

# Academic Burden Reduction Endeavors in China in the Context of East Asia's Educational Predicament

Mingbin Wang

Jiangsu Second Normal University, Nanjing 211200, Jiangsu, China

*"Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire."  
-William Butler Yeats*

“HIGH academic achievements accompanied by heavy academic burdens” has been a popular perception of East Asian education, and China’s education system is no exception to this paradox. In China, the issue of academic burdens concerns not only the students but also the parents, schools, and private training institutions. Manifestations of the issue include onerous academic burdens and declining learning motivation in the students; the fixation with “advanced education” (having children learn knowledge and skills beyond their developmental phases) in the parents and the attendant education anxiety; the pervasive practice of “teaching to the test” with disregard for the essence of education in the schools; and disorderly competition among private training institutions, a severe disruption to on-campus teaching enactment (Hua & Wu, 2022). Underlying causes of these phenomena are: (i) The mismatched scales of education at various levels have intensified competition for school progression opportunities, which is further exacerbated by the disparities in educational standards between prestigious and ordinary schools. (ii) The examination-worship tradition associated with the imperial examination culture magnifies education anxiety in the popular public. (iii) Systemic problems with present school education, such as defective primary and secondary curricula, unscientific evaluation mechanisms, illegitimate teaching methods, and inadequate school-based tutoring, have contributed to the students’ academic burden by compromising teaching and learning efficiency and effectiveness (Xiang, 2019).

East Asian countries have advanced their respective initiatives in response to the issue of excessive academic burden. For instance, Japan, after having experimented with the “Yutori Education” (Relaxation Education), now moves towards “de-relaxation” in

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education, providing quality after-school services to the students to alleviate their academic pressure. South Korea introduced the “Equalization Policy” to lessen educational competition, which was followed by the “Free Semester Program” aimed at increasing time for student comprehensive education and mitigating employment anxiety in youth (Hua & Wu, 2022; Xu & Lu, 2024). Singapore advanced such initiatives as “Teach Less, Learn More” and “Learning for Life,” focusing on cutting curricular components and homework loads to spare time for personalized learning (Hua & Wu, 2022; Xu & Lu, 2024).

Recent decades have seen China’s endeavors to tackle the inordinately heavy academic burdens to its basic education students. In 2000, the State Council of China issued the *Circular on Alleviating Excessive Academic Burdens on Primary School Students*, which emphasizes the urgency of genuinely reducing the loads of schoolwork at the primary level and proposes a range of specific measures (Wang & Tan, 2021; Liu & Zuo, 2023). In 2013, the Ministry of Education of China launched the initiative of “Embarking on the Long Journey of Student Academic Burden Reduction”, which specifies the objectives and concrete measures for the campaign and mandates the establishment of an integrated governance and supervision system across provincial, county, and school levels for the purpose of controlling student workloads (Liu & Zuo, 2023). In 2018, the Ministry of Education and other three departments jointly issued the *Circular on Alleviating Extracurricular Burdens to Primary and Secondary School Students through Specialized Regulation of Private Training Institutions* (Wang, 2021). In 2021, the State Council released the *Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-campus Training for Compulsory Education Students* (also referred to as the Double Reduction policy), aiming to substantively lower the volume and difficulty of homework at the compulsory education level while also imposing strict regulation on off-campus tutoring services (Wang, 2021; Lin & Li, 2024).

What are the outcomes of all these policies and programs aimed at supporting student healthy growth by reducing illegitimate academic burdens? This question has been a focal topic among Chinese education researchers in recent years. *A Review of Empirical Studies of the Effects of the Double Reduction Policy* in this issue seeks to investigate the effects of the policy on the students, parents, and teachers at the compulsory education level by reviewing relevant empirical studies in the literature. The study finds that the Double Reduction program is effective in lightening homework and after-school training burdens in compulsory education students, which is of vital significance for their all-round development. It also points out the challenges that have arisen in the program’s implementation, such as the low satisfaction of the students with the after-school services, unresolved education anxiety in the parents, and increased work burdens to the teachers (Zeng, 2025). While the paper has its limitations, primarily derived from the relatively small sample sizes and constrained scope of regions examined in the empirical studies included in the review, it still successfully showcases the developments in China’s endeavor to bolster its basic education and provides implications for future improvement.

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**Correspondence to:**

Mingbin Wang  
Jiangsu Second Normal University  
Nanjing 211200  
Jiangsu  
China  
E-mail: [396517407@qq.com](mailto:396517407@qq.com)

**Conflict of Interests:** None

**Doi:** 10.15354/sief.25.co429