

# Examining the Burden Reduction Policy for Primary and Secondary School Teachers in China: A Framework Analysis Centered on the Rational Selection of Institutional Doctrine

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**Abstract:** The “burden reduction” policy aims to reduce the workload of primary and secondary school teachers to alleviate their burdens. While it has improved the quality of teachers, implementation challenges still exist. This study utilizes rational choice institutionalism and Ostrom’s institutional analysis and development framework to examine the policy. By considering the preferences of the Ministry of Education, local governments, schools, and teachers, it explores interactions and outcomes, identifies challenges, and provides policy suggestions.

**Keywords:** Primary and secondary school teachers; Reducing burden; Rational selection institutional doctrine; Institutional analysis and development framework

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the issue of teacher burden has hindered the professional development of teachers. In December 2019, the Party Central Committee and the State Council of China issued “Opinions on Reducing the Burden of Primary and Secondary School Teachers”<sup>[1]</sup>. This policy document aims to alleviate the burden on teachers and has received national attention. After three years of implementation, the policy has achieved certain results but also faces challenges<sup>[2]</sup>. The impact on teachers has been limited and, in some cases, worsened<sup>[3]</sup>. This study examines whether these problems stem from the policy itself or inadequate implementation. It also explores strategies to address and improve the challenges faced in implementing the policy.

Elinor Ostrom, a representative of the Chicago School, paid special attention to solving the problems in public decision-making through institutional arrangements and proposed the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework for empirical analysis. In the IAD framework, the priority is to determine the action stage, and the combination of the actors and the action context. These two variables interact under the influence of external factors and cause a direct or indirect reaction to the action stage. Actors identify

problems in the system by assessing interaction patterns and outcomes, and drive policy updates. According to the analysis framework, the following analysis steps can be determined: determine the action stage under the specific institutional arrangement; analyze the interaction mode between actors; evaluate the system; and improve the action stage<sup>[4]</sup>. The actors in the action stage will provide feedback and evaluate the policies to achieve institutional innovation.

## 2. Policy description

In the IAD framework, the first step in the analysis system is to confirm the action stage. The so-called action stage refers to the social space in which individual actors interact, exchange goods and services, solve problems, and dominate or struggle with each other<sup>[5]</sup>. It can be used to analyze, predict, and explain behavior under institutional arrangements. The action stage includes two groups of variables: an actor and an action situation.

The policy to reduce the burden of primary and secondary school teachers involves multiple actors, including the Ministry of Education, local governments, schools, and teachers. The Ministry of Education prioritizes the public interest by creating a favorable teaching environment and improving teaching quality. Local governments implement the policy while considering regional circumstances, and schools aim to attract high-quality students by enabling teachers to focus on teaching. Teachers desire reduced work burden and pressure to invest more effectively in education. The decision control and information advantage of the Ministry of Education influence policy formulation, while local governments, schools, and teachers make rational choices based on limited information.

## 3. Behavior explanation

The institutional doctrine of rational choice assumes that individuals are “rational people” who pursue the maximization of their own interests. They obtain relevant information in the action stage and use all resources as much as possible to meet their own preferences. The information in the action situation will affect the prediction of the behavioral results, thus affecting the behavior of the actors<sup>[6]</sup>.

The Ministry of Education aims to reduce the burden on teachers and provide them with more time to improve their teaching quality. However, non-teaching tasks have increasingly occupied teachers’ time, resulting in teaching becoming a secondary priority. The burden reduction policy for primary and secondary school teachers is intended to improve teachers’ quality and enhance education. Local governments play a role in implementing the policy but face challenges in its execution. Higher requirements and a lack of incentives for policy executors lead to delays and weak implementation. Primary and secondary schools prioritize their interests and aim to improve teaching quality. However, limited autonomy and government-assigned tasks hinder the effectiveness of burden-reduction efforts. Additionally, non-teaching burdens often transform into teaching burdens, further adding to teachers’ workload. Teachers have limited influence on policy implementation and lack teaching autonomy. Despite the burden reduction policy, they still accept tasks assigned by superiors due to career development concerns and workplace pressure.

## 4. Policy evaluation

Ostrom summarizes the criteria for assessing policies: economic efficiency, fairness in financing equilibrium, fairness in redistribution, accountability, and consistency with universal morality<sup>[7]</sup>. The purpose of reducing the burden of primary and secondary school teachers is to reduce the burden of teachers, create a secure

teaching environment for teachers, and improve the quality of education, so its policy objectives are consistent with universal morality<sup>[8]</sup>. From these aspects, the current policy of teacher burden reduction has shown certain effectiveness, but due to the opportunistic behavior of actors and the influence of external variables, the effect of teacher burden reduction policy is far less than people expected. The following part evaluates the policy of reducing the burden of Chinese primary and secondary school teachers from three aspects<sup>[9]</sup>.

#### **4.1. Policy efficiency**

Efficiency analysis is crucial in evaluating the effectiveness of teacher burden reduction policies. Currently, the implementation of burden-reduction policies for primary and secondary school teachers in China incurs high costs and offers relatively low returns. Transferring non-teaching tasks from teachers to government departments increases the operational costs of these departments and places higher demands on their governance capabilities<sup>[10]</sup>.

#### **4.2. Policy accountability**

The effectiveness of teacher burden reduction policies is influenced by the imperfect accountability mechanism. Drawing on the hypothesis of “rational economic man,” different actors make rational choices to maximize their personal interests<sup>[11]</sup>. To prevent opportunistic behavior, supervision and accountability play a pivotal role in policy implementation. However, the lack of investigation and adjustment of issues in the burden reduction lists formulated by various provinces, as well as the lack of scientific nature in policy texts, hampers effective policy implementation<sup>[12]</sup>.

#### **4.3. Policy adaptability**

There is a need to strengthen the adaptability of burden-reduction policies for primary and secondary school teachers. The current challenges faced by these policies stem from both their formulation and the influence of other related policies<sup>[13]</sup>. The policy focus for primary and secondary school teachers in China primarily centers on government departments, neglecting the subjectivity of teachers and failing to address excessive teaching burdens<sup>[14]</sup>. The issuance of policies under the backdrop of “reducing burdens at the grassroots level” has led to formalism and bureaucratic tendencies becoming prevalent in burden-reduction efforts<sup>[15]</sup>.

### **5. Suggestions**

The policy of reducing the burden of primary and secondary school teachers in China is in its initial stage, and challenges have emerged. To achieve the goal of reducing teacher burdens and improving public satisfaction, innovative system improvements are necessary. This can be achieved through effective coordination, supervision, and feedback mechanisms. Clear delineation of roles and responsibilities among relevant departments should be promoted to ensure coordination and cooperation. Strengthened supervision and an accountability mechanism will deter policy violations. Establishing an information communication platform will facilitate feedback and information exchange. Additionally, policymakers should improve the policy content by addressing non-teaching tasks and unreasonable burdens in education. Coordination among multiple policies should be ensured to avoid increasing burdens unintentionally.

### **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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