outside the education sector often simplistically label after-school services as “custodial care.” Consequently, their understanding of after-school services, including the participation of off-campus training institutions, remains limited.

#### **2.4. Difficulties for institutions entering schools**

Although national policies encourage multi-stakeholder participation in after-school services, actual implementation remains challenging, resulting in insufficient support from external resources. Moreover, off-campus training institutions themselves face issues regarding the quality of their teaching staff and courses, making it even harder for them to participate in school-based after-school services. Typically, teachers at these institutions are accustomed to small class sizes of 5–20 students. It remains uncertain whether they possess the professional competence to manage classes of 45 students or whether they can maintain the same level of commitment when occasionally teaching unfamiliar students. In addition, there is a lack of clarity regarding the management of these instructors once they enter schools—whether they should be supervised by the schools or by their parent institutions—leading to disputes. Detailed operational plans for their integration into schools are largely absent. Furthermore, course content oversight is insufficient, and evaluation mechanisms are underdeveloped. An analysis of after-school service operations in five schools in Ninghai County shows that regulatory responsibilities largely fall on the homeroom teachers, with occasional classroom inspections serving as the only form of supervision. There is no reliable means to assess whether the classes effectively contribute to students’ holistic development. Lastly, some schools have misused the name of after-school services to conduct collective academic tutoring aimed at improving test scores. All these factors combined create significant obstacles for off-campus training institutions seeking to participate in school after-school services.

### **3. Development of primary school after-school services from the perspective of stakeholders**

In the 1980s, American economist Freeman defined stakeholders as “individuals or groups who can affect or are affected by the achievement of an organization’s objectives” [5]. To ensure the smooth operation of organizational activities, multiple stakeholders must participate jointly in the governance process, engaging in competition and negotiation to achieve a balance of interests. However, balancing interests does not imply an equal distribution of benefits; instead, the returns received by each stakeholder are proportional to the capital they have invested [6].

Primary school after-school services represent a dynamic process involving multiple participants. Schools need to coordinate the interests of various parties when implementing after-school services. Introducing stakeholder theory into this field aligns with its inherent developmental logic. In the process of promoting high-quality and balanced after-school service development, stakeholders not only pursue their own interests but also gradually form interdependent relationships, thereby laying the foundation for collaborative governance.

First, students and parents, as the direct recipients of after-school services, can be regarded as a single group. Second, educational training institutions, as providers of in-school after-school services, act as suppliers. Third, school administrators and teachers, as the primary implementers and bearers of after-school services, directly influence the outcomes of these services through their attitudes and

the strategies they adopt. Finally, education authorities, as the supervising bodies of schools and training institutions, are responsible for standardizing, guiding, and overseeing the organization and implementation of in-school after-school services. Based on the above analysis, a theoretical model is proposed, as shown in Figure 1.

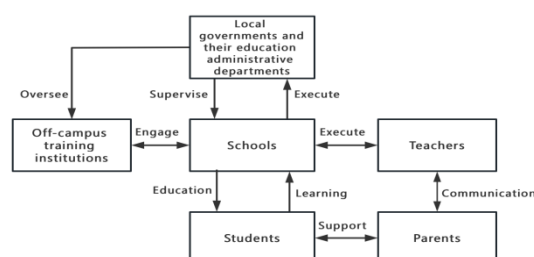


Figure 1: Logical framework of stakeholder collaboration in after-school services

#### 4. Enhancing quality and efficiency in the “Double Reduction” initiative through stakeholder collaborative governance

Some scholars have suggested that the healthy operation of a high-quality after-school service system requires collaborative governance among stakeholders. The government should guide collaboration among schools, families, and society to jointly create an educational system characterized by aligned goals and visions, shared resources and content, complementary approaches and methods, and coordinated timing and spaces, thereby forming a practical path for multiple entities to share the responsibility for after-school services [7].

##### 4.1. Government level

The “Implementation Opinions” issued by Ningbo City explicitly state that after-school services should adhere to the principles of public welfare and low cost. Emphasis must be placed on restoring the public welfare nature of education by fully coordinating the interests of all parties and establishing a robust support system for after-school services, with public welfare consistently upheld as a core value.

First, funding for after-school services should be raised through multiple channels, including “government subsidies + reasonable fees + social donations,” with education funding subsidies fully guaranteed. Although absolute education fiscal expenditures are increasing, relative education fiscal expenditures are declining. During the compulsory education stage, while it is acceptable for parents to bear a modest portion of the costs and for social institutions to moderately lower their fees, the most critical factor remains sufficient government financial support. The government should conduct public opinion surveys, consider local fiscal conditions, and appropriately increase education funding to ensure the smooth implementation of after-school services and address the substantial gaps in service provision between urban and rural schools. Transparent and reasonable fee standards should be established. After determining the fee standards, schools should organize parent meetings to inform parents, ensuring their right to be informed and gathering feedback for potential adjustments. Schools should act as intermediaries to collect minimal service fees, thereby safeguarding the public welfare attribute of after-school services.

Second, regarding the establishment of a “whitelist,” the education departments must strictly control the selection process. For instance, in County N, the education bureau required training institutions (public welfare organizations) to apply independently, followed by departmental recommendations and rigorous expert reviews before the first batch of non-academic training



institutions (public welfare organizations) eligible for after-school services was approved by the bureau's party committee and announced. However, there were shortcomings in setting clear selection standards for training institutions. For those included in the whitelist, a scoring system could be introduced based on institutional qualifications, teacher quality, student numbers, and parental feedback, ultimately selecting high-quality training institutions.

#### 4.2. School level

First, it is essential to thoroughly interpret after-school service policies so that teachers, parents, and students all understand them. To address teachers' mistrust, schools can organize training sessions and trial classes for teachers from selected external training institutions to ensure classroom quality and alleviate concerns. To address parents' lack of understanding, schools can invite experts to hold seminars, where experts provide in-depth analysis and explanations regarding the introduction of external training institutions into after-school services. Subsequently, parent meetings can be organized where teachers explain the participation of external training institutions in after-school services and engage in full communication with parents, ensuring their right to be informed and to provide suggestions. Additionally, schools can arrange activities where parents are invited to participate in learning activities alongside their children, creating a two-pronged approach.

Second, the whitelist issued by the education bureau should serve only as a preliminary reference. Schools should select compliant training institutions that meet their specific curricular needs from the whitelist. Through investigations and trial classes, schools should conduct further screening and make informed decisions regarding which training institutions may enter. After selecting the institutions, schools must carefully deliberate on specific aspects of after-school services. First, it must be clearly defined which teachers are responsible for which courses to avoid multiple teachers per course, which could disrupt classroom order and lower quality. Second, the management responsibility of the institutional teachers should be clarified—whether they are managed by the school or the institution itself—requiring the issuance of specific guidelines. Finally, external training institutions should be guided to prioritize character building, aim for students' holistic development, embrace social responsibility, and seek high-quality educational development through cooperation with schools.

Lastly, schools should establish a dedicated after-school service management department based on the actual situation of their teaching staff. As after-school services are gradually becoming a regular part of primary and secondary school operations, schools should create a management department to oversee after-school services comprehensively. Schools must strictly prohibit conducting academic subject teaching during after-school service sessions in pursuit of higher student scores or school advancement rates. Moreover, external training institutions must not use after-school courses as opportunities for "sales promotions," as this practice violates the public welfare nature of compulsory education and the original intent of after-school services, and it is detrimental to students' all-round development. As the primary providers of after-school services, schools must strictly supervise and eliminate such occurrences.

#### 4.3. Family level

First, parents need to clearly understand the essence of after-school services. Although these services emerged to address the "three-thirty problem," they primarily aim to promote children's holistic development rather than merely offering homework tutoring or extending school hours to boost academic performance, thereby imposing additional academic burdens. Schools share part of the responsibility for family education through after-school services but do not completely transfer this responsibility from parents. Parents must continue to bear the responsibility for their children's overall development at home.

Second, parents should cooperate with schools and teachers and actively participate in their children's growth. They should collaborate on tasks assigned by teachers. For instance, since younger students often have limited homework during after-school service hours, leading to a "nothing to do" situation, parents can prepare extracurricular reading materials to enrich their children's academic and extracurricular lives.

Finally, parents should alleviate their own "education anxiety," no longer adhering rigidly to previous evaluation standards or excessively comparing their children with others. They should establish good communication with teachers and children, listen to teachers' advice and children's needs, and assist children in selecting preferred after-school service courses based on their personal interests.

#### 4.4. Off-campus training institutions level

After-school services can become a comprehensive practical education approach through "curricularization." Since services are provided through curricularization, higher standards must be set for off-campus training institutions.

First, the development goals of after-school services should be interconnected with curricular objectives, emphasizing students' comprehensive development in morality, intelligence, physical fitness, aesthetics, and labor skills. Training institutions should tailor their after-school service offerings to the actual conditions of schools and the interests and needs of students, providing professional and targeted courses.

Second, the design of after-school service course content should incorporate elements of fun, practicality, and developmental value. Training institutions should integrate school characteristics into their offerings to deliver distinctive after-school service courses. They may assign appropriate stage-based homework and organize small quizzes at the end of courses to assess effectiveness. Institutions should strengthen process management and self-assessment, using evaluation to drive improvement. Managers of training institutions should conduct regular or irregular inspections of after-school services and promptly address any issues identified.

Finally, as an extension of school courses, after-school services must adhere to a public welfare nature. Training institutions must uphold the principle of compulsory education and provide public-interest-oriented after-school services. It is strictly prohibited for institution teachers to sell courses or market related products during the delivery of after-school services on campus.

### 5. Conclusion

Prior to the introduction of the "Double Reduction" ("双减") policy, after-school services for primary and secondary students in China existed in two forms: on-campus care services and off-campus care services. As a derivative service, after-school services did not initially attract significant public attention. With the formal proposal of after-school services in recent years and the introduction of related policies, public attention to on-campus after-school services has grown, and the focus of after-school services has shifted toward the school setting.

Following the implementation of the "Double Reduction" policy, after-school services have become a critical component of the policy's execution. How these services are defined and developed constitutes an essential aspect of the "Double Reduction" strategy. The participation of off-campus training institutions in providing school-based after-school services is an inevitable part of the evolutionary process. It addresses urgent issues such as insufficient school teaching staff, monotonous course content, and heavy parental educational burdens, thereby contributing significantly to improving the quality of after-school services. Given that after-school services involve multiple stakeholders, it is imperative for the government to take the lead, schools to serve as bridges, parents

to act as collaborators, and training institutions to fulfill the role of service providers. Through multi-party collaboration, the quality of after-school services can be enhanced, enabling off-campus training institutions to genuinely support the “Double Reduction” initiative, improve efficiency, and promote students’ holistic development.

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