

Document 19.4: Excerpts from “The Fight for Education,” by Tang Yuankai in *Beijing Review*, February 2, 2006

In China today, the economic gap between urban and rural is so alarming that almost no single issue can be discussed without considering the huge differences. About 60 percent of China’s population lives in rural areas, where the average annual income is only one third of that in the cities. The gap will triple or even quadruple when a remote village in northwestern China is compared with a big city such as Beijing or Shanghai.

The choices facing millions of migrant worker parents are not easy. They can enroll their children in private schools or schools run by migrant workers, register them as transient students in state-run schools, return them to school in their hometown or worst of all, pull them out of school all together.

As more rural laborers flock into cities in the search for employment—about 100 million¹ are moving between the countryside and cities, making up 10 percent of the country’s total population—the education of their children has become a major concern. And it’s an issue not only disturbing the parents, but also the government and society at large. According to conservative statistics from relevant departments, 7 million children in this group are at the school age of six to 14, and should be engaged in the nine-year compulsory education program.

Due to the current residential registration system, farmers are deprived of the same treatment as urban residents in education opportunities, social welfare and other areas. In recent years, however, changes have begun to take place.

The Law on Compulsory Education requires that all school-age children should be provided with access to schooling, and the Central Government has also put forward explicit policies stating that governments in areas receiving migrant workers ought to help their children enroll in local state-run schools. In September 2003, the State Council

¹ Current estimates are more than 140 million.

ordered more financial support to schools receiving large numbers of such children. In March 5, 2005, in his Government Work Report Premier Wen Jiahao reiterated that greater efforts should be made to help migrant worker's children with access to schools.

Beijing now has 300,000 migrant children in its compulsory education system, 70 percent of whom are enrolled in state-run schools. The municipal government of Beijing allocates special funds to districts and counties experiencing financial problems because of the large influx of these children....

In Shanghai, although only one third of the 300,000 migrant children in the city are enrolled in state-run schools, the municipal government has promised to offer more education opportunities in state-run schools for these children.

In southeast China's Zhejiang Province, arrangements have been out in place to allow parents to pay tuition fees in monthly installments or in arrears. Those experiencing particular financial difficulties will be exempted from part or all of the tuition fees.

The city of Shaoxing in Zhejiang has made its 15 primary and secondary schools completely accessible to migrant children. Moreover, it is stipulated that none of these schools is allowed to refuse migrant students who are qualified to take the compulsory education.

Financial difficulties are always used as excuses to refuse children of migrant workers, but it is undeniable that financial pressure is a major problem. As major recipients of migrant workers' children, state-run schools are under heavy strain in terms of school buildings, teaching staff, finance and teaching facilities. Most of them are now overloaded. In urban-rural fringes the high concentration of migrant population results in insufficient school buildings. Worse still, in line with the overall plan on urban construction, it seems impossible to expand or build new school buildings in the coming year....

In Chengdu, capital of Sichuan Province, the local government is exploring the option of allocating part of the local business taxes collected from the migrant population to the children's education.

Some local governments have adopted a series of measures to use education funds in a more fair and effective way. For example, it is suggested that education outlays be directly allocated to students as living expenses, and schools that accept migrant children will receive cash from local governments by proving that they have a quota of such students. In this way, state-run schools will be willing to receive more migrant children, investments may function more efficiently and privately run schools may enjoy a great opportunity of rapid development....

Governments at various levels have now begun to support schools run by non-governmental sectors by supplying them with subsidies and unused buildings once used by state-run schools free of charge or at a low rental. They are also helping to train teachers for these schools. At the same time supervisors and qualified teachers are being sent by the government to standardize and improve the teaching in these schools....

Source: Tang Yuankai, "The Fight for Education." *Beijing Review*, February 2, 2006.