



China's Schools: A System in Transition

Robert J. Krajewski

American principals are providing role models for their Chinese counterparts in the struggle to upgrade China's public education.

Since embracing communism in 1949, China has struggled to provide adequate public education for its masses. An ambitious attempt during the 1966–1976 Cultural Revolution largely backfired because so many teachers and administrators lacked formal education. By 1985, when I was first invited to design a leadership training program for school leaders in Guangxi Province, concerns were so widespread that the government created an extensive reform movement, including a commitment to a compulsory nine-year cycle of elementary and middle-level education, and authorized specialized training to enhance principals' effectiveness.

IN BRIEF

An educator who has conducted leadership programs for Chinese principals since 1985 examines the changes in that nation's schools over a 20-year period. He finds them making slow progress, thanks in part to educational exchange programs that have given principals the skills and educational foundations needed to overcome entrenched and system-wide challenges.

Guangxi is an autonomous region of 45 million people in southeast China, bordering Vietnam and the Gulf of Tonkin. In the summer of 1985, I taught a six-week, all-day leadership program to 110 current and prospective principals from throughout the province. I've returned to China seven times since then, most recently in 2005, visiting schools in several provinces and lecturing to more than 4,200 school leaders in 15 cities and counties.

China's Schools: 1985

In 1985, Chinese students were being taught in barren surroundings. Try to picture 65 to 80 students packed wall-to-wall in a concrete-floored classroom, seated two, three, or four at primitive wooden tables. At the front was a small raised platform with a wooden podium for the teacher, and on the front wall was an old blackboard. There were no bookshelves or storage space for personal belongings, technology consisted

of an occasional cassette recorder, and only political pictures decorated the walls. Barred windows sometimes lacked glass, permitting subtropical humidity to permeate classrooms.

Buildings were generally several stories high—up to six in some cases—with doors at the front and back of classrooms opening onto outdoor concrete corridors. Each campus was surrounded with a high concrete wall, its entrances guarded around the clock. Education was Spartan and direct, with teachers lecturing on basic subjects assigned by the central government. Each school had a party secretary who oversaw the curriculum and teaching.

When I began teaching in 1985, the first assignment for my principal-students was to have each of them develop an individual philosophy, an unfamiliar concept in a Marxist country. Then we covered many other unfamiliar leadership topics: self-management; coping with changing demands; setting priorities; decision-making; managing time; and examining the principal's role as key to quality education.

China's Schools: 2005

Since 1985, education in China has been in a state of transition. The curriculum continues to be set by the central government, with additions from provincial and/or local education authorities. The six-year elementary curriculum has four main components: ideology and moral education; academic knowledge; physical education and health; and production technology. In the larger cities and at the better schools, the curriculum resembles that of elementary schools in the United States, with students taking reading and writing, math (including algebra and trigonometry), music, art, moral education, physical education, history, and natural science.

In the three-year middle-grade curriculum, chemistry and physics are substituted for natural science, moral education becomes politics, and students are required to learn English.

There have been some improvements in China's schools since 1985, but a

casual observer would be hard-pressed to notice them. Physically, the schools look the same—crowded, walled campuses with no climate control. But in many schools, students now wear stylish uniforms, and technology can be found in the form of computers, TV, overheads, and PowerPoint presentations.

Students who live in cities or close to school may go home for lunch and return to school in the afternoon. Some eat dinner at home and return to school in the evening before returning home to finish their homework. In less-populated mountain regions, children walk two or three hours to school at the beginning of each week and stay there until the weekend, when they walk home again. At the school, they are housed in stark dormitories, with 16 to 20 students packed in small rooms of two- or three-tiered bunks separated by small aisles.

Forty-five minutes before school begins in the morning, students sit at their desks reciting their day's lessons out loud, including extra assignments given to them by parents. When called upon, they stand and repeat their lesson. If they do not know their lesson that day, or if their term grades are below expected levels, they may expect corporal punishment by their teacher, their parents, or both.

Textbooks are up-to-date and more relevant to contemporary life, and teaching has become less lecture-based. Many teachers now explain problems and ask provocative questions, giving students practice in critical thinking and decision-making. While group activities are becoming more common, students are still expected to remain in their seats for 95 percent of the school day. Many children in rural areas still don't get much schooling, and in some poor rural areas they receive none whatsoever.

The Principal's Role

In China today, elementary and middle school principals continue to be selected from the teacher ranks, with little or no formal, university-sponsored school leadership training.

When selected to be principals, they must begin working right away to "catch up" on leadership skills through inservice training.

Because teacher pay and benefits in China are meager at best, principals must look for ways to bring in money from businesses or individuals to support teacher welfare and working conditions. Entrepreneurship is an important quality for principals, due in part to the fact that large cities in China have at least one "key school" that is reserved for children of the local elite and the unfair recipient of the best teachers and the most government funds.

Principals also must deal with discipline issues that teachers can't handle, a familiar problem in the United States that is becoming more prevalent in Chinese schools. The sheer number of teachers in Chinese schools is also challenging. One principal, who did not have an assistant, reported that he did not know how to motivate all 140 teachers in his school.

Nonetheless, most principals are concerned with creating a friendly atmosphere in the school, motivating both their teachers and disinterested students (more than 2 million children drop out of the Chinese school system each year), and making educational programs more globally relevant.

Global issues are a major concern. While students learn about other societies in school, many can also access information through television and the Internet. Even in the most remote areas, almost everyone has access to television and students can form their own opinions on what they see, including shows that might not be shown on prime time in the United States. Unfortunately, many students believe the things that they see on television and it is hard to convince them that not all Americans drive fancy cars, shoot each other, or have relationships like those they see on the screen. These fantasies become realities in the minds of Chinese youths.

In some ways, the Chinese schools' layout is the biggest impediment in principals' efforts to reach and teach students. For example, having to

The Chinese Principal's Day

navigate the narrow outdoor walkways and staircases to get from class to class affects their mobility in observing classes, and the large numbers of students crowded into classrooms make it difficult for the principal to simply pull up a chair next to a student.

The physical difference in their schools is not the only obstacle Chinese principals face in comparison with American principals. The Chinese and American education systems also have some basic differences in school administration. For example, Chinese principals accept personal responsibility for many activities that American principals routinely delegate or share, including creating and building support for initiatives designed to bring schools up to standards.

Although the list of entrenched and system-wide challenges seems overwhelming, most Chinese principals feel they now have the skills and educational foundations to overcome them. Inservice training, provided in part by visiting

Although Chinese principals, unlike their American counterparts, teach at least one class each day, in the past there was little communication with students concerning their performance. Like teachers, most Chinese principals live in or near their schools and many make dedicated efforts to spend time with students outside the classroom setting.


Because principals may spend much of their day in classrooms helping teachers, administrative duties have to wait until day's end. A 16- or 17-hour workday is common and sometimes a necessity to get everything done. One principal described a typical day as coming to school at 7 in the morning with the students, staying until 7 at night, and then working on administrative duties at home until 10 or 11.

educators from universities throughout the world, is giving them professional skills that, combined with such personal traits as confidence and diligence, have allowed them to meet and resolve many of the problems they face.

My experience in observing and working with Chinese principals during the past 20 years has convinced me that more educational exchange programs can help us to better understand both the differences and similarities between Chinese and American school

administration. Certainly, the experience of American principals can provide role models and support systems for their Chinese counterparts as they struggle to move their schools out of the adolescent-like stage that epitomizes Chinese public education today. ■

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WEB RESOURCES

Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia, has an informative section on education in mainland China, including descriptions of primary, middle, preschool, and special education.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_the_People's_Republic_of_China

Projects for International Education Research has posted "History of the Educational System of China" by David B. Surowski.
www.math.ksu.edu/~dbski/publication/history.html

The Christian Science Monitor has made available a 2004 article, "Chinese Schools Get Creative," which describes changing instructional patterns at a 3,500-student middle school.
www.csmonitor.com/2004/0120/p14s01-legn.html