

Wave-like Fluctuations of School-Age Population and Forward-Looking Allocation of Basic Education Resources During the 15th Five-Year Plan Period

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Abstract: The 15th Five-Year Plan period (2026–2030) marks a critical intersection of China’s demographic structural transformation and high-quality development of basic education. The school-age population will exhibit typical wave-like fluctuations, featuring phased and geographically concentrated rises and falls that pose new challenges to the dynamic, targeted allocation of basic education resources. Existing academic research mostly centers on static, balanced resource distribution, lacking forward-looking and systematic solutions to the temporal-spatial mismatch and supply-demand imbalance triggered by demographic shifts. These studies also fail to fully align with the policy guidelines and regional heterogeneity of the 15th Five-Year Plan era. Supported by demography, economics of education and public administration theories, this paper draws on historical school-age population statistics and demographic projections for the 15th Five-Year Plan period to systematically analyze the temporal-spatial patterns and inter-stage disparities of wave-like school-age population changes, and accurately identify core contradictions and practical hurdles in basic education resource allocation. The study finds that the population of primary school-aged children across China will peak in 2027 during the 15th Five-Year Plan period, while the junior high school-age population will witness stepped fluctuations. Significant agglomeration of school-age populations and widening urban-rural divides will lead to multiple problems including temporal-spatial mismatch of basic education resources, inter-regional inequity, imbalanced teacher staffing and irrational investment structures. In response, this paper constructs a forward-looking resource allocation framework featuring early warning and prediction, hierarchical optimization and

long-term adaptive governance. It establishes a three-tier early warning mechanism for demographic and educational resource dynamics, designs differentiated resource allocation strategies tailored to varied regions, urban-rural zones and school stages, builds a system for dynamic teacher mobility and diversified investment guarantees, and proposes a transformation pathway from passive response to proactive forward planning, fragmented distribution to systematic coordination, and single-source investment to multi-stakeholder supply. Phased implementation schedules are also clarified. This research aims to resolve the supply-demand imbalance of basic education resources amid demographic volatility, and provides theoretical support and practical schemes for advancing high-quality basic education, promoting educational equity and boosting efficient resource utilization throughout the 15th Five-Year Plan period.

Keywords: The 15th Five-Year Plan Period; School-Age Population; Wave-Like Fluctuations; Basic Education Resources; Forward-Looking Allocation

1. Research Background and Problem Statement

1.1 Research Context

The 15th Five-Year Plan period (2026–2030) constitutes a pivotal phase for deepening the implementation of China’s strategy to build a strong education nation and undergoing profound demographic restructuring. Demographic shifts have evolved into a core variable shaping basic education development, driving systemic reform in the models for allocating basic education resources. For the first time, the national 15th Five-Year Plan for Educational Development incorporates demographic structural changes into the core

education planning framework, mandating the establishment of resource allocation mechanisms adaptable to dynamic fluctuations in the school-age population and the optimization of educational spatial layout. This highlights the contemporary necessity of demographic-adaptive educational governance.

From a demographic perspective, the birth surge generated by the universal two-child policy will cascade down to compulsory education stages during the 15th Five-Year Plan period, creating periodic waves of student enrollment. Meanwhile, sustained urbanization drives the concentration of school-age populations in cities and urban agglomerations, while student numbers in rural and remote areas keep shrinking, completely disrupting the traditional stable supply model for basic education resources. Unlike preschool education, where fluctuations in school-age populations have moderated, compulsory education bears the most direct impact of wave-like demographic shifts, with prominent contradictions such as inter-stage resource mismatch, inter-regional inequity and widening urban-rural gaps [1].

From a policy evolution perspective, policy guidance has evolved from the 14th Five-Year Plan's proposal to optimize resource allocation in response to demographic shifts to the 15th Five-Year Plan's refined requirements for dynamic adaptation and forward layout. A national policy orientation centered on coordinated demographic and educational development has taken shape. It is therefore urgent to break rigid static resource allocation models and build a flexible, forward-looking educational resource governance system.

From an academic research perspective, existing literature mainly explores the impacts of total demographic changes on educational resource supply, focusing on matching aggregate indicators such as school places and teaching staff. Insufficient attention has been paid to deep-seated structural and regional contradictions arising from wave-like school-age population fluctuations and cross-regional student mobility, and few systematic forward-looking studies specifically target the 15th Five-Year Plan period. Against the backdrop of contemporary demands, policy guidelines and research gaps, this paper focuses on compulsory education to explore forward-looking pathways for basic education resource allocation amid wave-like school-age

population shifts, carrying substantial theoretical and practical value.

1.2 Definition of Core Concepts

(1) Wave-like fluctuations of the school-age population The school-age population examined in this paper refers specifically to children aged 6 to 14 eligible for compulsory education. Wave-like fluctuations of the school-age population represent periodic demographic phenomena stemming from volatile birth rates. Their core manifestations include cyclical alternations of peaks and troughs in total school-age population size, sequential transmission of enrollment surges across different school stages, and asynchronous rises and falls in student numbers across regions and urban-rural areas. Distinct from linear demographic trends, this pattern features three key dimensions: temporally staggered enrollment peaks across school stages forming long-cycle volatility; spatially concentrated population growth in eastern urban areas alongside sustained enrollment declines in rural and central-western regions; and structural cross-stage supply-demand imbalance, with simultaneous surpluses and shortages of educational resources at different school levels [2].

(2) Basic education resources Basic education resources in this paper denote the core set of elements supporting compulsory education operations, primarily covering three dimensions: teaching staff, physical infrastructure and educational funding. Auxiliary resources including curricula and digital software are not elaborated in detail here. Teaching staff resources encompass workforce size, disciplinary structure and professional competence as core human capital inputs. Physical infrastructure includes school buildings, teaching equipment and sports venues as tangible operational conditions. Educational funding covers fiscal education expenditure, per-student funding and special school operation grants. These three categories are most closely correlated with fluctuations in the school-age population and most sensitive to resource allocation adjustments, making them the primary levers for optimizing resource distribution.

1.3 Research Significance

(1) Theoretical significance This paper enriches the interdisciplinary theoretical system bridging

demography and economics of education. By centering on the unique demographic pattern of wave-like school-age population fluctuations, it fills gaps in existing research that overemphasize aggregate demographic analysis while overlooking structural volatility. It also introduces forward-looking governance into the field of basic education resource allocation, constructing a theoretical analytical framework for precise matching between dynamic demographic shifts and educational resources. The research delivers a new perspective for studies on educational resource distribution amid demographic changes in the new era.

(2) **Practical significance** This paper assesses trends in school-age population volatility and pain points in resource allocation throughout the 15th Five-Year Plan period, proposing actionable, easy-to-implement hierarchical and categorized allocation strategies and long-term mechanisms. The proposed measures can alleviate shortages of school places and teachers during enrollment peaks, mitigate idle resource waste during enrollment troughs, narrow urban-rural and inter-regional educational disparities, consolidate the foundation of educational equity, and provide support for high-quality and balanced development of basic education.

1.4 Research Questions and Objectives

Core research questions of this paper: Clarify the multi-dimensional temporal-spatial, inter-stage and regional differentiated characteristics of wave-like school-age population fluctuations during the 15th Five-Year Plan period, evaluate the systematic impacts of demographic volatility on basic education resource allocation, and construct long-term forward-looking resource allocation mechanisms and implementation pathways adaptable to dynamic demographic shifts. Sub-questions include: first, deconstruct the multi-dimensional features and evolutionary patterns of wave-like school-age population fluctuations; second, identify core contradictions and root causes of supply-demand mismatch and unbalanced development in current basic education resource allocation; third, design flexible, differentiated strategies for optimizing resource distribution; fourth, explore coordination pathways linking policy planning, demographic shifts and resource allocation.

Research objectives: Systematically assess trends in school-age population fluctuations

during the 15th Five-Year Plan period, comprehensively evaluate the current state and shortcomings of basic education resource allocation, establish a phased implementation framework and forward-looking resource allocation system with scientific rigor and practical operability, and deliver decision-making support for targeted layout, dynamic adaptation and efficient utilization of basic education resources throughout the 15th Five-Year Plan period.

2. Core Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Cohort-Component Population Projection Theory

This theory divides populations into age cohorts and accurately projects the scale, structure and temporal-spatial distribution of school-age populations at different stages by incorporating core demographic factors including fertility rates, mortality rates and population migration. It provides critical data support and scientific methodological grounds for forecasting school-age population trends and predicting demand for educational resources in this paper [3].

2.2 Balanced Allocation of Educational Resources Theory

Centered on the coordinated pursuit of equity and efficiency, this theory advocates coordinated resource redistribution to narrow inter-regional, urban-rural and inter-school educational gaps and realize dynamic matching between resource supply and demand. It serves as the core evaluation standard and theoretical basis for this paper to identify unbalanced resource allocation challenges and design differentiated equity-oriented strategies [4].

2.3 Forward-Looking Policy Planning Theory

This theory holds that policy formulation must be rooted in future trend forecasting, and realize a shift from passive response to proactive governance through ex ante early warning, dynamic adjustment and systematic layout. It underpins the design of forward-looking resource allocation mechanisms and phased implementation frameworks in this paper.

The three core theories together form the analytical framework of this research. Cohort-component population projection theory ensures precise assessment of demographic

trends, effectively accommodating staggered enrollment peaks across school stages and geographically differentiated population volatility. Balanced allocation of educational resources theory guides the identification and evaluation of current allocation deficiencies, analyzing resource distribution contradictions from aggregate, structural and spatial dimensions. Forward-looking policy planning theory leads the design of solution pathways, focusing on dynamic adaptation and pre-emptive layout to resolve the lag inherent in traditional resource allocation models. Meanwhile, this paper expands conventional static equilibrium theory by accounting for new demographic volatility patterns in the 15th Five-Year Plan period, establishing a logic of dynamic balanced resource allocation and enhancing theoretical adaptability and practical guidance value.

3. Trends in School-Age Population Changes and Current State of Basic Education Resource Allocation During the 15th Five-Year Plan Period

3.1 Core Characteristics of Wave-Like Fluctuations in the School-Age Population

(1) Pronounced periodic volatility in total population size Driven by the lagged effects of the universal two-child policy, the compulsory education school-age population will experience distinct alternating peaks and troughs forming wave-like fluctuations during the 15th Five-Year Plan period. The population of primary school-aged children will enter a periodic boom from 2026 to 2028, peaking in 2027 before gradually declining. Fluctuations in the junior high school-age population lag 3 to 4 years behind primary school cohorts, with enrollment surges emerging from 2029 to 2030. This asynchronous pattern—rising then falling primary school enrollment paired with late-stage junior high enrollment growth—generates periodic supply-demand contradictions amid sharp short-term swings in student numbers [5].

(2) Severe staggered enrollment peaks across school stages Volatility cycles differ completely between educational stages. Primary schools face enrollment surges in the early and middle phases of the 15th Five-Year Plan, creating high demand for entry-level teachers and basic school infrastructure. Junior high schools encounter enrollment peaks in the later phase, with greater demand for specialized subject teachers and

laboratory facilities. Time lags between enrollment surges across stages render conventional unified resource allocation models ineffective, resulting in prominent cross-stage resource mismatch.

(3) Obvious inter-regional differentiation Benefiting from population inflows and urbanization, eastern regions see steady growth in school-age populations, facing mounting pressure to expand educational capacity. Central regions maintain relatively stable total school-age populations with mild fluctuations. Western regions suffer sustained enrollment declines due to population outflow, accompanied by widespread idle educational resources. Heterogeneous demographic volatility across regions further widens inter-regional disparities in basic education resource allocation.

(4) Deepening structural urban-rural divides Cities record continuous net inflows of school-age children, with rapidly rising student numbers in megacities and core urban agglomerations leading to persistent shortages of school places and teachers. Rural areas face sustained loss of school-age populations, with severely under-enrolled small rural schools and satellite teaching sites, forming a dual divide of resource scarcity in urban areas and idle capacity in rural regions.

3.2 Comprehensive Current State of Basic Education Resource Allocation

Overall, the aggregate supply of basic education resources in China meets regular school operation demands, yet the system lacks sufficient capacity for dynamic adaptation to wave-like school-age population fluctuations. The prevailing landscape can be summarized as adequate aggregate supply, structural imbalance, insufficient forward planning and severe geographic differentiation [6]. In terms of supply-demand matching, static alignment between resources and enrollment is generally acceptable, yet concurrent shortages during enrollment peaks and underutilized resources during troughs persist. For inter-regional equity, substantial gaps in funding, teaching staff and physical infrastructure separate eastern, central and western regions, with a Matthew effect concentrating high-quality resources in eastern areas. In terms of urban-rural fairness, cities boast superior per-student resource ratios, higher-quality teaching staff and better physical facilities compared to rural areas, and the

urban-rural educational resource gap remains unresolved. In sum, the laggard and rigid nature of existing resource allocation models cannot adapt to dynamic, differentiated enrollment volatility patterns projected for the 15th Five-Year Plan period.

4. Core Challenges Facing Basic Education Resource Allocation During the 15th Five-Year Plan Period

4.1 Temporal-Spatial Mismatch: Resource Adjustment Lags Behind Demographic Volatility

An inherent conflict exists between short-cycle wave-like shifts in the school-age population and the long lead times required for educational resource adjustment. Projects including new school construction, teacher recruitment and staffing quota adjustments entail a 2–3 year implementation delay, preventing rapid alignment with alternating enrollment peaks and troughs. Temporally, school place shortages and oversized classes emerge during enrollment surges, while empty school buildings and redundant teachers waste resources during enrollment troughs, depressing overall resource utilization efficiency. Spatially, rapid cross-regional and urban-rural student mobility cannot be matched by rigid assets such as school buildings and staffing quotas, creating dual mismatches of resource scarcity in population inflow zones and excess capacity in outflow zones, which compound cumulatively alongside demographic shifts.

4.2 Inter-Regional Imbalance: Population Mobility Widens Resource Distribution Gaps

Superimposed regional economic disparities and wave-like student mobility continuously expand inter-regional inequities in basic education resources. Eastern population inflow zones face growing student numbers, forcing local governments to increase educational investment and upgrade resource allocation, reinforcing agglomeration of high-quality educational resources. Central and western population outflow zones experience shrinking enrollment, weakening local fiscal incentives for educational investment, accelerating brain drain of high-quality teachers and delaying upgrades to physical infrastructure. Demographic volatility has become a new core factor exacerbating inter-regional resource inequity, disrupting the

traditional pattern where economic disparities alone dominated resource distribution, and intensifying pressures for balanced inter-regional education development.

4.3 Imbalanced Teaching Staff: Dual Pressures of Workforce Scale Fluctuation and Structural Misalignment

Teacher allocation suffers from two intertwined dilemmas: insufficient flexibility in staffing scale and structural misalignment between teacher expertise and student demand. In terms of workforce size, regions with enrollment surges face acute teacher shortages, relying on temporary substitute instructors which undermine instructional stability. Regions with shrinking enrollment hold redundant teachers, creating difficulties in staff reassignment and wasting staffing quotas. Structurally, severe disciplinary imbalance persists: shortages of English, science and other specialized subject teachers contrast with surpluses of instructors for core Chinese and mathematics curricula. Rural teaching teams suffer from aging demographics and difficulty retaining young educators, undermining workforce vitality and professional capacity to meet high-quality education development standards. Conventional rigid staffing quota and management systems fail to accommodate dynamic demand driven by wave-like enrollment fluctuations.

4.4 Funding Constraints: Aggregate Shortfalls and Structural Distortions Impede Quality Improvement

Basic education funding suffers from insufficient total investment, distorted spending structures and delayed planning. In aggregate terms, growth in local fiscal education spending fails to keep pace with rising resource demands generated by demographic shifts, with particularly acute funding shortfalls in rural central and western regions. Structurally, investment skews heavily toward physical infrastructure, with excessive funding allocated to school buildings and equipment while underinvesting in teacher training, teaching research innovation and digital education—inputs that drive qualitative improvements. Current funding arrangements rely on reactive emergency spending without long-term forward planning that accounts for resource reuse across enrollment peaks and troughs, resulting in massive waste of public

funds.

4.5 Systemic Negative Impacts: Undermining Educational Equity and Coordinated Regional Development

Cumulative contradictions in resource allocation generate systemic adverse outcomes for basic education development. Widening urban-rural and inter-regional resource gaps directly erode educational equity, with stark disparities in school facilities, teacher quality and learning resources between urban and rural students. Shortages of teachers and funding slow improvements in educational quality in underdeveloped regions, expanding gradient disparities in instructional standards across regions. Resource mismatch and inequity further amplify the Matthew effect of population mobility, creating a vicious cycle: insufficient educational resources trigger population outflow, which in turn further weakens local educational capacity. This dynamic hinders balanced accumulation of human capital and coordinated economic development across regions.

5. A Forward-Looking Resource Allocation Framework Adapted to Wave-Like School-Age Population Fluctuations

5.1 Policy Guidance and Overall Layout

Aligned with core guidelines of the national 15th Five-Year Plan for Education, basic education resource allocation must undergo a fundamental shift in governance logic: moving from reactive remediation to forward planning, aggregate supply expansion to structural optimization, and fragmented governance to systematic coordination. Centered on dynamic demographic shifts as a core variable, this paper constructs an integrated resource allocation framework featuring early warning and prediction, hierarchical adaptation, long-term guarantees and dynamic optimization. The framework balances educational equity and operational efficiency to realize precise, dynamic and long-term alignment between resource supply and school-age population demand [7].

5.2 Establish a Multi-Dimensional Three-Tier Early Warning Mechanism

Moving beyond single-indicator early warning models, this research develops a comprehensive three-tier early warning system covering demographic volatility, resource shortages and

inter-regional inequity to enable ex ante prediction of resource demand [8]. First, peak-trough demographic early warning: yellow and red alert levels are designated based on regional school-age population growth rates and fluctuation magnitudes to forecast periodic supply-demand trends for student enrollment. Second, resource shortage early warning: core indicators including per-student school space, teacher workforce and funding are monitored against official school operation standards, triggering supplementary resource mechanisms when gaps emerge. Third, inter-regional inequity early warning: resource disparity coefficients dynamically track urban-rural and cross-regional resource gaps to target coordinated resource redistribution. A tiered response mechanism is established: low-level alerts activate intra-regional resource sharing and redistribution, while high-level alerts trigger targeted capacity expansion and cross-provincial coordinated support.

5.3 Implement Hierarchical and Categorized Optimized Allocation Strategies

Precision-targeted hierarchical allocation strategies are deployed to address differentiated demographic volatility across regions, urban-rural zones and school stages. At the regional level, eastern enrollment growth zones adopt an "expansion and quality upgrading" strategy, adding school places and upgrading smart educational facilities to accommodate student agglomeration. Stable and enrollment-declining central and western regions pursue an "integration and quality upgrading" strategy, consolidating underutilized small teaching sites, concentrating resources on standardized boarding schools and optimizing spatial resource layout. At the school stage level, resource guarantees prioritize primary schools in the early and middle phases of the 15th Five-Year Plan, focusing on expanding school places and recruiting entry-level teachers. Preemptive investment in junior high school infrastructure, specialized subject teachers and laboratory facilities occurs in advance to ensure orderly cross-stage resource transition. For urban-rural coordination, cities optimize school district layout to ease enrollment pressure at oversubscribed elite schools, while rural areas prioritize constructing standardized township schools and activating idle educational assets.

5.4 Build a Long-Term Mechanism for Dynamic Teacher Mobility

To resolve rigidities in teacher allocation, a teacher support system combining dynamic staffing quotas, two-way rotation and targeted pre-service training reserves is established. A linkage mechanism between school-age population size and teacher staffing quotas enables flexible adjustment of quota resources based on regional enrollment scales. A two-way urban-rural and inter-regional teacher rotation system is implemented, with incentive policies linked to professional title evaluation to guide high-quality teachers toward rural and underdeveloped regions. Targeted teacher reserve programs pre-train educators for enrollment growth zones and undersupplied disciplines, mitigating periodic and structural teacher shortages at the source and enhancing the adaptability and stability of teacher supply [9].

5.5 Improve a Diversified Investment Guarantee System

Structural and supply-side reforms to educational funding resolve aggregate shortages and distorted spending patterns. Fiscal education investment is expanded, with a special reserve fund for basic education resources prioritizing central and western rural disadvantaged regions. Funding structures are recalibrated to increase allocations for teacher training, teaching research innovation and digital education, realizing coordinated progress between physical infrastructure upgrades and digital instructional empowerment. Beyond exclusive government investment, standardized channels for social capital participation in school operation are established to supplement shortages of school places and educational resources during enrollment surges, boosting the flexibility and resilience of resource supply.

5.6 Clarify Phased Implementation Roadmap

Three sequential phases of implementation align with demographic volatility timelines outlined for the 15th Five-Year Plan period.

Pilot Exploration Phase (2025–2026): Pilot programs are launched in representative eastern, central and western regions to validate the feasibility of early warning mechanisms and hierarchical allocation strategies, generating replicable practical experience.

Nationwide Rollout Phase (2027–2028): The

forward-looking allocation framework is implemented nationwide, a provincial-level integrated educational resource coordination platform is established, resource guarantees for primary school enrollment peaks are fully delivered, and junior high school educational resources are pre-positioned.

Optimization and Refinement Phase (2029–2030): Educational spatial layout is adjusted to accommodate junior high school enrollment surges, long-term dynamic adjustment mechanisms are fully refined, reform outcomes are summarized, and empirical insights inform subsequent national educational planning cycles.

6. Conclusions, Research Limitations and Future Outlook

6.1 Main Conclusions

First, compulsory education school-age populations across China will display pronounced wave-like fluctuations throughout the 15th Five-Year Plan period, characterized by staggered enrollment peaks across school stages, inter-regional differentiation and deepening urban-rural dualism. Primary and junior high schools will experience sequential enrollment surges, alongside a geographic pattern of student agglomeration in eastern regions, shrinking enrollment in central and western areas and hollowed-out rural schools, creating layered periodic, structural and regional shocks to basic education resource allocation.

Second, current basic education resource allocation systems suffer from prominent structural deficiencies. Conventional static, rigid allocation models cannot adapt to dynamic demographic volatility, generating four core challenges: temporal-spatial resource mismatch, inter-regional inequity, misaligned teacher workforce structures and distorted investment patterns. These issues trigger cascading negative outcomes including wasted educational resources, weakened educational equity and widening disparities in instructional quality across regions.

Third, resolving supply-demand mismatches amid demographic volatility requires a forward-looking allocation logic centered on demand orientation, dynamic adaptation and systematic coordination. Integrated reforms covering multi-dimensional early warning mechanisms, hierarchical categorized allocation

strategies, dynamic teacher mobility systems and diversified investment guarantees enable three core transformations of basic education resource governance: shifting from passive response to proactive forward planning, fragmented distribution to systematic coordination, and single-source fiscal investment to multi-stakeholder resource supply.

Fourth, phased and tiered implementation pathways align with the timeline of demographic volatility projected for the 15th Five-Year Plan period, significantly improving the precision and utilization efficiency of basic education resource allocation, easing supply-demand imbalance, and advancing high-quality balanced development of basic education.

6.2 Research Limitations

This study contains several limitations. First, analysis focuses on national and macro-regional scales, with insufficient targeted research on micro-county disparities, ethnic minority regions and northeastern areas experiencing sustained population decline. Second, private educational resources and segmented characteristics of migrant school-age populations are not incorporated into the analytical framework, narrowing the scope of discussion. Third, the research prioritizes current situation assessment and strategy formulation without constructing quantitative coupling models, lacking simulation analysis of dynamic interactions between demographic and educational resource variables.

6.3 Future Research Outlook and Targeted Policy Recommendations

Subsequent research can deepen micro-level county empirical analysis and targeted studies of special geographic zones, construct quantitative coupling models linking demographic and educational resource dynamics, expand research on adaptive digital educational resources and draw on international governance experience to continuously refine the theoretical framework of forward-looking basic education resource allocation amid demographic shifts.

Based on the research findings, five targeted policy recommendations are proposed:

Establish a permanent linkage mechanism between demographic forecasting and educational resource allocation, with regular updates to student enrollment data and dynamic revisions to school operation planning.

Optimize educational funding expenditure

structures, increase investment in intangible educational resources and strengthen special financial support for disadvantaged regions [10]. Deepen reforms to teacher staffing quotas and rotation systems, build a national platform for coordinating teacher supply and demand, and resolve structural teacher shortages.

Promote cross-stage coordinated sharing of educational resources, activate idle school assets and raise overall resource utilization efficiency.

Leverage digital education platforms to advance universal access to high-quality instructional resources and narrow urban-rural and inter-regional gaps in educational quality.

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