

# Why the "Double Reduction" Policy Can Reduce the Burden on Primary and Secondary School Students

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**Abstract:** To explore the mechanism of the "Double Reduction" policy, this paper first reviews the reasons why burden-reduction policies were frequently issued but had limited effectiveness before the "Double Reduction" policy was promulgated. It then summarizes the impact of the "Double Reduction" policy on various stakeholders in the basic education ecology since its implementation four years ago. Based on this, the paper analyzes the policy's mechanism and issues requiring attention during its execution. The conclusion is that the "Double Reduction" policy has achieved significant results, but reforming educational evaluation methods remains key to thoroughly solving the burden reduction problem. Furthermore, attention should be paid to students facing significant academic pressure during policy implementation, and reasonable methods should be adopted to guarantee their diverse learning needs.

**Keywords:** Burden Reduction; "Double Reduction"; Off-campus Tutoring; Basic Education Ecology; Family Education

## 1. Introduction

In July 2021, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the "Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework Burden and Off-campus Tutoring Burden for Students Compulsory Education" (hereinafter referred to as the "Double Reduction" policy), and issued a notice requiring all regions and departments to diligently implement it in light of actual conditions. In fact, excessive academic pressure on students in the basic education stage has long been a significant issue in the fields of education and people's livelihood. Since the popularization of compulsory education began in 1985, the state has continuously promulgated various policies to reduce the burden on students in the basic education stage. Opinions on these burden-reduction policies varied among different sectors of society based on different perspectives, with both praise and criticism. Supporters believe burden reduction is a powerful measure for better implementing quality-oriented education, while opponents argue it hinders students from disadvantaged backgrounds from changing their family circumstances through hard work. Various news media often analyze the issue of educational burden reduction from the perspective of social mobility, yet the burden-reduction policies still failed to alleviate parental anxiety. Compared to previous policies, this "Double Reduction" policy not only continues the previous goal of "reducing the burden on students in compulsory education" but also constitutes a super-strong regulation and heavy blow to the current tutoring industry. As the highest department of educational management in the Chinese government, the Ministry of Education specifically established a new agency—the Department of Supervision for Off-campus Education and Training—to ensure the continuous implementation of the "Double Reduction" policy and to shift the management mechanism for the tutoring industry from "campaign-style" to normalized regulation, acting as a cooling agent for parents caught in educational anxiety and pressure who were obsessively pushing their children.

## 2. Reasons for the Limited Effectiveness of Previous Burden-Reduction Policies before the "Double Reduction" Policy

The excessive academic burden on primary and secondary school students has long been a significant and difficult problem in the field of basic education since China's reform and opening-up, mainly manifested in long study hours [1-3] and negative learning experiences for students [4]. An excessive learning burden not only reduces the quality of student learning but also affects students'

eyesight [5].

Before the formal release of the "Double Reduction" policy, central and local governments had already issued a large number of policy documents concerning burden reduction. Although certain results were achieved [5-6], they failed to reverse the situation of excessive academic burden on primary and secondary school students in China. Since the reform and opening-up, the central government has promulgated 41 burden-reduction policies. Analysis of these policy texts revealed problems such as frequent but unclear policy issuance, inefficiency, and lack of supervision [7]. Regarding local policies, in response to the "Notice of the Ministry of Education and Other Nine Departments on Printing and Distributing the Measures for Reducing the Burden on Primary and Secondary School Students" to advance the national burden-reduction plan, 23 provincial governments also issued burden-reduction policies for their respective provinces based on local conditions. However, these policy texts were vague, and policy support measures were relatively lagging [8]. From this, it is not difficult to see that the reasons for the limited effectiveness and difficulty in advancing burden-reduction policies were certainly related to objective factors such as the uneven distribution of basic education resources, the scarcity of higher education opportunities, traditional cultural factors, and a single evaluation standard in China. However, the lack of scientific rigor in the policies themselves and the neglect of shadow education like off-campus tutoring were also important reasons.

Because the content of previous burden-reduction policies before "Double Reduction" lacked scientific rigor and there was a lack of supervision during implementation [9], the policies were constrained by various complex factors [10]. There were certain conflicts between the pursuits of the policy implementers, the audiences, and the policy goals themselves. Gaming behaviors among relevant stakeholders during policy implementation led to poor effectiveness of burden-reduction policies [11], even resulting in phenomena of "policy distortion" and formalism of "digital burden reduction" [12]. Furthermore, since the burden-reduction policies before "Double Reduction" were designed without considering the impact of shadow education such as off-campus tutoring, implementation merely involved simply reducing in-school preparation time. This made it difficult for students to meet college entrance requirements through formal education alone, ultimately resulting in reduced burden inside schools but increased burden outside schools [13].

### **3. Impact of the "Double Reduction" Policy on the Basic Education Ecology**

From the perspective of the basic education ecology, "burden reduction" is a very complex systematic project. The students' academic burden is only the surface phenomenon; its core involves the screening and selection evaluation of talents, and also relates to parents' expectations for their children's success. Stakeholders in the basic education ecology—students, parents, schools, tutoring institutions, government management agencies—are all interconnected and have their own demands. Therefore, for the "Double Reduction" policy to achieve its intended goals, the interconnections between the various entities in the system must be considered during implementation, and the mechanisms through which the policy truly works must be explored and utilized. The "Double Reduction" policy has been implemented for over a year now. Analyzing its achievements so far, the reasons for these achievements, and existing problems in implementation is very necessary.

#### **3.1 Impact on Students in Basic Education**

Since the implementation of the "Double Reduction" policy, students in basic education generally feel a significant reduction in their academic burden, most notably improved sleep quality. Meanwhile, the proportion of students choosing to participate in off-campus tutoring has also significantly decreased. According to a research report released by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, after the implementation of the "Double Reduction" policy, over 60% of basic education parents reported that their children's bedtime became earlier, and about 70% reported that their children's sleep quality improved. According to the "Report on the Development of Chinese National Mental Health (2019-2020)", before the implementation of the "Double Reduction" policy, over 80% of students had various sleep problems [14]. In March 2022, the "National 'Double Reduction' Effectiveness Survey Report" (completed by the China Institute of Education and Social Development, Beijing Normal University) was released, showing that students and principals highly approved of "Double Reduction". Over 80% of basic education students did not participate in off-campus subject tutoring, and over 60% did not participate in non-subject tutoring.

### ***3.2 Impact on Student Families***

The "Double Reduction" policy has a positive effect on increasing family happiness and alleviating parents' educational anxiety. By strictly regulating off-campus tutoring institutions, it objectively reduces the likelihood of students attending them, decreases family education expenses, increases time spent with children, and thereby enhances family happiness. Surveys by relevant authoritative institutions confirm this. According to the "National Compulsory Education Stage Parents' Attitude towards the 'Double Reduction' Policy" survey conducted by the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League's Propaganda Department and the Social Survey Center of China Youth Daily, among about 510,000 parents, nearly 90% felt anxious about their children's education issues, and over 70% stated that the source of anxiety was their inability to provide good tutoring for their children. After the implementation of the "Double Reduction" policy, over 70% of the surveyed parents reported that their educational anxiety had eased, with a higher proportion of relief among middle-income groups. However, although parental anxiety has been somewhat alleviated under "Double Reduction", due to the current selective examination system, they still have significant worries about their children's education [15].

### ***3.3 Impact on School Education***

"Double Reduction" has a significant positive effect on improving the quality of school education. Most teachers support "Double Reduction", but it has also increased the work pressure for some teachers. If burden reduction does not improve teaching quality and allow classroom teaching to meet students' "exam-oriented" needs, it will inevitably lead to the phenomenon of reduced burden inside schools but increased burden outside, distorting the implementation of burden-reduction policies [16]. In fact, before the release of the "Double Reduction" policy, the Shenzhen Education Bureau had already used government-purchased after-school services to attract students to choose after-school services and enhance school education. According to a questionnaire survey on the implementation of the "Double Reduction" policy in Jiangsu Province, it was found that primary and secondary schools could relatively well implement the basic requirements of "Double Reduction", and most primary and secondary school teachers and parents supported the policy [17]. An investigation into the "Double Reduction" work of junior high schools in Shaoxing City showed that they had carried out effective work in comprehensively reducing homework burden, improving the level of after-school services, and enhancing education and teaching quality, and were generally positive in implementing "Double Reduction" [18]. On the other hand, although the "Double Reduction" policy significantly reduced the burden on students, it also increased the working hours and pressure for some teachers, even leading to job burnout [19].

### ***3.4 Impact on Off-campus Tutoring Institutions***

Although the "Double Reduction" policy has effectively curbed the disorderly expansion of subject-based off-campus tutoring, it has also brought issues such as the placement of tutoring industry practitioners and the handling of high-quality tutoring institutions. After the implementation of the "Double Reduction" policy, tutoring companies' market tracks, business focuses, and the career paths of practitioners all faced transformation issues [20]. To address this, excellent tutoring companies and high-quality talents from the industry can be attracted to school education, which can both improve the quality of school education and reduce the negative impacts brought by the "Double Reduction" policy. It is worth noting that although the "Double Reduction" policy dampened the fervor for subject tutoring, it may simultaneously induce an "art training fever". According to the "Survey Report on Non-Subject Training Consumption (2021)", over 80% of parents are willing to enroll their children in non-subject training classes such as music and dance, leading to a new source of academic pressure for basic education students. Facing this situation, measures need to be taken in advance to prevent it from becoming another source of student burden.

### ***3.5 Overall Analysis***

Currently, judging from the impact of the "Double Reduction" policy on stakeholders such as schools, parents, and students, it has overall significant positive effects on the education ecology. It can enhance people's satisfaction with education, prompt stakeholders in the basic education ecology to support the implementation and fulfillment of the "Double Reduction" policy, thereby promoting a virtuous cycle in the education ecology. Furthermore, the "Double Reduction" policy also provides

opportunities for institutions offering expanded reading materials such as educational publishers and popular science organizations, as well as for youth sports education [21-22], and has triggered public sentiment that requires guidance [23].

#### **4. Analysis of the Mechanism of the "Double Reduction" Policy**

The reason why the "Double Reduction" policy has achieved remarkable results lies in its strict restrictions on off-campus tutoring, its strengthening of school education, and its improvement of examination and evaluation methods. Meanwhile, the guiding role of the policy has a obvious positive effect on reversing the social atmosphere. However, during the implementation of the "Double Reduction" policy, the negative impact of a "one-size-fits-all" approach should still be avoided.

##### ***4.1 Reducing Off-campus Tutoring***

The "Double Reduction" policy significantly reduces off-campus tutoring institutions, greatly diminishing the phenomenon of excessive academic burden caused by students participating in off-campus subject tutoring, thereby alleviating students' learning burden. Although the root cause of increased student academic burden does not originate from off-campus tutoring institutions, the proliferation and flooding of these institutions made it an easy game strategy for students under academic pressure to choose to participate. Students not yet attending would become anxious, and this anxiety spread like an infectious disease among students and parents, causing the number of students participating in off-campus tutoring to continuously increase, intensifying involution in basic education and hindering students' healthy growth. The "Double Reduction" policy effectively blocks off-campus tutoring, eliminates the possible "shortcut" to obtaining high scores, and helps alleviate students' academic anxiety overall, reducing their burden.

##### ***4.2 Strengthening School Education***

Improving the quality of school education enables students to achieve learning goals within the stipulated time, thereby reducing the learning burden after class. A major reason for the demand for off-campus tutoring is that tutoring institutions can provide higher quality and more personalized learning guidance services. The "Double Reduction" policy requires strengthening school education, which can to some extent meet students' off-campus tutoring needs within schools. Through unified arrangement and planning of student learning, it makes learning more scientific and reasonable, allowing students to master basic knowledge while growing healthily.

##### ***4.3 Improving Examination and Evaluation Methods***

Improving examination and evaluation methods can effectively alleviate the score anxiety of students and parents, preventing primary and secondary school students from actively or passively increasing their burden in pursuit of rankings and scores. The "Double Reduction" policy document explicitly requires schools to take measures to improve examination methods and reduce the pressure exams place on students. Previously existing behaviors such as finishing courses early for exam preparation, unauthorized unified exams, test questions exceeding standards, and exam rankings must not occur. Student exam scores should be presented using a grading system. Although these measures do not fundamentally reform the selection mechanism, by refraining from ranking exam scores, presenting results with a grading system, and reducing the number of exams, they effectively curb the atmosphere of blind comparison of scores among primary and secondary school students and their parents, reduce the intensity of academic competition among students, and thus tangibly reduce the burden on primary and secondary school students.

##### ***4.4 The Guiding Role of the Policy***

Besides reducing off-campus tutoring, strengthening school education, and improving examination methods, the "Double Reduction" policy also has a strong guiding function. It sends a very positive signal to the whole society, expressing the state's determination to address the excessive academic burden on primary and secondary school students and the disorder in off-campus tutoring. It plays a positive role in improving the social cultural environment of excessive competition even "involution" among primary and secondary school students. It can also guide parents to establish correct views on

education and grades, treat their children's academic results more scientifically and rationally, thereby creating a suitable family education environment for their children and promoting their ability to find directions they are good at and passionate about, and to grow into talents.

#### **4.5 Issues Requiring Attention during the Implementation of the "Double Reduction" Policy**

The "Double Reduction" policy does not change the existing examination and selection methods; therefore, to ensure policy effectiveness, it must be implemented routinely. Under the baton of exams, if the "Double Reduction" policy is implemented in a campaign-style rather than routine manner, amidst the pressure of exams and advancement and the cultural background that emphasizes exam results, the trend of off-campus tutoring could easily resurgence. The failure of South Korea's version of the "Double Reduction" policy, precisely because it did not fundamentally reform the examination and evaluation system, serves as a profound lesson that illustrates this point [24]. Therefore, it is necessary to continuously promote the reform of the examination system and refine the student diversion mechanism. Furthermore, for students facing academic pressure, even if the quality of school education has generally improved, they may still study harder in private to win in exams. Even if they cannot attend off-campus tutoring, they might choose other forms of tutoring to gain a competitive advantage or adopt overloaded learning methods detrimental to their physical and mental health. Therefore, in this context, for high school stages with greater competitive pressure, the "Double Reduction" policy reduces students' diversified choices and may have negative effects, causing those students who want to improve through hard work to become physically and mentally exhausted with limited improvement. Reasonable methods should be provided to guarantee the learning needs of these students.

### **5. Conclusion**

In this paper, we analyzed the reasons why burden-reduction policies before the "Double Reduction" policy were difficult to implement and had poor effectiveness, discussed the impact of the "Double Reduction" policy on various stakeholders in the basic education ecology, and finally analyzed the mechanism and limitations of the "Double Reduction" policy. This paper argues that the "Double Reduction" policy aims to reduce the burden on primary and secondary school students by significantly reducing the supply of off-campus subject tutoring, improving the quality of school education, improving examination and evaluation methods, and leveraging the guiding role of the policy. In the short term, it can effectively reduce student academic burden. However, in the long run, if the problems of educational evaluation and selection mechanisms are not fundamentally solved, the issue of excessive student academic burden will persist. Therefore, it is necessary to continuously promote the reform of the examination system and refine the student streaming mechanism. Additionally, to ensure the implementation effect, the "Double Reduction" policy should be implemented routinely. Tutoring industry practitioners should be properly guided to become a beneficial supplement to school education, and close cooperation from parents should be sought. During implementation, special attention should be paid to students under excessive pressure due to upcoming exams, and reasonable methods should be provided to guarantee their learning needs. Furthermore, for quality-oriented training (e.g., arts, sports), measures should also be taken to prevent it from becoming "overheated" and avoid it becoming a potential source of student burden.

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