

## The Path Selection for County-level Secondary Vocational Education to Serve the Local Economy

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### Abstract

Secondary vocational education is an indispensable force in supporting regional development. With the continuous acceleration of industrial structure upgrading, county economies are at a critical period of transformation. On the one hand, the advantages of traditional industries are gradually weakening due to rising costs; on the other hand, emerging industries and high-skilled talents are continuously aggregating in central cities, posing severe challenges to county development. How to fully leverage the foundational role of secondary vocational education in county areas in revitalizing the local economy has become a key link in promoting regional development. Facing multiple predicaments such as the mismatch between professional structure and industrial demands, the weakening of local service functions, and the insufficiency of teaching staff and resources, county secondary vocational schools should focus on optimizing the professional layout; balance the orientation towards further education and employment, and clarify the school's positioning; strengthen the construction of "dual-qualified" teacher teams, and actively promote the establishment of shared industry-education integration platforms through school-enterprise cooperation, in order to achieve a new pattern of high-quality development where talent supports the economy and education boosts prosperity.

### Keywords

County-level; Secondary vocational education; Local economy Path.

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, vocational education has continuously received high attention from the state. The state has successively introduced relevant policies to promote the development of vocational education. In 2022, the newly revised "Vocational Education Law" for the first time legally clarified the "equal importance of vocational education and general education", marking its social function in serving the construction of the modern economic system. [1] County economies, as the basic component of the national economy, play an important strategic supporting role in promoting regional coordinated development. However, with the continuous advancement of vocational and general education integration, the scale of secondary vocational schools has continued to shrink, and the brain drain caused by the acceleration of urbanization has further weakened the foundation of county-level secondary vocational education in the local economy's development. Currently, county industries are constantly upgrading and accelerating, and secondary vocational education, as the main channel for cultivating local skills-based talents, is increasingly demonstrating its functions.

## **2. The Value Proposition of County-Level Secondary Vocational Education in Serving The Local Economy**

### **2.1. The National Policy-Driven Approach to the Development of Secondary Vocational Education in County-Level Areas**

County-level secondary vocational education, as an important part of the national vocational education system, is a significant force rooted in rural areas and serving the local economic and social development. It plays an irreplaceable and crucial role in the rural revitalization strategy. Since the reform and opening up, it has provided a large number of skilled talents to various sectors of society and made significant contributions. Currently, secondary vocational education still holds an important position in the education system of our country, and promoting the high-quality development of county-level secondary vocational education has far-reaching significance for the education cause and regional economic improvement.

Since 2010, when the Ministry of Education issued the "Trial Measures for the Establishment of Professional Programs in Secondary Vocational Schools", granting secondary vocational schools the autonomy to establish professional programs, a series of policy documents have continuously deepened the connotation and development path of secondary vocational schools. In 2019, the Ministry of Education issued the "Guiding Opinions on the Formulation and Implementation of Professional Education Programmes in Vocational Colleges", standardizing the formulation and implementation of professional education programmes in vocational colleges, including secondary vocational schools. It emphasizes the implementation of the fundamental task of fostering virtue and cultivating skills, adhering to the integration of morality and skills, and following the laws of vocational education. This not only promotes the transformation of vocational education's training goals from focusing on a single skill to cultivating high-quality skilled talents, but also enhances the comprehensive social competitiveness of secondary vocational school students. In the new development stage, policy support has continued to increase. In 2021, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the "Opinions on Promoting the High-Quality Development of Modern Vocational Education", clearly stating that efforts should be made to significantly improve the educational quality of secondary vocational education, implement the "Standards for the Establishment and Improvement of School Conditions for Secondary Vocational Schools", build outstanding secondary vocational schools and high-quality professional programs, and provide students for higher vocational education. In 2022, the "Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Modern Vocational Education System" clearly proposed "Supporting high-quality secondary vocational schools to jointly carry out five-year continuous education with higher vocational schools, and carry out the connection and cultivation between secondary vocational education and vocational undergraduate education." The continuous release of policies not only demonstrates the country's high attention to the cultivation of skilled talents, but also emphasizes the foundational position of secondary vocational education in the modern vocational education system at the institutional level.

### **2.2. The Demand for County-Level Economic Development**

County-level economy serves as a bridge connecting cities and rural areas, and it is an important cornerstone of China's national economic development [2]. In 2022, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the "Opinions on Promoting the Construction of Urbanization with County Towns as the Key Criterion", clearly stating that urban-rural integration should be advanced based on county-level units, leveraging the role of county towns in connecting cities and serving rural areas, and enhancing their ability to radiate and drive rural areas. County-level economy is a regional economy centered around county towns, with town centers as the link and rural

areas as the foundation, with regional characteristics and overall functions [3]. It covers numerous fields such as agricultural production, industrial manufacturing, commercial trade, and tourism development, and is an important part of the national economy. In the process of China's modernization, it occupies an indispensable and crucial position. Since the new era, China has achieved significant accomplishments in county-level economic development, and its role in economic development has become more prominent. According to the "Report on County-Level Economic Development in China (2024)", "In 2023, county-level economy accounted for 52.4% of the national population and contributed 38.5% of GDP, playing a pillar role" [4], and has become an important pillar for promoting economic growth and social stability. However, county-level economic development shows obvious regional imbalance. The county-level economies in the eastern regions and areas such as the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region and the Yangtze River Delta are relatively strong, while those in the western and southwestern regions are relatively lagging [5]. This disparity is not only due to objective factors such as geographical conditions, but also stems from the structural mismatch between the supply of skilled talents and actual demand during the industrial upgrading process of county-level areas. Whether it is the industrial technology upgrading in developed regions or the cultivation of characteristic industries in underdeveloped regions, there is an urgent need for local, high-quality technical and skilled talents. Therefore, promoting the deep integration of county-level secondary vocational education into local economies has become a fundamental choice to support county-level industrial upgrading and alleviate the shortage of talents.

### **2.3. The Compatibility Between County-Level Vocational Education and Local Economy**

Counties, as the basic units of national development, exhibit significant differences in their development status due to factors such as local characteristics and resource allocation disparities. Among the numerous elements that constrain the development of county economies, the collaborative development between county economies and secondary vocational education is particularly crucial [6]. In 2022, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the "Opinions on Doing a Good Job in 2022 in Comprehensively Promoting Rural Revitalization" which clearly emphasized the need to strengthen the construction of rural revitalization talent teams and support the establishment of agricultural-related universities and vocational education; the "Opinions" also mentioned "counties" multiple times, fully demonstrating the core position of counties as the basic unit of national economic and social development and their strategic role in rural revitalization and the modernization of agriculture and rural areas. Currently, with the deep adjustment of the industrial structure and the acceleration of economic operation rhythms, the imbalance in development among counties has intensified, causing some county-level vocational schools to face severe challenges in adapting to local economic development. Issues such as mismatch between professional settings and industrial development, prominent "two-skin" phenomenon of industry-academia integration, and lack of teaching staff have emerged. At the same time, the economic development of counties is also encountering new strategic opportunities. Trends such as the construction of characteristic industrial clusters, the transformation and upgrading of manufacturing, and digital transformation have injected new momentum into county economies; the further advancement of the rural revitalization strategy, the diversified expansion of the service industry, the upgrading of consumption and market penetration, and other macro-environmental changes have created favorable conditions for the deep integration of county-level vocational education and local economies. Therefore, seizing the opportunities of the times, basing on the actual needs of county economic development, and running vocational education well are the key to breaking through current development bottlenecks and empowering county economies.

### **3. The Current Practical Predicament of County-Level Secondary Vocational Education in Serving The Local Economy**

#### **3.1. Misalignment Between Professional Structure and Industrial Demands**

Currently, in the context of the accelerated upgrading of the industrial structure, county-level economies are facing multiple challenges such as the transformation of traditional manufacturing industries towards intelligence, the advancement of modern agriculture towards large-scale production, and the rapid rise of the digital economy and specialized service industries. This profound transformation poses a contemporary challenge to the professional settings of secondary vocational colleges. However, the professional structures of many county-level secondary vocational schools generally lack dynamic adjustments that are in sync with industrial changes, and still mainly consist of general-purpose majors such as traditional mechanical processing, nursing, and computer basics, failing to precisely align with the core demands of local key industrial sectors [7]. Taking Xinyang City as an example, the professional resources of local secondary vocational schools are overly concentrated in popular fields such as computer application and accounting, resulting in an excessive supply of graduates far exceeding the market capacity, and a continuously declining employment rate; while the specialized agriculture sectors that support the regional economy, such as rice-shrimp co-culture and oil tea planting, and the pillar industries such as textile and food processing, still urgently need skilled technical personnel, but they have long been in a state of "labor shortage", creating a stark imbalance between supply and demand. Moreover, with the advancement of trends such as the improvement and efficiency enhancement of county-level characteristic agriculture, the branding development of rural tourism, and the professional upgrading of elderly care services, the market has an increasingly urgent demand for skilled technical personnel with a combination of multiple skills. In contrast, most secondary vocational schools are still slow in the layout of emerging majors that align with rural revitalization and industrial integration, such as modern agricultural technologies and digital commerce. This lag is not only constrained by resource limitations such as training equipment and professional teachers in schools, but also lies in the lack of deep integration between professional settings and local industrial planning, ultimately causing a structural mismatch between talent supply and industrial demand [8].

#### **3.2. The Demand for County-level Economic Development**

With the implementation of vocational-education-university education integration, the concept of resource sharing and integrated training model advocated by the relevant policies is easily misunderstood at the county level as merely "moving towards the general education model" [9]. In some county-level secondary vocational schools, in order to cater to the academic qualification-seeking mentality of the society, a large amount of educational resources are invested in the teaching of general knowledge to meet the needs for further education, which directly leads to the compression of skills training and the reduced utilization rate of training equipment, and gradually blurs the original "establishing oneself through skills" educational positioning.

Most county-level secondary vocational school students have a strong desire for practice and skills learning. Their choice of secondary vocational education is often the result of the middle school entrance examination diversion and the local employment intention. However, under the influence of the academic promotion orientation brought by vocational-education-university education integration, students are forced to spend a lot of time studying cultural courses, resulting in insufficient training time and insufficient proficiency [10]. For students who fail to enter higher education, they have neither mastered the skills sufficient to perform local industry positions nor have the theoretical foundation of ordinary high school graduates,

falling into the predicament of "not achieving success in higher education and not being able to find employment". Even for the few students who successfully enter higher education, they may also be unable to connect with professional learning in the higher vocational education stage due to long-term lack of skills training, ultimately affecting the sustainability of career development.

In addition, the development of county economies is highly dependent on the support of localized skilled talents. The academic promotion orientation brought about by vocational-education-university education integration causes the students trained by county-level secondary vocational schools either to flow to higher education and no longer return to the county for employment, or to be unable to meet the needs of local enterprises due to insufficient skills. This will directly lead to the breakage of the local industry talent supply chain [11]. In the long run, the county economy may face the embarrassing situation of "labor shortage" and "employment difficulties", restricting the pace of local industrial upgrading and economic transformation.

### **3.3. Weak Teaching Staff and Low Equipment Utilization Rate**

In recent years, under the continuous promotion of national policies, the integration of education and industry has become the core path for the development of vocational education. County-level secondary vocational education, as the educational form most closely linked to local industries, has also gradually deepened its collaborative cooperation with enterprises. However, in general, the educational level and quality of county-level secondary vocational education still need to be improved. Firstly, there are structural shortcomings in the construction of the teaching staff [12]. Some counties are constrained by the dual limitations of geographical location disadvantages and economic development levels, resulting in the dilemma of "difficulty in recruiting" and "difficulty in retaining" teaching staff. On one hand, highly educated and outstanding graduates show a significant preference for cities in career choices, even when facing a mismatch in majors, they still tend to choose employment in big cities, making it difficult for county-level secondary vocational schools to attract high-quality teaching resources; on the other hand, compared with similar urban colleges, county-level secondary vocational teachers have obvious gaps in salary and career development opportunities, which further exacerbates the outflow of outstanding teaching staff. Secondly, there is a serious shortage of "dual-qualified" teachers who possess both solid theoretical knowledge and proficient practical operation skills in county-level secondary vocational schools. More critically, in the context of rapid industrial iteration leading to profound changes in knowledge systems, some teachers have failed to update their knowledge structures and skill reserves in time, making it difficult for them to effectively convey cutting-edge industrial knowledge and practical skills to students, which directly restricts the update of students' knowledge systems and the precise cultivation of their vocational abilities [13]

## **4. County-level Secondary Vocational Education Contributes to the Practical Development of Local Economy**

### **4.1. Optimize the Professional Layout and Resolve The Dilemma of Mismatched Positioning**

To address the structural contradiction between the supply of vocational education talents in county areas and the demand for talents in regional economic development, it is urgent to promote the transformation of the training goals of vocational education in county areas from "blindly following short-term popular majors" to "precisely serving the talent demands of local pillar industries" [14]. Only by integrating the development depth of vocational colleges into the new ecological system of county economic development can we achieve long-term win-win

results, promote the coordinated development of vocational education and regional economy, and inject strong impetus into the high-quality development of county economies.

The core value of county-level vocational education lies in precisely matching the local industrial demands. The professional settings need to closely align with the county's industrial structure and focus on the technical upgrading demands of local industries. For example, agricultural counties should layout modern agriculture-related majors, industrial counties should focus on equipment manufacturing majors, rather than blindly chasing popular majors unrelated to the local area, ensuring that students can still find employment in their hometowns after graduation, and reserve technical talents for the county. In addition, service to the county economy should be included in the core standards of school operation, and order-based classes should be set up for local key industries and shortage positions, to cultivate skilled talents in a targeted manner, achieving a win-win situation for the three parties: students, enterprises, and schools. At the same time, vocational colleges should base themselves on the characteristics of the county's industrial structure and establish a real-time dynamic adjustment mechanism [15]. Compared with urban vocational education, county-level vocational education needs to strengthen "locality". With the local industrial structure and market demand as the fundamental orientation, precisely align with the actual needs of local economic and social development, professional layout should closely follow the talent demand map of regional economic development, optimize the professional structure around local pillar industries and advantageous industries, and ensure that talent cultivation resonates with industrial development at the source, enhancing students' employment competitiveness. When county-level vocational schools admit students locally, they can implement targeted scale admissions based on the types of job gaps in the region; at the same time, they should deeply collaborate with enterprises, jointly formulate training plans, and set students' learning content and graduation standards according to the actual needs of enterprises.

#### **4.2. Balance Academic Education and Employment, Reverse The Weakening Trend**

To address the core contradiction of the gradual shift of county-level vocational education towards academic advancement, it is necessary to avoid deviating from the essence of vocational education solely for academic purposes, while also strengthening the core function of local service, and achieving the training goals of having a solid foundation for academic advancement, being adaptable for employment, and retaining talents in the county [16].

County-level vocational education should abandon the one-size-fits-all training model and, based on students' wishes and the needs of the county, establish a dual-track parallel training system with distinct focuses to avoid students getting trapped in difficulties such as difficult academic advancement transitions and weak employment skills. For students with obvious employment intentions, employment-oriented classes can be set up, with courses designed around the core skills of county-level industries. After students complete the basic skills and theoretical learning within the prescribed period, they can enter local enterprises for on-the-job internships. Those who pass the internship can directly sign employment agreements with the enterprises, truly enabling students to achieve their employment goals. For students with academic advancement intentions, while ensuring the time for basic cultural courses, sufficient practical training courses should be retained, and the training content should be in line with the corresponding vocational programs of higher vocational colleges. County-level vocational education schools can reach agreements with local or surrounding higher vocational colleges for the connection between secondary and higher vocational education, clearly stating that the skill credits obtained in the secondary vocational education stage can be directly recognized as credits in higher vocational education, avoiding skill learning gaps after academic advancement

and ensuring that students can quickly transition to professional learning in the higher vocational stage.

In terms of the curriculum system, break the fragmented state where cultural courses serve academic advancement and skills courses serve employment, and construct dual-function integrated courses [17]. The teaching of basic cultural courses can incorporate county-level industry cases to break down knowledge through case analysis and connect with practice, avoiding pure theoreticalization; professional skills courses can be designed based on the standards of local enterprise positions and introduce real enterprise projects as training content, promoting education to shift from "producing graduates" to "embedding in the industrial chain"; in addition, add county-level industry awareness courses, and organize students to regularly conduct research on local enterprises, cooperatives, and rural projects, allowing students to directly face the difficulties of county-level industries and strengthen the sense of serving their hometowns.

### **4.3. Attract and Cultivate A High-Quality Teaching Staff, And Build A Shared Training Platform**

To address the structural contradiction between the supply of vocational education in county areas and the demand of local industries, we should strengthen the teaching staff through "attracting, cultivating, retaining, and employing", and build a shared training platform through industry-academia integration. This will promote the organic connection between the education chain and the industrial chain [18].

First, in terms of the construction of the teaching staff, we should adopt a strategy of attracting and cultivating, combined with retention and utilization. Led by the local government, select technical experts with rich practical experience to serve as part-time teachers. Allocate fixed class hours for them to participate in teaching every week. At the same time, we can establish a county-level vocational education teacher training program in collaboration with vocational colleges and universities both within and outside the province. This program will recruit students from local vocational and senior high school graduates. Provide tuition subsidies during their studies and require them to serve in county-level vocational education for a certain period after graduation. In terms of retaining and utilizing existing teachers, we need to improve the guarantee mechanism and expand the career development channels. Clearly define the path for teacher promotion, set aside special funds to support teachers to attend academic conferences and professional training, and multi-dimensionally enhance their teaching and professional capabilities. Through strengthening the effectiveness of training and assessment, holding skills competitions, building an achievement display platform, and publicly recognizing contributions, we can test the training results [19]. Regarding the shortage of "dual-qualified" teachers and the lag in knowledge update, we should encourage teachers to regularly go to enterprises for practical learning and convert the cases obtained from practice into teaching resources. Relying on key enterprises in the county, jointly build "dual-qualified" teacher training bases. Enterprises provide equipment and technical mentors, while the school provides theoretical support. The content directly aligns with the real job requirements of enterprises.

Second, based on industry-academia integration and school-enterprise collaboration, establish a county-level industry-education joint body and build a shared training base. The training base should integrate practical teaching, real production, and technical services. It should focus on the demands of key industries in the county and actively carry out on-the-job skills training to ensure that the training content for students comes from the industry and serves the industry, and to provide truly needed skilled talents for enterprises [20]. In daily teaching, we should formulate a systematic rotation training plan, arrange classes to enter the base for practical training on a regular basis, so that students can practice immediately after learning and

promote learning during practice. At the same time, encourage teachers to lead students to participate in real technical improvement projects in enterprises, promote the transformation of excellent project results into entrepreneurial practices, and be guided by real production problems to enhance students' ability to solve practical problems. Through the training base, students will not only master solid theory but also possess practical operational skills. After graduation, they can quickly adapt to the job requirements of county-level enterprises. For enterprises, obtaining customized skilled talents can reduce training costs; for educational institutions, achieving a virtuous cycle of teaching benefiting the industry and the industry empowering teaching, ultimately achieving the development pattern of providing high-skilled talents for the county economy and promoting mutual benefit and win-win development between schools and enterprises.

## 5. Conclusion

The essence of county-level secondary vocational education serving the local economy lies in achieving the synergy between the allocation of educational resources and the regional economic and social development strategy. Based on the background of the high-quality development of the national economy and the comprehensive promotion of rural revitalization, this paper systematically analyzes the practical difficulties faced by county-level secondary vocational colleges in serving the local economy, such as professional mismatch, deviation in the orientation of further education, and weak resources [21]. It proposes practical solutions: establishing a dynamic adjustment mechanism for specialties based on demand, promoting precise alignment between talent cultivation and industrial demands; establishing a dual-track training system that prioritizes both further education and employment, strengthening the core function of secondary vocational education in serving the county's development; through attracting and cultivating high-quality teachers and jointly building and sharing training platforms, consolidating the basic ability of school operation. In the future, efforts should be made to build a joint community of industry and education involving the government, industries, enterprises, and schools, achieving organic connection at a deeper level between the education chain, talent chain, industrial chain, innovation chain, and providing continuous talent support for the high-quality development of the county's economy.

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