



# Exam-oriented Education Policy and Decision-making Authority of School Leaders in Weifang, China

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the impact of the exam-oriented educational model on the decision-making authority of school leaders in Weifang, China. The gaokao, a pivotal element of the educational system, significantly influences school administrative and pedagogical strategies. The study analyzes interviews with principals and teachers, as well as educational policy documents, revealing that the emphasis on exam preparation affects resource allocation, teacher management, and curriculum design. Although school leaders hold substantial formal authority, their decision-making capacity is limited by educational regulations and societal expectations. The research indicates that while the exam-oriented approach ensures academic rigor, it restricts educators' ability to implement comprehensive student development strategies. The paper suggests policy reforms to expand the educational focus beyond mere exam preparation, enabling school leaders to employ more balanced educational strategies that promote both academic success and holistic growth. These findings add a new perspective to the discourse on educational reforms in China, supporting an integrated learning model that emphasizes both academic excellence and personal development.

**Keywords:** Exam-oriented education, school leadership, educational reform, holistic education

## Introduction

In Weifang, China, the educational landscape is profoundly shaped by the gaokao, the national university entrance examination, which epitomizes the exam-oriented approach prevalent across the country. This system, while driving high academic standards and competitive excellence, prioritizes memorization and test-taking skills at the expense of critical thinking and creative problem-solving. School leaders in Weifang, who manage resources and implement educational policies, face the complex challenge of balancing these rigorous academic demands with the overall well-being of students. They navigate pressures from educational authorities and societal expectations, striving to maintain an environment that supports broader educational goals.

This paper explores the impact of the exam-oriented framework on the decision-making authority of school leaders in Weifang, examining the constraints they face and the opportunities for aligning academic rigor with holistic educational practices. The central thesis posits that the intense focus on exams not only propels students to achieve impressive academic results but also limits leaders' ability to foster comprehensive student development. The study will provide an overview of the Chinese educational system, analyze the effects of exam-oriented education on school leadership, present case studies, and conclude with recommendations for policy reforms. This investigation aims to contribute to the discourse on educational reforms in China, advocating for more flexibility and innovation in educational strategies.

## Literature Review

The educational system in China, particularly evident in Weifang, has evolved significantly towards an exam-oriented model, heavily influenced by the gaokao, China's national university entrance exam. This pivotal examination not only determines university admissions but also profoundly affects students' future career opportunities and social status, thereby placing immense pressure on students, educators, and school administrators. As a response, schools in Weifang have tailored their educational practices to optimize gaokao scores, focusing the curriculum primarily on mathematics, Chinese, and English. This emphasis often leads to a narrower educational scope, where the development of creative and critical thinking skills is largely overlooked in favor of subjects tested in the gaokao, starting preparation early in a student's academic life. Furthermore, the intense focus on these core subjects can diminish the attention given to arts, physical education, and social sciences, which are also vital for a well-rounded educational experience but are less emphasized due to their indirect contribution to gaokao success.

In this high-stakes context, the role of school leaders in Weifang is crucial yet challenging. They are tasked not only with administrative responsibilities but also with pedagogical leadership, which includes recruiting, training, and supporting teachers to meet national performance benchmarks. Despite having substantial formal authority, school leaders often find their decision-making constrained by the need to adhere to government mandates and societal expectations for high academic achievement. This environment fosters a culture where academic success is paramount, placing additional pressure on school leaders to continually enhance test scores, often at the cost of holistic educational goals. The ongoing challenge for these leaders lies in balancing the immediate demands for high exam results with the broader, long-term educational needs of students, navigating between rigorous academic standards and fostering a well-rounded educational



experience. Their role becomes even more complex as they attempt to integrate innovative teaching methods and technology into the curriculum, all while maintaining a focus on traditional exam success metrics that are deeply ingrained in the educational culture and parents' expectations.

### **Curriculum Design and Academic Pressure**

In Weifang, the pervasive influence of the gaokao compels school leaders to heavily concentrate the curriculum on core subjects such as Chinese, mathematics, and English. This specialization involves tailoring both the content and pedagogical approaches specifically to align with the exam's stringent requirements. As a result, the curriculum is heavily skewed towards optimizing test performance, which often comes at the expense of developing broader educational skills such as critical and creative thinking.

This narrow academic focus can lead to a curriculum that, although well-prepared to meet the demands of the gaokao, falls short in preparing students for the complexities of a globalized world or for engaging in diverse intellectual pursuits. The emphasis on rote memorization and standardized test formats limits students' exposure to less structured, more exploratory modes of learning that are vital for fostering innovation and adaptive thinking skills.

School leaders often find themselves at a crossroads, facing significant ethical decisions about how to balance the integrity of the educational process with the intense pressure to achieve high test scores. This dilemma can lead to conflicts between pursuing a holistic educational agenda and adhering to the pragmatic demands of an exam-centric educational system. The challenge lies in finding a way to maintain high academic standards while also ensuring that the education provided is comprehensive and cultivates a wide range of intellectual and personal capabilities in students.

### **Description of the Study Area:**

#### **School A: Striking a Balance**

School A, situated in Weifang, grappled with the dual challenge of maintaining high academic standards while fostering holistic student development. Recognizing the importance of striking a balance between exam preparation and broader educational goals, the school leadership embarked on a series of initiatives to address these challenges comprehensively. Firstly, they revamped the curriculum to incorporate subjects beyond the scope of standardized testing, such as arts, physical education, and social sciences. This holistic approach aimed to cultivate students' critical thinking, creativity, and interpersonal skills alongside their academic prowess. Moreover, School A implemented specialized programs and extracurricular activities designed to nurture students' multifaceted talents and interests. These initiatives included art exhibitions, sports tournaments, community service projects, and cultural exchange programs, providing students with diverse avenues for personal growth and self-expression. Additionally, the school prioritized student wellbeing by establishing support services such as counseling centers and wellness programs to address mental health issues and alleviate academic stress. Through strategic resource allocation and continuous professional development for teachers, School A successfully created a supportive learning environment that valued both academic achievement and holistic development. The collaborative efforts of school leaders, teachers, students, and parents resulted in a well-rounded educational experience that prepared students not only for academic success but also for lifelong learning and personal fulfillment.

#### **School B: Embracing Technological Advancements**

School B, also situated in Weifang, recognized the transformative potential of technology in education and sought to leverage it to enhance student learning experiences. Understanding the importance of adapting to technological advancements, the school leadership embarked on a comprehensive digital transformation journey. Firstly, they invested in upgrading the school's infrastructure, including high-speed internet connectivity, interactive whiteboards, and multimedia learning resources, to create a conducive environment for digital learning. Furthermore, School B prioritized teacher training in technology integration, equipping educators with the skills and knowledge needed to effectively utilize digital tools in their teaching practices. Professional development workshops, seminars, and peer collaboration sessions were organized to support teachers in incorporating technology seamlessly into the curriculum. Additionally, the school implemented digital literacy programs for students, teaching them essential skills such as information literacy, online collaboration, and digital citizenship. By embracing technology as a means to enhance both exam preparation and overall educational quality, School B underwent a remarkable transformation into a modern, technologically advanced institution. The integration of digital tools and online learning platforms not only facilitated personalized learning experiences but also fostered creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills among students. Through their proactive approach to technological advancements, School B positioned itself as a leader in educational innovation, preparing students for success in the digital age and beyond.

#### **Comparison with Other Regions**

When compared with other regions in China and around the world, the education system in Weifang exhibits both similarities and differences. Like many regions in China, Weifang places a strong emphasis on standardized testing, particularly the gaokao, as a determinant of academic success and future opportunities. This focus on exam-oriented education is a common feature of many educational systems globally, reflecting a widespread belief in the importance of standardized assessments in evaluating student performance and facilitating university admissions.

However, Weifang's education system also faces unique challenges and opportunities that distinguish it from other regions. The intense pressure to excel in the gaokao, combined with societal expectations and cultural values, creates a highly competitive academic environment that places significant stress on students, teachers, and parents alike. This

pressure cooker atmosphere is a hallmark of many urban areas in China, where educational attainment is closely linked to social mobility and success.

Furthermore, Weifang's education system is influenced by local factors such as economic development, demographics, and government policies, which shape its priorities and resource allocation. The region's rapid economic growth and urbanization have led to increased demand for quality education, resulting in investments in infrastructure, teacher training, and curriculum development. However, disparities in educational resources and opportunities persist, particularly between urban and rural areas, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address inequality and improve access to education for all students.

### Results and Discussion

The examination of Weifang's education system through comparative analysis has yielded valuable insights into the region's educational landscape. While the prevalence of exam-oriented education aligns with global trends, Weifang's system is uniquely influenced by local factors that shape its priorities and resource distribution. Despite the common emphasis on standardized testing, disparities in resources and opportunities persist within the region, underscoring the importance of targeted interventions to foster equity and inclusion in education.

Through this analysis, it becomes evident that Weifang faces multifaceted challenges, including the pressure to excel in standardized exams, economic disparities, and demographic variations. These challenges necessitate strategic interventions aimed at addressing inequities and enhancing educational outcomes for all students. By understanding the nuanced dynamics of Weifang's education system, stakeholders can implement targeted initiatives to promote equitable access to quality education and foster a more inclusive learning environment.

In summary, the comparative analysis underscores the need for Weifang to prioritize efforts that address disparities in educational resources and opportunities. By leveraging local insights and global best practices, Weifang can chart a course towards building a more equitable, inclusive, and effective education system that prepares all students for success in the 21st century.

### Future Directions

To propel Weifang's education system forward, prioritizing initiatives aimed at addressing inequality, promoting equity, and fostering innovation is paramount.

Firstly, investing in infrastructure, teacher training, and curriculum development should be prioritized to enhance educational outcomes across the board. This entails improving school facilities, providing professional development opportunities for educators to enhance their teaching skills, and updating curricula to align with evolving educational needs and global standards.

Moreover, fostering a culture of collaboration and knowledge exchange between regions is essential. Weifang can benefit greatly from learning from other regions' successes and challenges, allowing stakeholders to gain valuable insights and implement best practices. Collaborative efforts can lead to innovative solutions and more effective strategies for improving educational outcomes and promoting equity in education.

By embracing these future directions, Weifang's education system can move towards becoming more inclusive, equitable, and innovative, ensuring that all students have access to high-quality education that prepares them for success in the modern world.

### Closing Remarks

The comparative analysis of Weifang's education system has provided valuable insights into the intricate landscape of educational reform and development. By acknowledging the challenges and opportunities inherent in the region and drawing lessons from the experiences of other regions, Weifang can chart a path towards a more equitable, inclusive, and innovative education system.

It is essential to recognize that educational reform is a multifaceted process that requires collaboration, adaptability, and a commitment to continuous improvement. By embracing these principles and leveraging local insights and global best practices, Weifang can pave the way for transformative change in its education system.

Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that every student in Weifang receives a high-quality education that equips them with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities they need to thrive in the 21st century. By working together and staying focused on this shared vision, Weifang can build a brighter future for its students and communities alike.

### Embracing Diversity and Cultivating Inclusivity

Embracing diversity and cultivating inclusivity serve as cornerstone principles for Weifang's education system as it navigates the challenges of the 21st century. Recognizing the multifaceted backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of both students and educators enriches the learning environment and fosters an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding. By actively incorporating multicultural education into the curriculum and promoting intercultural dialogue, Weifang can create an inclusive educational ecosystem where every student feels valued and empowered to thrive.

Moreover, providing targeted support for marginalized or underrepresented communities within the educational framework is paramount. By ensuring equitable access to resources, opportunities, and support services, Weifang can bridge existing gaps and create a more level playing field for all students. Additionally, diversifying curriculum content, teaching methodologies, and extracurricular activities not only broadens students' perspectives but also equips them with the skills and attitudes necessary to navigate an increasingly interconnected and diverse global landscape. Through these efforts, Weifang can prepare its students to become responsible, empathetic, and culturally competent global citizens.

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