


# 25 YEARS

OF THE CONVENTION ON  
THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

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**Afford Every Child  
the Opportunity to  
a Brighter Future**

By Yang Yinfu



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## Afford Every Child an Opportunity to a Brighter Future

By **YANG YINFU**

Children are the future of our country, and of mankind. On November 20, 1989, *the Convention on the Rights of the Child* was adopted at the General Assembly of the United Nations, requesting all efforts to be made to ensure and promote children's rights to life and development. It is the most widely accepted convention with the largest number of signatory country states.

Education is one of the key approaches to ensure children's right to development, and it should be accessible for all children, positively contributing to their development. In many ways, education is regarded as a lofty undertaking of mankind. In 1986, *the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China* was promulgated, and in 1992, China acceded to *the Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Since then, with the ceaseless efforts of its government and its people, China has made great progress in ensuring children's right to development through education.

**Continuous progress toward universal education is necessary to ensure children's basic right to development has made compulsory education available to all.** In 1949, shortly before the founding of the People's Republic of China, the primary school enrollment rate in China was only 20 per cent. The overall illiteracy rate was 80 per cent, while that in rural areas was as high as 95 per cent. In comparison, in 2000, nine-year compulsory education was available to 85 per cent of the total population. Then in 2011, nine-year compulsory education was made universal in all provinces and autonomous regions, with the illiteracy rate among young and middle-aged population down to just 1.08 per cent. This is a major milestone in the history of education in China, as well as in the development of the Chinese nation.

While universal compulsory education was emphasized, education at all levels, including pre-school education, also saw rapid development. According to latest available statistics, in 2013, among the 38.95 million young children in China, the gross enrollment of pre-school education was 67.5 per cent; 93.61 million students were enrolled in primary schools, a net enrollment rate of 99.71 per cent; 44.4 million students were enrolled in junior high school, a gross enrollment rate of 104.1 per cent; 43.7 million students were enrolled in senior high school, a gross enrollment rate of 86.0 per cent; 34.6 millions students were enrolled in higher education institutions, a gross higher education enrollment rate of 34.5 per cent. The development of education at all levels offers more education opportunities to a wider range of children.

**An effective national student aid system has been established to ensure that no child drops out of school for economic reasons.**

To ensure that compulsory education is available to all children, rural students in Western China have been exempted from all school fees since 2006, benefiting a total of 48.8 million students and bringing about 200,000 dropouts back to school. Furthermore, all rural students nationwide were exempted from school fees in 2007, and textbooks were made available to all rural students receiving compulsory education based on the statutory national curriculum with the expense borne by the national budget, involving a total of 150 million students. By 2008, compulsory education in urban areas was also provided for free. In addition, for rural boarding students in central and western China from economically disadvantaged families, the government provides living aids at a level of RMB4/day for primary school students and RMB5/day for junior high school students. For senior high school education, free education was extended to secondary vocational education in rural areas, agriculture-related programs in urban secondary vocational education, and students from families living on low-income subsidies. National grants are offered to economically disadvantaged senior high school students at an average level of RMB1,500/year/student, covering around 20 per cent of all enrolled senior high school students nationwide. For higher education, a scholarship and grant system has been put in place, including national grants, national endeavor fellowships, national scholarships, and national student loans. Moreover, one year of pre-school education is provided for free in some areas. Thus, the current national student aid system covers all levels of education.

Gaps in education narrowed significantly and efforts were made to promote education equality and equal educational opportunities. In particular, the urban-rural gap in education narrowed substantially. The urban-rural gap in primary school net enrollment rate and five-year retention rate has been reduced to less than 1 percentage point. A number of programs have been launched to address the poor school conditions in rural areas, including the modern long-distance education program for rural primary schools and high schools, the project for full teaching site coverage of digital teaching resources, the school building renovation project for rural junior high schools in central and western China, the rural boarding school construction project, the improvement program for disadvantaged rural compulsory education schools, to name a few. Through such initiatives, infrastructure of rural schools has been improved substantially.

After the Wenchuan Earthquake, the primary and high school building safety project was launched to reinforce and renovate school buildings in areas vulnerable to earthquakes and other disasters. After three years of this project, the safety level of rural school buildings have been improved significantly with an investment of RMB30 billion from the central government and RMB350 billion from local governments. Starting from the autumn semester of 2011, a pilot nutrition



For many years, the focus of classroom instruction was based on rote learning. Now, things are changing and in classrooms like this in rural China, children learn from interactive games and participatory learning.



Children in an interactive session in the classroom. In recent years, UNICEF has worked with the Ministry of Education to make lessons more interactive and strengthen emotional social learning especially in rural ethnic minority schools.

improvement program was carried out among rural students of compulsory education in poverty-stricken areas. A food subsidy of RMB3/day/student was offered to students in 699 counties in central and western China. Similar programs were also conducted by local governments in 259 counties of 19 provinces, covering over 30 million students. This is the first large-scale nutrition intervention program in China, which as contributed to the narrowing of regional gaps significantly. From 2000 to 2010, the east-west gap in primary school net enrollment rate narrowed from 1.83 percentage points to 0.58 percentage point and the gap in primary school graduation rate reduced from 6.9 percentage points to 0.52 percentage point. The compulsory education enrollment rate in ethnic areas came closer to the national average with over ten ethnic groups seeing higher overall education level than the national average.

In 2014, the national government launched a program to comprehensively improve the basic conditions of disadvantaged compulsory edu-

cation institutions in poor rural areas with an initial investment of RMB31 billion from the central budget. Targeted mainly at poverty-stricken areas in central and western China, but also giving due consideration to poverty-stricken areas in the east as well as other target areas of the national poverty relief program, the national program aims to improve the basic conditions of disadvantaged compulsory education institutions in poor rural areas within three to five years and promote balanced development of compulsory education across the country.

The education gap between population groups has also reduced. In 2013, the national primary school net enrolment rate was 99.71 per cent, and the enrollment rates of boys and girls were 99.70 per cent and 99.72 per cent, respectively, with the latter being 0.02 percentage point higher than the former. In 2000, the secondary school enrolment rate of female primary school graduates was 2.37 percentage points lower than that of male graduates, while in 2010, the rate of female graduates was 1.3 percentage points higher than that of their male counterparts. In 2013, 12.77 million enrolled students in compulsory education were children coming into cities with their parents who were migrant workers, and 80 per cent of them were enrolled in public schools of the destination areas; a total of 21.27 million rural students of compulsory education were left-behind children and the central and local governments, schools, and civil society have all taken various measures to build a service system that care for them and ensure their healthy development. Education opportunities for disabled children have grown significantly, approaching the goal of inclusive education. Back in 1985, there were only 41,700 students in special education schools around the country. This grew to 377,600 in 2000 and further to 425,600 in 2010. From 2009 to 2011, a total of RMB4.7 billion was allocated from the central budget for the construction of special education schools, building and renovation of 1,182 schools, to better satisfy the learning needs of disabled students.

Investment in human capital made important contributions to child development, national development and the world's progress toward educational for all. In the early 1980s, Chinese people had an education level of less than 5 years on average, while in 2000, the average years of schooling for people aged 15 and above reached nearly 7.9

years, and in 2010, it increased further to 9 years, which was higher than the world average at that time. This constituted to a major breakthrough in China's efforts to build up its human resources. From 1982 to 2010, the share of population with a education level of junior high school or above increased from 24.87 per cent to 61.75 per cent. The improvement in basic education as outlined in the Constitution, increased both social returns and personal gains, which helped improve people's livelihood and contributed significantly to the country's efforts to change its appearance of poverty and backwardness. It also contributing to narrowing the urban-rural gap, and increasing national income.

As the most populous developing country in the world, China has fulfilled its commitment to the international community by realizing ahead of schedule the goal of the Dakar Framework for Action (2001-2015), which aims to ensure that all children have the right to access and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality by 2015. The commitment to make nine-year compulsory education available to all, which has brought the illiteracy rate among young and middle-aged population down to 1.08 percent, has not only helped China develop, it has also greatly influenced the world's progress toward education for all. According to the 2006 Education for All Global Monitoring Report, the education for all development index of China was 0.954 in 2002, ranking the 38th among the 121 countries monitored. With a population one fifth of the world's total, China is among the first countries to fulfill the goals of education for all. By achieving this, it realized its commitments to the world, established its image of a responsible country, and set an example for other developing countries in promoting education development and protecting children's rights.

China has gathered useful experience in promoting development-oriented education and protecting children's rights to development. We should continue to adhere to the concept that children are the priority and education always comes first. This means we need to continue to take concrete measures to protect children's rights and develop education as a strategic priority. To do this, we need to pay attention to top-level design and continue to position universal nine-year compulsory education as a top priority; intensify our efforts to improve relevant systems and put in place comprehensive laws and regulations and effective supervision and inspection systems that allow for region-



specific plans; provide category-based guidance and implement all measures step by step while giving full consideration to our basic national conditions; strive to deepen reform and improve the education administration system and funding mechanism with continuous efforts; and strengthen social participation to achieve synergy between government and civil society to promote the overall development of education and children.

Through tireless efforts, China has made great progress and achievements in protecting children's right to development. Building on previous achievements, China has given every child an opportunity to go to school, and the priority for our next step is to offer education of good quality to all students, which means improvement of the quality of education. In particular, as there are still gaps between urban and rural areas, different regions, and different population groups, China should introduce preferential policies to offer support to underprivileged groups and disadvantaged schools in remote and rural areas, in poverty-stricken areas, in minority areas, and in poorer central and western regions to narrow education gaps. The government should also actively promote innovation in guidelines and systems to achieve reasonable allocation of education resources, offer equal access to basic education as a public service, and strive to give every child better and fairer opportunities to develop to the best of their abilities.

President Xi Jinping once said that the Chinese dream integrates national and personal aspirations, as it offers every Chinese an opportunity to have a better life, to live their dreams and to prosper together with their country. The opportunity to live one's dream and to have a better life depends firstly on education. Education is what nurtures our heart and what mankind pursues with everlasting endeavor. Education changes one's destiny and its importance will only grow as we see the benefits and results over time. Let's forge ahead with strenuous effort. Let's make more innovations and explore new frontiers in our ambitious undertaking. Let's do everything we can to make education better and more equal to all in China. By so doing, we will better safeguard children's rights, contribute to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and to the progress of human civilization.

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