



Policy Analysis of China's Principal Rank System for Primary and Secondary Schools : Policies, Challenges, and Future Directions

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Abstract: The Principal Rank System for primary and secondary schools has undergone a nearly 30-year pilot phase, representing a significant reform in the realm of education management in China. However, challenges persist in advancing this reform, and the overall progress has been sluggish. This paper conducts a literature-based examination of the policy background and the implementation of the Principal Rank System. During the promotion of this reform, the implementation of the Principal Rank System encounters multiple challenges, including passive responses from certain principals, inquiries into the determination of principal professional ranks, and the varied impacts of the salary incentive mechanism. This paper analyzes these issues and proposes solutions to address them. It is imperative to establish a unified and stringent principal admission system, develop a comprehensive principal evaluation framework, modernize the principal training mechanism, set forth a rational principal ranking system, enhance the principal duty station exchange system, address income disparities among regions, and augment feedback mechanisms following expert reviews to foster holistic educational development.

Keywords: the Principal Rank System; principals of primary and secondary schools; policy analysis

Introduction

In the 1990s, nearly 30 years ago, China initiated a pilot program for the Principal Rank System in primary and secondary schools. The Principal Rank System was designed to promote the professional development of school principals and enhance the overall quality of school management. This initiative involved the establishment of a hierarchical structure for principals, which was based on the requirements of their roles. It also included the development of a comprehensive system for evaluating and assessing principals, as well as determining promotions, rewards, penalties, and compensation. The underlying purpose of this system design is threefold: first, it aims to shift the identity of principals from a "political identity" to a "professional identity" in terms of personal development; second, it seeks to transition from a "power-oriented" to a "competency-oriented" approach in the appointment of principal positions; and third, it intends to evolve from a singular, broadly administrative management style to a standardized and equitable policy environment, thereby achieving centralized management^[1].

This paper delves into the policy background and principal practical measures of the Principal Rank System. It conducts an analysis of the challenges encountered during the implementation phase and proposes solutions to these issues. The insights from this study can serve as both an academic and practical reference for China's education system. The suggestions presented within may contribute to steering the Principal Rank System towards a more favorable developmental direction.

2 Research basis

2.1 The proposal of the Principal Rank System policy

In August 1998, the Ministry of Education of China proposed a gradual implementation of the Principal Rank System and emphasized the need to bolster the overall construction of the principal team^[2]. Following this, the State Council of China introduced policies to transition from a "gradual implementation" approach to full-fledged "implementation"^[3,4]. In November 2013, a formal proposal emerged, aiming to streamline the relationship between public institutions and competent departments, leading to the rationalization and gradual elimination of administrative levels within schools and other units^[5]. A pivotal aspect of the Principal Rank System reform was the question of whether to abolish the administrative level within schools, which garnered significant attention in Chinese society. Then, in 2015, another crucial policy initiative was put forth, calling for a comprehensive reform of the rank system for primary and secondary school principals, with the aim of achieving specialization and professionalization among school leaders^[6,7]. These

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policy developments have provided a well-defined direction and roadmap for the advancement of the Principal Rank System.

The implementation of the Principal Rank System has been driven by national policies, with Shanghai leading the way in executing this reform. Other provinces and cities, including Shandong, Beijing, Guangdong, Jilin, Gansu, Anhui, Jiangsu, Shaanxi, Zhejiang, and more, have actively engaged in exploring and practicing this reform initiative^[8]. While Shanghai initiated the reform as early as 1994, it wasn't until 2013 that the Principal Rank System was gradually introduced in six stages^[9]. In 2010, specific pilot areas for the Principal Rank System in primary and secondary schools were identified, including Songyuan City in Jilin Province, Weifang City in Shandong Province, Zhongshan City in Guangdong Province, and Baoji City in Shaanxi Province^[10]. Although some progress has been made, challenges have also emerged along the way^[11]. Remarkably, after a quarter-century of trial implementation, Beijing comprehensively implemented the Principal Rank System in primary and secondary schools and kindergartens citywide in 2019^[12]. Despite nearly 30 years of development, the overall reform of the Principal Rank System has proceeded at a measured pace^[13].

The Principal Rank System's implementation holds several advantages. It enables school principals to establish a clear direction for their schools, delineates their responsibilities, facilitates the exploration of effective school governance practices, and promotes overall scientific management. Moreover, it fosters the development of a novel government-school relationship, resulting in a management framework that amalgamates macro-management regulations from education administrative departments with the autonomy of principals. This, in turn, raises the overall level of educational governance and enables a multi-pronged approach to education management. Additionally, it contributes to bridging the gap between urban and rural education, ultimately promoting educational equity^[14].

3 Research objectives and methods

3.1 Research objectives

The Principal Rank System for primary and secondary schools in China has undergone over 20 years of piloting and implementation in numerous provinces, yielding several practical outcomes. Research indicates a positive correlation between the quality of education and economic and social development^[15]. Nonetheless, improving education quality and enhancing policy implementation remain pressing challenges for the Chinese government. The widespread implementation of the Principal Rank System across provinces has brought certain policy-related issues to light. This paper delves into the policy background and primary implementation approaches of the Principal Rank System, with the aim of examining and analyzing the system's challenges. It seeks to propose viable solutions that can steer the Principal Rank System for primary and secondary schools towards a more favorable trajectory and facilitate nationwide adoption in the near future.

3.2 Research Methods

To conduct this study, the primary methodologies employed involve literature research and data analysis. The research process includes a comprehensive review of pertinent literature on the Principal Rank System, with a particular focus on scholarly contributions. Additionally, data collection and statistical analysis are integral components of this research. Through rigorous data analysis, the study aims to systematically investigate and analyze the challenges associated with the Principal Rank System, ultimately proposing effective countermeasures and solutions.

4 Results and discussions

4.1 The main measures of the Principal Rank System

Summarize the literature of scholars on the Principal Rank System. The main measures are as follows : First, de-administration of primary and secondary schools and school cadres, in accordance with the principle of 'who organizes, who manages ', centralized management of education administrative departments, and follow the route of expert management^[15]. Secondly, the rank sequence is divided into four levels of nine or four levels of ten, which correspond to the post structure of primary and secondary school teachers, including special-level principals, first-level principals, second-level principals and third-level principals. Among them, the first / second / third-level principal positions are constructed in a ratio of 3 / 5 / 2. At the same time, the principles of municipal coordination, grading evaluation and dynamic management are adopted to establish the qualification evaluation system for primary and secondary school principals^[16,17]. Thirdly, we should improve the relevant supporting system to ensure that the reform takes root. According to the actual situation in various places, there are subtle differences in their specific practices on this basis, but their general principles and purposes are to de-administration, emphasizing the return of education management to the essence, advocating educators to run schools, and promoting the professional development of principals^[18].

4.2 The main problems and analysis of the Principal Rank System

The implementation of the Principal Rank System has encountered several practical problems across different regions. These issues have been identified through extensive data analysis.

4.2.1 The implementation progress of the Principal Rank System is not uniform

The lack of recognition for the rank system reform among some school principals is a significant issue [19,20]. This lack of recognition can be attributed to the fact that the reform challenges established interests and practices. Consequently, the implementation of the Principal Rank System varies significantly across different regions, often guided by the preferences of various stakeholders. Some regions choose to adhere to traditional approaches favored by experienced individuals, while others embrace innovative methods favored by newcomers. Additionally, there are regions that adopt a middle-ground approach, blending old and new methodologies [20].

This divergent implementation process results in clear differences in the rankings assigned to principals in different regions. Moreover, it leads to varying attitudes among teachers within the same school toward their principal. These discrepancies create unnecessary hurdles in the governance process of school principals. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in underdeveloped areas, where it exerts a more pronounced impact on the overall educational development of schools and regions.

4.2.2 The identification of the principal 's rank are doubts

Identifying the rank sequence of principals has proven to be a challenging task [18,21]. The principal evaluation system lacks standardization, resulting in overall inefficiency [22,23]. The qualification, evaluation, and credibility of authority within the principal rank system have encountered substantial resistance.

In most regions, assessing the competency of principals during the implementation process remains difficult. The criteria for new principals to enter the principal talent pool are conditional and based on qualifications, rather than the previous approach of first selecting and then providing training. New principals often exhibit confidence in their qualifications and abilities. However, third-party organizations' evaluation panels tend to form preconceived judgments based on the development level of the school led by the principal. This can lead to unfair evaluations, as some promising new principals may have recently taken charge of underdeveloped schools and haven't had the opportunity to demonstrate their leadership. Conversely, principals in more developed areas may benefit from historical school achievements, which might not necessarily reflect their individual strengths. Evaluation experts often overlook such nuances.

The "Professional Standards for Primary and Secondary School Principals," as published on the official website of the Ministry of Education of China, outline six professional standards for primary and secondary school principals: school development planning, fostering an educational culture, leadership in curriculum teaching, fostering teacher growth, optimizing internal management, and shaping the external environment. The specific assessment plan and the weight assigned to each criterion can vary depending on the city's circumstances. While these standards appear quantified, their implementation process often involves a significant degree of subjectivity. Therefore, it is crucial to scrutinize the qualifications of the evaluators. Evaluators should possess knowledge and competence in specific fields, extensive management experience, and broad perspectives. The perceived subjective evaluations by these experts have been a point of contention for many principals in the Principal Rank System's implementation [24]. Principals often feel that evaluation experts rely solely on reports, without conducting on-site investigations or gaining an in-depth understanding of local school development. This leads to uniform judgments based on standardized criteria, which principals consider unfair.

Principals endeavor to demonstrate their management and leadership abilities by presenting vivid cases and outlining their schools' actual developmental situations. However, their efforts result in a grade assessment only, with evaluation experts, possessing years of educational management experience, relying solely on the principal's reported progress. This significant information gap hinders principals' understanding of the reasons behind their assigned ratings and the areas they need to improve to advance. Principals require feedback on the rating results and specific areas for improvement rather than generalized training programs for all principals.

4.2.3 Wage incentive mechanism will produce positive and negative two-way multiple effects.

In the literature of many case interviews, the principal is very concerned about his salary, and the salary incentive mechanism will have a positive and negative two-way impact [23,25]. Taking the data of Gaomi City in Shandong Province in 2014 as an example, the principal 's rank salary under the principal rank system consists of four parts : basic salary, post salary, allowance and grade salary. Among them, the basic salary is the file salary issued according to the provisions of the state, province and city. The post salary reflects the difficulty of work. The post salary of high school principals : director of township education management office : junior high school principals : primary school

principals : kindergarten principals is calculated at 100 : 88 : 80 : 75 : 64, and the highest salary of high school principals is 500 yuan. The allowance is divided into two parts : the length of the principal 's service and the scale of the school. In the length of service allowance, there is no such allowance for less than 5 years, 30 yuan per month for 5-10 years, and 60 yuan per month for more than 10 years ; the number of school size allowances is divided into 100 yuan per month and 150 yuan per month. Rank salary is the main part of rank salary, which reflects the performance and effectiveness of the principal 's work. The specific grade standards are as shown in table 1 ^[26] .

Table 1: Rank-based Salary Distribution Method for Gaomi City Under the Principal Rank System of Principals in 2014

Rank	Senior Level			Intermediate Level			Junior Level	
	First Grade	Second Grade	Third Grade	First Grade	Second Grade	Third Grade	First Grade	Second Grade
Kindergarten	990	920	850	780	710	640	570	500
Primary School	1100	940	870	800	730	660	590	520
Junior High School	1120	960	890	820	750	680	610	540
Educational Management Office	1140	980	910	840	770	700	630	560
Senior High School	1160	1000	930	860	790	720	650	580

From the analysis above, it is evident that the rank level directly impacts the salary of principals. For high school principals, the disparities between different ranks result in more than a 1-time difference in their salaries. This grade salary component can, to some extent, incentivize principals, motivating them to enhance their school management capabilities. However, it can also lead to two distinct psychological responses among principals. Firstly, principals may be more inclined to move to schools in relatively developed areas because there is insufficient coordination between schools in different regions by the government. While there are subsidies available in less developed areas, this vertical mobility incentive may still be weaker compared to other considerations. Secondly, principals may prefer schools where they can swiftly advance their ranks, resulting in increased salaries upon direct promotion. Additionally, higher ranks make it easier to transfer to school positions in relatively developed areas.

5 Conclusions and suggestions

The development of the Principal Rank System of primary and secondary school principals is expanding the scope of the pilot. At present, it is urgent to deal with the problems existing in the current policy, and some scholars have reached a consensus. Under the current system, the implementation of the principal rank system needs to make up for the shortcomings, establish a unified and strict principal access system, establish a comprehensive principal evaluation system, update the principal 's training and training mechanism, determine a reasonable principal rank sequence, and improve the principal 's tenure. The workplace exchange system regulates income differences between different regions.

In future policy formulations for the Principal Rank System, it is advisable to incorporate feedback mechanisms following expert reviews. This will enable principals to identify their areas of improvement, fostering targeted development and advancing overall educational progress.

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