

A Comparative Study of School District Systems in China and the United States: An Analysis Based on School Choice in the Elementary Education Stage

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Abstract: With the rise of globalization, evaluating and improving education systems have become pivotal for individual and national development. As major world economies, China and the United States have undertaken distinct approaches to education. Within these systems, school district policies and structures form the foundation for educational administration and school operations. This paper provides a comparative analysis of school district systems in China and the United States, emphasizing their relationship with school choice policies during elementary education. It examines key aspects including policy content, historical origins, and management structures. According to the analysis, it found that China's system prioritizes geographic proximity and centralized oversight to ensure equitable access. In contrast, the decentralized United States model grants parents more school choice options within and across districts. While China's standardized approach promotes fairness, the United States demonstrates that moderately expanding school choice and localized governance can foster competition, innovation, and responsiveness to diverse needs. As China continues reforming its school district system, lessons from the United States highlight potentials for increasing choices and autonomy while upholding equity guardrails. Synthesizing ideas from both nations could help China enhance elementary education quality and fairness.

Keywords: school district system, school choice, elementary education, education policy, comparative education

1. Introduction

In today's interconnected world, the quality of education stands as a determinant of both individual success and a nation's progress. As two of the world's largest economies, China and the United States have garnered significant attention for their diverse approaches to education. Within these countries, the school district system serves as the bedrock upon which educational policies are formulated and schools are operated. This research paper is dedicated to a comparison of school district systems in China and the United States, with a specific focus on the intricate relationship between these systems and the phenomenon of school choice during the elementary education stage. Furthermore, it seeks to discern valuable insights from the American experience and assess their potential implications for China's evolving educational landscape.

China's school district system, while exhibiting variations across regions, wields substantial influence over educational accessibility and quality on a national scale. The configuration and resource allocation of these districts directly impact the equitable distribution of educational resources and the overall educational standards. In parallel, the process of school choice and enrollment in China is a complex interplay between parents, students, and the parameters set by the school district, all seeking to optimize educational opportunities.

Conversely, the United States employs a decentralized approach to school district governance, resulting in a spectrum of regulations and practices that vary from state to state and even within regions. This diversity has cast the American education system into a global spotlight, most notably for the autonomy granted to school choice and parental involvement. Parents in the United States are afforded the freedom to tailor their children's education by selecting schools that align with their preferences and values, thus marking a distinctive feature of the American educational landscape.

Moreover, the experiences of the United States in navigating the delicate equilibrium between school district systems and school choice offer invaluable lessons. By examining the policies, practices, and outcomes of the American educational landscape, this study seeks to provide suggestions for potential reforms in China. It posits that by drawing upon the American model, China can refine its school district management strategies, ultimately fostering an enhanced educational quality and equitable access to education during the crucial elementary education years.

In the subsequent sections, this paper will delve into the specific nuances of school district systems in China and the United States, emphasizing their interplay with school choice dynamics during the elementary education stage. Through this exploration, the paper aims to provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators and researchers, facilitating a broader discourse on enhancing educational quality and equity in both nations.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

2.1. Elementary Education

Elementary education refers to the provision of fundamental, general cultural knowledge to citizens. It serves as the foundation for nurturing essential skills and knowledge among individuals and, in turn, contributes to building their core competencies as citizens [1]. In the context of elementary education, two prevailing viewpoints exist. One perspective primarily identifies elementary education as encompassing primary and junior high schools. An alternative viewpoint classifies elementary education based on educational levels, considering all education below higher education as part of the elementary education continuum. This extended perspective includes elementary, junior high, and high school education.

Elementary education in China typically extends over six years, starting from Grade 1 (around age 6) through Grade 6 (around age 12). The curriculum places a significant emphasis on core subjects like the Chinese language and mathematics [2]. Attendance during this phase is compulsory, ensuring that students complete their elementary education [3].

In the United States, elementary education usually covers six years, spanning from Kindergarten (around age 5) to either Grade 5 or 6 (around age 11 or 12). The curriculum is notably broader, including English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. In addition, physical education and the arts are often contained [4]. Similar to China, elementary education is also compulsory, with variations in attendance requirements depending on the state.

2.2. School Choice

"School choice" refers to the decisions made by parents or guardians regarding the selection of a school for their child's education. It involves the process of evaluating various educational options

and choosing the one that best aligns with a family's preferences, values, and educational goals. School choice can involve a range of decisions, including selecting between public and private schools, considering charter or magnet schools, or even opting for homeschooling [5]. It often involves assessing factors such as school quality, curriculum, location, extracurricular offerings, and other elements that impact a child's educational experience [6].

In the early years following China's revolution, the country employed a dual approach to education [7]. On one hand, various schools were established to offer basic education to the public. On the other, significant educational resources were directed toward selective primary and secondary schools to nurture urgently needed talents. To ensure these key institutions attract academically talented students, the "school choice based on examination scores" system emerged. This system, which determined admissions through exam scores, aimed to ensure equality among students based on merit. However, as policies favoring these key schools gained momentum, the competition for high-performing students intensified, leading to undue academic pressure [7,8]. In the mid-1980s, a significant change occurred, abolishing entrance exams and introducing a policy of enrolling students in nearby schools [9]. This marked the end of the "school choice based on examination scores" system, replacing it with a system where parents could choose nearby schools for their children. In this context, a practice of "school choice based on finances (or influence)" began to emerge [7,10]. This transformation paved the way for school choice to evolve from an individual action into a policy issue related to social injustice and educational inequality, forming the foundational basis for the formulation of school choice policies.

The United States had a historical preference for local neighborhood schooling, limiting school choice primarily to private and homeschooling options. However, during the mid-20th century and into the 1980s, various states began to introduce policies that encouraged school choice within the public school system. This change was motivated by the desire to foster competition among schools, improve educational quality, and expand parents' options [11]. Unlike China's centralized education system, the United States follows a decentralized approach, where school choice policies can vary significantly from one state to another and even among school districts within the same state. While many American students attend public schools in their local districts, school choice is actively promoted by the government, and parents have options such as charter schools, magnet schools, and open enrollment programs, depending on their state and district [12]. The goal has been to provide parents with the freedom to select schools that align with their educational philosophies and meet their children's specific needs.

In summary, the evolution of school choice policies in China and the United States has followed distinct trajectories. In China, the shift from an examination-based school choice system to a policy of enrolling students in nearby schools was driven by the desire to reduce academic pressures. On the contrary, the United States has embraced school choice as a means to introduce competition and enhance the quality of education. While school choice policies have become increasingly formalized in the United States, China continues to grapple with the challenges of ensuring equitable access to quality education while managing school choice practices.

3. Comparison of School District Systems in China and the United States

Having explored the evolution of school choice policies in China and the United States, this section shifts to the connection between school district systems and the choices parents and guardians make regarding their children's education. This section will delve into a comparative analysis of school district systems in both countries, examining their policy content, historical origins, and management structures. Analyzing these elements aims to shed light on the intricate relationship between school district systems and school choice, offering insights into the complexities of educational policy and practice in both China and the United States.

3.1. Comparison of Policy Content

China's school district system originated during the early stages of educational reforms with the primary goal of providing equitable educational opportunities. Established in the 1980s during China's educational reform, the system has evolved over time [13]. Its core principle is to ensure that every student has the right to attend the nearest school, thereby reducing the impact of family background and geographical location on educational opportunities. School districts are typically delineated based on geographical locations to ensure that students are assigned to the nearest school.

The "nearby enrollment" policy is a fundamental aspect of China's school district system. According to this policy, students are generally expected to attend the school closest to their residence. The aim of this policy is to provide equal educational opportunities and ensure that students do not have to travel long distances to attend school. Parents typically register their children in local schools based on their residential address, without the need for entrance exams or interviews [14].

In the United States, school districts are typically based on geographical boundaries, but many states and regions implement school district choice policies, allowing parents to choose the school district in which their children enroll [15]. Additionally, some areas permit parents to choose to send their children to other public schools beyond their residential district without geographical constraints. The United States also offers charter schools and magnet schools, which often have specialized educational focuses or unique curricula. Furthermore, parents can opt for private schools or homeschooling, options that are generally not constrained by school district boundaries [16].

3.2. Comparison of Historical Origins

The divergent approaches to school choice in China and the United States originate from different historical contexts surrounding the formation of school district systems in each country.

China's centralized, unified framework of school districts emerged after the 1980s following education reforms, aiming at modernizing the school system [17]. While allowing some regional flexibility, this district structure increased centralized oversight by the national Ministry of Education. This enabled policies like "nearby enrollment" to be implemented nationally, restricting student school choice to schools and districts near their home address in pursuit of equitable access [18]. The centralized yet regionally adaptable nature of China's district system facilitates national standardization of curriculum and examinations alongside local policy experimentation.

In contrast, in the United States, locally controlled school districts have existed since the colonial era in the 17th century, when European settlers established small, community-based schools funded by local taxes [19]. This highly decentralized educational governance and financing model laid the foundation for school choice policies to gradually emerge over time, including open enrollment across school district boundaries, charter schools operating outside traditional district control, and private school vouchers [20]. This localism increased options for school choice, though access and quality continue to vary widely across districts.

3.3. Comparison of Management Structures

China's school district management structure is highly centralized and unified. Since the implementation of school district pilot programs in 2004, municipal education bureaus have been responsible for establishing district working committees to manage and oversee school districts [21]. These committees implement education policies from higher authorities but can also formulate modest school-level policies based on local conditions [22]. However, provincial and municipal education departments still control key decision-making power over district budgets and personnel appointments in China [23]. School principals focus mainly on administrative work and lack autonomy over school operations.

In contrast, school district management authority is highly decentralized at the local level in the United States. Except for Hawaii, school districts in every state have locally elected school boards that are accountable to local residents [24]. School boards not only have extensive authority over education policy decisions but also control district budgets and personnel appointments [20]. Superintendents appointed by boards are responsible for carrying out board decisions and managing schools. Principals serve as instructional leaders with considerable autonomy over curriculum and teaching methods. However, local control has also led to resource and quality disparities between districts.

To sum up, the comparison of school district systems between China and the United States underscores their contrasting nature. China's system prioritizes geographic proximity to ensure equitable access, coupled with centralized management. In contrast, the United States boasts a diverse landscape of school districts, offering numerous choices and promoting local control.

China's commitment to equitable access through geographic proximity policies has promoted a sense of educational fairness. However, there is potential for greater flexibility and innovation in school choice policies, as well as balancing centralization and local autonomy in management structures. Conversely, the United States' diverse system offers parents a wide array of choices, but it also results in educational disparities. Lessons can be drawn from China's emphasis on equitable access and standardization.

4. Lessons from the United States and Implications for China

While China and the United States have adopted divergent approaches to structuring their school district systems, each country's model holds meaningful insights for the other. As China continues reforming its education system, integrating selected positive elements from America's decentralized, choice-oriented model could help build a more balanced system.

4.1. Expanding School Choice Through Limited Open Enrollment Between Districts

First, China could implement pilot programs allowing limited open enrollment between high-performing school districts in adjacent provinces and cities. This would enable student mobility based on parent preferences, increasing options while reducing the over-concentration of resources in singular districts. However, strong guardrails regarding fairness and sustainability are essential. District enrollment caps could be utilized to control cross-district scales at modest rates, along with family income verification and needs-based prioritization. Comprehensive evaluations must analyze district funding equitability, student socioeconomic diversity, and resource allocation to ensure continued quality. If carefully regulated, such open enrollment could boost parent satisfaction and school competition.

4.2. Offering Focused Academies as Specialized Options Within Districts

Second, China could establish specialized, focused academic schools within existing districts as alternatives to standard curriculum schools. For instance, districts could house dedicated STEM, art, music, or language immersion schools to align with student talents, strengths, and interests. This provides diverse course offerings, avoiding one-size-fits-all uniformity. However, codified approval processes for new schools must mandate demonstrated societal needs, sustainable funding plans, and enrollment quotas to prevent over-commercialization or elite dominance. Strong oversight is imperative to regulate such schools as supplements rather than replacements for equitable mainstream education.

4.3. Reforming Governance to Integrate Centralized and Localized Authority

Third, China should focus on reforming its school district governance model to better integrate centralized and localized authority. At the national level, China needs to improve the institutional environment for district reform through policies like education finance allocation, teacher deployment, accountability mechanisms, and performance evaluations that uphold fairness while allowing flexibility. The central government should shift from direct control to indirect supervision by empowering districts with more clearly defined, relatively independent authority over resources, budgets, and personnel. Locally, districts and schools must actively collaborate to enhance autonomous management capabilities aligned with district reform objectives. This involves transitions in leadership appointment, governance approaches, and delineation of responsibilities between districts and schools.

Pursuing institutional diversity and scientific decision-making across levels can truly integrate administrative supervision with school autonomy. The reform logic should focus on centralized guidance on the overall direction, monitoring of standards, and support for implementation while decentralizing specific governance and policy details to align with local conditions. A coordinated, iterative approach can balance centralization and decentralization and China can achieve integrated governance that blends centralized oversight with localized decision-making authority and capacity.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this comparative analysis highlights significant differences between China's centralized, standardized school district system and the decentralized, diverse landscape across the United States. China's pursuit of educational equity through policies like nearby enrollment has notable merits. However, the American model demonstrates that moderately expanding school choice options and localized governance, while upholding equity guardrails, can foster positive competition, innovation, and responsiveness to diverse needs. As China continues reforming its school district system, integrating aspects of expanded choice and decentralized management aligned to local conditions, as evidenced in the United States, could prove beneficial. However, recognizing the distinctions between the two countries, China should incorporate these lessons selectively, with care and prudence. If implemented thoughtfully, China can work toward a balanced model that increases school choice and district autonomy while ensuring fairness for all students. This has the potential to enhance both the quality and equity of elementary education nationwide. In essence, synthesizing ideas from the two nations while considering their unique contexts could help China build an education system positioned for the needs of today's world.

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