

Policy Implementation Gaps in Compulsory Education for Migrant Children: a Case Study of Jinan

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Abstract: The compulsory education policy for migrant children is a major livelihood policy involving the vital interests of tens of millions of school-age children and hundreds of millions of migrant people. At the national level, a policy framework of "Two Priorities," "Two Inclusions," and "Two Unifications" has been established, but the process of moving from central decision-making to local implementation still faces many practical obstacles. Taking Jinan City as a case, this paper uses policy text analysis and comparative analysis to systematically compare the most recent enrollment policy documents of the 13 districts and counties under its jurisdiction for 2025. First, it reveals inter-district policy differences along three dimensions: access conditions, policy instruments, and admission methods. It finds that the compulsory education policy for migrant children in Jinan City presents a fragmented pattern of "unified commitment at the municipal level but decentralized implementation at the district level," with significant differences across districts in aspects such as guardian conditions, social insurance years, housing requirements, and scoring standards. Second, it analyzes the practical challenges of policy implementation at three levels: fragmentation of access conditions, structural imbalances in resource allocation, and the absence of supervision and accountability mechanisms. It points out that inconsistent access conditions across districts create unequal opportunities, and the points-based system produces implicit exclusion of vulnerable groups despite the appearance of formal equality. Third, it identifies the institutional roots of the challenges along three dimensions: central-local fiscal relations, institutional path dependence, and the lack of supervision mechanisms. Finally, it proposes policy recommendations in three areas: lowering enrollment barriers, improving

funding guarantees, and establishing oversight and accountability mechanisms. This study provides a city case study for understanding policy implementation deviations in local government, and also offers a reference for optimizing compulsory education policies for migrant children in similar cities.

Keywords: Migrant Children; Compulsory Education; Policy Implementation Gaps; Enrollment Barriers; Jinan

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

China is a large country with a large migrant population. According to the data from the seventh national census conducted in 2020, the total migrant population in the country reached 376 million, accounting for more than a quarter of the total population^[1]. Behind this huge migrant population, there is a considerable number of migrant children. According to the national education development statistics released by the Ministry of Education, in 2024, the number of migrant workers' children in compulsory education nationwide was 13,088,300, of which 9,038,100 were enrolled in primary schools and 4,050,200 were enrolled in junior high schools^[2]. This means that, in China's urban schools today, migrant children have become a group of undeniable significance. Whether these children can enjoy equal access to education in their host cities not only concerns the core interests of tens of millions of families but also serves as an important benchmark of China's progress in advancing educational equity. Looking back over the course of the twenty-first century, one can see that the state has consistently and continuously paid attention to the education of migrant children. The State Council's Decision on the Reform and Development of Basic Education, issued in 2001,

for the first time clarified at the national level the "Two Priorities" approach, namely that the governments of host cities should assume primary management responsibility and that public schools should serve as the main channel for enrollment^[3]. The National New-Type Urbanization Plan (2014–2020), released in 2014, further required that migrant children's education be incorporated into cities' overall development planning and fiscal guarantee systems, a policy framework referred to as the "Two Inclusions"^[4]. In 2015, the State Council established a unified urban-rural education funding guarantee mechanism and explicitly required that the residence permit serve as the basic credential for migrant children's school enrollment, thereby forming the "Two Unifications" policy arrangement^[5]. In 2019, China's Education Modernization 2035 outlined a long-range blueprint in which the enrollment treatment of migrant children would gradually converge with that of local children with household registration^[6]. From this policy evolution, it is clearly evident that the national-level objective has shifted from solving the problem of "whether there is a school to attend" to the higher-level pursuit of "whether a quality school can be attended."

Despite the increasingly refined top-level design, a considerable gap remains between policy texts and their actual implementation. Current policies still encounter practical challenges in local enforcement, including excessive enrollment barriers, imbalanced resource allocation, and inadequate oversight and accountability mechanisms. As a result, the right of migrant children to equal access to compulsory education has yet to be fully guaranteed.

Jinan is the capital of Shandong Province and one of the key central cities in the Bohai Rim region. As the provincial capital of a relatively developed coastal area in eastern China, Jinan has long been a major destination for migrant workers and business people. In recent years, along with urban expansion and industrial restructuring, the continuous growth of the migrant population has correspondingly increased the demand for compulsory education for migrant children. Against this backdrop, in the process of implementing national policies, the districts and counties under Jinan's jurisdiction have formulated distinctive enrollment measures for migrant children based on their own regional conditions and educational

resources. It is worth noting that, in addition to the ten municipal districts—Lixia, Shizhong, Huaiyin, Tianqiao, Licheng, Changqing, Zhangqiu, Jiyang, Laiwu, and Gangcheng—and the two counties of Pingyin and Shanghe, the Jinan High-Tech Industrial Development Zone, although not a statutory administrative division, has an independent Education, Culture and Sports Department that separately formulates and implements compulsory education enrollment policies, and is therefore included within the analytical scope of this study. The research covers the above-mentioned thirteen districts and counties. The variations in policy provisions among these districts and counties provide a window for observing the logic of local government policy implementation and help to explore the universal problems in implementing compulsory education policies for migrant children. Based on the above background, this paper takes Jinan as a case study to systematically analyze the implementation challenges and optimization pathways of its compulsory education policies for migrant children.

1.2 Research Significance

First, at the theoretical level, existing academic research on the education policy for migrant children is mostly focused on policy analysis at the national macro level, or on specific issues such as enrollment barriers and funding security. Relatively few studies have taken a single city as a case to conduct an in-depth analysis of policy differences across its internal districts. Taking Jinan as a case, this paper compares the policy provisions of thirteen districts and counties within the city and analyzes the formation logic of policy differences within the same city from the perspective of policy implementation deviations, thereby providing a concrete case study for understanding the local-level implementation of the compulsory education policy for migrant children.

Second, at the practical level, Jinan, as a provincial capital city with net population inflow, is representative to some degree among similar cities in terms of the education of migrant children. By comprehensively reviewing and comparing the policies of Jinan's various districts horizontally, this article clearly presents the specific problems in current policy implementation, offering a reference for education authorities to optimize relevant

policies and unify implementation standards.

1.3 Research Methods

This paper mainly adopts policy text analysis and comparative analysis. The study collects the latest compulsory education enrollment policy documents for migrant children issued at the national level, the Shandong provincial level, and in the thirteen districts and counties of Jinan City, and systematically interprets the policies of each district along three dimensions: enrollment conditions, policy instruments, and admission methods. On this basis, a cross-district horizontal comparison of the differences in enrollment conditions, documentation requirements, and admission methods across districts is carried out to reveal the specific manifestations of policy implementation deviation.

1.4 Conceptual Definitions

First, migrant children. In academic research and policy documents, this group has been referred to by various terms, such as floating children, children of migrant workers, and accompanying children of migrant workers. In this paper, migrant children refer to school-age children who follow their parents or other legal guardians away from their place of household registration to receive compulsory education in urban areas or townships. A more common expression in the policy texts of Jinan's various districts and counties is "accompanying children of migrant workers." It should be noted that each district's definition of the household registration boundary of this concept is not exactly the same, and this difference itself is a manifestation of policy fragmentation.

Second, compulsory education policy implementation. Policy implementation is the process of transforming policy texts into concrete actions, involving the step-by-step decomposition of policy objectives, the formulation and implementation of implementation plans, and the evaluation of implementation outcomes, among other aspects. In this paper, this concept specifically refers to the process by which governments at all levels and relevant functional departments in Jinan transform the provisions on compulsory education for migrant children into specific work practices such as setting enrollment conditions, arranging school place supply, and guaranteeing education funding, in accordance with national

and provincial policy requirements.

Third, policy implementation deviation. Implementation deviation refers to the gap between the actual effects of policy implementation and the expected objectives at the time of policy formulation. Its manifestations include: superficial implementation without substantive action, selective implementation of only certain provisions, adding extra conditions during implementation, and replacing the original policy requirements with different practices. In the field of compulsory education for migrant children, implementation deviation is specifically manifested in requiring parents to provide additional documentation beyond what is stipulated by policy, unequal opportunities caused by inconsistent enrollment conditions across districts, and the implicit exclusion of vulnerable groups through points-based ranking systems. This paper's analysis of the policy differences and implementation challenges across districts in Jinan City revolves around this concept.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Literature Review

2.1.1 Research on the evolution of compulsory education policies for migrant children
Regarding the evolutionary trajectory of compulsory education policies for migrant children, the scholarly community has already produced relatively systematic findings. Some researchers have synthesized the relevant policies since the reform and opening-up into four distinct stages. The first stage, spanning the 1980s, was one in which the problem had only just begun to surface and the policy landscape remained largely empty—there were virtually no dedicated regulations addressing the issue. The second stage, extending through the 1990s, saw the problem of migrant children's access to schooling grow increasingly acute, forcing a passive policy response, though the overarching approach during this period was still dominated by regulation and control. The third stage stretched from the early 21st century to the period just before the 18th Party Congress, and it can be characterized as a time of heightened attention and active problem-solving; notably, following the establishment of the "Two Priorities" policy in 2001, the underlying policy philosophy underwent a fundamental shift,

gradually moving from "restrict and limit" toward "protect and guarantee." The fourth stage, beginning after the 18th Party Congress, has been marked by a broader range of approaches and more diverse measures: the "Two Inclusions" and "Two Unifications" policies were successively introduced, and while the push toward high-quality educational equity advanced on one front, supporting institutions—such as funding guarantee mechanisms and supervision and evaluation systems—were also gradually constructed on the other^[7].

Other scholars, proceeding from the practical effects of the "Two Priorities" policy, have pointed out that while this policy has largely resolved the problem of "access to schooling" for migrant children, the demand for "access to quality schooling" has become increasingly prominent. Host city governments, in the course of policy implementation, face obstacles such as significant fiscal pressures, limited capacity of public schools, and a lack of diversified enrollment pathways. Achieving the transition from "access to schooling" to "access to quality schooling" holds significant implications for promoting educational equity^[8].

2.1.2 Research on policy implementation challenges

The issue of enrollment barriers is one of the most widely examined topics in the existing literature. Taking the Yangtze River Delta urban agglomeration as a sample, one study found that cities employ two primary models to set enrollment thresholds—document-based admission and points-based admission—and that a significant negative correlation exists between enrollment barriers and the likelihood of children migrating with their parents. Specifically, the probability of children's accompanying migration in cities with high enrollment barriers was 55% lower than in cities with low barriers, and this effect was more pronounced among low-income groups^[9]. Another study, based on a policy text analysis of 31 provincial capital cities, examined the policies regulating migrant children's trans-jurisdictional senior secondary school entrance examinations from the perspectives of admission conditions, policy instruments, and policy preferences. The findings revealed considerable variation across cities in the selection of policy instruments, the intensity of policy implementation, and the degree of goal attainment^[10].

In more comprehensive analyses of policy implementation challenges, some scholars have drawn together the three dimensions of the "Two Priorities," "Two Inclusions," and "Two Unifications" into a systematic investigation. They pointed out that relying on the "public school enrollment rate" as an evaluation indicator is inherently flawed. Host city governments encounter a difficult dual predicament: insufficient capacity on the one hand, weak willingness on the other; and the points-based admission system, which maintains the appearance of fairness, often ends up producing an invisible form of exclusion against disadvantaged groups in practice^[7].

2.1.3 Research on policy optimization strategies

In response to the challenges described above, researchers have explored optimization strategies from various angles. On one front, concerning enrollment barriers, some scholars have argued for a more rational spatial allocation of educational resources, proposing that the planning and distribution of such resources be gradually restructured around the permanent resident population as the baseline^[9]. On another front, with respect to oversight of policy implementation, scholars have recommended bringing the compulsory education policy for migrant children within the scope of national tracking audits of major policy measures, drawing on the independence and professionalism of the national audit system to fill the gaps that remain in the current supervisory framework^[7].

2.1.4 Literature review and research gap

A review of the existing literature makes it clear that the bulk of current research has concentrated on policy analysis at the national level or on nation-wide investigations, while the number of studies that go deep into a single city and treat it as a case has remained fairly limited. Moreover, relatively little scholarly attention has been directed toward understanding how policies actually differ from one district to another within the same city, or toward untangling the logic behind how those differences took shape in the first place. It is precisely this gap that the present study sets out to address. Taking Jinan as the case, the paper lays out and systematically compares the enrollment policies for migrant children across all thirteen districts and counties under its jurisdiction, aiming to bring into sharper focus both the concrete manifestations of intra-city policy variation and the

implementation challenges that these variations reveal.

2.2 Theoretical Foundation

2.2.1 Policy implementation theory

Policy implementation is the core link of the public policy process and the key step in turning policy goals into practical results. The field of theoretical research that has developed around policy implementation is known as the theory of policy implementation.

The factors affecting policy implementation can be summarized into five aspects: first, the characteristics of the policy issue itself—the more complex the problem, the more difficult it is to implement; second, the rationality and clarity of the policy content; third, the organizational structure and competence of the implementing agents; fourth, the degree of acceptance of the policy targets; and fifth, political, economic, social, cultural, and other external environmental conditions^[7]. When any one or more of the above factors go wrong, policy implementation results may deviate from the expected objectives. This deviation is referred to as policy implementation deviation, which is also called "implementation obstruction" or "implementation blockage" by some scholars in domestic academic circles.

Regarding the specific manifestations of policy implementation deviation, Ning Sao classified them into seven types, including "symbolic," "additional," "incomplete," "substitutive," "hesitant," "copycat," and "evasive" implementation^[11]. Jin Taijun and others classified them into two categories: policy cognition deviation and policy implementation deviation^[12]. These types are often intertwined in policy practice. In terms of causes, overly general policy objectives create room for implementation deviation. The interest calculations of implementing agents may lead to selective implementation, and the absence of oversight mechanisms allows such deviation to persist.

The subsequent chapters of this study revolve around the core concept of policy implementation. Chapter Three reveals the policy differences across districts, which serve as the spatial manifestation of implementation deviation. Chapter Four analyzes the practical challenges of policy implementation, which represent the concrete presentation of implementation deviations. Chapter Five

explores the causes of these challenges and explains how implementation deviation arises and persists. Chapter Six proposes optimization recommendations that point to pathways for correcting implementation deviation.

3. The Current State of Enrollment Policies for Migrant Children in Jinan

3.1 The Policy Framework at the Shandong Provincial and Jinan Municipal Levels

Shandong Province mainly plays a role in conveying national requirements and setting basic norms in the compulsory education policy for migrant children. In 2025, the Provincial Department of Education forwarded the Ministry of Education's notice on the special initiative for transparent school enrollment, requiring all localities to implement enrollment policies based primarily on residence permits and to streamline documentary requirements^[13]. With regard to funding guarantees, Shandong Province has unified the urban-rural "Two Exemptions and One Subsidy" policy and the baseline per-student public funding standards, promoting the portability of relevant funds as students migrate. However, on operational matters such as the setting of enrollment conditions, scoring criteria, and admission procedures, the provincial level has refrained from issuing uniform regulations, instead delegating discretionary authority to municipalities and districts.

At the municipal level, Jinan has established a relatively systematic policy framework. In 2017, the Implementation Opinions on Further Deepening the Reform of the Household Registration System explicitly mandated that accompanied migrant children be fully incorporated into the city's educational development planning and fiscal guarantee system^[14]. In 2024, the "One-Stop Service for Compulsory Education Enrollment" plan promoted unified online enrollment processing^[15]. In 2025, the "Implementation Plan for Strengthening the Care and Protection of Migrant Children" required that migrant children be enrolled "as fully as possible" and enjoy the same treatment as locally registered children after enrollment^[16]. However, Jinan City likewise refrained from making unified city-wide regulations on enrollment conditions, documentation, and admission procedures, leaving each district to formulate its own detailed rules. This institutional arrangement—

characterized by clear welfare commitments at the municipal level but decentralized operational discretion at the district level—has resulted in families of migrant children in different districts of the same city facing markedly different enrollment barriers.

3.2 A Comparative Analysis of District-Level Enrollment Policies

Based on the most recently issued compulsory education enrollment policy documents (2025) from Jinan's 13 districts and counties, this paper conducts a horizontal comparison across three dimensions: enrollment conditions, policy instruments, and admission procedures.

3.2.1 Enrollment conditions

There are significant differences in enrollment conditions across districts, manifesting primarily in guardian requirements, the duration of social insurance contributions, and housing conditions. In terms of guardian requirements, Licheng District imposes the most stringent regulations: both guardians must have held a residence permit issued by Licheng District for at least six consecutive months and must have been lawfully employed or operated a business in Jinan for at least six consecutive months. Single-parent families or families in which only one guardian meets the conditions are deemed ineligible to apply. Other districts require merely that "at least one guardian" satisfy the relevant conditions.

Regarding the duration of social insurance contributions, most districts calculate the six-month requirement retroactively from August 31 of the enrollment year. Gangcheng District extends the deadline to October 31, making it the most lenient among all districts in terms of the time requirement.

As for housing conditions, the classification treatment of Huaiyin District is the most prominent: those who own property may register without providing a residence permit or a social insurance certificate, whereas those without property are required to provide a residence permit along with either a social insurance certificate or a business license. In effect, property ownership serves as a pathway to bypass the social insurance and residence permit requirements. Changqing District and Pingyin County also have similar regulations. Shanghe County imposes the simplest enrollment conditions, requiring only an identity card, a household registration booklet, a rental contract,

an employment contract, and a residence permit, with no mandatory stipulation regarding the duration of social insurance contributions.

3.2.2 Policy instruments

Across Jinan's districts, two principal types of policy instruments have emerged: the points-based admission system and the condition-based admission system.

The points-based system is adopted in Shizhong, Lixia, Tianqiao, Huaiyin, Licheng, the High-Tech Zone, Jiyang, and Gangcheng. In these districts, applicants are quantitatively scored on the basis of factors such as the duration of their residence permit, social insurance contribution record, and housing status, with admission granted in descending order of total points. Huaiyin District provides the most transparent scoring criteria: one point is awarded for each month of residence permit holdings, and 0.5 points for each month of social insurance contributions or business license holdings; the total score is the sum of the primary applicant's and the co-applicant's scores, capped at 72 months. Jiyang District distinguishes between two channels—"urban employment" and "urban business operation"—each with its own set of scoring factors. Lixia District stipulates that applicants who simultaneously satisfy the criteria for both channels may submit only one; however, if the two channels alternate without interruption, the periods may be combined for continuous point calculation. Gangcheng District explicitly allows materials dating back up to six years for both guardians to serve as the basis for point assignment.

The condition-based admission system is adopted in Changqing, Zhangqiu, Laiwu, Pingyin, and Shanghe. In these districts, no points-based ranking mechanism is employed; instead, applicants who satisfy a basic set of conditions are permitted to register for enrollment. Geographically, the points-based system is concentrated in the central urban districts and inner suburbs, whereas the condition-based system is predominantly found in outlying suburban districts and counties—a spatial pattern that reflects regional disparities in educational resources and demographic pressures.

3.2.3 Admission procedures

The differences among districts in admission procedures are concentrated in three main areas: the order of priority for admission, the way school preferences are submitted, and how

placement is coordinated when school places run short.

To begin with the order of admission, Huaiyin District has drawn the clearest lines, setting up a five-tier priority system. Households that hold both Huaiyin household registration and matching property ownership fall into the first tier; those with Huaiyin household registration but whose property does not match their registration fall into the second; migrant families who own property in Huaiyin or who hold Huaiyin household registration but have no property come third; and migrant families without property are placed in the fourth tier. The High-Tech Zone, by contrast, simply places all migrant children into the third admission batch as a whole. Laiwu District adopts yet another approach: it gives priority placement to school-age children whose household registration, property ownership, and actual residence are all consistent.

Moving to the submission of school preferences, districts such as Shizhong, Lixia, Tianqiao, and Gangcheng all follow a model of "online preference submission plus points-based admission." Tianqiao District follows a fairly typical procedure here: it first sets a minimum admission score for migrant children, announces the number of available places at each school, and then invites parents to submit their preferences; admission is granted in descending order of scores; those who are not admitted in the first round can still participate in a second round of submissions; those who remain unadmitted after both rounds and consent to placement coordination are then assigned by the district education and sports bureau through a unified arrangement.

As for placement coordination, every district retains a fallback mechanism, though the specific practices differ from one to another. Changqing and Pingyin directly assign migrant children from property-owning families to schools in the service area of their property, while renters are placed centrally at the county level. In urban districts like Shizhong and Tianqiao, the policy documents explicitly state that "where school places are limited and eligible children cannot be accommodated, parents are advised to contact the education authorities in their place of household registration as early as possible to arrange schooling." On one level, this language brings the reality of strained school capacity out into the open; on another, it also

reveals, to some extent, a tendency to shift the responsibility for placement back onto the place of household registration.

4. Practical Challenges in Implementing Compulsory Education Policies for Migrant Children in Jinan

4.1 Enrollment Conditions: Admission Barriers and "Conditional Acceptance"

The national policy requires that the residence permit serve as the main basis for arranging migrant children's school enrollment, but districts across Jinan have generally imposed additional conditions such as social insurance and housing in practice, forming a multi-layered barrier system.

First, the inconsistent enrollment conditions across districts create unequal opportunities. Licheng District requires both guardians to meet the conditions, making it the most stringent among all districts; Shanghe County requires only basic documentation, making it the least restrictive. This difference means that whether migrant children can enroll in school—and what kind of school they can attend—depends to a large extent on which district the family rents, creating opportunity inequalities rooted in the fragmentation of the institutional framework.

Second, the sheer volume of required documentation substantially heightens the difficulty of the application process. The enrollment materials required by Shizhong District include at least a household registration booklet, an identity card, a residence permit, proof of employment, proof of residence, among other categories. Tianqiao District requires passenger and freight operators to submit as many as seven or eight types of documentation. Zhangqiu District also requires multiple documents such as a household registration booklet, proof of business operation or employment, and a residence permit, with business operators required to hold a valid business license and employees required to demonstrate social insurance contributions, both for a minimum of six months. The fact that some documents serve as prerequisites for obtaining others further raises the application threshold.

Third, the points-based admission system exerts an implicit filtering effect on vulnerable groups. In districts that adopt the points-based system, families with longer residence permit holdings, extended social insurance contributions, and

housing property rights accrue higher scores, while families with low income, irregular employment, and limited housing affordability are systematically disadvantaged. Under Huaiyin District's scoring criteria, a household in which both guardians have held residence permits for six years and contributed to social insurance for six years may obtain a score dozens of times higher than that of an otherwise comparable household with only one year of residence and less than six months of social insurance. Such extreme disparities place vulnerable groups at risk of being reassigned to under-resourced schools or being denied enrollment altogether.

4.2 Resource Allocation: Structural Imbalances in School Place Supply

Even when migrant children meet the enrollment conditions and secure a school place, they continue to face constraints in terms of access to educational resources.

First, the overall supply of public school places is insufficient. Shizhong District explicitly cautions that "where school places are limited and eligible children cannot be accommodated, parents are advised to contact the education authorities in their place of household registration as early as possible to arrange schooling." On this side of Tianqiao District, admission is screened by drawing an admission score line to determine eligibility. The practice of Lixia District is more direct: migrant children who do not accept placement coordination are simply excluded from the school allocation process entirely. It can be seen from these two examples that the public school places in the central urban area still cannot keep up with the enrollment demand of migrant children, and the gap is really there.

Another problem is that the spatial distribution of schools receiving these children is becoming increasingly marginalized. Changqing District has restricted the schooling of migrant children to three designated schools, and the location of these schools is right on the edge of the urban area. The situation is almost the same in Laiwu and Pingyin: it is stipulated that migrant children must attend "designated schools." Objectively, this has created a situation in which children with local household registration and migrant children have essentially taken two different paths in terms of school location.

Looking within schools, implicit exclusion has always existed. Although the national level has

put forward the requirements of "mixed class formation and unified management," in practice, it is difficult to ensure full implementation. For example, teachers have different expectations for different children in the classroom, or there is imperceptible discrimination among peers. These are issues that cannot simply be set aside when discussing educational equity, because they are an inescapable dimension of the whole process.

4.3 Oversight and Evaluation: Inadequate Constraining Mechanisms in Policy Implementation

A prominent problem is that the oversight body is still not clearly defined. Each district formulates its own enrollment rules, implements them independently, and handles the final enrollment results on its own. At the municipal level, there is a lack of effective constraints on the reasonableness and consistency of the enrollment conditions set by individual districts. On the other hand, the evaluation and feedback mechanism is basically absent. To date, Jinan has yet to establish a supervision and evaluation system specifically for the compulsory education of migrant children. The mechanisms for collecting, aggregating, and publicly releasing key data such as the number of applicants, admitted students, and available school places remain underdeveloped.

In addition, the channels for social oversight and appeals have remained relatively narrow. The consultation hotlines made available by the various districts are primarily used to address operational questions about the registration process, rather than to handle substantive challenges to the policy itself. In the points review process, what can be examined is mainly limited to the authenticity and accuracy of the submitted materials, while the reasonableness of the scoring criteria themselves falls entirely outside the scope of review. Throughout the process of how the policy is formulated and implemented, migrant families largely lack an institutionalized position from which to participate and make their voices heard.

Taken together, the implementation challenges facing the compulsory education policy for migrant children in Jinan stem from the cumulative effect of fragmented enrollment conditions, structural imbalances in resource allocation, and the absence of oversight and accountability mechanisms. These three factors,

overlapping and mutually reinforcing, have placed real constraints on migrant children's right to equal access to education. From the perspective of policy implementation theory, the fragmentation of enrollment conditions corresponds to the patterns of supplementary and selective implementation; the structural imbalance in resource allocation reflects the problem that resource guarantees in policy implementation fall short; and the absence of oversight and accountability mechanisms explains why these implementation deviations have persisted for so long without being genuinely corrected.

5. Institutional Attribution of Policy Implementation Challenges

5.1 The Central-Local Fiscal Relations Dimension

To trace the problem to its root, the deepest institutional cause of policy implementation deviation lies in the current fiscal system—specifically, the mismatch between expenditure responsibilities and fiscal capacity.

First, the existing fiscal sharing structure places an excessively heavy burden on host local governments. Although the national level has long established policy goals such as the "Two Priorities" and "Two Inclusions," when it comes to funding the actual implementation of these policies, the bulk of the cost still falls on host local governments. The "money follows the child" policy introduced in 2015 has indeed provided a certain amount of supplementary funding for host areas, yet the central government's share of compulsory education expenditure for migrant children remains limited in the end. The more concentrated the migrant child population is in a given district or county, the greater the fiscal strain and the heavier the pressure.

Second, local governments have shown limited enthusiasm for investing in public goods, especially education, which takes a long time to yield results. Under the current performance evaluation system, local governments tend to channel fiscal resources toward areas that can generate quicker economic returns, such as infrastructure and industry, and do so with considerable willingness; but when it comes to education, with its long return cycle, they hesitate and struggle to muster the same drive. Compulsory education for migrant children also

carries a distinctive "spillover effect": many children must return to their place of origin for further schooling after completing compulsory education, which means that the educational investment made by the host area largely flows elsewhere along with the children. No matter how one looks at it, it feels as though one has done the work only for the benefits to be reaped by others, and this naturally dampens the motivation to invest.

Third, fiscal capacity varies considerably across districts, and the Matthew effect has further widened this gap. Jinan's central urban districts are relatively better off, yet they also have the highest concentration of migrant children, placing the greatest pressure on school places right at their doorstep. By contrast, outlying suburbs and counties still have more room in terms of school places, but less money in their pockets. When setting enrollment conditions, districts lean toward leniency or stringency largely by weighing their own ledger—gauging how much surplus they have and how much burden they can shoulder—and then making a choice that is, in effect, a necessary one.

5.2 The Institutional Path Dependence Dimension

While the fiscal tensions between the central and local governments help explain how these difficulties emerged, institutional path dependence sheds light on why they have proven so resistant to resolution.

The first point that cannot be overlooked is the urban-rural dual household registration system, whose influence remains deeply entrenched. The root of the education problem for migrant children lies in the linkage between the household registration system and access to public services. Although reforms to the household registration system have advanced in recent years, for migrant workers with limited educational attainment and modest incomes, meeting Jinan's criteria for household registration remains difficult. A substantial proportion of migrant families will continue to hold "non-registered" status for the foreseeable future, and their children's education will still need to be addressed through specialized policy channels.

Second, policy fragmentation carries a self-reinforcing dynamic. Once disparities in enrollment policies for migrant children across districts have taken shape, they become resistant

to spontaneous adjustment. If a district with high entry thresholds were to unilaterally lower them, it could face the risk of a sudden influx of migrant children in the short term; conversely, districts with low thresholds have already absorbed the spillover demand from high-threshold districts. In the absence of external intervention, districts have little incentive to proactively adjust their policies.

Third, an implicit connection exists between enrollment policies and population regulation. The emphasis placed by Jinan's district-level points-based admission systems on stable employment and property ownership has, in practice, functioned to screen the migrant population. This latent population regulation function means that enrollment policy design extends beyond purely educational considerations, which partly explains why local authorities have responded cautiously to national calls for simplifying enrollment conditions.

5.3 The Absence of Oversight Mechanisms Dimension

Fiscal pressures account for the deficiency in implementation willingness, path dependence explains the persistence of institutional inertia, while the absence of effective oversight mechanisms illuminates why implementation deviations have remained uncorrected over time. First, there is a lack of specialized mechanisms for overseeing policy implementation. Jinan's oversight of the implementation of compulsory education policies for migrant children relies primarily on the general education inspection system, and no dedicated monitoring and evaluation framework has yet been established to assess the compliance and fairness of enrollment policies. The migrant child monitoring and screening mechanism established in 2024 focuses predominantly on child guardianship, care, and protection, offering only limited coverage of enrollment policy implementation.

Second, education inspection pays insufficient attention to migrant children's education. Although the existing inspection and evaluation framework for the balanced development of compulsory education incorporates indicators related to migrant children, these indicators carry limited weight, and the evaluation criteria are largely qualitative descriptions that lack quantitative benchmarks. This mode of evaluation—formally compliant yet

substantively lax—exerts weak disciplinary pressure on local governments.

Third, information asymmetry makes higher-level oversight difficult. Each district holds firsthand data on enrollment applications, point-based assessments, and admission outcomes, while the municipal education authorities currently lack a mechanism for comprehensively aggregating and cross-verifying these data. In the absence of complaints and feedback from service recipients, higher-level authorities find it difficult to proactively detect problems in the enrollment conditions set by individual districts. Pulling together the analysis laid out above, it becomes clear that the implementation troubles facing compulsory education policies for migrant children in Jinan are rooted in three institutional threads that have become tightly tangled together. One is the mismatch between central-local fiscal responsibilities and expenditure obligations, which leaves local governments perpetually short of the drive they need to push the policy forward. Another is the powerful inertia of the urban-rural dual household registration system, which keeps migrant children trapped in an institutional "non-registered" status from which they can hardly break free. The third is the persistent weakness of oversight and accountability, which has effectively left the door open for implementation deviations to drag on unchecked. These three threads do not operate in isolation; they reinforce one another, and together they form an institutional barrier that has, in very concrete terms, held back the effective implementation of the policy.

6. Policy Optimization Pathways

6.1 lowering Enrollment Barriers and Advancing the Standardization of Admission Conditions

Given the fragmentation of enrollment conditions across districts and the excessive volume of required documentation, the first priority in policy optimization is to streamline and standardize admission requirements.

First, the enrollment policy based primarily on the residence permit must be effectively implemented. In 2016, the State Council's Opinions on Promoting the Integrated Reform and Development of Urban-Rural Compulsory Education at the County Level already made this very clear: it explicitly called for the

establishment of an enrollment system for migrant children that uses the residence permit as the primary credential. Having the document on paper, however, is one thing; whether individual districts can truly put it into practice and make it work is quite another. Jinan should promote the use of the residence permit as the core credential for migrant children's enrollment across all districts and progressively reduce rigid additional requirements related to the duration of social insurance contributions and property ownership. For the current requirements imposed by some districts—such as a minimum of six consecutive months or one year of social insurance contributions—consideration could be given to moderately lowering the duration thresholds or permitting flexibly employed individuals to substitute tax records or business income statements in lieu of social insurance certificates. For Licheng District's stipulation that both guardians must satisfy all conditions, this could be revised, in line with the practices of other districts, to require only one guardian to meet the criteria, thereby accommodating single-parent families and households in which only one parent is employed in Jinan.

Second, the documentation requirements for enrollment across districts should be unified and streamlined. At present, the inconsistency in the documentation requirements for migrant children's enrollment across Jinan's districts imposes additional adaptation costs on families that move across district boundaries. It can be considered that the Municipal Education Bureau should issue a unified list of enrollment materials for migrant children across the city, clearly specifying which core materials must be submitted and which optional auxiliary materials can be submitted, and ensuring that individual districts are not permitted to add extra requirements beyond the core materials on their own. On the other hand, full use should be made of the data sharing platform established under the 2024 "Compulsory Education Enrollment One-Stop Service" plan, improving the online verification capacity for information on household registration, residence permits, social insurance, and housing. Where information can be automatically captured and verified through big data systems, parents should no longer be required to submit paper documentation, so as to move from "reducing documentation" to "eliminating documentation."

Third, optimize the scoring criteria to reduce the

implicit exclusion of vulnerable groups. For districts that continue to employ the points-based system, a fairness review of the scoring criteria is warranted. In designing the scoring items, the weighting of the basic score could be moderately increased, and the decisive role of "stock-based points" derived from the duration of residence permit holdings and social insurance contributions could be reduced, so that families newly arriving in Jinan for work may also secure a fair enrollment opportunity. Huaiyin District's practice of capping the scoring period at seventy-two months is worth emulating: such a ceiling prevents the cumulative advantage of "the earlier one arrives, the higher one's score" from expanding indefinitely, thereby preserving competitive space for later arrivals. At the same time, differentiated school place guarantee measures could be adopted for migrant children's families falling within different scoring brackets: families with higher scores may be prioritized for placement where public school capacity is ample, while those with lower scores may be safeguarded through government purchase of private school places or cross-district coordination and placement.

6.2 Improving the Education Funding Guarantee Mechanism

Funding is a core factor constraining the development of compulsory education for migrant children. The current inadequacy of funding guarantees for migrant children's education in Jinan stems fundamentally from imperfections in the central-local fiscal allocation mechanism. While a fundamental resolution to this problem lies beyond the authority of local governments, there remains room for optimization within the existing institutional framework.

The first priority is to clarify the expenditure responsibilities of different levels of government in financing migrant children's education, and to shift the center of fiscal gravity moderately upward. For the education costs generated by children who move across regions, the central and provincial governments should assume a higher proportion of the funding burden. In megacities and large cities where education funding demands are especially concentrated, provincial-level coordination could be further strengthened, moving some of the expenditure responsibilities originally resting at the district level up to the municipal or provincial level.

Once district-level financing and provincial-municipal coordination have done what they can, any remaining funding gaps would then be filled through higher-level transfer payments. Such an arrangement would, on one hand, offer some breathing room to host districts and counties where migrant children are heavily concentrated, easing their fiscal strain to some degree; and on the other hand, it would be consistent with the direction that the reform of the compulsory education fiscal system has been moving in since 2016.

A further step is to make the "money follows the child" cross-regional funding transfer mechanism work more smoothly. The portability framework for migrant children's education funding established by the State Council in 2015 has indeed laid a foundation for relieving fiscal pressure on host localities. The problem at present, however, is that there remains considerable room for improvement in both the level and the coverage of the "Two Exemptions and One Subsidy" funds and the baseline per-student public funding that actually get allocated. One possibility worth considering is to broaden the scope of what counts as portable funding—for instance, bringing fixed expenditures such as teacher salaries partially into the mobility-based funding calculation, so that they too have a basis for being accounted for as children move. At the same time, the approval procedures for fund allocation should be simplified, and the entire transfer cycle—from the place a child leaves to the place a child arrives—should be shortened, so that host governments can receive their matching funds in a more timely fashion and are not left waiting indefinitely.

A third point is that there is room to optimize how education funding is distributed across districts. When the municipal education budget is being drawn up, the number of migrant children enrolled in each district and the trajectory of growth in that enrollment should be treated as important weights in the allocation formula, with districts where migrant children account for a high proportion and are growing fast receiving a certain degree of preferential treatment where warranted. For schools that actively take in migrant children while also finding ways to ensure those children receive a reasonably good education, targeted rewards or performance-based subsidies could well be used to give them a genuine push—so that accepting migrant children becomes not merely a task to

be completed out of obligation, but something that carries a measure of intrinsic motivation.

6.3 Establishing and Improving Policy Implementation Oversight Mechanisms

The weakness of oversight mechanisms constitutes a prominent institutional deficiency in the implementation of compulsory education policies for migrant children in Jinan. A robust oversight system can not only correct implementation deviations in a timely manner, but also prevent such deviations from arising in the first place through the forward transmission of accountability pressures.

One important step is to clarify the oversight bodies and the standards they are supposed to apply. It is worth considering whether a dedicated oversight unit—or at least a clearly designated lead office—could be set up at the level of the municipal education bureau, with the responsibility of coordinating the supervision and inspection of how compulsory education policies for migrant children are being implemented across all districts. The tasks of such a unit would include reviewing the enrollment policy documents issued by each district to see whether they are genuinely consistent with the national "Two Priorities, Two Inclusions, and Two Unifications" requirements, assessing the reasonableness and fairness of the enrollment conditions set by individual districts, and examining whether the points-based scoring criteria are properly standardized and whether admission procedures have departed from what is expected. Jinan's 2025 plan for the care and protection of migrant children already points toward the development of big data platforms and dynamic data monitoring, which in effect provides a technical foundation for strengthening oversight. Building on that, a dedicated monitoring module specifically geared toward education enrollment policy could be developed for deeper and more targeted use.

Another step is to broaden the disclosure of policy implementation information and to open up channels for social oversight much further. Every district should take the initiative to release key data—such as the number of applicants, final admission figures, how points are distributed, and how many school places are actually available—so that the public can see what is going on, exercise oversight, and raise questions where needed. The number of policy

consultations and complaints received during the enrollment period, the main issues that emerge, and how those issues are eventually handled should also be compiled into an annual report and made publicly available. Full disclosure of this kind not only helps the public access information they have a right to know, but also provides independent research institutes and the media with the raw material to carry out third-party evaluations. It is precisely this kind of openness that can produce a complementary relationship between internal government supervision and external social oversight.

A further move is to build an incentive and accountability mechanism that genuinely ties oversight results to rewards and sanctions. Whether oversight can truly function depends, in the final analysis, on the extent to which its outcomes can shape the behavioral choices of those responsible for implementation. It is recommended that the implementation of compulsory education policies for migrant children be incorporated into the performance evaluation of district-level education administrative departments and the relevant responsible personnel. Practices that violate policy requirements by adding unreasonable enrollment conditions or artificially suppressing the enrollment rate of migrant children should be subject to accountability. On the other hand, districts that have performed notably well in safeguarding the education of migrant children may be given positive incentives through commendations, awards, or modest increases in municipal financial support, gradually fostering an institutional orientation that rewards strong performance and holds poor performance to account, so that those who do well are not left unrewarded, and those who fall short are held answerable.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Principal Findings

First, based on the situation in Jinan City, the implementation of the compulsory education policy for migrant children has effectively broken into a pattern in which "the municipality sets a uniformly high standard, while districts carry out implementation in a fragmented manner." There are indeed significant differences in enrollment conditions, the range of policy instruments deployed, and the final admission procedures, resulting in an enrollment

spectrum that ranges from very lenient to extremely strict.

Second, across the three dimensions of enrollment conditions, resource allocation, and oversight and evaluation, the implementation of policies has encountered systematic difficulties. The fragmentation of enrollment conditions has led to unequal opportunities; the allocation of resources is structurally imbalanced, which has constrained the education that migrant children can access; oversight and accountability have failed to keep up, so that these implementation deviations have persisted for a long time without being corrected.

Third, the institutional roots of these challenges ultimately lie in the combined effect of three factors: the mismatch in central-local fiscal sharing, the inescapable path dependence of the household registration system, and the persistent absence of effective oversight mechanisms. These three factors do not operate in isolation; rather, they pull at one another and mutually reinforce one another, eventually forming a thick institutional wall that constrains effective policy implementation.

Fourth, if policy optimization is to be pursued, coordinated efforts must be made along four fronts: enrollment conditions need to be simplified, the pattern of resource allocation needs to be adjusted toward greater balance, funding guarantee mechanisms need to be substantively strengthened, and the oversight and accountability system needs to be bolstered from start to finish. Only in this way is it possible to pull any one dimension back onto the right track.

7.2 Limitations and Future Directions

After this paper is completed, there are indeed a few areas that are not fully addressed, and further research will be needed to make up for them in the future.

The first limitation concerns methodology. This paper mainly relies on policy text analysis, coupled with some research findings that have been produced by previous scholars. It was not possible to conduct fieldwork or obtain first-hand information through interviews. There may be a gap between the policy differences documented in the official texts of each district and the actual effects produced in practice, and at present, it is difficult to know for certain whether such a gap exists. Future research could speak with staff members in education

administrative departments, school principals and administrators, and parents of migrant children, and by bringing together the evidence drawn from documentary analysis with findings gathered from the field, a clearer picture could be obtained.

The second limitation relates to the scope of the study, which focuses solely on Jinan. Some of the features revealed in Jinan's policy implementation may be highly specific to this locality, making it difficult to generalize the conclusions to other cities. Subsequent research could broaden the comparative lens to include several cities, taking into account differences in city size, level of economic development, and volume of population inflow, and examine how education policies for migrant children play out in different types of settings, thereby filling the gap that currently exists.

The third limitation has to do with the depth of analysis. This paper mainly traces the institutional and structural roots of the policy implementation challenges, but devotes relatively little attention to the actors involved in the implementation process—how they calculate their options, how they make decisions across successive rounds of choices, and how different actors engage in mutual maneuvering and strategic interaction. This entire dynamic process receives rather limited treatment in the paper. Should future studies employ interviews or observational methods, tracing a policy from its deployment at the municipal level through its adaptation into local plans at the district level and finally to its operationalization at the school level, and follow the process step by step to closely capture the action logics and interaction patterns of the multiple stakeholders, the analysis would be considerably more solid.

The fourth limitation is that the research focus remains somewhat narrow. The paper confines itself throughout to enrollment policy at the compulsory education stage, leaving aside entirely questions about subsequent educational progression—such as how migrant children take the senior secondary school entrance examination (zhongkao) or the college entrance examination (gaokao) after arriving in the host area—as well as a set of finer-grained issues, such as how migrant children interact with others in everyday school life, how they gradually construct a sense of identity, and how they adapt to the local culture. These thinner and more complex threads have not yet been taken

up for examination. These directions are also worth pursuing further in future research.

That said, despite the shortcomings noted above, the systematic analysis presented in this paper of the implementation of compulsory education policies for migrant children in Jinan can nonetheless be taken as a city-level case study. For those seeking to understand the behavioral logic that local governments follow in implementing policy and the institutional constraints that shape their actions, it offers some clues that may be worth pursuing further. Against the broader backdrop of China's ongoing urbanization and the sustained momentum of population mobility, the question of how to provide steady support to such a large and distinctively situated group as migrant children, so that they can gain equal access to the cornerstone of compulsory education, is no longer simply a question of whether educational equity can be achieved. It also serves as a key yardstick for evaluating a city's governance capacity and the adequacy of its public services. In the years ahead, more research and more practice will surely be needed, moving forward step by step, to push migrant children from "having a school to attend" to "attending a good school," and further toward truly taking root and integrating into the host community.

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