

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Access to compulsory education by rural migrants' children in urban China: A case study from nine cities**

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Accepted 10 May, 2010

**In this study, we examined the educational challenges faced by the children of rural migrants who have increasingly come to Chinese cities in large numbers seeking employment. Based on large-scale surveys of students in public, licensed private, and unlicensed private schools in nine cities (small, medium, and large), we found that access to public schools was easier for children in small and medium cities than for those in large cities, but in all cities, the children faced discrimination on several levels (e.g., extra fees, difficulty traveling to and from school). To mitigate the problems faced by these children and acknowledge the importance of their parents in sustaining China's rapid economic growth, we propose several solutions that should be implemented by Chinese educational decision-makers. In particular, more resources (funding, teachers, and support staff) should be allocated to meet the needs of these children and their parents.**

**Keyword:** Compulsory education, rural migrants' children, urban China.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The migrant workers (often farmers) who have come from rural areas to cities in China became a major phenomenon in the early 1980s. Since the 1990s, China's rapid socioeconomic development has led to dramatic increases in the population of rural migrant workers. As of 2009, the population of migrant workers had increased since 1980 by 180 million, of which 82.8% were rural migrants (SCIOC, 2010). Currently, about 14 million rural migrants' children live in urban areas, accounting for one-eighth of the total number of urban children (Zhu, 2009). Because of limitations on the resources available to the Chinese education system and the resulting inadequacy of urban public education resources, children of migrant farm workers face a greater risk of academic failure than other children. These factors include mobility of their families (which must often relocate to seek work), poverty, and a lack of access to schooling. It is especially difficult for these children to enroll in urban public schools.

As a result of these conditions, unofficial schools (both licensed and unlicensed private schools) run by social workers, volunteers, and even migrant workers have sprung up throughout urban China during the last 20

years to fill the gap. For instance, in Beijing (2006), there were about 380 licensed and unlicensed private schools for rural migrants' children, accounting for nearly 19% of the City's 2017 schools (BPSMC, 2007). These schools are poorly equipped in terms of both facilities and teaching resources, and pose such problems as lower quality of education, inadequate schooling conditions and sanitation, and high safety risks. These problems have significant impact on China's equality of educational opportunities and social harmony.

In response to the problems of access to compulsory education for rural migrants' children, the central government has devoted increased effort to the formulation of remedial policies. In 1996, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued a policy statement entitled the "Pilot Regulation for School-aged Migrant Children's Enrolment", in which it was stipulated that "the urban government should create conditions and provide opportunities for school-aged rural migrants' children to receive compulsory education, and the education authority of urban areas should take full responsibility for ensuring that these children receive compulsory education". In 2003, the State Council issued a decree

**Table 1.** Sample size in the survey of rural migrants' children (RMC)

City category	City name	No. of schools sampled	No. of schools sampled from three categories			No. of students sampled	No. of RMC students	No. of families sampled	No. of RMC families
			(a)	(b)	(c)				
Big	Beijing	8	4	2	2	677	578	634	582
	Shanghai	8	4	4	0	579	418	550	417
	Guangzhou	8	4	4	0	777	425	548	291
Medium	Changzhou	8	4	3	1	718	604	716	609
	Mianyang	4	4	0	0	676	339	656	342
	Yichang	6	6	0	0	722	418	681	424
Small	Sanhe	6	6	0	0	629	153	594	153
	Changle	6	6	0	0	668	71	666	70
	Yiwu	8	4	2	2	774	508	694	446
	Total	62	42	15	5	6220	3818	5739	3334

(a) public schools; (b) licensed private schools; (c) unlicensed private schools

saying that “the governments of cities that receive rural migrants are entirely responsible for providing educational services for their children”. Since then, a series of policies relating to the education of these children have been issued by both central and local governments, aiming to provide this disadvantaged group with a better education. Some cities have been experimenting with inclusion of these children within the local education system.

To better understand the effects of these government decrees and provide guidance to adjust policies to better reflect the changing situation and to facilitate various experiments designed to improve the situation at local levels, the Basic Education Department of the Chinese Ministry of Education initiated a field survey of the educational issues faced by rural migrants' children in 2007. The survey was conducted by China National Institute for Education Research, with financial support from the World Bank. Using the results of this survey, we have provided insights into the education conditions faced by these children in terms of their characteristics and their enrolment situation, the factors that affect their access to urban public schools, and the opinions of their parents about the current situation. Based on this analysis, we formulate recommendations to support government decision-making that will better meet the needs of these children.

## METHODOLOGY

### Selection of Study Areas

Based on the population of rural migrants' children in the cities that are receiving these migrants, we selected study areas from three categories of city: big (provincial level), medium (prefecture level),

and small (county level). Nine cities were selected:

- Big: Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou (Guangdong province);
- Medium: Changzhou (Jiangsu province), Yichang (Hubei province), and Mianyang (Sichuan province);
- Small: Sanhe (Hebei province), Yiwu (Zhejiang province), and Changle (Shandong province).

### Sampling method

We surveyed schools of three categories in the study areas: (a) public schools that enroll some rural migrants' children, (b) licensed private schools for these children, and (c) unlicensed private schools for these children. We planned to select a total of eight schools in each city, including four public schools (two primary and two middle schools), two licensed private schools (one primary and one middle school), and two unlicensed private schools (one primary and one middle school). In each primary school, we sampled one class (of 50 students) from grade 3 and one from grade 5. In each middle school, we sampled one class from grade 7 and one from grade 8. In practice, the actual number of schools in each category changed according to the actual local situation. Table 1 summarizes the final survey sample.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from both secondary and primary sources. Secondary data were obtained from relevant research institutions, schools, education centers, and education departments in the study areas, and included books of statistics, project reports, research reports, and educational files. Primary data were collected through school-based surveys, household-based surveys, focus-group discussions, on-site interviews, and observation.

The field surveys were conducted from May 2006 to November 2006 and included a total of 62 schools (42 public, 15 licensed

**Table 2.** The ranking of the home province of rural migrants' children (RMC) who responded to the survey

Ranking	Origin (province)	Number of RMC	Proportion of the total sample (%)	Provincial population (millions)	Surplus rural labor force (millions) +
1	Sichuan	724	26.59%	86.50	14.18 (16.39%)
2	Anhui	560	20.57%	62.28	10.58 (16.99%)
3	Guangdong	290	10.65%	88.89	9.25 (10.41%)
4	Henan	257	9.44%	97.17	18.77 (19.32%)
5	Jiangsu	204	7.49%	74.32	6.18 (8.32%)
6	Jiangxi	181	6.65%	42.17	4.23 (10.03%)
7	Hubei	171	6.28%	60.31	9.54 (15.82%)
8	Hebei	122	4.48%	68.69	6.74 (9.81%)
9	Zhejiang	119	4.37%	47.20	3.51 (7.44%)
10	Shandong	95	3.49%	92.84	11.88 (12.79%)
Total number of students sampled		2723	100%		

+ Values in parentheses represent the percentage of the total provincial population accounted for by the rural surplus labor force in 2006 (Li, 2009)

private, and 5 unlicensed private schools). A total of 6220 school-based questionnaires were distributed, and all responses were collected. An additional 6220 household-based questionnaires matched with the school-based questionnaires were distributed, and 5739 responses were collected (Table 1).

Data were analyzed using Version 11 of the SPSS software for Windows. We used chi-square test and analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine the significance of relationships between the study parameters; linear relationships were determined by using Pearson's product moment correlation coefficient ( $r$ ).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Characteristics of rural migrants' children

Of the 6220 respondents, 55% were male ( $\chi^2 = 66.200$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and 97.5% belonged to the Han nationality ( $\chi^2 = 5613.000$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Of the 3514 rural migrants' children in the survey, 56.3% were male ( $\chi^2 = 55.788$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and 97.3% belonged to the Han nationality ( $\chi^2 = 2570.281$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests significant disparities in both gender and nationality.

The rural migrants and their children mainly came from 10 large provinces with a large population and a large-scale surplus of rural labor. Of the 2723 respondents who specified their province of origin, Sichuan province accounted for the largest proportion (26.6% of the students), even though the province's total population ranked 4th and its percentage of the national rural surplus labor force ranked 3<sup>rd</sup>. (Table 2). This was followed by children from Anhui and Guangdong provinces, who accounted for 20.57% and 10.65% of the total sample respectively, largely due to their high population (ranked 7th and 3rd) and large rural surplus labor force (ranked

2nd and 6th). Table 2 summarizes the proportions and rankings for the provinces reported in the survey.

### Enrollment of rural migrants' children in public schools

Current governmental policy is to enroll rural migrants' children in urban public schools. However, our study showed a different result. As of 2006, there were 1518615 of these students in the study area, of which only 58% were enrolled in urban public schools; the remaining 42% being enrolled in licensed or unlicensed private schools with poorer facilities and lower teaching quality than provided by the public schools (Table 3). In Shanghai and Guangzhou, less than half of these children (49% and 34.6%, respectively) were enrolled in public schools; the remaining 51% and 65.4% were enrolled in private schools. In medium cities, the majority (between 70% and 100%) were enrolled in public schools. In small cities, the results were more variable: although 100% of these students were enrolled in public schools in two of the three cities, only 51% were enrolled in public schools in Yiwu city. Thus, enrollment rates of these students in public schools were larger in small and medium cities than in big cities ( $p < 0.05$ ). In terms of the level of economic development, the enrollment rate of these children in public schools in economically developed cities such as Guangzhou and Yiwu was lower than in private schools due to the relatively larger number of rural migrants' children in these cities and the frequent displacement by their family to seek new work.

**Table 3.**Enrolment of rural migrants' children in schools in the study areas in 2006 based on the survey results

City category	City	Enrolled in public school (%)	Enrolled in private school (%)	Total
Big	Beijing	228 000 (63%)	138 000 (37%)	366 000
	Shanghai	187 000 (49%)	192 000 (51%)	379 000
	Guangzhou	135 000 (34.6%)	255 000 (65.4%)	390 000
Medium	Changzhou	77 000 (70%)	33 000 (30%)	110 000
	Mianyang	30 875 (95%)	1625 (5%)	32 500
	Yichang	198 000 (100%)	0	198 000
Small	Sanhe	4533 (100%)	0	4533
	Changle	635 (100%)	0	635
	Yiwu	19 353 (51%)	18 594 (49%)	37 947
Total (%)		880 396 (58%)	638 219 (42%)	1 518615

**Table 4.**Extra school fees charged by public schools based on the responses to our survey

City category	No. of respondents (% of total) who reported school fees			Total
	Charged every year	Charged at least once	Never charged	
Big	110 (30.9%)	163 (45.8%)	83 (23.3%)	356
Medium	194 (17.7%)	482 (44.1%)	417 (38.2%)	1093
Small	68 (19.5%)	115 (33.0%)	166 (47.6%)	349
Total	372 (20.7%)	760 (42.3%)	666 (37.0%)	1798
Statistical significance		$\chi^2 = 60.730, p < 0.001$		

### Factors affecting enrollment by rural migrants' children in urban public schools

#### Insufficient public education resources

The rapid increase in the population of rural migrants' children is a major reason for the shortage of public education resources in urban areas. This is because urban education development and school distribution planning are based on estimates of the local population size that fail to take into account the migrant population. In recent decades, substantial number of farmers and their families have migrated to urban areas, greatly increasing the pressure on the enrollment capacity of urban public schools. The increase in education resources for these urban areas has been unable to catch up with the rapid growth of this population, leading to overcrowded classes (more than 50 students per class, versus a target size of 40 set by the government). For instance, in Beijing, the number of these children was estimated to be 228,000 in 2006, but this number increased to 420,000 by 2009 (Liu, 2010) showing an annual increase of 64,000.

Migrant workers prefer to take their children with them when they shift to another place to obtain work, and must find a nearby public school for the education of their children. Our household survey showed that this pursuit of a better education was the primary reason why these workers brought their children with them to stay in a city

(42.3%), followed by the desire to take good care of their children (37.5%) and the desire to keep all their family members together (18.9%). Public school is attractive to most migrant workers due to its long history of providing quality education and resources such as qualified teachers and equipment, which are normally provided by the government. The quality of educational resources in urban areas is one of the most important driving forces responsible for the shift of rural migrants' children towards cities. This also suggests that ensuring regional development in rural areas and providing better support for education would be an alternative solution, since fewer people would be forced to move to big cities to seek work.

#### School fees

School fees are one of the biggest barriers to the access of rural migrants' children to urban public schools. To make schooling more affordable for the migrant population, the central government has made it illegal for public schools to demand "donations" when they enroll these children. However, in practice, some public schools continue to collect extra school fees. Our survey found that out of 1798 of migrant rural children enrolled in public schools, 20.7% were charged extra fees (Table 4). There were significant differences in the amount of school fees among the three categories of urban schools ( $\chi^2 = 60.730$ ,

$p < 0.001$ ). The extra school fees were higher in big cities than in medium and small cities.

### **Income of rural migrant families**

Most of the migrant workers in cities are from rural areas and earn relatively less money by performing unskilled labor. Because of the problem, of residency and unfamiliarity with available local resources, most migrant families receive few social, economic, health-related, or educational services. In addition, migrants are usually not given urban residential status when they arrive in a city, and they are, therefore, not eligible to receive the benefits that are automatically available to registered urban residents. The resulting financial hardship has blocked the access to public schools for many children of these families. Our survey found that 15% of rural migrant families had an income of less than 500 RMB (US\$74) per month, versus 32.7% with 500 to 1000 RMB (US\$74 to 147) and 38.4% with 1000 to 2000 RMB (US\$147 to 294). About 6% of their children were unable to attend urban public schools because their families could not afford the extra school fees. About 47.3% of these families were under heavy economic pressure due to the extra school fees. Further analysis revealed a positive correlation between the family income and the children's access to a public school ( $r = 0.43$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The higher the family income the easier the access to a public school. In addition, the family income directly affected enrollment of their children in a public school ( $\chi^2 = 22.361$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

### **Mobility of rural migrant families and relationship to school locations**

The mobility of rural migrant families is a primary hurdle to their children's access to a public school. The public schools with good facilities and qualified teachers are usually located in central urban areas, whereas the families of migrant workers tend to be clustered on the outskirts of cities as a result of their frequent need to move from place to place in search of work. Their length of stay in one place is determined by the local demand for and supply of labor; so, there is no guarantee that a family can stay for any length of time at a given location. The parents of these children have difficulty in sending their children to school and bringing them back home after school due to their irregular job situation. This is a serious barrier to their access to public schools.

Under these circumstances, some migrant workers and educators try to run schools near the family residence, provide school buses, and adopt flexible school hours to attract children and to earn profit. This accounts for the large enrollment of rural migrants' children in licensed or unlicensed private schools. Our survey found that a

location of school close to home was the first priority for these families when selecting a school (32.2%). Their children had several alternative means to reach nearby schools: 49.0% walk to and fro school, 18.5% travel by school bus, 8.4% take public transportation, 14.3% ride a bicycle and 9.8% travel by other means. Among the group that travels by school bus, only 6.3% were studying at a public school and the remaining 93.7% studied in private schools. In addition, 73% have changed schools at least once, supporting the hypothesis that the mobility of their families leads directly to frequent school changes and inconvenient access to public schools.

### **Perceptions of rural migrant parents about their children's education**

Our survey showed that most parents had ambitions for their children's future that included a good education. More than half of the parents (51.9%) hoped that their children would obtain a bachelor's degree in the future versus 24.8% who hoped that their children would earn a master's degree, 13.6% who hoped that their children would finish high school or tertiary education, 3.2% who hoped that their children would finish middle school, 0.9% who hoped that their children would finish primary school, and 5.6% who hoped that their children would learn to read and write. These data indicate that most of the parents had high hopes for their children's educational attainment.

Our survey showed that among all the rural migrant parents whose children were enrolled in public school, 63.2% felt that it was easy for their children to enroll in a public school. In contrast, 29.3% reported difficulties, 7.1% reported severe difficulties and 0.4% expressed no opinion. We found significant differences in perceived access to a public schools among the three urban categories ( $F = 4.394$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The access to a public school was perceived as being easier for children in medium and small cities than in big cities (Table 5).

Our survey found that 46.8% of the parents believed that currently charged extra school fees were "affordable"; in contrast, 47.3% believed that they could afford to pay the fees with moderate to severe difficulty (Table 6), and 5.9% considered the fees "unaffordable." Significant differences existed in the perceived affordability among the three urban categories ( $\chi^2 = 66.706$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The perceived affordability of the extra school fees was greater in medium and small cities than in big cities.

In addition, 7.7% of the parents believed that their children were not treated as well as urban children. To explain this perception, 69.7% of the parents attributed the inequality to the higher extra school fees than those charged from local urban children, versus 18.4% who attributed it to negative attitudes that teachers and urban

**Table 5.** Perception of the ease of access to a public school by rural migrant parents

City category	Perceived access: no. of responses (% of total)				Total
	Easy	Difficult	Very difficult	No opinion	
Big	599 (60.6%)	298 (30.1%)	87 (8.8%)	5 (0.5%)	989
Medium	863 (64.9%)	385 (28.9%)	81 (6.1%)	1 (0.1%)	1330
Small	408 (63.9%)	184 (28.8%)	43 (6.7%)	3 (0.5%)	638
Total	1870 (63.2%)	867 (29.3%)	211 (7.1%)	9 (0.4%)	2957
ANOVA results	$F(2, 2954) = 4.394, p < 0.05$				

**Table 6.** Perceived affordability of extra school fees for rural migrants' children

City category	Affordability: no. of responses (% of total)			Total
	Affordable	Affordable with some difficulty	Unaffordable	
Big	489 (38.1%)	694 (54.1%)	99 (7.8%)	1282
Medium	710 (51.8%)	592 (43.2%)	68 (5%)	1370
Small	353 (53.2%)	283 (42.6%)	28 (4.2%)	664
Total	1552 (46.8%)	1569 (47.3%)	195 (5.9%)	3316
Statistical significance	$\chi^2 = 66.706, p < 0.001$			

children showed towards their children, 5% attributed it to discrimination, 2% who attributed it to their poor family income, and 4.9% who attributed it to other reasons. This indicates that the higher extra school fees are important factor that is perceived to affect educational equality of rural migrant children with local urban children.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The causes that restrict access of rural migrants' children to urban public schools have long been debated by scholars (Du, 2004; Zhou, 2004; Wu, 2007). The present study investigated the availability of schooling facilities to these children and analyzed the factors that affect their access to public schools in urban areas as well as the perception of their parents. The disparities in allocation of resources between rural and urban residents are the forces that are driving these families and their children into urban areas. The insufficient public education resources and limited enrolling capacity of public schools are challenged by the substantial inflow of rural migrant populations as a result of China's rapid urbanization.

Furthermore, such factors as school discrimination (higher extra fees), lower incomes, and higher mobility of migrant families (leading to difficulty in bringing their children to and from public schools) have made it difficult for their children to enroll in a public school. In practice, the government's policy of educating these children has been compromised by a complicated array of factors due to the challenges that face local education authorities and public schools. As a result of these factors, rural migrants' children have been marginalized and denied equal access to the compulsory education offered to urban

children, and this phenomenon is more severe in big cities and economically developed cities. The educational dilemma faced by these children reflects the imbalance in the resources allocated to rural and urban residents, and has, therefore, damaged China's social harmony and stability. To solve this problem, governments, at all levels, must improve their understanding of the problems faced by these migrant populations and find ways to give them equality with urban citizens. To accomplish this, it will be necessary to gradually implement institutional reforms. Based on the results of our study, we have several specific recommendations for achieving these reforms:

#### **Provide more educational resources to rural migrants' children by integrating their education within urban education development planning.**

Currently, the performance of governments and education authorities are evaluated using a statistical system that is based on household registration (i.e., that focuses on registered urban residents) and that excludes the population of migrant workers from consideration because they are not considered to be registered urban residents. The governments of urban areas that are receiving the rural migrants should account for the education problems faced by these children during education development planning. In particular, the school distribution should be designed to facilitate the education of these children. Governments should develop schools for these children nearer to the place where their families live by either building or renovating schools specifically for these children and by allocating sufficient funds and sufficient high-quality education resources for these

schools.

For existing private schools that enroll these children, problems such as unstable resources, changing school locations, insufficient resource inputs, and short-term planning must be overcome by providing appropriate long-term government assistance. In addition, the responsibility for solving the education problems of these children should be strengthened and integrated into the assessment and evaluation system for measuring government performance to ensure that permanent and temporary urban residents are treated equally. Education authorities should cooperate closely with other government agencies to regularly supervise and monitor the situation to ensure that policies designed to solve the problems faced by these students are fully implemented.

### **Punish schools that illegally charge extra school fees**

Our survey revealed that most rural migrant parents were charged extra school fees, which is an important evidence to show the unequal treatment meted out to their children. Governments should enhance their management and supervision activities to detect this illegal action and should heavily punish schools that charge illegal fees. However, to avoid the need for schools to charge extra fees to cover their expenses, additional funding should be provided to these schools so that these extra fees are no longer necessary.

### **Provide additional support (teachers, support staff, and funding) to public schools that enroll rural migrants' children.**

Migrant workers are in high demand to sustain China's urban development, and because of their importance for China's economy, the government should pay special attention to their needs, including education of their children. As we have noted in this paper, the burden on school management created by these children can only be eased by providing adequate resources. Some of these students with low school performance require more attention from teachers and other staff. The increase in student numbers and staff workload require a corresponding increase in the number of teachers and support staff. In addition, government incentives should be earmarked for public schools based on the number of children they receive.

### **Establish "mobile schools" on the outskirts of urban areas where rural migrants are clustered.**

In response to the shortfall in education resources, governments should earmark special funds to build "mobile" schools on the outskirts of cities where rural

migrants are concentrated. Our survey found that school location is a very important factor that affects school selection by rural migrants and that the difficulty of bringing their children to schools at fixed, unsuitable locations is a major problem. Therefore, the establishment of mobile schools capable of being relocated nearer to these families and providing improved transportation options such as school buses will both promote enrollment of their children in public schools and make it easier for rural migrants to relocate when it is necessary to seek new employment.

### **Provide financial support to licensed private schools that enroll rural migrants' children and integrate them into the formal school management system to encourage them to provide better educational services.**

The education of rural migrants' children is the responsibility of government. In practice, many private schools have been sharing this responsibility with the government. Most scholars have argued that these schools should therefore receive financial support from the government and enjoy the same rights as public schools. Especially after abolishing the collection of extra school fees, these schools will face greater financial difficulties. Therefore, governments should earmark special funds for these schools to replace the lost income and should integrate them into the formal school management system so that they can receive treatment equal to that of public schools in terms of assessment of the qualification of teachers and promotion opportunities.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

This research was funded by the World Bank (grant number: TF055794) and the Ministry of Education of China. The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of government authorities of study areas in conducting this research. Sincere thanks are extended to all stakeholders for actively and patiently participating in questionnaire survey process.

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