

Dilemmas and Resolution Paths of Group-Based Schooling in Basic Education - An Investigation Based on Practical Experience in Hainan Province

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Abstract: Group-based school running in basic education is an important strategy for promoting the high-quality and balanced development of education and advancing the construction of an educationally powerful country. Taking Hainan Province as an example, this paper systematically analyzes the practical dilemmas encountered in the practice of group-based school running, including imbalanced powers and responsibilities in resource coordination, lack of collaborative mechanisms coupled with insufficient endogenous motivation, and the dual absence of evaluation and incentive mechanisms. In response to these dilemmas, the paper proposes countermeasures such as strengthening resource coordination to achieve precise matching of powers and responsibilities, enhancing cultural synergy to stimulate endogenous motivation, and establishing scientific evaluation and incentive mechanisms. This study aims to provide theoretical references and practical insights for deepening the reform of group-based school running and promoting its transformation from "emphasizing establishment" to connotative development focusing on "practical effectiveness". It is expected that by building a collaborative and innovative "education community", the fundamental goal of empowering every school, every teacher, and every student will ultimately be achieved.

Keywords: Group-Based Schooling; Educational Equity; Resolution Strategies

As an innovative model for optimizing the allocation of educational resources and narrowing inter-school gaps, group-based school running has been widely practiced across China. By leveraging core schools to drive member schools, it facilitates the sharing of advanced educational concepts, management experience,

teaching staff, and other resources, thereby injecting new impetus into promoting the high-quality and balanced development of regional education. However, against the backdrop of the era theme of high-quality development, the exploration of group-based school running is constantly evolving. While demonstrating the development trends of the coexistence of "diverse forms" and integrated co-governance, it also faces a series of in-depth challenges. How to break through practical difficulties and achieve sound development from scale expansion to connotative improvement has become an urgent issue to be addressed. Taking Hainan Province as a case study, this paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the practical dilemmas in group-based school running of basic education and puts forward systematic countermeasures accordingly, aiming to contribute insights to the healthy and sustainable development of group-based school running nationwide.

1. Evolution of Group-Based School Running in Basic Education and Practices in Hainan

Since the 1990s, some cities in China have begun to explore the model of group-based school running. Vocational education groups, private education groups, and public school education groups have emerged successively. The group-based operation of public schools has provided important references for educational reform. Under the guidance and support of the Zhejiang Provincial Government, Hangzhou established China's first public compulsory education group, the Hangzhou Qiushi Education Group, in 2002, after which the group-based development strategy was fully rolled out across the city. Shanghai launched the "entrusted management" model for public schools in 2005, opening up a new path for mobilizing social resources to support the accelerated development of underperforming schools. As one of the earliest cities in China to

explore and implement group-based school running, Beijing is renowned for its models such as elite schools establishing branch campuses, urban-rural integration, and educational alliances, which have achieved remarkable results. Following the promotion of group-based school running in Hangzhou, Shanghai, Beijing, and other regions, other parts of the country have successively followed suit.

In 2012, the State Council issued the Opinions on Further Promoting the Balanced Development of Compulsory Education, proposing to "explore group-based school running and implement school district-based management", marking that group-based school running was officially incorporated into the national policy framework. In 2017, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Educational System and Mechanism, advocating "improving management models, piloting school district-based management, exploring group-based school running, and adopting flexible and diverse school-running forms such as entrusted management, strong schools assisting weak ones, school alliances, and nine-year consistent education". In 2023, the Ministry of Education and two other departments jointly issued the Opinions on Implementing the Action Plan for Expanding High-Quality Resources and Improving Quality in Basic Education for the New Era, emphasizing the role of group-based school running in promoting educational equity and requiring "driving high-quality schools to tap potential and expand capacity". Since then, group-based school running has been fully promoted nationwide.

Since Hainan Province fully advanced group-based school running in basic education in 2022, it has built an extensive collaborative development network based on the "1+N" model, covering more than half of public schools, with the coverage rate of group-based school running for underperforming schools reaching 100%. Remarkable achievements have been made, yet common problems and challenges remain. Up to now, the province has established 189 educational groups, forming various school-running models such as intensive, loose, and composite types. Practices in many regions have proven that group-based school running

maximizes the sharing and exchange of high-quality educational resources, optimizes the allocation of teaching staff, courses, and management, improves the school-running standards of member schools (especially underperforming ones), narrows inter-school gaps, promotes the balanced development of regional education, and enhances the overall educational quality.

The group-based school-running models in Hainan can be categorized into intensive, loose, and composite types. Cities and counties such as Sanya and Wanning mainly adopt the intensive model. Sanya No. 9 Primary School has established a unified mechanism for "curriculum, teaching staff, and resource allocation", leading to a significant improvement in academic performance in some campuses. Notably, Sanya achieved a coverage rate of over 80% for educational group-based school running in less than three years. Haikou has a typical composite group-based school-running model: it not only dispatches backbone teachers to teach in member schools to drive their transformation into regional leading schools but also establishes a unified management model within the group, enabling the in-depth sharing of teaching concepts, faculty, teaching resources, and research and training activities. In addition, it is common in relatively underdeveloped cities and counties to adopt different group-based school-running structures based on local realities to maximize the effectiveness of group-based school running. For example, Baoting Li and Miao Autonomous County has promoted the rapid rise in the ranking of Maogan Central Primary School through joint examinations and evaluations; Qionghai No. 1 Primary School has adopted a management model of "one leadership team overseeing three campuses" to balance the teaching staff, both of which are typical cases. However, with the in-depth advancement of group-based school running, numerous practical dilemmas have emerged in aspects such as development models, management systems, resource sharing, quality evaluation, and cultural identity. These dilemmas not only restrict the further development of group-based school running but also affect its expected effects in promoting educational equity and improving educational quality.

2. Practical Predicaments of Group-Based

School Running: An In-Depth Analysis Based on Hainan

Despite the remarkable achievements, the deepening of group-based school running in Hainan Province and even across China still faces many challenges, mainly reflected in the following three aspects.

2.1 Imbalanced Powers and Responsibilities in Resource Coordination

Group-based school running involves multiple stakeholders, and unclear powers and responsibilities in resource coordination have become the primary obstacle.

First, the boundary of powers and responsibilities between administrative departments and group schools is ambiguous, often resulting in the phenomenon that "matters that should be managed are not well managed, and those that should be delegated are not fully delegated". Local administrative departments have an inadequate understanding of group-based school running. Tight financial conditions in some counties lead to the failure to implement special funds, resulting in unfulfilled curriculum development plans in group schools, suspension of teacher external training programs by some member schools due to financial pressure, and long-term personal advance of travel expenses by teachers participating in inter-school exchanges. The lack of stable special operating funds and difficulties in reimbursing basic expenses such as transportation and materials have restricted the in-depth development of group-based school running activities.

Second, the absence of management mechanisms leads to insufficient guarantees. Corresponding management mechanisms have not been revised and issued in a timely manner. Due to weak financial capacity in some counties, it is difficult to implement special funds. The funding support model has obvious deficiencies in sustainability, flexibility, and accuracy, making it difficult to fully meet the actual needs of group-based operations, resulting in the phenomenon that funds allocated to group schools cannot be effectively used.

Third, core schools face the risk of "hollowing out". In the process of "strong schools assisting weak ones", core schools need to output a large number of backbone teachers and management personnel, leading to an institutional contradiction of "inverted powers and

responsibilities" when core schools assume the main responsibility of resource output. Core schools lack sufficient support and guarantees: the dispatch of a large number of backbone teachers and middle-level management personnel has diluted their core teaching and management capabilities. Due to the lack of effective compensation and feedback measures for core schools, a sound cycle of "strong schools assisting weak ones and mutual enhancement" has not been formed. Instead, the long-term competitiveness of the entire group may be weakened due to excessive resource extraction.

2.2 Lack of Collaborative Mechanisms and Insufficient Endogenous Motivation

The success of group-based school running is inseparable from in-depth collaboration and internal drive among member schools, but reality often runs counter to this.

First, there is a lack of internal collaborative mechanisms. Many groups "emphasize branding over integration" and lack regular communication and mutual promotion mechanisms. Group-based school running faces many difficulties in the promotion process, making it challenging to achieve policy goals. As a result, the gaps between member schools have not been effectively narrowed, the effectiveness of group-based school running is unsatisfactory, and the goals of educational equity and balanced development are difficult to achieve. For example, due to remote locations and limited resources, teacher exchange activities between core schools and member schools in Wuzhishan City are relatively limited, and there is a lack of regular teacher exchange mechanisms. This restricts the exchange and collision of educational concepts, is not conducive to the sharing of teaching methods and experience, and at the same time, member schools and core schools act independently in teaching and research activities, lacking unified planning and organization, leading to repetitive and inefficient teaching and research activities that are difficult to form a synergistic effect.

Second, resource allocation is still unbalanced. The ideal resource sharing may evolve into a new "center-periphery" structure in practice, with high-quality resources (such as renowned teachers and advanced equipment) still tilting towards core schools. For example, in some educational groups, resource allocation still

favors urban core schools (central schools), while relatively remote underperforming schools still lack sufficient educational resources and investment.

Third, the foundation for sustainable development is unstable. Some member schools have a dependent mentality of "waiting, relying on, and asking for help", lacking the initiative and creativity for self-renewal. For example, the high-level entrusted management assistance project of Shanghai Jiao Tong University to Ding'an Middle School has been completed, and there is uncertainty about subsequent cooperation, highlighting the unsustainability and potential risks of introducing external high-quality resources. The two parties in the assistance lack a common cultural identity, resulting in weak collaborative cohesion. To a certain extent, some groups "emphasize establishment over substantive integration", failing to effectively stimulate the endogenous motivation for collaborative innovation and self-improvement among member schools.

2.3 Dual Absence of Evaluation and Incentive Mechanisms

Scientific and effective evaluation and incentive mechanisms are the driving force for the sustainable and healthy operation of group-based school running, but there are obvious shortcomings in this regard at present. First, the assessment mechanism lacks a unified benchmark. In the absence of authoritative assessment guidelines, various regions act independently. There is a lack of scientific quantitative indicators for evaluating the overall effectiveness of the group, the radiating capacity of core schools, and the progress of member schools, resulting in an unclear development orientation. For example, Ding'an County's "dual assessment" system has burdened primary-level schools with coping with different standards; Chengmai County lacks scientific quantitative indicators to assess the operational quality of groups, the radiating effect of core schools, the progress of member schools, and the efficiency of resource integration. The absence of unified provincial assessment guidelines has left local governments in a wait-and-see state. Although Chengmai County and Wuzhishan City have drafted the Interim Measures for the Assessment and Evaluation of Group-Based School Running in Chengmai County and the Assessment Indicators for

Group-Based School Running respectively, the implementation progress has been slow.

Second, teacher incentive policies are inadequate. The additional efforts (such as transportation, time, and energy) made by teachers participating in inter-school exchanges lack reasonable labor compensation and honor recognition, leading to low willingness of teachers to participate in mobility programs, making teacher rotation a mere formality. Insufficient incentives have become a key factor restricting the orderly flow of teachers and the in-depth integration of groups. Teachers transferred to member schools have not received special subsidies for transportation, accommodation, or labor.

Third, there is an absence of a performance evaluation and honor system for teacher exchanges. There is an imbalance between the workload and remuneration of mobile teachers, and outstanding performers are not adequately rewarded, making rotation a mere formality. Although preferential policies such as "eligibility for first-level professional titles after 25 consecutive years of service in remote areas" have stabilized the teaching staff, they have weakened teachers' sense of urgency for professional improvement and job mobility. These issues urgently need to be addressed by refining assessment indicators, accurately quantifying standards, scientifically allocating weights, and optimizing feedback mechanisms and incentive policies to enhance the effectiveness of group-based school running.

3. Moving Towards "Connotative Development": Countermeasures and Strategies for Group-Based School Running

To address the above dilemmas, the future development of group-based school running must shift from extensional expansion to connotative construction, with its core mission focusing on "building an innovation community and empowering every individual".

3.1 Strengthen Resource Coordination and Achieve Precise Matching of Powers and Responsibilities

To promote the high-quality and balanced development of basic education, it is necessary to establish a fair and reasonable resource allocation mechanism to ensure that underperforming schools can share high-quality educational resources.

First, clarify powers and responsibilities and optimize resource supply. Educational administrative departments should take the lead in defining the list of powers and responsibilities of all stakeholders. Special funds for group-based school running should be established, along with a flexible allocation and utilization mechanism. For financially constrained regions, provincial finance should provide special transfer payment support.

Second, improve management and strengthen the construction of core schools. Establish a compensation mechanism for core schools' resource output, and provide feedback in terms of funds, staffing quotas, and selection for excellence based on the number and duration of dispatched backbone teachers. Meanwhile, strengthen the quality monitoring of core schools to prevent their weakening due to excessive output and ensure that "strong schools become stronger".

Third, provide targeted support and focus on weak links. Implement an "attack plan" for underdeveloped cities, counties, and schools. Concentrate efforts on improving the quality of key school stages and weak subjects through measures such as on-site guidance from provincial-level master teacher studios and the establishment of subject-specific task forces to achieve targeted assistance.

3.2 Enhance Cultural Synergy to Stimulate Endogenous Motivation

To promote the transformation of group-based school running towards connotative improvement, emphasis should be placed on connotative construction and cultural integration.

First, strengthen cultural integration and build a sense of community identity. Promote joint cultural construction within the group, cultivate shared values and organizational culture, and enhance a sense of belonging and cohesion.

Second, strengthen resource sharing and build a digital platform. Establish a platform for sharing high-quality curriculum resources within the group. Make full use of information technology to deepen remote interactive classrooms and online collaborative teaching research, breaking the limitations of physical space.

Third, strengthen the main body and encourage characteristic development. Change the tendency of "one-size-fits-all schools", stimulate the internal creativity of member schools,

transform from "passive acceptance" to "active growth", and form a pattern where "each group has its own characteristics and each school has its own brand".

3.3 Establish Scientific Evaluation and Incentive Mechanisms

Formulating and improving scientific evaluation and incentive mechanisms is crucial for both core schools and member schools of the group, as it can give play to the role of problem orientation, goal orientation, and efficiency orientation.

First, further unify standards and implement bundled evaluation. Establish an overall bundled evaluation system centered on "the leading capacity of core schools, the progress of member schools, the effectiveness of resource sharing, and the satisfaction of teachers and students", guiding the development of groups from "emphasizing establishment" to "emphasizing effectiveness".

Second, further conduct dynamic monitoring and strengthen the application of evaluation results. Explore a dynamic monitoring mechanism, and closely link evaluation results with fund allocation, school selection for excellence, and cadre assessment, forming an incentive and constraint mechanism oriented towards practical results.

Third, further encourage teachers and ensure the orderly flow of faculty. Introduce supporting policies, establish a special performance reward system, and pilot a "staffing pool" system to provide staffing guarantees for inter-school teacher mobility, ensuring that teachers can "move freely, stay committed, and teach effectively".

4. Conclusion

Group-based school running in basic education is an inevitable path towards high-quality, balanced, and equitable education, but its deepening is destined to be accompanied by both challenges and opportunities. To address current dilemmas, it is necessary for the government, schools, and society to form a joint force. Through institutional innovation, cultural synergy, and scientific incentives, group-based school running can be promoted from formal "grouping" to substantive "integration", truly building a collaborative and innovative "education community".

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