

China's Policy Actions to Lead Teacher Development With Evaluation Reform

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Abstract

Purpose: This study introduces a policy with great strategic significance and far-reaching impact by analyzing the background, measures, and future development trends of teacher evaluation reform in China.

Design/Approach/Methods: This study primarily conducts a policy text analysis of the section on teacher evaluation of the *Overall Plan for Deepening the Reform of Educational Evaluation in the New Era*.

Findings: The *Overall Plan for Deepening the Reform of Educational Evaluation in the New Era* was drafted to enhance the quality of Chinese teachers and address many problems in teacher evaluation. It comprised four sections: teachers' professional ethics, teaching effectiveness, evaluation models and methods, and honorary titles. The policy has distinctive features such as the high status and authority of the issuing body, a holistic and systematic nature, and an orientation toward practical issues. This article proposes three major policy foresights: promoting implementation through the force of political trends, giving schools autonomy in teacher evaluations, and implementing progressive reforms.

Originality/Value: This study conducted a specialist analysis of the policy in combination with the real scenario and institutional environment of Chinese teacher evaluation, which could

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encourage international peers to better understand Chinese teacher evaluation policies and promote policy learning and dissemination internationally.

Keywords

China, public policy, teacher evaluation

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Evaluation policy plays an important role in the development of education. It directly affects the allocation of public educational resources, school operations, teaching practice, and the learning of students. It also deeply affects the educational concept of society as a whole and even shapes the educational ecology of an era. To better conduct educational evaluation and guide the development of a higher-quality education, China issued the *Overall Plan for Deepening the Reform of Educational Evaluation in the New Era* (hereafter referred to as the *Overall Plan*) and advanced a series of far-reaching policy measures in October 2020. There are 12.23 million primary and secondary school teachers in China,¹ supporting the largest basic education system in the world. Therefore, the reform of primary and secondary schoolteacher evaluations is a crucial link in this policy.

Research on teacher evaluation policies is relatively abundant and can be broadly divided into the following categories: research on the policy text itself (Zeng et al., 2021), research on evaluation methods in policy implementation (Liebowitz, 2021), analysis of the benefits of policy implementation (Pauffer & Sloat, 2020), and research on factors affecting policy implementation (Ford et al., 2017). It can be seen that teacher evaluation is a complex systemic project, difficult but significant, that plays a fundamental role in the development of education in a country. Currently, Chinese researchers are more likely to refer to foreign teacher evaluation policies in domestic teacher evaluation reform (Liu & Shen, 2017). This paper, on the other hand, focuses mainly on teacher evaluation, in which respect it introduces a landmark policy proposal regarding China's education evaluation reform, the *Overall Plan*, presenting a detailed description and analysis of the background, significance, content, and characteristics of the policy. It is hoped that this paper will serve as a resource for international teacher evaluation reform through the exchange of ideas and provision of relevant references.

Background and significance of the policy

The strategic focus of China's teacher policy has shifted from quantity expansion and scale to quality improvement and development. Teacher evaluation must thus adapt to this transformation.

Currently, the number of primary and secondary school teachers in China is 17.9 times what it was in the early days of the People's Republic of China and nearly twice what it was in the early days of Reform and Opening-up, a number sufficient to meet the needs of educational development (Gai & Li, 2020). As the era of substantial quantity expansion has passed, the focus of teacher evaluation needs to shift from superficial quantitative measurement to more profound qualitative regulation to enhance the overall quality of primary and secondary school teachers.

In addition, there have long been many problems with teacher evaluation in China, and there is an urgent need for reform. Before discussing these issues, it is necessary to outline the basic patterns of past primary and secondary school teacher evaluation policies. In the past, China's teacher evaluation policies were scattered across four different domains. First is recruitment evaluation, that is, the evaluation conducted when recruiting teachers, in which the recruiter evaluates whether the candidate has the quality required for the teaching profession, including educational level, professional knowledge, professional ability, and professional quality. The system governing the appointment of teachers in China is the authorized teacher capacity system, under which a special organization is responsible for verifying the total number of teachers in the school. After taking their posts, teachers become national public officials with clear career development prospects, stable incomes, and relatively secure occupation. The quota system provides teachers with career stability, high income, and social status, which make the teaching profession attractive (Li et al., 2020).

The second domain of evaluation is the evaluation of professional titles. China's primary and secondary schools have implemented a unified national professional title system, under which teachers are divided into Level 3, Level 2, Level 1, senior teachers, and Professor senior teachers according to the standards of their professional ability, work performance, and duration of service. After passing the review, teachers can be appointed to posts appropriate for their levels, and their salaries and responsibilities change accordingly. The third domain is the performance evaluation. China's primary and secondary schools implement a teacher performance salary system to evaluate teachers' post-responsibility performance. The results of the performance evaluation form the basis for the distribution of performance salaries. The evaluation mainly concerns professional ethics, job dedication, teacher cooperation, and teaching efficiency. Fourth is the merit evaluation.² China has a relatively mature teaching merit system. Titles for meritorious teachers have been set at the national, provincial, municipal, and county levels, such as distinguished grade teachers, renowned teaching teachers, heroes of education, and backbone teachers. Further details are listed in Table 1.

However, there are problems with these teacher evaluation scenarios. The first is the replacement of substantive evaluations of professional ethics, teaching ability, and teaching standards with formal evaluations of teachers' external characteristics. Typical manifestations of this are evaluations of teacher performance based on student examination results and promotion rates and

Table 1. Main primary and secondary school teacher evaluation policies.

Category	Main policy	Central provisions
Recruitment evaluation	<i>Trial Measures for Examination Qualification Certificates of Primary and Secondary School Teachers (1986)</i>	Establish a teacher qualification assessment system and issue qualification certificates to qualified teachers
	<i>Teachers Law of the People's Republic of China (October 1993)</i>	It is clearly stipulated that the State implements the teacher qualification system.
	<i>Teacher Qualifications Ordinance (December 1995)</i>	Classification of teacher qualification examinations
	<i>Guidance on the Pilot Reform of Teacher Qualification Examination in Primary and Secondary Schools and Kindergartens (September 2011)</i>	Test object Registration conditions Examination content Administrative department
Professional title evaluation	<i>Tentative Regulations on the Positions of Teachers in Primary and Secondary Schools (1986)</i>	China's teacher title system was formally established. The title categories are specified. Evaluation methods are stipulated.
	<i>Trial Measures for Post Setting Management of Public Institutions (2006)</i>	Standardize the system of teachers' professional titles
	<i>Guiding Opinions on Deepening the Pilot Reform of Professional Title System for Primary and Secondary School Teachers (2009)</i>	Improve the title system Improve professional title evaluation standards Improve the professional title evaluation mechanism
	<i>Guiding Opinions on Deepening the Reform of Professional Title System for Primary and Secondary School Teachers (September 2015)</i>	Expand the scope of implementation and improve policies and programs based on the 2009 documents
Performance evaluation	<i>Opinions on the Implementation of the Reform Plan for the Income Distribution System of Staff in Public Institutions in Primary and Secondary Schools (October 2006)</i>	Primary and secondary schools implement the post-performance salary system.
	<i>Guidance on Performance Appraisal of Teachers in Compulsory Education Schools (December 2008)</i>	Determine the content of performance evaluation Propose performance evaluation methods Propose the use of evaluation results

(continued)

Table I. (continued)

Category	Main policy	Central provisions
Honor valuation	<i>Law of the People's Republic of China on National Medals and National Honorary Titles</i> (December 2015)	The state establishes national honorary titles and grants them to outstanding talents, including in the field of education.
	<i>Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Comprehensively Deepening the Construction and Reform of Teachers in the New Era</i> (2018)	Strengthen the recognition of teachers Vigorously publicize the outstanding representative teachers
	<i>Work Plan for the Selection and Commendation of Advanced Collectives and Individuals in the National Education System in ** Year</i> (generally issued every year)	Merit types and selection scope Evaluation criteria Selection procedure

measuring teachers' standards in terms of academic qualifications, the number of papers published, and the number of research projects undertaken. The second is to emphasize result evaluations, ignoring process and value-added evaluations. In all the evaluation domains, result evaluations have come to be used much more frequently than the other evaluation models. The final results of teachers' teaching and scientific research form the main basis for evaluation, whereas process and value-added evaluations, focusing on teachers' development and growth, are ignored. Third, there is a significant problem of a utilitarian focus on evaluation results: The results of teacher evaluations are directly related to the vital interests of teachers. For example, teachers' job evaluations directly affect their job appointment, their professional title evaluation directly affects their chances of promotion, their performance evaluation directly affects their income, and the merit evaluation directly impacts the acquisition of merit titles. In addition, in the environment of China's teacher personnel system, teachers' appointments are often lifelong, and teachers' professional titles generally rise, with few demotions. This renders evaluation results extremely important to teachers, leading them to blindly pursue external indicators, such as student achievement and scientific research achievement, while ignoring the internal value of education.

Against this background, China issued the *Overall Plan*. As the first systematic policy document on the reform of education evaluation since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the significant *Overall Plan* is committed to promoting the construction of an education system serving the lifelong learning of the whole population. In terms of primary and secondary school teacher evaluation, this policy is becoming the top-level design and wind vane of teacher evaluation reform and will have a far-reaching impact on Chinese primary and secondary school teachers.

Main contents and characteristics of the policy

The policy objective proposed in the *Overall Plan* is to establish “an educational evaluation system with contemporary features that highlights Chinese characteristics and reflects the world level that will be formed by 2035.” In terms of teacher evaluation, the *Overall Plan* takes “promoting the implementation of the mission of teaching and educating people” as the theme. With the implementation of the following policies, teachers will move away from impetuosity and utilitarianism and truly return to the classroom, the front line, and education.

First, teachers’ professional ethics are specified in the *Overall Plan* as the most important standard for evaluation, in response to the neglect of teachers’ ethics in the past practice of teacher evaluation, so that teachers’ ethics are the primary standard for qualification and recognition, job performance evaluation, professional titles, and merit awards. The *Overall Plan* also proposes establishing a system of notification and warning for ethical misconduct by teachers and considers the implementation of an industry-wide ban on teachers with serious problems of morality and behavior.

Second, it emphasizes the actual effects of teaching and educating people. In view of the problem in the past of the replacement of substantive evaluation by formal evaluation, the *Overall Plan* highlights the actual effects of education and teaching and specifies performance in which education and teaching responsibilities are taken seriously as the basic requirements for evaluating teachers, guiding teachers to teach every class and care for every student. The *Overall Plan* proposes the establishment of a teaching review system for primary and secondary school teachers, whereby teachers must conduct a review of each student’s studies every semester, which shall be included in the teacher assessment. The *Overall Plan* also proposes guiding teachers to directly participate in students’ work and incorporating home–school communication into teachers’ evaluation indicators. The evaluation of school leaders and managers also considers students’ work experience as an important standard.

Third, it seeks to improve the evaluation mode and method. Given the problem of a single mode and method of evaluation in past practice, the *Overall Plan* proposes to improve the result evaluations, strengthen the process evaluations, explore value-added evaluations, and improve the comprehensive evaluations. Full use of information technology should be made to improve the scientificity, professionalism, and objectivity of educational evaluations. It also proposes implementing classified evaluations according to the characteristics of different subjects, stages, and types of teachers.

Fourth, it promotes restoring talent titles to an academic and honorary nature. In the past, teachers’ talent titles have attracted considerable attention, and even the phenomenon of simply measuring teachers’ achievements and contributions with talent titles has caused many contradictions. In

response, the *Overall Plan* proposes streamlining the titles of various talents and optimizing various talent plans. It is prohibited to take the title of talent as a restrictive condition for undertaking scientific research projects, professional title evaluation and employment, recognition of excellence, and awards, and simply link it with material interests.

As a much-anticipated national policy, the *Overall Plan* has distinctive characteristics and innovations. The first important feature is the high level and authority of the main body issuing the policy. This policy was deliberated and adopted by the Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the highest leading body in China's national reform, and issued in the name of the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council. The high level of decision-making and issuing makes this policy authoritative. The second feature is the outstanding integrity and systematicity of policy design. According to the characteristics of the different stages and types of teachers, the *Overall Plan* implements a classified policy design in which the integrity and systematicity of the reform is manifest. The third feature is that the policy scheme is oriented toward addressing the problems arising in practice while being fully in line with the *Law of Education*. The *Overall Plan* is committed to solving practical problems of general concern to the state, society, and teachers; identifying the root causes of the problems; and proposing targeted solutions in line with the *Law of Education*.

Challenges and prospects of policy implementation

First, teacher evaluation is the basis for the allocation of benefits and resources and is a matter of high concern to all stakeholders, making it difficult to find an authoritative and accurate evaluation method. Currently, teacher evaluation methods are mainly divided into quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative evaluation has the characteristics of standardization and objectivity, but it has been challenged by those who believe that education is an interaction between people and that data on teacher evaluation are a way of "objectifying" people, which is a departure from the value of education. Qualitative evaluation is more comprehensive and subjective, and is based on human subjectivity. However, the evaluation standards used by different subjects are different and more arbitrary. Especially in situations of scarce resource allocation, qualitative evaluation is easily affected by interpersonal relationships, which affect the authority and credibility of the evaluation. Although schools are committed to integrating quantitative and qualitative evaluations in practice, most attempts are mechanical and rigid. However, their contradictions and conflicts have not been effectively resolved.

Second, it is difficult for schools to gain sufficient legitimacy for their governance structures as evaluation subjects, and evaluation by the government or third parties is prone to problems such as

information asymmetry. Schools are an important subject of teacher evaluation; however, many schools have a low degree of institutionalization and weak governance ability, making it difficult for them to exercise their evaluation functions effectively. As an evaluation subject, the government or third-party evaluation organization influences the evaluation effect because of information asymmetry. Third-party evaluation often incurs high costs, and a third-party evaluation system is not yet mature in China, which makes its implementation difficult.

Third, teacher evaluation is deeply rooted in China's teacher staffing system, professional title system, performance-based salary system, and other personnel systems. The relationship between them is complex, making reform difficult. After long-term development and improvement, these systems have formed a self-consistent institutional logic, nested within each other and bound to a specific pattern of interests and power that is difficult to change. Influenced by these factors, teacher evaluation reform faces the resistance of strong inertia and shows a clear path dependence.

China's teacher evaluation reform program faces several challenges. Efforts are required in three directions to successfully achieve the policy objectives.

First, it is necessary to build a consensus of those in authority to overcome obstructions to change. The reform of teacher evaluation involves the vital interests of multiple government departments, schools, teachers, and other subjects, and is path-dependent. The conventional reform method is difficult to achieve and must be promoted through top-down political action. In China, the leadership of the Communist Party has a high degree of authority, which reflects the consensus of the public sector and society as a whole. This authority is already reflected in decisions on teacher evaluation policies, and its implementation still relies on the authority of the Party to generate political momentum and drive reform.

Second, it is necessary to provide school teachers with evaluation autonomy and improve the schools' governance system and governance ability. Schools are not only a realistic field of educational activities but also a key subject of teacher evaluation. The key to the effective implementation of teacher evaluation in schools is to improve the governance system and governance ability on the basis of full authorization. The first measure to this end is to fully delegate key powers to the school, such as teacher employment authority, teacher title evaluation, post-employment authority, and teacher income distribution authority. The second measure is to improve the participation of teachers as evaluation subjects and change the passive attitude whereby teachers always regard themselves as evaluation objects. The third measure is to build a supervision and communication mechanism to guarantee that multiple subjects participate in teacher evaluations.

Third, it is necessary to carry out progressive reform to reduce contradictions in policy implementation. The teacher evaluation system that has accumulated over the past few years has been wrapped in complex interests, forming a relatively solidified pattern of rights. Hasty reforms can easily lead to confusion in the evaluation order. Therefore, in the process of policy implementation,

it is necessary to make use of the “pilot-promotion” reform model formed through China’s long-term exploration and facilitate the diffusion and promotion of new policies after some pilot projects have amassed information on the typical experience and gained wide recognition, so as to reduce the opposition of vested interests that may be encountered in the process of policy implementation.

In examining the most typical teacher evaluation policy in China, this study considered two points: international references and insights. On the one hand, in terms of the content of the policy, it insists on making teacher ethics the first criterion for teacher evaluation, which is a fundamental guarantee for establishing moral education and nurturing talent in the country. On the other hand, in terms of policy implementation, this policy uses national authority to provide institutional and resource guarantees.

Contributorship

Tingzhou Li was responsible for the conception of the whole thesis and the writing of the main part, and he developed the analytical framework of the thesis. Luo Zhang compiled the literature review and policy collection, and summarized the policy features.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Notes

1. According to the relevant data in the *Statistical Bulletin on the Development of National Education* issued by the Ministry of Education in 2020, the calculation caliber includes full-time teachers in compulsory education and ordinary high schools until the end of 2020.
2. Honor evaluation refers to the honor titles given to teachers according to their teaching level or contribution, which is used to motivate teachers to work and form a good social culture that respects teachers and education.

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