



# Differences in the Implementation of Campus Football Policy in Grassroots Schools in Tianshui, Gansu

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the implementation of China's national campus football policy in grassroots schools within Tianshui, Gansu Province, a region characterized by developmental disparities. Through a combination of interviews and case studies, the findings reveal significant urban-rural differences in policy execution. Key disparities are identified in infrastructure, coaching resources, curriculum integration, and management commitment. Urban schools generally benefit from better facilities, more specialized coaching, and systematic training structures, aligning more closely with national policy objectives. In contrast, rural schools face substantial challenges, including inadequate pitches, a shortage of qualified football teachers, and ad-hoc curriculum implementation, often limited to basic physical education. The analysis identifies that these differences stem primarily from uneven regional funding, a limited supply of qualified coaching talent, varying levels of administrative motivation, and differing socio-cultural attitudes towards sports among parents. The study concludes that without targeted interventions addressing these specific resource and motivational gaps, the policy risks reinforcing existing educational inequalities rather than achieving its goals of widespread youth development. Recommendations are provided for multi-level stakeholders to promote more equitable and effective policy implementation.

**Keywords:** Campus Football Policy, Implementation Difference, Resource Allocation, Urban-Rural Disparities, Teacher Training, Policy Effectiveness, Social and Parental Factors

## Introduction

The integration of sports into education has become a cornerstone of China's national strategy for youth development, with school football serving as a flagship initiative [1]. Since the pivotal 2015 "Implementation Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Youth School Football," a suite of policies has established a comprehensive framework [2]. This framework mandates the development of football-specific schools, the enhancement of teacher capacity, and the creation of a multi-tiered competition system, aiming to leverage football for physical health, character building, and talent cultivation. Subsequent guidelines, including the 2020 emphasis on "sports-education integration," have further reinforced football's role, pushing for a shift from basic popularization to sustainable, high-quality development within schools [3]. Despite these robust top-down directives, a significant gap often emerges between national policy ambitions and their grassroots execution, a challenge particularly acute in economically diverse regions [4]. This study investigates this implementation gap within Tianshui, Gansu Province, a region emblematic of the urban-rural disparities common in Northwestern China. While Tianshui's urban schools may possess the resources to align with national goals, its rural and county schools often grapple with fundamental constraints in funding, infrastructure, and specialized personnel [5]. This divergence creates a natural laboratory to examine how a uniform national policy is adapted, interpreted, and ultimately enacted in vastly different local contexts, raising critical questions about equity and effectiveness.

Focusing on this disparity, our research examines the concrete differences in campus football policy implementation across Tianshui's grassroots schools. It moves beyond policy rhetoric to analyze the on-the-ground realities of facility quality, coaching expertise, curriculum integration, and administrative commitment. By employing a qualitative approach involving interviews and comparative case studies of urban and rural schools, this study seeks to identify the principal factors — including resource allocation, local governance, and socio-cultural attitudes — that drive implementation differences. The findings aim to provide a nuanced understanding of the barriers to effective policy execution in underdeveloped regions, offering evidence-based insights for designing more targeted and equitable support mechanisms.

## Literature Review

The implementation of national education policies at the local level is a complex process influenced by a multitude of factors. This review synthesizes existing literature concerning China's campus football policy, with a specific focus on studies that explore its implementation, the challenges faced in underdeveloped regions, and the theoretical frameworks used to analyze such policy gaps.

### A. The National Campus Football Policy Framework

The launch of the national campus football policy in 2015 marked a significant shift in China's sports education strategy. Existing scholarship has extensively documented the policy's objectives and top-level design. Researchers like Jin and Wang have analyzed the "Implementation Opinions" as a foundational document that established a clear, ambitious framework for popularizing football in schools, with goals centered on student health, talent identification, and



educational quality [2], [6]. Subsequent studies have traced the policy's evolution, noting how later directives, particularly the 2020 "Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving School Sports in the New Era," expanded its scope to integrate sports more deeply into the overall educational mission [3], [7]. This body of literature primarily describes the policy's intentions and official metrics for success, such as the number of characteristic schools built or teachers trained, often from a top-down perspective [8].

#### B. Implementation Challenges and Regional Disparities

A growing segment of the literature moves beyond policy description to examine the practical challenges of implementation. A consistent finding is the significant disparity between policy goals and outcomes, particularly in Central and Western China. Studies by Chen and Li have highlighted that while eastern, economically developed provinces have made substantial progress, schools in northwestern regions like Gansu face profound obstacles, including insufficient funding, inadequate facilities, and a critical shortage of qualified football coaches [7], [9]. This research points to a systemic issue where uniform national policies encounter vastly different local realities, leading to an "implementation gap" [4]. The urban-rural divide within provinces is a critical dimension of this challenge. Zhang and Wei's work on educational resources in Northwest China underscores how intra-regional inequalities can be as significant as inter-provincial ones, with rural schools often lacking the basic infrastructure and administrative capacity to implement sports policies effectively [5], [10]. This suggests that analyses focusing solely on the provincial level may overlook critical variations at the sub-regional or school-district level.

#### C. Theoretical Lenses for Analyzing Policy Implementation

To explain these disparities, scholars have applied various policy implementation theories. The "top-down" model, which views implementation as a linear process of executing centrally-defined objectives, is often used as a starting point but is criticized for its inability to account for local agency and constraints [11]. In response, the "bottom-up" approach emphasizes the role of street-level bureaucrats, such as school principals and teachers, who reinterpret and adapt policies based on their local context and available resources [12]. This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant for understanding the varied implementation of campus football, as the commitment and creativity of individual schools can significantly influence outcomes, especially in resource-scarce environments [13]. More recent studies advocate for a synthetic framework that considers the interaction between top-down policy design and bottom-up local adaptation, arguing that effective implementation requires alignment between central directives and the capacities, motivations, and socio-cultural contexts of grassroots implementers [4], [14].

### Statement of problems

Unlike the traditional top-down model, the bottom-up policy implementation model emphasizes the initiative and creativity of grassroots implementers in the policy implementation process. This model argues that the main actors in the actual implementation of policies—school administrators, physical education teachers, local education officials, and external coaches—are not only recipients of policies but also "re-creators" of their meaning.

This is particularly evident in school football policy:

1. Whether a principal values sports or football influences investment in facilities, curriculum arrangements, and participation in competitions;
2. The professional competence, work attitude, and understanding of football culture of physical education teachers directly determine teaching quality;
3. The interaction between grassroots education departments and social forces determines the flexibility and dynamism of policy implementation.

These actors adjust policies based on local conditions, school resources, and student interests to better adapt them to grassroots needs. Therefore, the final presentation of policies often does not strictly follow the path predetermined in the policy text but rather evolves into unique implementation methods after a "second interpretation" at the grassroots level.

In the development of school football in Tianshui City, the initiative of the bottom-up approach is particularly crucial. Due to limited overall resources, grassroots schools often rely on the personal enthusiasm of physical education teachers, the local football culture, and the school's attitude towards football to promote the development of the sport. These factors together constitute an interactive system between "policy - grassroots reality - implementation behavior".

### Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the differences in the implementation of campus football policies across grassroots schools in Tianshui, Gansu Province. A multi-method approach was adopted, integrating document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and comparative case studies to ensure a comprehensive and triangulated understanding of the phenomenon. This methodology was selected to capture both the formal policy framework and the complex, contextual realities of policy enactment at the school level.

The data collection process was conducted in three sequential phases. Initially, a comprehensive document analysis was performed to establish the formal policy framework. This involved a systematic review of national policy documents, such as the "Implementation Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Youth Campus Football" from 2015, and local implementation guidelines from the Gansu Department of Education. This phase provided the essential normative benchmark against which actual implementation practices could be compared. Following this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-eight key stakeholders across the Tianshui education system to gather firsthand perspectives. A purposive sampling strategy ensured representation from administrators, such as municipal education bureau staff and school principals, implementers including physical education teachers and coaches, and students involved in football programs. The interview protocol was designed to explore critical themes, including policy understanding, resource allocation, curriculum integration, and perceived challenges. Finally, to enable a deep, contextualized analysis, a comparative case study approach was utilized. Two contrasting schools were selected based on a maximum variation sampling strategy: a high-quality urban middle school with relatively abundant resources and a rural grassroots middle school with significant constraints. Data for each case was compiled from interviews, observational notes on facilities, and analysis of school documents.

For data analysis, a thematic analysis approach was employed to systematically examine the interview transcripts and case study data. The process began with the familiarization and coding of the transcripts to identify initial codes related to key implementation factors. These codes were subsequently grouped into emerging themes, such as "Urban-Rural Resource Disparity" and "Role of Local Leadership." A critical component of the analysis involved a cross-case comparison, where themes were systematically contrasted across the two case studies to identify patterns of similarity and difference. This integrated methodological approach ensured that the findings were robustly grounded in both official policy and the lived experiences of grassroots implementers, thereby providing a nuanced explanation of the causes underlying the observed implementation differences.

### **Current Status of Campus Football in Primary Schools in Tianshui Area**

In the actual implementation of the school football policy in Tianshui City, the differences in field facilities and hardware are the most direct and fundamental factors affecting the quality of development in each school. Surveys and interviews reveal significant disparities between urban and county schools in terms of field conditions, equipment configuration, and funding, directly impacting student training experience, teaching quality, and competition capacity.

1. A key middle school in Tianshui City: Artificial turf, fencing, and professional football field facilities, with two campuses.

This key middle school in Tianshui City generally possesses good basic campus infrastructure. Through local government support and special funding, it has built standardized school football fields, including artificial turf, fencing, professional goals, and basic lighting. These fields are flat, safe, and durable, meeting the needs of daily teaching, club training, and school leagues.

Furthermore, the school has a separate equipment storage room equipped with training markers, marker poles, small portable goals, training ladders, and other equipment, enabling more comprehensive skills training methods in the classroom. Overall, the hardware conditions of urban schools are better suited to the "standardized and regular training" advocated by the national school football policy. Furthermore, in recent years, this school has established branch campuses, expanding its enrollment and providing students with better football facilities.

2. A Rural Middle School: Primarily Dirt Fields, Cement Surfaces, and Simple Facilities

In contrast, rural middle schools lag behind in football field construction due to local economic conditions, limited campus size, and historical issues. Most schools still use dirt fields, cement surfaces, or synthetic running tracks with simple open areas as their football activity areas. These fields are hard, uneven, and poorly drained, making training impossible during the rainy season, affecting student participation and posing safety hazards.

Regarding equipment, rural middle schools typically only have a small number of footballs and very simple iron or wooden goals, lacking basic training equipment. For example, insufficient markers, missing training posts, and damaged or long-unreplaced nets are common problems. This makes it difficult for physical education teachers to conduct systematic, specialized instruction, forcing them to substitute basic passing and simple group scrimmages for formal training content.

3. Uneven Development Due to Differences in Funding Investment

The root cause of the disparity in facilities between urban and county schools lies in the uneven distribution of funding. In urban areas with higher fiscal revenue and concentrated educational resources, schools are more likely to receive special funding or social sponsorship, thus forming a more complete infrastructure system. However, due to limited funding sources, school football in county schools is often considered a "dispensable" activity, lacking sustained investment, resulting in facilities construction failing to meet policy standards.

Funding differences not only affect facility construction but also impact:

- (1) Frequency of equipment updates
- (2) Availability of professional training equipment

(3) Long-term involvement of external coaches or social forces

(4) Frequency and scale of school league events

**Coaching Staff Differences:** Significant differences exist in coaching staffing between urban and rural schools in Tianshui City. Urban schools generally attract full-time or part-time football coaches through specialized recruitment and partnerships with social organizations. These coaches typically have strong professional backgrounds, more standardized training systems, and can conduct systematic technical and tactical instruction.

In contrast, rural schools mostly employ non-football-specialized physical education teachers part-time. Due to limited professional skills and fewer training opportunities, their instruction often remains at the level of basic passing and simple games, lacking systematicity and specificity.

This context results in a significant gap in training quality between urban and rural schools. Urban students generally have a higher overall technical level, while rural schools focus more on cultivating interest and struggle to establish stable training systems. This difference directly impacts the depth of implementation of the school football policy in different regions.

**Curriculum Implementation Differences:** A similar significant difference exists between urban and county-level schools in curriculum implementation. Urban schools generally incorporate football into their physical education curriculum according to school football requirements and offer stable after-school training sessions, forming a basic structure of "classroom teaching + after-school training + intra-school matches." Training schedules are relatively fixed, allowing for phased instruction based on grade level, demonstrating a degree of systematization and sustainability.

In contrast, curriculum implementation in county and district schools is less than ideal. Constrained by factors such as teacher availability, facilities, and teaching pressure, many schools equate football instruction entirely with physical education classes, lacking dedicated football-specific courses. Some schools only conduct short-term intensive training before matches, with haphazard and unplanned content, exhibiting a "crash course" or "perfunctory" approach, failing to meet the policy-required, standardized teaching goals.

This disparity results in urban students developing more complete football skills through continuous and systematic learning, while county and district students are often in a fragmented and sporadic learning state, further widening the gap in school football levels between different regions.

#### **Analysis of the causes of implementation differences in Tianshui area**

Regional economic disparities lead to uneven resource allocation. Significant differences in regional economic development levels exist within Tianshui City, directly impacting the investment and allocation of resources for school football. Urban areas have a stronger economic foundation and greater financial capacity, enabling them to provide schools with relatively stable dedicated funding for facility upgrades, equipment purchases, and coach recruitment, thus forming a more comprehensive school football support system.

In contrast, counties and rural areas have limited financial resources, with education funding primarily prioritizing basic teaching needs, resulting in relatively insufficient investment in sports, especially football. Schools often struggle to maintain facilities, update equipment, or recruit professional coaches, leading to grassroots school football development remaining at a minimum level, exhibiting a "sufficient but unprofessional" state.

This uneven resource allocation caused by regional economic disparities not only affects school infrastructure but also teacher training, competition organization, and the quality of daily training, further widening the gap in school football development between urban and county schools.

**Insufficient Coaching Talent.** Another key constraint on the development of school football in Tianshui City is the insufficient supply of coaching talent. Due to the overall weak social foundation for football and limited professional training channels, the number of local teachers with specialized football backgrounds is already limited. While urban schools can partially fill the gap by recruiting and introducing external coaches, schools in counties and rural areas typically struggle to attract and retain professional football talent.

Most grassroots schools rely on physical education teachers to teach football part-time. These teachers often lack systematic football training experience, making it difficult to conduct professional and long-term teaching and training. Furthermore, limited training opportunities and career advancement prospects discourage existing teachers from improving their skills.

The persistent shortage of coaching talent results in "not enough qualified coaches, and difficulty retaining capable ones," directly limiting the improvement of the quality of school football instruction and hindering the effective implementation of policies at the grassroots level.

#### **Different School Management Motivations**

The attitude and level of importance that school management places on school football are crucial factors influencing the depth of policy implementation. In urban schools, principals and management teams generally hold a positive attitude towards school football, arranging specialized courses according to policy requirements, supporting training team development, and coordinating resources such as funding, facilities, and teachers. Therefore, the promotion of school football is more motivated and standardized.

In contrast, the management focus of county and rural schools is often concentrated on basic teaching and college entrance exam pressures, with a lower level of emphasis on sports such as football. Some schools only push forward with related work when required by higher-level inspections or competitions, lacking a sustained institutional arrangement.

With limited resources, management often treats school football as a "secondary task," making it difficult for policies to form a long-term mechanism.

This difference in management motivation leads to "two speeds and two attitudes" for the same policy in different schools, a significant source of disparities in grassroots implementation.

#### Parental and Local Cultural Factors

Parental attitudes and local culture are also important factors influencing school football participation and policy effectiveness. In urban areas, parents generally have higher acceptance and a more open understanding of physical education, recognizing the positive effects of football on physical fitness, character, and teamwork, resulting in relatively stable student participation.

However, in counties and rural areas, parents generally prioritize academic performance, holding cautious or even averse attitudes towards sports like football, worrying that training will take away from study time or increase the risk of injury. Furthermore, some areas lack a football-participatory atmosphere, and the local culture has low awareness of football, leading to insufficient student interest and resistance to school promotion.

These family and cultural factors limit the effective coverage of policies in grassroots schools and further exacerbate the disparities in school football development across different regions.

#### Conclusions

This study reveals a pronounced disparity in the implementation of the national campus football policy between urban and rural schools in Tianshui, Gansu Province. The findings demonstrate that urban schools, benefiting from superior infrastructure, specialized coaching, and systematic curriculum integration, largely align with national policy objectives. In stark contrast, rural schools struggle with inadequate facilities, a severe shortage of qualified football teachers, and ad-hoc implementation, often reducing football to a peripheral activity within physical education. These differences are not incidental but are fundamentally driven by systemic issues, including severe unevenness in regional funding allocation, a critical lack of investment in coaching talent, varying levels of administrative commitment at the school level, and deeply rooted socio-cultural attitudes that prioritize academic performance over sports in rural communities.

The implications of these findings extend beyond sports education, highlighting a critical challenge in China's broader educational policy. The current top-down implementation model, without sufficient consideration for local contextual capacities, risks exacerbating existing educational inequalities. Instead of fostering widespread youth development, the policy, as currently enacted, may inadvertently widen the opportunity gap between students in resource-rich urban settings and their counterparts in resource-constrained rural areas. This underscores the necessity of moving beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to policy implementation and developing more nuanced, context-sensitive strategies that address the specific barriers faced by grassroots schools.

To achieve the policy's original goals of equity and quality development, a reconfigured approach is urgently needed. Future efforts must prioritize targeted interventions that directly address the identified gaps. This includes establishing equitable funding mechanisms specifically for rural schools, creating sustainable pathways for training and retaining qualified football teachers in underserved areas, and incentivizing school-level leadership to champion sports education. Ultimately, bridging the implementation gap requires a concerted effort to align top-down policy objectives with bottom-up realities, ensuring that the benefits of the national campus football policy are realized by all students, regardless of their geographic or socioeconomic background.

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