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Challenges in Teacher Allocation in Small-Scale Rural Schools and Strategies for Alleviating Them in the Context of High-Quality and Balanced Education

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Abstract: ***Against the backdrop of the ongoing promotion of high-quality and balanced development in compulsory education, small-scale rural schools serve as vital institutions for ensuring that rural children can attend school locally and for upholding equity in basic education; consequently, the state of their teacher allocation directly impacts the realisation of these objectives. At present, teacher allocation in small-scale rural schools faces practical challenges such as a disconnect between approved staffing quotas and actual needs, shortages of teachers in in-demand subjects, high staff turnover, and insufficient training support, which in turn constrain the provision of courses, teaching quality and school development. The underlying causes lie primarily in the segmentation of the urban-rural labour market, insufficient compensatory incentives, inadequate county-level coordination, and high coordination costs. To resolve these challenges, comprehensive measures must be implemented across supply mechanisms, incentive mechanisms, coordination mechanisms and support mechanisms, thereby shifting the allocation of teaching staff in small-scale rural schools from merely 'filling numerical gaps' to 'optimising quality'.***

Keywords: High-quality and balanced development, Small-scale rural schools, Teacher resource allocation, Educational equity.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the comprehensive universalisation of compulsory education in China and the effective realisation of the goal of 'basic equity', the focus of educational development is shifting from 'access to education' to 'quality education', moving from equity of opportunity towards equity of quality. 'China's Education Modernisation 2035' explicitly sets out the strategic task of 'promoting high-quality and balanced educational development', the core of which lies in expanding the coverage of high-quality educational resources, ensuring every school is run effectively, and providing a good education for every pupil. However, against this grand backdrop, small-scale rural schools (typically referring to village primary schools and teaching centres with fewer than 100 pupils) located in remote areas with sparse student populations have become the weakest and most challenging link in achieving the goal of high-quality and balanced development. As an integral part of the basic public education service system in rural areas, small-scale rural schools play an irreplaceable role in safeguarding educational equity and promoting the comprehensive revitalisation of rural areas. Particularly in this new era of high-quality and balanced development in compulsory education, and in the face of new circumstances such as the acceleration of urbanisation and significant fluctuations in the rural school-age population, correctly recognising the vital value of small-scale rural schools, making full use of their unique resource advantages, and ensuring the effective operation of these 'essential' small-scale rural schools is key to resolving the imbalances and inadequacies in the development of urban and rural compulsory education. It is also crucial for promoting the high-quality development of the rural population and for laying a solid foundation for national prosperity through the strength of education. Teachers are the primary resource in education and the key determinant of educational quality. For small-scale schools, their 'small' and 'weak' characteristics make the importance of teaching resources particularly pronounced. In fact, whilst physical facilities can be readily improved through short-term capital investment, building a stable, high-quality and well-structured teaching workforce is not something that can be achieved overnight. At present, the challenges commonly faced by small-scale rural schools—such as the difficulty of offering a full range of subjects and delivering high-quality lessons, the difficulties in implementing quality-oriented education, and a lack of vitality in school operations—are, ultimately, a direct reflection of the difficulties in allocating teaching resources.

2. THE PRACTICAL DILEMMAS IN THE ALLOCATION OF TEACHING RESOURCES IN SMALL-SCALE RURAL SCHOOLS AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF HIGH-QUALITY AND BALANCED DEVELOPMENT

The core objective of promoting high-quality and balanced development in compulsory education lies in bridging the gaps in educational quality across regions, between urban and rural areas, and amongst schools, thereby providing every pupil with fair and high-quality education. However, considering the current state of teaching staff in small-scale rural schools, there are problems with attracting teachers, retaining them, and utilising resources effectively. These three challenges are intertwined and compound one another, collectively hindering the high-quality and balanced development of compulsory education.

2.1 The Teacher Supply Mechanism is Dysfunctional, and Curriculum Homogenisation is Compounded by Structural Staff Shortages

Insufficient teacher numbers and low overall quality are the main issues constraining the development of small-scale rural schools. In China, teacher staffing levels are primarily determined by the pupil-to-teacher ratio. Whilst the total number of teachers in most rural schools meets the requirements set by this ratio, when applied to individual small-scale rural schools, staffing based solely on the pupil-to-teacher ratio fails to meet the demands of specialised teaching. Although national policy continues to advocate a flexible approach to staffing allocation that combines class-to-teacher ratios with pupil-to-teacher ratios, implementation at the county level is constrained by the total cap on publicly funded staff (i.e. the 'staffing pool' ceiling). Consequently, personnel and education departments often tend to adopt the 'pupil-to-teacher ratio' one-size-fits-all model, which is easier to manage. The direct consequence of this supply mechanism is an imbalance between the rigid constraints of the total staffing quota and the flexible demands of subject-specific structures. Even if a school with fewer than 100 pupils were to be fully staffed with 5–6 teachers in accordance with the 1:19 standard, it would still fall far short of meeting the teaching requirements for the comprehensive coverage of more than ten subjects stipulated by the national curriculum standards. In reality, having sufficient staffing quotas does not equate to meeting actual teaching needs. Rural primary schools suffer from a severe shortage of teaching staff; the pupil-teacher ratio, subject-teacher ratio and teachers' professional standards fall short of scientific benchmarks, making it difficult to institutionalise teaching design and management. This further highlights the gulf between the staffing quotas allocated to rural primary schools and their actual needs.

The underlying dilemma manifests as the normalisation and concealment of structural subject-specific staff shortages. Staff allocation in small-scale rural primary schools suffers from a severe lack of subject-specific alignment. Given the current acute shortage of generalist teachers, it is common practice to 'assign teachers to subjects at random rather than matching them to their specialist disciplines'; consequently, the degree of subject-post alignment is low, and teaching quality suffers. For instance, subjects such as music, art and physical education require a high degree of specialisation; without a certain number of years' specialised training, teachers generally find it difficult to reach a level of competence sufficient for teaching these subjects. Consequently, whilst rural children formally enjoy access to the same range of subjects, the substance and quality of the curriculum fall far short of the state's requirements for 'standardisation', thereby hindering the process of achieving high-quality and balanced education at its very source.

2.2 Instability in the Pool of High-calibre Teachers; a Lack of Sustained Guarantees for Quality and Equity

In recent years, although various localities have introduced favourable policies to supplement teaching staff in small-scale rural primary schools in line with regional circumstances, these measures have merely addressed symptoms rather than root causes. The shortage of teaching staff remains a key issue hampering the sustainable development of the vast majority of small-scale rural primary schools, and the contradiction between high demand for education and insufficient teaching staff has not been substantially alleviated. The majority of urban teachers who voluntarily participate in rural teaching support programmes do so merely to meet the mandatory requirements for professional title promotion and administrative position assessments; whilst the government's Special Post Teacher Scheme has temporarily provided a certain number of teachers to rural primary schools, due to various rural conditions and individual factors, these teachers tend to move back to urban areas once their teaching term expires; Substitute teachers recruited to work alongside permanent staff are paid differently for the same work; the disparity in remuneration is significant, and their turnover rate is high, making it impossible to ensure the stability of the teaching workforce; the actual implementation of the state's 'State-funded Teacher

Training Programme' varies across provinces and municipalities, with a considerable number of state-funded teacher trainees failing to take up posts in grassroots schools upon graduation, instead finding positions in urban or higher-level schools through various channels. Not only do newly recruited teachers leave when the opportunity arises after completing their service period, but a number of previously stable, middle-aged key teachers are also leaving the profession. Urban schools, relying on their relatively superior conditions and generous remuneration, frequently extend offers to key teachers in rural areas, creating a powerful 'siphon effect' on outstanding rural teaching staff. This has led to the peculiar phenomenon of 'leaving immediately upon receiving an award' in many rural schools, and the exodus of rural teachers is becoming increasingly severe. This 'double-peak exodus' (the simultaneous departure of both young and middle-aged teachers) has led to a 'hollowing-out' crisis within the teaching staff of small-scale schools, depriving efforts to improve educational quality of a sustainable human capital foundation.

At its root lies the complete failure of a comprehensive incentive system. With regard to financial incentives, the standards for allowances in remote and inhospitable areas have not been adjusted in line with socio-economic development for many years, and their compensatory effect has been eroded by inflation and the widening urban-rural income gap. There are significant intergenerational differences in income satisfaction among teachers in small-scale rural schools. Although the remuneration of rural teachers has improved in recent years, 44.53 per cent of teachers remain dissatisfied with their income, whilst only 11.19 per cent express satisfaction. With regard to developmental incentives, the 'paper-only, research-project-only' orientation in the evaluation and appointment of professional titles is at odds with the actual work performance of rural teachers. Meanwhile, the professional development challenges faced by the majority of young and middle-aged teachers stem from a mismatch between their professional development needs and the opportunities available. Among the work needs of teachers across all age groups, young teachers are most eager to achieve 'self-actualisation' in their work They find it difficult to convert the practical achievements of their in-depth work in combined-class teaching, whole-class teaching and the development of locally-based curricula into 'hard currency' for promotion, leading to a continuous erosion of their sense of professional achievement and intrinsic motivation. Emotional incentives are equally lacking; the fading of a social atmosphere that respects teachers and values education, coupled with a weakening of community support, further exacerbates teachers' feelings of isolation and professional burnout. The combined failure of multiple incentive mechanisms has led to instability within the teaching workforce, making the sustainability of quality and equity unattainable.

2.3 Inefficient Resource Allocation Makes it Difficult to Achieve High-quality Teaching Objectives Effectively

Given the existing pool of teaching staff, the extensive nature of resource allocation models and the blockages in coordination mechanisms severely hinder the realisation of existing resources' potential, making it an arduous task to achieve high-quality teaching objectives. The primary issue is the lack of targeted support for teachers' professional development. The curriculum design and teaching models of current training programmes—such as the National Teacher Training Programme and Provincial Teacher Training Programme—are largely based on the needs of large-scale schools, and are severely out of step with the unique context of small-scale schools, characterised by 'multi-subject teaching, combined-class management and home-school co-education'. Training content tends to focus on cutting-edge theory, whilst failing to equip teachers with practical skills such as small-class teaching strategies, the integration of multidisciplinary knowledge, and the development and utilisation of local resources.

Furthermore, as training is predominantly delivered through intensive off-duty sessions, the high costs of substitute teaching and travel further reduce teachers' willingness to participate, resulting in a low return on investment.

A deeper-rooted challenge lies in the lack of an ecological framework for collaborative sharing mechanisms. Although policy instruments such as 'county-level management and school-based recruitment' exist within the county, the lack of effective mechanisms for coordinating interests and providing compensation creates significant barriers to the reverse flow of teachers from urban to rural areas, making it difficult to ensure a regular supply of high-calibre itinerant teachers. At the same time, there is an intangible cultural divide between schools and communities; schools have failed to effectively open up and integrate into the community, and hidden educational resources within the community—such as local experts and masters of intangible cultural heritage—have been excluded from the education system. Digital technology has failed to effectively resolve this impasse. Although models such as 'specialised distance classrooms' and 'dual-teacher instruction' have been widely promoted, they

often remain confined to the level of equipment deployment. There is insufficient in-depth application in areas such as curriculum collaboration, teaching interaction, and assessment management, and they have failed to truly realise the remote sharing of high-quality teaching resources. The 'island-like' nature of these resources prevents existing resources from generating a synergistic effect where '1+1>2' through optimised allocation, thereby creating an efficiency bottleneck in the realisation of high-quality teaching objectives. It is worth noting that the 'small-scale school development consortia' model, explored in places such as Lizhou District in Guangyuan, Sichuan, and Chun'an County in Zhejiang, offers an illuminating practical pathway to resolving this dilemma by establishing a collaborative ecosystem centred on the sharing of teaching staff, joint curriculum development and the cultivation of a shared school culture.

3. CAUSES OF THE CHALLENGES IN TEACHER RESOURCE ALLOCATION IN SMALL-SCALE RURAL SCHOOLS

The challenges in teacher resource allocation in small-scale rural schools are not an isolated phenomenon, but rather an inevitable outcome of the combined effects of labour market failure, inadequate incentives and compensation, and flaws in institutional design. The core contradiction lies in the conflict between the requirement for high-quality and equitable education and the economic laws governing the allocation of educational resources in rural areas.

3.1 The Dual Structure of the Labour Market and Market Failure in the Supply of High-Quality Teaching Staff

The teaching labour market is characterised by a marked urban–rural dichotomy, which divides teaching resources into a primary labour market and a secondary labour market. Urban schools, with their superior working environments—such as well-equipped teaching facilities, ample resources for teaching and research, clear career prospects and additional 'non-monetary benefits'—naturally belong to the primary labour market; whereas small-scale rural schools, due to their remote locations—mostly situated in villages on the periphery of counties—are constrained in terms of professional development and offer limited living conveniences, and are consequently confined to the secondary labour market.

A survey of the new generation of rural teachers in the Wuling Mountainous Region revealed that 68.3 per cent of teachers on the Special Post Programme chose to move to urban schools upon completion of their service period, whilst 27.6 per cent of young teachers explicitly stated that they were 'very reluctant to remain in rural areas', This tendency to move to urban areas is, in essence, a rational decision driven by the individual's pursuit of utility maximisation—the secondary market status of rural schools results in a return on investment in human capital that is far lower than in urban areas. Consequently, high-calibre teaching staff continue to flow from rural to urban areas, creating a situation of adverse selection: those willing to remain in rural areas are predominantly older teachers with limited professional capabilities, whilst young, high-calibre teachers continue to leave, ultimately leading to a shortage of teaching staff in small-scale rural schools in terms of both quality and quantity. Surveys indicate that 83.6 per cent of teachers surveyed believe that working and living conditions in small-scale rural schools are 'poor', whilst 78.2 per cent are concerned that their 'professional development is restricted'. Even among young teachers recruited through policy initiatives, the attrition rate exceeds 50 per cent within one year. The mechanism for supplying high-quality teaching staff has effectively failed, rendering it fundamentally incapable of meeting the core requirement of 'sufficient and high-quality teaching staff' for high-quality and balanced education.

3.2 Severe Shortfall in Compensatory Incentives and the Depreciation of Teachers' Human Capital

According to the theory of compensatory wage differentials, in order to attract workers to accept a position with poor working conditions and low utility, their loss of utility must be compensated for through higher wages or additional benefits. However, there are currently significant shortcomings in both the financial and non-financial incentives for teachers in small-scale rural schools, directly resulting in the failure of teachers' human capital to appreciate—and indeed, its depreciation.

In terms of financial incentives, due to fiscal constraints in some counties, the 'allowance for arduous and remote areas' for rural teachers has not been properly implemented: 28.6 per cent of teachers have not received the full amount, whilst 29.3 per cent have a monthly performance-related salary of less than 1,500 yuan (with the lowest being just 861 yuan). Substitute teachers earn an average monthly wage of less than 2,000 yuan and have no social

security coverage; such remuneration levels fall far short of offsetting the utility gap between urban and rural posts. Teachers in small-scale rural schools shoulder the dual responsibilities of class-based teaching and managing pupils' daily lives; there is a severe mismatch between their labour input and remuneration. Young teachers are generally dissatisfied with their income, and their sense of professional identity continues to decline. With regard to non-economic incentives, the content of teacher training is out of step with the needs of small-scale schools; 65.4 per cent of teachers stated that 'the training content cannot be transferred to teaching practice', and there is a lack of practical skills training in areas such as teaching multiple year groups and managing small classes. Furthermore, the criteria for professional title assessment do not take into account the specific nature of rural teachers' work; the focus on academic papers and research projects makes it difficult for teachers responsible for cross-disciplinary teaching and the development of local curriculum to meet the standards. This dual deficiency in incentives has obstructed teachers' professional development pathways: not only is their existing human capital unable to be updated through training, but it is also difficult to realise its value through professional title advancement. Some teachers, unable to adapt to the requirements of the new curriculum reform, have seen their professional capabilities gradually erode, which runs sharply counter to the need for a 'stable and motivated' teaching workforce required to achieve high-quality and balanced education.

3.3 Diseconomies of Scale and High Coordination Costs, Resulting in Inefficient Resource Allocation

Due to their small scale and sparse student populations, small rural schools are inherently faced with the dilemma of diseconomies of scale; meanwhile, coordination mechanisms designed to optimise resource allocation are difficult to implement due to high transaction costs, ultimately leading to inefficient resource allocation. Empirical research indicates that the per-pupil teacher cost in small rural schools is 42.6 per cent higher than in urban schools. Low pupil numbers result in low utilisation rates of teaching staff—whilst staffing levels calculated based on a 'pupil-to-teacher ratio of 1:19' may appear to meet the requirements in absolute terms, they fail to cover the actual needs for delivering a full and comprehensive curriculum. Furthermore, policies introduced to address this dilemma—such as county-level management of school staffing and itinerant teaching arrangements—face extremely high transaction costs: The average distance between small-scale rural schools and neighbouring schools is 21 kilometres; there is a lack of financial support to cover the transport and time costs incurred by teachers travelling between schools, and 76.8 per cent of schools have not established mechanisms for sharing teaching staff between schools. Furthermore, in school–community collaboration, the absence of an information-sharing platform means that engaging retired community teachers and local experts in teaching requires significant communication and coordination costs; 89.6 per cent of schools have not successfully mobilised community resources.

When coordinating teacher mobility at the county level, multiple costs must be borne, including information search, negotiation and consultation, and supervision and assessment. Some counties find it difficult to cover these costs due to limited financial resources, resulting in coordination mechanisms remaining at the policy level and failing to operate on a routine basis. Diseconomies of scale lead to inefficient initial resource allocation, whilst high transaction costs hinder subsequent resource coordination. Ultimately, this traps small-scale rural schools in a predicament of resource isolation, severely constraining the efficiency with which the goal of high-quality teaching can be achieved.

4. MEASURES TO OPTIMISE THE ALLOCATION OF TEACHING RESOURCES IN SMALL-SCALE RURAL SCHOOLS AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF HIGH-QUALITY AND BALANCED EDUCATION

In response to the aforementioned causes, a systematic reform plan must be developed across three dimensions: supply, incentives and effectiveness. By innovating supply models to overcome diseconomies of scale, strengthening composite incentives to compensate for human capital, and reducing transaction costs to promote coordination, the goal of high-quality and balanced allocation of teaching resources in small-scale rural schools can ultimately be achieved.

4.1 Innovating Supply Models to Overcome the Problem of Diseconomies of Scale

The key to overcoming diseconomies of scale lies in breaking free from the constraints of a single school staffing quota system, coordinating the supply of teaching staff at the county level, and establishing a new supply model tailored to the needs of small-scale schools. Firstly, the standards for determining staffing quotas should be

reformed by moving away from the sole criterion of pupil-teacher ratio. Instead, a flexible approach should be adopted, prioritising the class-teacher ratio whilst using the pupil-teacher ratio as a supplementary factor—allocating three teachers to small-scale schools with one to two classes, five teachers to those with three to four classes, and providing an additional one to two posts to schools where combined-grade teaching is the norm. At the same time, a minimum staffing guarantee should be established to prevent staffing quotas from being reduced due to low pupil numbers; County-level education authorities may establish a county-wide staffing pool, incorporating surplus posts from township central schools and idle posts within the county into the pool, to be prioritised for allocation to small-scale schools. For example, in Gushi County, Henan Province, 87 surplus teachers were redeployed to 32 small-scale schools through such a pool, effectively resolving the contradiction of simultaneous staff surpluses and shortages.

4.2 Strengthening Composite Incentives to Compensate for Investment in Human Capital

Based on the theory of compensatory wage differentials and the theory of human capital appreciation, a composite system comprising 'economic incentives, development incentives and emotional incentives' should be established to compensate teachers for their utility losses and investment in human capital, thereby enhancing the attractiveness of the profession. With regard to financial incentives, a merit-based remuneration system should be implemented, substantially increasing the standard of living allowances for rural teachers and categorising these according to the degree of remoteness—with monthly allowances of 1,500–2,000 yuan for remote mountainous areas and 800–1,200 yuan for non-remote areas—to ensure that the total income of teachers in small-scale rural schools is 20–30 per cent higher than that of teachers at the same level in county towns; At the same time, performance-related pay should be linked to tasks such as cross-disciplinary teaching, multi-grade teaching and care for left-behind children, whilst appropriately increasing the variable proportion of performance-related pay. In terms of development incentives, the professional title evaluation and training systems need to be reformed. A dedicated evaluation and appointment pathway should be established for teachers in small-scale schools, with evaluation criteria focusing on tangible achievements such as the quality of course delivery, student satisfaction and the development of local curriculum, whilst relaxing requirements regarding academic papers and research projects; Training content should focus on strategies for teaching combined-age classes, classroom interaction in small groups, and psychological counselling for left-behind children, utilising a blended model of 'online micro-lessons combined with on-site teaching support'. County-level teacher development centres should assign one full-time teaching and research officer to each small-scale school, who will visit the school 2–3 times per month to provide guidance, ensuring that training content is effectively translated into teaching competence. In terms of emotional motivation, the achievements of outstanding rural teachers are publicised through local media, and the 'Most Admirable Rural Teacher' is selected annually and honoured with awards to enhance social recognition; simultaneously, working and living conditions are tangibly improved. County-level governments coordinate the construction of temporary accommodation for teachers, equipped with basic furniture and household appliances, and organise commuter shuttle buses to resolve the issues of 'difficulties with accommodation and commuting'; Regular team-building activities and local cultural experiences are organised to help teachers integrate into rural communities, thereby strengthening their sense of belonging and professional pride.

4.3 Reducing Transaction Costs to Promote Synergistic Resource Utilisation

According to the theory of cross-boundary collaboration, the resources possessed by any single organisation are limited and scarce. This necessitates that diverse organisations—including government bodies, communities, and both for-profit and non-profit entities—transcend their own boundaries to form inter-organisational cooperation networks. Through the transfer, utilisation and integration of resources across organisations, they can collaboratively produce high-quality resources that meet organisational needs. Through 'organisational innovation + technological empowerment + community integration', transaction costs associated with resource coordination can be reduced, promoting the efficient flow and integration of teaching staff and curriculum resources within the county, thereby overcoming the problem of resource silos. At the level of organisational innovation, the establishment of a 'school district system' or 'alliances of small-scale schools' should be vigorously promoted. The county should be divided into several school districts, with township central schools serving as the core to coordinate teaching staff and teaching and research resources across small-scale schools within the district. Transport and lesson-hour allowances for itinerant teachers will be uniformly covered by the school district, whilst information coordination and performance management will be handled by dedicated personnel within the district, thereby significantly reducing coordination costs for individual schools; Regular collective lesson planning and 'same lesson, different approaches' activities should be organised within school districts to share high-quality

teaching resources such as lesson plans and presentation materials. Teachers from small-scale schools may undertake work-based learning placements at central schools to enhance their professional capabilities. At the level of technology-enabled innovation, the development of the 'Three Classrooms' (specialised distance learning classrooms, master teacher classrooms and online classrooms from leading schools) should be further refined. County-level finances should allocate dedicated funds to upgrade the network infrastructure of small-scale schools, ensuring a bandwidth of no less than 200M.

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