

ARTICLE

The current situation of rural teacher resource allocation in western China Investigation and Research (Taking Jingning County of Gansu Province as an Example)

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: 22 December 2025

Accepted: 24 December 2025

Published Online: 30 December 2025

Keywords:

rural teachers

resource allocation

development planning

ABSTRACT

For China's western regions, rural education is key to promoting rural revitalization and achieving high-quality, balanced regional education development. The stability of the rural teaching workforce is even more crucial for ensuring educational equity and advancing the integrated development of regional education toward high-quality balance. Since 2020, when Gansu Province as a whole passed the national assessment for balanced compulsory education at the county level, it has implemented teacher recruitment policies such as the Special Post Program, "Three Supports and One Assistance" initiative, the Excellent Teacher Program, free normal students, and primary school all-round teachers to fully equip rural areas with teaching staff and stabilize the rural teaching workforce. However, under the current trend of intensifying urbanization, declining rural populations, and annual contraction of rural education, how is the allocation of rural teachers? Can the current status of the rural teaching workforce meet the new demands of social development on rural education? This paper takes Jingning County in Pingliang City, Gansu Province—a region bordering Ningxia, Gansu, Shaanxi, and Sichuan—as a case study to investigate the allocation and status of rural teachers in western China.

Introduction

Article 29 of the Outline for Building a Strong Education Nation (2024-2035), jointly issued by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council, proposes to optimize teacher management and resource allocation.^① Vigorously building a team of teachers with noble ethics, excellent qualities, and a willingness to take root in rural areas is not only a key move to achieve a strong education nation but also a fundamental prerequisite for improving

the quality of education in rural schools. In recent years, with the large-scale migration of rural populations from China's western regions to cities and the annual decline in birth rates, rural schools have also experienced structural changes characterized by a decreasing number of students. In response, rural schools have undergone mergers and adjustments, leading to current issues such as an overall sufficient number of teachers, shortages in specialized subject teachers and teaching assistants, and the loss of outstanding teachers. These problems have become the

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weakest link in consolidating the basic balance of compulsory education in regions and have also affected the overall advancement from basic balance to high-quality balance in regional education.

1. The proportion of rural teachers is still relatively high

In order to find out the actual situation of the allocation of the teachers in the western rural areas, the author has carried out a survey in 249 rural primary and secondary schools in Pingliang City and Jingning County.

The 2024-2025 academic year saw the county's student population distributed as follows: 50,533 students in total, including 26,474 in primary schools, 14,409 in junior high schools, 9,517 in senior high schools, and 133 in special education schools. Among primary school students, 8,050 were from rural areas, accounting for 16% of the total. Junior high school enrollment included 6,219 rural students (including those from five comprehensive high schools' junior departments), representing 12.3% of the total. Senior high school students were 2,766 rural residents, making up 5.5% of the county's student population. Rural students totaled 17,035, constituting 33.8% of the county's student body, with this proportion expected to remain relatively stable from 2026 to 2030.

The 2024-2025 academic year saw a total of 5,561 teaching and administrative staff in the county's primary and secondary schools, including 2,619 primary school teachers, 1,803 junior high school teachers, 1,112 senior high school teachers, and 27 special education teachers. In terms of urban and rural distribution, urban schools had 2,657 staff members, comprising 1,188 primary school teachers, 673 junior high school teachers, 769 senior high school teachers, and 27 special education teachers, accounting for 47.8% of the total. Rural schools had 2,904 staff members, including 1,431 primary school teachers, 1,130 junior high school teachers, and 343 senior high school teachers, representing 52.2% of the total. Notably, rural schools accounted for over half of the county's teaching and administrative staff, making up 52.2% of the total.

In summary, in the economically underdeveloped provinces of western China, rural education still accounts for a significant proportion, and the allocation of rural education teachers remains higher than that in county urban areas, and this will not change significantly in the foreseeable future. This indicates that the rural teacher workforce in western China still plays a dominant role in regional education, serves as the main force in promoting educational equity, and is also an important guarantee for implementing the education safety net project in the revitalization of rural China.

Second, the stability of rural teachers can be effectively guaranteed

In order to ensure a stable rural teaching staff, Jingning County in Gansu Province has made a coordinated effort in teacher supplementation, ability promotion and treatment guarantee.

First, a diversified mechanism for replenishing rural teachers ensures team stability. To address the shortage of specialized teachers in subjects like English, science and technology, information technology, labor, physical education, and arts at rural primary schools and teaching points, Jingning County has, within the scope of higher-level policies, continuously recruited specialized teachers for rural schools since 2022 through methods such as hiring for scarce specialties, special post teacher recruitment, and provincial selection of volunteer teachers. The replenishment volume accounts for over 56% of the county's total annual teacher replenishment, fundamentally alleviating the weak faculty and structural shortages in rural schools.

Second, stable salary policies ensure teachers professional stability. Jingning County in Gansu Province has established comprehensive incentive mechanisms for schools, principals, and teachers. These include performance evaluation guidelines for school staff and a plan to enhance salary security for primary and secondary school teachers. The county government fully funds the implementation of policies such as tiered performance-based pay for rural teachers, class teacher allowances, township work subsidies, and rural living subsidies. Rural teachers earn 530-1,100 yuan more monthly than urban counterparts, enabling them to dedicate themselves to rural education.

Third, multi-tiered capacity-building training ensures high professional standards. Jingning County in Gansu Province, while rigorously implementing national, provincial, municipal, and county-level teacher training programs, has intensified school-based training. This focuses on training new teachers, basic subject teachers in classroom teaching reforms, and knowledge integration in scarce professional disciplines. Through activities like collective lesson planning, curriculum research, classroom teaching competitions, and symposiums, the county promotes practical achievements in new curriculum reforms and efficient classroom construction, thereby enhancing the overall educational quality of rural schools. Meanwhile, the "Internet + Teacher Education" initiative integrates information technology with teacher training, adopting a blended online-offline research and training model. This effectively addresses the lack of teaching research capabilities among rural school teachers, enabling

them to balance online teaching guidance with self-improvement through research, achieving mutual enhancement.

III. Problems in the Allocation and Construction of Rural Teachers

Through the survey of the teacher-student ratio in Pingliang City, Gansu Province, especially the teacher allocation in 13 primary and secondary schools in 6 townships of Jingning County, the following prominent problems are found:

First, the issue of surplus teachers in rural schools is relatively prominent. Taking Pingliang City in Gansu Province as an example, during the 2024-2025 academic year, there were 41,116 students and 6,903 full-time teachers in rural schools at the compulsory education stage, with a student-teacher ratio of 1:5.9. Among them, rural primary schools had 30,192 students and 2,032 full-time teachers, with a student-teacher ratio of 1:14.8; rural junior high schools had 10,924 students and 1,946 full-time teachers, with a student-teacher ratio of 1:5.6. The student-teacher ratio in rural schools across the city is far higher than the national standard of 1:21. Taking Jingning County in Gansu Province as an example, there were 188 rural villages and teaching points with fewer than 100 students, with 1,624 students and 642 teachers, resulting in a student-teacher ratio of 1:2.5. There were 180 villages with fewer than 50 students, with 963 students and 472 teachers, resulting in a student-teacher ratio of 1:2. There were 175 villages with fewer than 30 students, with 749 students and 419 teachers, resulting in a student-teacher ratio of 1:1.8. There were 143 villages with fewer than 10 students, with 234 students and 197 teachers, resulting in a student-teacher ratio of 1:1.2. In Balia Town Junior High School, there were 25 teachers and 64 students, resulting in a student-teacher ratio of 1:2.5; in Balia Town Central Primary School, there were 21 teachers and 66 students, resulting in a student-teacher ratio of 1:3.1. The above data sufficiently illustrates that the overall surplus of rural education teachers in western China is relatively prominent. This phenomenon not only increases the difficulty of educational management but also leads to the waste of teachers, school buildings, and facilities.

Secondly, the structural shortage of specialized rural teachers is a pressing issue. In Jingning County, Gansu Province, the 1:23 teacher-to-student ratio for the 2024-2025 academic year indicates that while the county has sufficient teachers to meet basic teaching needs, there is a critical shortage of specialized instructors in subjects like music, physical education, information technology,

art, and science. Notably, 89.8% of these subjects in rural schools are taught by non-specialized teachers. For example, Weirong Comprehensive Middle School has 85 teachers, with only 9 (1%) specializing in music, physical education, or art. Similarly, the towns central primary school has 42 teachers, with merely 5 (1.2%) qualified for these specialized subjects. This structural shortage results in courses that are either nominal or of poor quality, severely hindering the holistic development and core competency enhancement of rural students.

Thirdly, rural high school teachers generally possess lower academic qualifications. Annual statistics from Jingning County, Gansu Province reveal that among the three rural comprehensive high schools in the county, only 8% of faculty members hold postgraduate degrees, are state-funded normal students, or participate in the Excellent Teacher Program. Furthermore, teachers recruited through the Special Post Program or the Provincial Three Supports Program (a provincial-level teacher recruitment initiative) often lack practical training in basic education materials and teaching methodologies, as their institutions only offer general knowledge courses. This disconnect between theoretical knowledge and classroom practice results in weak professional competence and overall low teaching quality, which directly impacts both classroom instruction and students holistic development. Consequently, rural high schools face significant challenges in adapting to the new college entrance examination reforms and improving teaching standards, making it difficult for them to compete with urban high schools in county-level cities.

In light of the above, the research data from Jingning County, Gansu Province, profoundly reveals the deep-seated contradictions faced by the construction of rural teacher teams in western China during the “post-equilibrium era.” The current issue is no longer limited to a shortage of teachers but has evolved into a complex situation of “overall surplus coexisting with structural shortages.” On one hand, small-scale schools lead to the “idle” and wasteful use of staffing resources; on the other hand, the structural shortage of specialized teachers and their relatively low educational qualifications severely hinder the improvement of educational quality. This necessitates moving beyond traditional teacher allocation thinking. By deepening the “county-managed, school-hired” reform to activate existing resources, implementing “targeted training” to optimize new hires, and adopting multiple measures to promote the high-quality transformation of rural teacher teams from “quantity” to “quality,” we can lay a solid educational foundation for rural revitalization.

4. We must make a targeted effort to improve the allocation and construction of rural teachers

Teachers are the foundation of education and the source of education.^② Maintaining a stable and professional rural teacher workforce is a crucial task in ensuring educational equity, promoting rural revitalization, and achieving a strong education nation by establishing education rooted in China. According to a survey on the teacher allocation and development in Jingning County, Gansu Province, it is essential to optimize the dynamic adjustment mechanism of staffing from the top-level design and intensify targeted supplementation of teachers in scarce disciplines to truly achieve the revitalization of rural education.

The first measure involves upgrading the qualifications for special post teachers. By offering preferential living wage policies, we aim to attract and incentivize government-funded normal university students, participants in the Excellent Teacher Program, and outstanding graduates from teacher-training programs to join rural teaching teams. The recruitment requirements for rural special post teachers will now mandate a bachelors degree or higher in teacher education, raising the entry threshold for rural school educators. This initiative seeks to fundamentally improve the academic qualifications and professional expertise of rural teachers, injecting fresh vitality into rural education and addressing the core issue of insufficient professionalization.^③

Second, fully utilize the targeted training policy for primary school general education teachers. Education authorities at all levels, including the Ministry of Education, provincial education departments, and municipal/county education bureaus, should annually conduct comprehensive assessments of rural teacher workforce conditions and specific needs—particularly the demand for primary school general education teachers. Through systematic customized training programs, they should cultivate a group of versatile teachers who are “capable of fieldwork, retention, and effective teaching,” thereby stabilizing rural school teaching teams and addressing the structural imbalances in some rural schools.^④

Third, we will continue to implement teacher support and exchange programs. Under the “county-managed, school-hired” policy framework, urban schools will leverage their experienced teachers to address rural schools shortages in key subjects and specialized courses. These teachers, including subject leaders and master teachers, will rotate to rural schools for teaching support and professional exchanges. Meanwhile, township-level music, art, and IT specialists will conduct mobile teaching at vil-

lage primary schools and teaching points. This initiative aims to resolve the lack of qualified teachers and improve teaching quality in rural areas, ensuring students receive authentic instruction in music, physical education, and arts.^⑤

Fourth, we will advance urban-rural school integration in a proactive yet measured manner. A school consortium model will be established, where urban schools serve 2-3 rural schools. Through teacher rotation, joint teaching research, special needs teacher deployment, and on-the-job training, this model will establish a rational mobility mechanism for core teachers, a teacher training system, and an integrated curriculum teaching system, thereby promoting professional development. Outstanding core teachers will receive greater recognition, making their flexible mobility the new norm. By leveraging the mentorship of master teachers, we aim to achieve deep integration and mutual benefit in urban-rural educational resources.

In summary, the case of Jingning County in Gansu Province profoundly reveals that the current construction of rural teacher teams in western China is at a critical transition point. We must not only confront the resource waste caused by the “inverted student-to-teacher ratio in small-scale schools,” but also address the structural staffing shortages resulting from “teaching unrelated to students actual needs.” More importantly, we must focus on enhancing the professional competence of rural high school teachers to meet the challenges of the new college entrance examination system. This is not merely a simple issue of personnel allocation, but a profound transformation involving educational philosophies, resource allocation mechanisms, and talent cultivation models. In pursuit of Chinas goal of building a strong education nation, we must clearly recognize that the quality of rural education directly determines the foundation and success of rural revitalization. In the future, governments at all levels, education administrative departments, and all sectors of society must continue to make efforts: to replenish the source of vitality through more precise “order-based” training, to activate existing resources through more flexible “county-managed school-hired” and “itinerant teaching” mechanisms, and to retain outstanding talents with more generous benefits and broader development opportunities. Only by truly establishing a high-quality, professional rural teacher team that “goes down, stays, and teaches well” can the sunshine of educational equity shine in every corner of the countryside, laying the most solid foundation for building a strong education nation.

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