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Strategic Planning for Deepening the All-Around Structural Reform of Education


Abstract: *The National Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development Guideline (2010–20) (hereafter abbreviated as the Guideline)* posits that the development of education must be driven by reform and innovation. It devotes six chapters to mapping out the targets, tasks, and major policy measures for reforming the educational system. Focusing on the reform of the talent-fostering institutions, the Guideline is intended to offer a holistic institutional design for developing a modern school system, renewing the school operating system, and
upgrading the government’s governance system. This paper explores the rationale and theoretical foundation for such a design, revolving around three issues—the construction of a modern school system, reforming the school operating system, and reforming the administrative system. It analyzes the structural issues targeted by such institutional design, as well as the basic assumptions and main discussions [that took place] during the Guideline’s drafting process, and offers a brief description of implementation strategies for structural reform.

The National Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development Guideline (hereinafter abbreviated as the Guideline) specifically posits that development of education must be driven by reform and innovation, and devotes six chapters to mapping out the targets, tasks, and major policy measures for reforming the educational system—a clear indication of the key position of the structural reform [presented] in the Guideline. The general framework for the part on the structural reform of education was devised on the basis of consensus reached through about a year of investigations and research by Education Reform and the Institutional Innovation topic group. Eventually, a series of reform tasks and measures for structural reform were put forward in six aspects, that is, reform of the talent training system, the examinations and recruitment system, the school operation system, and the administrative system; construction of a modern school system; and an increase in the openness of education. This paper focuses on the rationale of the structural reform and three main issues of constructing a modern school system, reforming the school operating system, and the administrative system, to discuss the assumptions and discussions in the course of formulation as well as strategies for implementing the Guideline [in an effort to achieve the] structural reform of education.

The Rationale of the Guideline for Structural Reform of Education

Since the 1985 “Decision of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee on Structural Reform of Education,” China’s reform of the education system has gained significant advances and has achieved breakthroughs in many areas. The current Guideline involved a comprehensive institutional design for deepening the structural educational reform from a new historical starting point, just as that reform has entered a critical new “deep water” phase. The previous period’s reform of the education
system laid emphasis on the administrative system and school operating system, that is, it resolved the main problems of “monopolizing too much and controlling too rigidly.” In the new period, an across-the-board drive was launched in the field of the talent training system.

The rationale for the policies relating to advancing the structural reform of education is based on perceptions of historical experience and historical processes of reform. It was against the background of the overall launching of the reform of the economic system and education entering into a new phase of development subsequent to the restoration of order after the chaos of the Cultural Revolution that the structural reform of education initiated by the 1985 “Decision of the CCP Central Committee on the Structural Reform of Education” was launched. The spearhead of this reform was directed at the education system’s shortcomings of “monopolizing too much and controlling too rigidly” under the planned economy. Breakthroughs were made in terms of expanding local government administrative powers over higher education and reforming the controls over student enrollments and student job assignments at secondary specialized schools and institutions of higher learning. The reform eliminated the oppressive absolute controls by the planning system and injected life and vitality into education. In the early 1990s, when the reforms reached a crucial advance-or-retreat pass, Comrade Deng Xiaoping’s talk during his trip in the southern provinces affirmed the socialist market economy system as the target pattern for the economic system, and the “Program for the Reform and Development of Education in China” promulgated by the CCP Central Committee and the State Council in 1993 explicitly posited that the target of the structural reform of education was to build up a new education system suited for the socialist market economy, political system, and the science and technology system; it also specified the targets and tasks of reforms of the school operating system, the administrative system, the schools’ internal management system, the student enrollment and employment system, the fund-raising system, and other important domains. In particular, the reform of the school operating system promoted the development of nongovernmental education; the reform of the administrative system devolved the management of more than four hundred institutions of higher learning formerly affiliated to central government departments down to the provincial-level governments; the reform of the student enrollment and employment system allowed graduates from vocational schools and higher education institutions to find their own jobs in the labor market (instead of being assigned a job);
and reform of the fund-raising system expanded and diversified sources of education funds. All of these reforms established closer relationships between education and the socialist market economy and increased the ability of education to adapt to its own volition vis-à-vis the demand of economic and social development.

During the late 1990s, as a result of the rise of the knowledge economy and the impact of the “Asian Financial Crisis” and reflections on the traditional pattern of development, demands arose that education reform be oriented toward reforming the model of talent training. The “Decision on Deepening Educational Reform and All-Around Advancement of Quality Education,” publicized by the State Council in 1999, focused on the theme of advancing quality-oriented education, put forward new tasks and new measures for deepening the structural reform of education, and called for new progress in reforming the educational structure and system, improving the coordination systems of provincial-level governments, and accelerating the development of nongovernmental education. Since the advent of the new century, the Party Central Committee has proposed the implementation of a scientific development concept, building up a harmonious society, paying greater attention to an equity orientation in education policy, implementing free-of-charge compulsory education in urban and rural areas, and promoting the balanced development of compulsory education and ensuring the right of disadvantaged groups to education. The government’s public service functions have also been enhanced: the administrative system of “local government responsibility and administration by levels mainly under county administration” has been implemented; a three-level central, provincial, and county government mechanism for sharing the funding of compulsory education has been set up; and an administrative framework for compulsory education has basically taken shape.

The more than three decades of the structural reform of education has proved that “incremental” reform is a correct choice that conforms to China’s circumstances and to the regularities of educational development. It has revealed that reform must be premised on objective requirements and necessary conditions for reform: that one must not react so slowly to needs as to miss opportunities, nor disregard objective conditions and be too eager for results; that one should advance the reforms at the proper time and in a sound and reliable manner. Now that the reform of education has proceeded for three decades and the reform of the education system has entered “deeper waters,” the previous interest relationships have changed, and new interest relationships are forming. Some of the
early reformers may have acquired vested interests, and have evolved from driving forces into hindrances, which has increased the difficulty of reform. Hence, the new round of the structural reform of education shall resolve not only problems remaining from the previous round, but will also solve new problems generated by and accumulated in the process of the “incremental” reform. From this vantage point, the Guideline has comprehensively planned the overall line of thinking and strategies for advancing and deepening the structural reform of education.

The Guideline’s proposal to “give first place to education of the person” manifests the new education development concept guided by the scientific development concept, and emphasizes education’s ultimate objective of cultivating people. The ultimate objective of the structural reform of education is to create an institutional environment conducive to the training of large numbers of talented people, especially talented innovators. The structural reform of education is a comprehensive reform that comprises many different domains and requires comprehensive coordinating and overall designing. The cultivation of innovative talents necessarily requires a school system that possesses autonomous school operating powers and responsibilities, and that is imbued with vitality; hence, reform of the school system constitutes a necessary condition for reforming the talent training system, whereas any reform of the school system is, to a large extent, affected and constrained by the government’s governance system. Thus, reforms of the talent training system, the modern school system, and the government’s governance system constitute the basic components of the reform of the education system. As far as the interactions among these three components are concerned, reform of the government’s governance system is the key to advancing the structural reform of education, and institutional construction is the most important of all. Based on the above understanding, the Guideline entails the institutional design of construction of a modern school system, reform of the school operation system, and reform of the government administration system as a whole, revolving around the central issue of talent training.

Institutional Arrangements in the Guideline for the Structural Reform of Education

If we say the past twenty-five years of structural reform focused on switching from an old to a new system, or in other words, striving to excise the flaws in the education system rising from the planned economy,
the focus of the next ten years of education structural reform is building up a new education system while sweeping aside structural obstructions. The Guideline has performed institutional designing from three aspects: a modern school system, reforming the school operation system, and reforming the government’s administrative system.

Building Up a Modern School System

Institutions for autonomous school operations are one of the basic components in the structural reform of education. In a certain sense, one might say that transformation of government functions, realization of social participation, and even whether education will truly adapt to and promote social development and the all-around development of the person, are ultimately determined by whether the schools will possess the ability to adapt to and promote social development and the all-around development of the person on their own volition, and this ability on the part of the schools will, in turn, be determined by whether they possess the vigor of autonomous operation. In the past, there was also talk about expanding autonomy in school operations, but it never dealt with the separation of schools from administration and management from school operations, and thus failed in changing the excessively rigid controls over schools by the relevant departments, which constrained the vitality that schools could display. The Guideline proposes to “advance the separation of government administration from school affairs and detach school governance from school operations, build up a modern school system that features operation by law, autonomous management, democratic supervision, and social participation, and establish a new type of relationship among government, schools, and society.” During the drafting of the Guideline, everyone was of the opinion that governments and schools are institutions of a different nature, and governments should not manage schools as subordinate administrative institutions. School autonomy is given by law and not conferred by governments. Hence, autonomy should be restored to the schools. Moreover, the schools’ autonomy should be established, and the legal status of their independent operations should be guaranteed. Schools should be governed by law, and governments should govern education by law. Relations of reciprocal rights and responsibilities based on law shall be set up between education administrative departments and schools, to create a better legal and institutional environment for school operation by educators.
According to the practical experiences of reforms and the results of theoretical research, the key to realizing autonomous school operation by schools rests in setting up mechanisms for the schools to develop on their own and limit themselves. Broadly speaking, these mechanisms comprise three parts that are mutually connected and provide mutual checks and balances. First, the *Guideline* straightens out the relationship between administration powers and academic powers, and “explores the setting up of a management system and complementary policies that conform to school characteristics, and gradually eliminate existing administrative rankings and administrative management patterns.” The reason schools are bureaucratized, as far as extrinsic reasons are concerned, is because governments manage schools as administrative institutions, use administrative means to manage them, and use administrative powers to intervene in the schools’ internal management; internal reasons for bureaucratization lie in the powers of the schools’ administrative institutions being overly centralized, causing them to interfere with or even squeeze aside academic powers. Hence, modern school systems should clearly define the relationships between administrative powers and academic powers, and strengthen the role of academic quarters in school governance. The *Guideline* stipulates to “give full play to the role of academic commissions in disciplinary construction, academic evaluations, and academic development, and give full play to the role of professors in teaching, academic research, and school management.”

Second, [the *Guideline* calls for] improving the governance structure of legal persons of educational institutions. The autonomous operation of schools is not an action by any individual, but consists of organizational actions based on a modern school system. Hence, when education institutions acquire the conditions to operate autonomously, the key to whether they are able to do a good job of using their autonomous rights in institutional operation lies in their governance structure. This governance structure consists mainly of coordination and checks and balances between its administrative powers and academic powers as far as its power structure is concerned; of coordination and checks and balances among its decision-making institution, implementation institution, and supervisory institution where its organizational structure is concerned; and of coordination and checks and balances among the rights and interests of its administrators, educators, and learners where its interest structure is concerned. While strengthening academic powers, educational institutions shall “fortify the teacher and staff congresses
and students’ congresses, and bring the role of mass organizations into play.” Primary and secondary schools shall “implement school affairs meetings and other administrative systems, set up and perfect the system of teacher and staff congresses, and endeavor to construct scientific and democratic decision-making mechanisms.” This will enable stakeholders at all levels, in all fields, and of various interests, to enjoy equal rights, share the results of development, assume responsibilities in common, mobilize the initiative of all quarters to the maximum, and stimulate vitality of educational institutions.

Third, set up and perfect bidirectional participation and interaction mechanisms between schools and society. Autonomous school operations are not insular operations, but consist of closer relationships set up between the schools and society in the course of interactive mutual participation in and by society, and under the effects of social support and accountability to society. One important reform measure is to explore setting up a system of school boards of directors or councils and bringing in persons from various quarters, such as enterprise representatives, social luminaries, and representatives of the general public to participate in decision making, consultation, and management advising on major school affairs. Another measure for open school operation is to explore and gradually perfect the method for selecting and employing school principals. Schools where the conditions for doing so exist are called on to try out open recruitments and adopt competitive recruitment and screening, with final appointments to be confirmed by the government.

Reforming the School Operation System

A fundamental issue in reforming the educational system is properly handling the relationships among the government, society, and schools, and gradually forming a new educational system featuring government macromanagement, effective social participation, and autonomous school operation. An important premise for handling relationships among the three is to define the boundaries of the education services provided by the government and the market. Generally speaking, basic public services for education (public products) shall be provided by the government, public services of a general nature (quasi-public products) shall be provided jointly by the government and the market, and nonpublic services (private products) shall be provided by the market. In deepening reform of the school operating system, the point of departure should be to ensure
basic public services, the precondition of which is to clearly define the provision of education services, that is, which part is to be ensured by the government and which part shall be provided by the market. Setting up a school operating system in which the government is the principal player, where communities participate in school operation, and in which public and nongovernmental education develops in tandem is the inevitable choice for meeting society’s diverse requirements for education. Hence, the **Guideline** proposes that the government and nongovernment quarters together operate schools and form a “setup in which the government takes the lead in running schools, society as a whole actively participates, and public and nongovernmental schools develop simultaneously.” This is the basic foundation for the school operating system established by the **Guideline**.

The **Guideline** sees nongovernmental education as an important growth point for the development of education and an important force for prompting educational reform, and has proposed strong support for nongovernmental education. This proposal is based on the actual state of supply and demand for education in China today. At the present stage, with the rise in the level of economic development and the income levels of the general public, people are constantly voicing demands for more and better education, and their needs tend toward greater diversification. Faced with these diversified demands, mobilizing nongovernmental forces to meet the requirements of the general public has become an objective need in educational development. However, nongovernmental education, at its present stage of development, is facing new circumstances. In recent years, the government’s input in education has increased; as a result, the operating conditions of public schools at the compulsory education stage substantially improved, the income standards of public school teachers have been raised, and school fees for students have been waived. These have posed new challenges to nongovernmental education, and to a certain extent, have squeezed its development. Based on such considerations, a series of new measures has been proposed to support the development of nongovernmental education. For example:

The government shall entrust nongovernmental schools with education and training tasks, and allocate education funds accordingly. Governments at and above the county level shall, in view of the specific circumstance of their administrative districts, set up special funds to assist nongovernmental schools. The state shall cite and award organizations, schools, or individuals that make outstanding contributions to the development of nongovernmental education.
At the core of this is a change in government functions from direct management to indirect management and the government’s purchase of public education services provided by various educational institutions in society.

Another important issue is the Guideline’s proposal to “initiate pilot projects for differentiated management of profit making and nonprofit nongovernmental schools,” with reference to the common practice of differentiating between profit making and nonprofit schools in other countries as well as the institutional basis for developing nongovernmental education in the present phase. The purpose of this differentiation is to encourage donations and investments for running schools. There must be rational policies for education funded by investments, because effective management would be impossible if these are poorly supervised and managed. Hence, the basic institutional design is: government finances will be used on public services that are entirely for the public welfare; for nonprofit, nongovernmental schools, the government will implement policies that give the same treatment as those for public schools; and preferential treatment will also be accorded to profit-making nongovernmental schools, but these shall be registered and managed in accordance with the categories for enterprises. Pilot projects shall be conducted to explore financial and accounting systems, and auditing systems for profit-making and nonprofit educational institutions. To put it simply, the development of nongovernmental education must be encouraged, but different types of nongovernmental schools shall be treated differently. Besides, it warrants a rational governance structure, which clearly defines the powers and responsibilities of the investors and school operators, a system of social accountability, and mechanisms for guarding against risks in nongovernmental school operations, as well as a system for openness of information.

Diversification of the forms of operation of public schools in advancing the reform of the school operating system is also an important content of the Guideline. The Guideline proposes to “deepen the reform of the public school operation system, actively encourage industries, enterprises, and institutions to join in the operation of public schools, expand quality education resources, invigorate school-running efforts, and raise school operation efficiency. Local authorities may proceed from the realities of their respective situations, conduct experiments in joint school-running cooperation in public schools and in outsourcing school management, and explore various ways of school operation to improve the performances
of schools. If public schools are operated entirely by the government without participation by a third party, it will hardly be possible for them to optimize and integrate education resources to achieve cost efficiency in education services. Thus, diverse forms of school operation, and especially, diverse forms of cooperative school operation, have been proposed. On the one hand, the governance structure shall be reformed to diversify the ways schools are operated, and on the other, cooperative school operation will be exercised by delegating management to other parties, such as delegating management of public schools to intermediaries, similar to charter schools in the United States.

Reform of the Government Administration System

Setting up and improving the government’s macromanagement system is the main mission of the reform of the education administration system, and the core of this reform is to transform government functions and change governance patterns. The Guideline specifically states: “Perfect a well-coordinated education administration system in which rights and responsibilities are clearly defined. Focus on simplifying government functions and decentralizing powers, deepen the reform of the education administration system, and raise the quality of public education services.” The key to this is improving the government’s public services and public governance system. The government will, on the one hand, actually fulfill its public service functions and, on the other, on the premise of fulfilling responsibility for basic public services, will ensure the equitability of such services by opening up toward society, providing access to all quarters in society and creating a social atmosphere of equal competition. In other words, in terms of government functions, the monopoly functions of an “omnipotent government” under the planned economy system that took charge of everything should be replaced by a policy and social environment where all kinds of school operation institutions can compete equally.

Social participation is a necessary condition for government function transformation and realizing autonomous school operations. It involves multiple levels, that is, macro (the government), meso (the schools), and micro (teaching), and covers many realms, such as decision making, implementation, and supervision. Social participation in terms of the school operation system calls for extensively opening up pathways and encouraging various social forces, private organizations, institutions,
industries, enterprises, and educational institutions outside China to provide diverse forms and multiple types of educational services. Social participation in terms of the administrative system calls for stepping up the development of professional intermediary institutions and gradually handing over professional management work, such as education decision-making consultancy, school curricula designing, education examinations and appraisals, education quality evaluation, education fiscal appropriations, employment, and talent exchanges, to professional intermediary institutions. In terms of the investment system, social participation calls for encouraging nonfiscal fund participation in educational development by means of donations, funding, or investments by social intermediary organizations. Social participation in terms of school teaching and management is effected through such channels as “community committees,” “parents’ committees,” college and university councils, and “industry/university research collaborations,” and by ensuring the right of being informed, accountability, and supervision for participation in school operation and management.

“Decentralization of government powers and changing of government functions” is pinpointed mainly at the government’s excessively centralized powers. Central government education administration institutions continue to exercise centralized and unified management, manifested as poorly defined division of rights and responsibilities between central and local education administrations and relationships that have not been clarified. To a large extent, this restricts the autonomy of local education administrations and makes it difficult to mobilize local initiative or enthusiasm for developing education or for taking up corresponding responsibilities. Today, of China’s more than 2,200 institutions of higher education, over 100 fall under central government management and the rest are managed by local authorities. Powers are excessively concentrated in the hands of the central and local governments. For this very reason, it is proposed that “the central authorities shall devolve powers to the local authorities and governments shall devolve powers to the schools; the responsibilities of government at all levels shall be clearly defined; school operation actions shall be regulated; administration, operation, and evaluation shall be separated; and a clearly defined school administration system in which school governance is detached from government administration, rights, and responsibilities is well coordinated and well regulated.”

The governments’ main functions must be separated from adminis-
trative affairs and micromanagement and shifted to macromanagement, that is, to guidance through planning (policies), allocation of resources, information services, and supervision. The approach to governance should shift from mainly relying on administrative orders to comprehensive use of legal, economic, policy, and information instruments, plus some necessary administrative means. We should, in line with the requirements for setting up a “service-type government,” perfect a democratic and scientific decision-making system, and improve such procedures and institutions as investigations, research, participation by the general public, legal reviews, public hearings, and interpellations for major government decisions on education. Thus, for the sake of changing administrative functions and improving administrative approaches, the Guideline stipulates: “Change the monotonous mode of direct administration over schools to comprehensive use of legislation, funding, planning, information services, policy guidance, and necessary administrative measures, and minimize unnecessary administrative intervention.” For scientific and democratic decision making, the Guideline posits: “Standardize decision-making procedures; hold open discussions and thoroughly canvass people’s opinions before major education policies are announced,” and “set up education advisory commissions to provide advice and support for education reform and development.” The National Education Advisory Council was established in January 2010, which constitutes an important measure for implementing the Guideline and marks China’s advancement toward scientific and democratic policymaking in the field of education.

Implementation Strategies

Now that the reform of China’s education system has entered a key stage and deeper waters, and in particular, since the structural reform of education currently under way in our country increasingly touches on the interests of diverse groups of people, the difficulties can well be imagined. Advancement of this new round of reforms of the education system calls for a scientific and feasible line of thinking, as well as a blueprint for a positive and appropriate set of strategies. The strategy of bold innovation and steady advances, and the principles of “well-coordinated planning, step-by-step implementation, and prior experimentation” proposed in the Guideline manifests the integration of proactive and incremental reform strategies.

In terms of regional layouts, the rates of advance and the requirements
of reform do not call for all regions to “march in lockstep,” but that each region determines its own targets, pace, and approaches to reform in light of its actual circumstances and objective needs. Timewise, the reform objectives may be fulfilled earlier or later. Regions where the conditions are mature may advance more quickly; those with relatively poor conditions need not be overanxious for quick results. Each region may also have their own models for realizing reform targets and may advance specific implementation of reform in light of local conditions.

In terms of strategies for achieving these objectives, emphasis is placed on starting with pilot projects. Major reform measures and policies must be preceded by pilot projects in some localities or schools. The pilot projects must be of a representative and typical nature. The 425 pilot projects to be launched by the state include the eastern, western and middle regions, as well as educational institutions of small, medium, and large sizes. The pilot projects should have the ample participation of leaderships, experts, and representatives of interested parties. Necessary procedures shall be set up for generalizing and extending the experiences gained by the pilot programs. In this process, the initiative of the localities and at the grassroots should be given full consideration. Experiments conducted on this basis will constitute organized and scientific experiments on a socialized education system and institutions with Chinese characteristics, and extension of the resulting experiences will also constitute the process of building up a socialist education system and institutions with Chinese characteristics.