

# The 'Competition for University Places' in Home-School-Community Collaborative Governance: The Emergence of Involution in County-Level Senior Secondary Education and Strategies for Resolution

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## Abstract

This study examines the "competition for university places" within county-level secondary schools and the resulting educational involution. It explores the misalignment of roles and conflicting dynamics among schools, families, and communities within this competitive framework. Taking Hengshui High School and its imitators as case studies, the research reveals how intensive exam-focused training and an overemphasis on university admission rates profoundly distort the educational ecosystem. Scarce educational resources at the county level and limited evaluation methods exacerbate parental anxiety and teaching pressures within schools. The prevailing "score-centric" ethos within society intensifies the competition for secondary school admission, creating a vicious cycle of involution. By applying social elite theory and cultural capital theory to analyse this phenomenon, the study examines the formation process of involution and its detrimental effects on educational equity and student development, proposing concrete countermeasures to break the cycle. Reforming educational assessment systems, altering teaching organisation and performance evaluation methods, establishing sound home-school collaborative education mechanisms, and fostering a positive educational culture provide theoretical guidance and feasible solutions for county-level educational improvement, thereby advancing educational equity and enhancing teaching quality.

## Keywords

Academic; Competition; Educational; Involution; Home-school-community collaborative governance.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Context

With the expansion of basic education coverage and the intensification of the Gaokao's selective function, university entrance has become the primary pathway for families in county-level areas to alter their children's destinies. Consequently, senior secondary education in these regions has progressively taken on the characteristics of an "admissions race". Parents, schools, and society engage in fierce competition centred on "admission rates". This competition, which should drive educational equity and quality improvement, has instead degenerated into "involution": schools have curtailed non-exam-focused curricula, teachers have intensified teaching loads, parents have organised students into competitive extracurricular tutoring, and pupils bear excessive exam burdens. This has plunged the entire educational ecosystem into "ineffective involution". Particularly following the widespread replication of the Hengshui High School model, admission rates have become the sole measure of educational success. The

dominance of "score-centric" and "admission-centric" approaches has severely deviated from the original intent of holistic education. County-level regions, constrained by scarce educational resources, concentrated societal expectations, and narrow institutional orientations, have become the hardest-hit areas of this "admission-focused involution". Against this backdrop, resolving the misalignment of roles and the involution dilemma among families, schools, and communities within a collaborative governance framework has become a critical challenge for China's educational reform.

## **1.2. Research Significance**

This study adopts the perspective of the intensifying "competition for university places" phenomenon in county-level secondary schools, focusing on analysing the role interactions and structural dilemmas that emerge among schools, families, and communities during collaborative educational governance. This holds significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this research contributes to enriching discussions on cultural capital, social reproduction, and collaborative governance, addressing a previous lack of understanding regarding how educational intensification manifests. Practically, county-level education constitutes a vital component of China's basic education system. Its reform trajectory and collaborative governance methodologies hold broad reference value. By conducting detailed analyses of typical cases to uncover the deep-seated causes of entrance examination-driven involution, this research aims to provide policymakers, educators, and parents with systematic pathways for reflection and viable solutions.

## **1.3. Theoretical Foundations**

### **1.3.1. Social Elite Theory**

Social elite theory posits that educational systems serve as instruments for reproducing social elites, with the advancement process inherently functioning as a mechanism for social selection and stratification. Within the context of county-level secondary schools' "competition for advancement," this theory illuminates how education influences resource redistribution through social stratification: the Gaokao examination is imbued with the function of "social mobility," while families, schools, and society at large regard education as the primary pathway to acquiring social capital. This has resulted in "advancement rates" becoming a focal point of societal attention. Under the pressure of elite selection, county schools compete to emulate high-intensity training models, creating a Matthew Effect where "the strong grow stronger while the weak become increasingly constrained".

### **1.3.2. Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital**

Bourdieu posits that cultural capital, as a key social asset transmitted through families, exists in three forms: institutionalised (qualifications), embodied (habits and refinement), and objectified (books and cultural environments). The current obsession among county-level parents with academic pathways fundamentally stems from anxieties and motivations to achieve class mobility through institutionalised cultural capital. Disparities in families' capacity to accumulate cultural capital not only exacerbate educational inequality but also reinforce schools' tendency to select "high-calibre students," thereby further cementing educational stratification.

## **1.4. Core Conceptual Definitions**

### **1.4.1. Collaborative Governance Among Families, Schools, and Communities**

Home-school-community collaborative governance denotes a mutually reinforcing, cooperative governance model where families, schools, and society align educational objectives, pedagogical philosophies, and resource allocation. Each entity complements the others in student development, forming a cohesive educational force through communication and

collaboration. In county-level secondary education, this collaborative governance—intended to alleviate resource disparities and educational anxieties—has instead become dysfunctional and prone to buck-passing under the influence of "exclusive focus on university admissions" and "exclusive focus on exam scores" [1]. The failure of collaboration or its counterproductive reinforcement of internal competition has become the norm, reflecting governance imbalance. Xu Xiaoge and Zhang Xianglan contend that governance imbalances arising from unclear functional divisions and conflicting interests within home-school-community collaborative education necessitate effective communication and shared responsibility to integrate educational resources and advance educational objectives [2].

### **1.4.2. Academic Advancement Competition**

The competition for advancement refers to the systematic competitive behaviour of students, families, and schools centred around pivotal events such as the Gaokao university entrance examination. Its core manifestation is the relentless escalation of resource investment, academic intensity, and psychological pressure. Within the context of county-level secondary schools, advancement rates are often highly correlated with institutional evaluations, teacher performance metrics, and parental aspirations for social mobility. While this competition may stimulate student motivation to some extent, it has increasingly devolved into a "scores-only" contest, imposing excessive strain on students' physical and mental wellbeing and the educational ecosystem. Sun Yuantao and Xiong Dianshuang contend that the rise of merit-based systems within this competition drives irrational resource allocation and vicious competition, leading to educational involution that undermines both equity and quality [3].

### **1.4.3. Educational Involution**

The essence of contemporary educational involution lies in competition and evaluation supplanting education itself, with its root cause being the mismatch between high-quality educational resources and the educational demands of middle-class offspring [4, 5]. This manifests primarily through excessive parental anxiety, schools intensifying teaching demands, and students bearing dramatically increased burdens without corresponding improvements in educational quality. In county-level academic advancement competitions, similar patterns of involution emerge: high-density repetitive drills, formalised assessment methods, and micromanagement have become the norm. This reveals structural issues of distorted educational functions and governance failure. He Jing notes that educational involution leads to inefficient resource utilisation and deteriorating educational ecosystems, necessitating resolution through institutional and cultural guidance [6].

## **2. The Evolutionary Logic and Involution Manifestations of County-Level "Academic Competition"**

### **2.1. The Ecological Structure of County Education and the Soil of Academic Anxiety**

County-level education has long grappled with resource scarcity, inadequate teaching staff, and relatively outdated facilities, creating a significant gap with urban areas' superior educational resources [7, 8]. As one of the few pathways enabling social mobility, the Gaokao examination is imbued with the core significance of "changing one's destiny through education" within county-level communities. Families universally regard academic advancement as their children's sole future prospect, leading to the rapid proliferation of educational anxiety. Local governments frequently use graduation rates as a primary metric for evaluating school performance. Under dual pressure from authorities and parents, schools continually intensify exam-focused investments while neglecting students' holistic development. This ultimately traps county-level education in a vicious cycle of competition-driven intransigence.

## **2.2. Primary Manifestations and Behavioural Patterns of the Academic Competition**

### **2.2.1. The Collective Frenzy of Shadow Education**

The pressure to advance through the education system has driven families in county-level areas to view extracurricular tutoring as an essential requirement for improving academic performance. Regardless of their financial circumstances, families invest significant time and money in out-of-school coaching, online courses, or one-to-one tutoring. Tutoring has morphed from "filling knowledge gaps" into "pre-learning beyond the syllabus" and "drill-based tactics," becoming routine for pupils. Schools tacitly condone or even encourage such tutoring to compensate for insufficient classroom time, while parents compete over the intensity and quality of tutoring, fostering a blind trend of "everyone tutoring, weekly tutoring, year-round tutoring" that perpetually escalates educational involution [9].

### **2.2.2. Grade rankings and competitive evaluations**

Competition and evaluation have become the dominant narrative in education, academic performance serving as the primary metric for assessing student capability, teacher performance, and school quality. County-level secondary schools commonly reinforce this performance-oriented approach through frequent monthly and weekly examinations, supplemented by public ranking systems, tiered teaching, and reward-punishment mechanisms [4]. This quantifiable and public evaluation system fuels school-wide, counterproductive competition: pupils transform from learning companions into rivals; teachers bear the pressure of ranking, concentrating resources on 'key students' while neglecting educational equity and individual development; parents repeatedly compare their children's results based on rankings, intensifying family educational anxiety. Ultimately, this fosters a 'competition-oriented educational culture' centred on scores.

### **2.2.3. Homework Burden and Time Compression**

Under the pressure of academic advancement, maximising time efficiency became the primary strategy for county schools, resulting in severe daily overload for students. The combination of morning reading sessions, evening study periods, high-density classroom teaching, and substantial homework loads placed pupils under intense pressure. Homework was not only voluminous but often exceeded students' academic capabilities, becoming a tool for rote learning that squeezed both rest and study time. Under the influence of parents' "grades-only" mentality, children's study hours are often extended voluntarily, with parents even requesting teachers to assign more homework. This burden adversely affects students' health and mental wellbeing, transforming learning from an active pursuit into a passive obligation, thereby undermining education's fundamental role in nurturing individuals.

## **2.3. Analysis of a Typical Case of Educational Involution: The Hengshui High School Model**

### **2.3.1. The Hengshui Model**

Hengshui High School, nationally renowned as a "Gaokao factory," has become a model for county-level secondary schools through its extreme management and intensive training. It implements a closed, "military-style" regime: students' study and daily schedules are meticulously planned down to the minute. From the dawn run at half past five in the morning until lights out at ten o'clock at night, every moment is strictly controlled by the school, leaving students with little autonomy over their time [10]. Academically, it cultivates exam specialists through a "sea of questions" approach and high-frequency testing, with daily quizzes, weekly assessments, and monthly examinations becoming routine.

Curriculum arrangements compress Years 10 and 11 into eighteen months, accelerating into Year 12 revision. Teachers employ rote-learning methods prioritizing exam performance.

Campus slogans like "Hanging hair from beams, pricking thighs with needles" and "Strive for one year to live without regret" reinforce the competitive spirit. Regular motivational assemblies and collective pledges cultivate a highly uniform, tense atmosphere. While this model has achieved over 90% first-tier university admission rates for three consecutive years, it has distorted educational objectives, leading to student exhaustion, stifled creativity, and other detrimental effects. It has become emblematic of educational over-competition, with its approach widely replicated by county-level schools, fuelling widespread irrational academic rivalry.

### **2.3.2. Blind Imitation and Mutation of the Hengshui Model in County Schools**

Hengshui High School's high admission rates prompted widespread replication of its management model. In 2021, a county-level high school in Shangqiu City, Henan Province, established a "Hengshui Experimental Class" implementing full-board boarding: pupils rise at 5:40am, lights out at 10:50pm, with nearly 15 hours of daily instruction. Break times are strictly regulated, mobile phones and recreational activities prohibited; The high school curriculum was compressed into two and a half years, with comprehensive revision commencing in the first and second years. "Supervising tutors" were assigned round-the-clock duty to eliminate "inefficient behaviour"; A key high school in Fuyang City, Anhui Province, implemented a "universal assessment" system: students were grouped by entrance exam scores, underwent one-hour subject quizzes before lunch, and faced classrooms adorned with Hengshui-style slogans like "Fight for Your Dreams" to foster an intense atmosphere. Teachers' salaries were directly tied to the number of students passing the college entrance exam, further amplifying teaching pressures.

In emulating the Hengshui model, these county-level schools commonly prioritise form over substance, neglecting student diversity and holistic development. The education process focuses solely on grades while disregarding humanistic care, generating immense psychological pressure. Some students have developed sleep disorders and anxiety from prolonged "question-sea tactics," leading to withdrawal or dropping out. The differentiated replication of the Hengshui model across county schools not only amplifies the negative impacts of exam-oriented education but also entrenches "high-pressure advancement" as a driving force of educational involution within these institutions.

## **3. Role Alienation and Involution Drivers in Home-School-Community Tripartite Interaction**

### **3.1. The Family: From Educational Collaborator to Anxiety-Driven Agent**

The family should be an educational supporter and collaborator. However, within the county-level academic competition, it has progressively transformed from a "collaborator" into a "driving force". Confronted with limited resources and intense competition stemming from urban-rural educational disparities, parents commonly experience acute academic anxiety. They fear that their children's failure will deprive them of opportunities to improve the family's circumstances. Consequently, they are compelled to compete for educational resources in urban centres to secure better educational opportunities [11, 12]. This manifests in stringent demands on children's study time and quality, alongside the relentless accumulation of supplementary resources such as cram schools and private tutoring. Confronted with perpetual comparisons of academic rankings, parents—operating under information asymmetry and singular assessment criteria—reinforce a "grades-only" educational philosophy, descending into an irrational, anxiety-fuelled race. Anxious tensions also strain parent-child and marital relationships within households. This anxiety propels schools and society into an exam-oriented education arena, intensifying overall educational involution. Paradoxically, familial

behaviour patterns fuel the vicious cycle of academic competition, transforming what should be collaborative home-school-community nurturing into rigid confrontation.

### **3.2. Schools: Caught Between Admission Rates and Parental Demands**

County-level secondary schools, as the primary agents of educational activity, bear the heavy responsibility of boosting admission rates while facing ever-increasing parental expectations and demands. Navigating between academic pressure and parental aspirations, schools are compelled to allocate most resources and energy towards exam-focused teaching. Evaluation systems often prioritise admission rates as the primary metric for assessing school performance, with teacher promotions and salaries tightly linked to student results. This forces schools to intensify teaching efforts, prioritizing short-term improvements in student performance. The intense scrutiny from parents regarding teaching standards and academic outcomes further compounds the schools' predicament. Under pressure to boost admission rates, schools neglect students' individual development and psychological support, reducing teaching time for non-exam subjects like moral and aesthetic education. Some institutions even intensify exam-focused approaches by increasing classroom hours, extending homework time, and boosting mock exam frequency. This dual pressure—both self-imposed intensification and passive adaptation—diverts educational objectives from their fundamental purpose of nurturing students, becoming the primary driver of educational involution within county-level education.

### **3.3. Society: Dual Reinforcement by Cultural Perceptions and Institutional Structures**

At the societal level, cultural perceptions and institutional structures jointly reinforce county-level educational involution. Traditional notions such as "being cut out for study" and "education changing one's destiny" place academic responsibility squarely on students, gradually elevating education to the primary pathway for social mobility. This has fostered high expectations for the Gaokao among both schools and families [11]. Media coverage of Gaokao success stories further entrenches the perception that "high scores = prestigious universities = social status," narrowing diverse life values into a singular pursuit of academic advancement. At the institutional level, local governments have tied educational performance metrics to college entrance examination results, with admission rates directly impacting school reputations and resource allocations. This has caused educational evaluation systems to skew entirely towards exam preparation. The coupling of these cultural beliefs and institutional structures forms the systemic foundation of this internalization, locking families, schools, and communities into a vicious cycle of academic competition.

## **4. Collaborative Governance Challenges in Academic Competitions and Pathways to Resolution**

### **4.1. Collaborative Imbalance: The Game Theory Logic in Tripartite Home-School-Community Interaction**

#### **4.1.1. Absence of Trust Mechanisms**

In county-level academic competition, collaborative governance among families, schools, and communities suffers from severe trust deficits, with unclear positioning of each party's educational responsibilities: families question schools' pedagogical philosophies and educational equity, diminishing trust in management and evaluation systems, and lacking coordination with schools and community education initiatives; schools resent parental over-involvement, fearing their anxieties disrupt teaching order; communities and education authorities lack transparency in resource allocation and policy implementation, hindering

resolution of home-school conflicts [13]. The scarcity of communication channels and feedback mechanisms leads all parties to adopt defensive and competitive strategies, creating a situation of mutual restraint and buck-passing. This obstructs collaborative governance progress and intensifies the futile internal friction of academic competition.

#### **4.1.2. Divergent Educational Objectives**

Significant divergence in educational objectives among families, schools, and communities constitutes the core obstacle to collaborative governance [14]. Families view academic advancement as their children's sole pathway, prioritizing grades over holistic development and fixating on rankings and prestigious university admissions; schools, pressured by parents and policy, treat graduation rates as the paramount metric while neglecting student growth; society and education authorities also skew assessments towards scores, with resource allocation centred on advancement metrics [7]. This "score-centric" orientation weakens or marginalizes non-exam-oriented education like moral and aesthetic cultivation. Overburdened students see education's foundational purpose fractured, ultimately trapped in an internalization dilemma that obstructs collaborative nurturing and educational development goals.

### **4.2. Governance Strategies to Address "Involution"**

#### **4.2.1. At the educational policy level: Reshaping the educational evaluation system**

Education inherently exists prior to competition and evaluation; its emergence and development do not depend on these as preconditions. Even detached from competition and assessment, education can still stand independently [4]. The core of overcoming involution lies in dismantling the "exam-oriented mindset", reversing the singular evaluation system centred on admission rates, establishing a diversified comprehensive evaluation mechanism, and vigorously developing quality education: Firstly, transform educational approaches by focusing on cultivating students' core competencies and key abilities. A student-centred teaching philosophy requires not only shifting the subject's status but also empowering students to become agents of self-education rather than passive recipients. The cultivation of core competencies (manifested in humanistic literacy, scientific spirit, learning to learn, healthy living, responsibility, and practical innovation) and key abilities is pivotal to achieving this goal [15]. Secondly, implementing an admissions policy combining "academic proficiency examinations + diversified admission pathways + comprehensive evaluation" will guide universities to value students' holistic capabilities, thereby fundamentally diminishing the societal emphasis on Gaokao scores. Local education authorities must adjust county-level school evaluation metrics, abandoning the singular focus on university admission rates. Instead, multi-dimensional comprehensive assessments should guide schools in implementing quality education and tailored teaching approaches. Concurrently, increased support for rural and under-performing schools is essential to balance resource allocation, narrow educational disparities between counties and between urban and rural areas, and reduce resource competition. By transforming evaluation priorities, we can curb the vicious cycle of competition among families, schools, and communities, allowing education to return to its fundamental purpose of nurturing individuals.

#### **4.2.2. School Level: Reforming Teaching Organization and Performance Mechanisms**

At the National Education Conference, the General Secretary emphasized the imperative to resolutely dismantle the entrenched malpractice of prioritizing "scores, university admissions, diplomas, publications, and titles above all else." This aims to fundamentally address the issue of education being driven by evaluation metrics, reverse utilitarian educational orientations, and abandon the simplistic practice of labeling students based solely on scores [16]. Schools must comprehensively reform teaching organization and teacher assessment mechanisms: In teaching organization, promote diversified curriculum structures by increasing elective

courses, practical activities, and arts/sports programs to alleviate examination pressure and foster balanced student development. Establish tiered teaching systems based on individualized learning needs, avoiding one-size-fits-all intensive training while addressing requirements across all ability levels. Teacher performance evaluations should move beyond single metrics like admission rates and grades, incorporating dimensions such as classroom quality, student development support, moral education, and pedagogical innovation. This diversification of assessment will encourage educators to invest effort in teaching innovation, psychological counselling, and competency development, reducing reliance on high-intensity exam preparation. Concurrently, a robust teacher training system should be established to enhance professional capabilities and awareness of humanistic care. Through reforms in teaching and assessment, education should return to its fundamental purpose of nurturing individuals, fostering a healthy and sustainable educational ecosystem.

#### **4.2.3. School-Home Level: Cultivating Effective Collaborative Education Mechanisms**

Establishing collaborative mechanisms among schools, families, and communities is pivotal to overcoming educational overcompetition. The core of this collaboration lies in institutional framework development, fundamentally involving the coordination of multiple stakeholders [2]. Regular, institutionalized consultation platforms (such as periodic parent-teacher meetings, open classrooms, and mental health counselling) should be established to enhance parental alignment with the school's educational philosophy and developmental objectives. Parent education programs should cultivate scientifically grounded parenting perspectives, reasonable expectations, and psychological support capabilities, thereby alleviating anxiety and preventing excessive intervention or competitive pressure. Schools may establish parent committees to invite parental involvement in governance, fostering educational consensus. Strengthen two-way feedback between home and school by establishing shared student growth records, enhancing cooperation through transparency. Provide psychological support and family education guidance to help parents manage pressures of child development, shifting family education from utilitarian to supportive approaches. This builds an educational ecosystem where home and school collaborate, establishing a symbiotic relationship that alleviates parental anxiety and promotes students' healthy development – a win-win outcome for all [14].

#### **4.2.4. Social Support Dimension: Cultivating a Healthy and Rational Educational Culture**

Society must cultivate a healthy and rational educational culture to alleviate academic pressure and internal competition: the Government and media should guide public discourse, advocating diverse evaluation metrics and success criteria while de-emphasizing singular worship of university entrance exam scores and elite institution admissions. Promote vocational education and lifelong learning concepts to enhance societal acceptance of varied educational pathways. Local authorities may disseminate scientific parenting principles through community activities and family education seminars, assisting parents in developing reasonable child-rearing perspectives. Education authorities must regulate private tutoring to curb excessive supplementary classes and the commodification of education, preventing resources from being disproportionately channelled into "exam preparation". Communities should establish home-school-community interaction platforms to promote resource sharing and information transparency, forming robust social support networks. By combining cultural leadership with institutional safeguards, an educational ethos that "respects diverse development and values individual growth" can be cultivated. This will alleviate utilitarian pressure for academic advancement and propel county-level education towards equitable, healthy, and sustainable development.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper takes the competitive environment surrounding university entrance examinations in county-level secondary schools as its point of departure. It systematically presents the role of distortion and interest-based dynamics within the tripartite interaction between home, school, and community, analyzing the generative mechanisms whereby academic competition becomes distorted into a state of intensified competition. Using the case of Hengshui High School alongside its imitations and mutations within the county, it illustrates how high-pressure training and exam-oriented tendencies profoundly alter the educational ecosystem. It emphasises the vicious cycle that arises when trust is absent, objectives are misaligned, and resource allocation is chaotic among families, schools, and society. To break this impasse, a comprehensive, coordinated efforts across all fronts. This entails reforming the evaluation system at the educational level to improve teaching organization and performance mechanisms, strengthening home-school collaboration to establish sound educational frameworks, and fostering healthy societal attitudes towards education. Collective endeavours must redirect education towards its fundamental purpose of nurturing individuals. This study not only enriches the theoretical perspective on the involution of county-level education but also offers pragmatic recommendations for policy planning and implementation. Moving forward, it is hoped that through concerted efforts across all sectors, county-level education can achieve dual improvements in equity and quality, truly becoming a robust platform for advancing social mobility and individual development.

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