

# “From ‘Access to Kindergarten’ to ‘Affordable Kindergarten’”: Implementation Logic, Practical Challenges, and Institutional Improvement of China’s Free Preschool Education Policy

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## Abstract

Since the fall semester of 2025, China has officially launched a free preschool education policy, marking a critical step from “access to kindergarten” to “affordable kindergarten.” Based on a systematic review of the policy’s evolution and implementation progress, this article analyzes four major practical challenges: fiscal sustainability, teacher workforce development, urban-rural resource disparities, and integration of childcare and preschool education. It then proposes institutional improvements including establishing a stable and long-term funding mechanism, strengthening teacher compensation and professional development systems, improving quality supervision and evaluation, and accelerating the institutional design for integrated childcare and preschool education. The aim is to provide a reference for the high-quality advancement of the free preschool education policy.

## Keywords

Free preschool education, Preschool Education Law, inclusive kindergartens, fiscal investment.

## 1. Introduction

In The year 2025 marks a milestone in the history of China’s preschool education. In this year, the Preschool Education Law of the People’s Republic of China officially came into effect, signifying a major transition from policy-driven to law-based governance of preschool education. At the same time, the General Office of the State Council issued the Opinions on Gradually Implementing Free Preschool Education (Guo Ban Fa [2025] No. 27) [1], clearly stating that starting from the fall semester of 2025, the tuition and childcare fees for children in the first year of preschool (the senior year) in public kindergartens would be waived nationwide. For children enrolled in private kindergartens approved by educational authorities, the fees would be reduced by reference to the waiver level of similar local public kindergartens. Preschool education is the starting point of the national education system, bearing on the developmental starting point of millions of children and the well-being of families.

For a long time, “difficulty in accessing kindergarten” and “high cost of kindergarten” have been pain points for many families. By 2024, China’s gross enrollment rate in preschool education had reached 92%, and the proportion of children enrolled in inclusive kindergartens reached 91.61%, placing China in the upper-middle ranks of the world in terms of access. However, the situation in which families bear the majority of preschool education costs has not fundamentally changed. High childcare fees remain an important consideration in many families’ fertility decisions. Against this backdrop, the free preschool education policy carries profound strategic significance – it is not only a direct response to high child-rearing costs but also a key institutional arrangement for building a fertility-friendly society and achieving the goal of a strong education nation.

This article aims to systematically analyze the implementation logic, practical challenges, and institutional improvement paths of China's free preschool education policy, in order to provide a reference for the continuous optimization of this major livelihood policy.

## **2. Organization of the Text Implementation Progress and Effects of the Free Preschool Education Policy**

### **2.1. Policy Evolution: From Local Experiments to Top-Level Design**

The China's exploration of free preschool education did not begin in 2025. As early as 2008, Shipai Town, Dongguan City, Guangdong Province, took the lead in offering education subsidies covering the entire population from kindergarten to doctoral level. By 2025, this had achieved full coverage, with town and village fiscal inputs exceeding 18% of disposable funds annually. Subsequently, provinces such as Shaanxi, Xinjiang, and Tibet successively launched free preschool education pilots in certain areas, accumulating local experience.

Entering the 14th Five-Year Plan period, free preschool education gradually rose from local experimentation to a national strategy. The Outline of the Plan for Building a Strong Education Nation (2024–2035) explicitly proposed “exploring the gradual expansion of free education,” providing policy preparation for the free preschool education policy. On June 1, 2025, the Preschool Education Law officially came into effect, legally affirming the public-welfare and inclusive nature of preschool education and providing legal guarantees for the free policy. On this basis, the State Council issued a dedicated document in August 2025, clearly requiring the gradual implementation of free preschool education nationwide starting from the fall semester of 2025.

### **2.2. Implementation Progress: Local Implementation and Fiscal Guarantees**

From the release of the central policy to local implementation, responses were rapid. As of early 2026, provinces such as Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia, Sichuan, Anhui, and Guizhou had successively issued specific implementation plans. Most defined the target group as “children in the first year of preschool (senior year) in public kindergartens” and stipulated that children attending eligible private kindergartens would have their fees reduced by reference to the public kindergarten standard. For example, Heilongjiang Province's plan clearly states: “Starting from the fall semester of 2025, childcare fees for children in the first year of preschool in public kindergartens will be waived,” and provides corresponding subsidies to private kindergartens.

In terms of fiscal guarantees, a tiered central-local cost-sharing mechanism has been established. Taking Inner Mongolia as an example, the required fiscal subsidies for waived childcare fees are allocated as follows: after the central government allocates its share, the remaining portion is shared between the autonomous region and the league/city governments according to their respective fiscal responsibilities and expenditure authority. According to the Summary of the Conference on Finance for Preschool and Disadvantaged Children [2]. The Ministry of Finance's preliminary estimates show that the single-semester fiscal input for the fall semester of 2025 was about 20 billion yuan, covering approximately 12 million families. This means that those 12 million families directly saved 20 billion yuan in educational expenditures.

### **2.3. Policy Effects: Student Flow Back to Public Kindergartens and Enhanced Inclusiveness**

After the policy's implementation, social response has been positive. On the one hand, some public kindergartens have seen a clear “backflow” of students in the senior year – families who had previously chosen private kindergartens due to fees or access barriers are now opting for

public kindergartens under the free policy. This phenomenon indicates that the free policy has had an initial effect in guiding rational student flow and promoting the utilization of public kindergarten resources.

On the other hand, the policy includes children in the “first year of preschool” at private kindergartens approved by educational authorities, breaking down the barrier of kindergarten type. This design not only protects the legitimate interests of private kindergartens but also prevents a sharp decline in their enrollment due to the free policy, reflecting the refined nature of the policy design.

## **2.4. International Reference: Free Preschool Education as a Global Consensus**

From an international comparative perspective, more than 90 countries worldwide have implemented 1 to 4 years of free preschool education as a necessary path to promote inclusive and high-quality preschool education. The experience of developed countries shows that free preschool education not only effectively reduces family child-rearing costs but also helps narrow the developmental gap between disadvantaged children and their peers through early intervention, yielding significant social returns [3]. China’s free preschool education policy, while drawing on international experience, has also taken into account domestic conditions such as demographic changes, fiscal capacity, and regional disparities, thus forging a development path with Chinese characteristics.

## **3. Practical Challenges of Free Preschool Education**

The implementation of the free preschool education policy is not without difficulties. Based on local implementation experiences and expert discussions, four major challenges currently stand out.

### **3.1. Fiscal Pressure and Sustainability**

Fiscal input is the core guarantee for the sustainable operation of the free policy. After implementation, kindergarten operating funds have shifted from being tuition-based to mainly government-subsidized, placing higher demands on local finances. This is especially true for economically underdeveloped areas in central and western China, which already have weak fiscal bases. In addition to central subsidies, they must also provide matching funds according to the prescribed ratios [4], resulting in considerable fiscal pressure. In some areas, early implementation has encountered problems such as delayed funding and sluggish disbursement processes, affecting normal kindergarten operations.

Moreover, the current free policy covers only the “first year of preschool” (senior year). As the policy advances, calls to extend free coverage to the middle and junior years are growing louder. However, each additional year of free coverage would increase fiscal expenditure by approximately 20 billion yuan, posing a further test to fiscal sustainability. Balancing the gradual expansion of free coverage with fiscal affordability is a major issue for policymakers.

### **3.2. Deep-Seated Dilemmas in Teacher Workforce Development**

The Preschool Education Law stipulates that from 2026 onward, those without a kindergarten teaching qualification may not be employed, and by 2027 all unqualified personnel will be phased out. This regulation aims to enhance the professional level of the teaching force. However, against the backdrop of the free policy, the teacher issue has become more complex. A comparative analysis of early years workforce policies in the four UK nations [5] reveals common challenges such as qualification requirements, low pay and status, and limited career development opportunities – issues that resonate with China’s current situation.

First, after the free policy’s implementation, kindergartens’ revenue structures have changed. Some kindergartens that previously relied on tuition fees to maintain operations are now facing

funding shortages, leaving little room to raise teacher salaries. While the reduction in the number of children has somewhat eased the cost pressure on kindergartens under the free policy, the space for improving teacher compensation remains limited. Second, the free policy may lead to public expectations that preschool education becomes “compulsory,” which would in turn demand higher teacher status and salaries – expectations that current fiscal inputs cannot quickly meet. Third, the shortage of qualified teachers in rural areas remains acute. With limited funds, attracting and retaining competent teachers in these areas is a pressing problem.

### **3.3. Uneven Distribution of Resources Between Urban and Rural Areas and Across Regions**

China’s preschool education resources have long suffered from imbalances between urban and rural areas and among different regions. Urban areas generally have higher coverage of inclusive kindergartens and relatively abundant resources, while rural areas—especially remote mountainous regions – still face problems of insufficient kindergartens, poor facilities, and a shortage of qualified teachers.

The free policy addresses the “affordability” issue but does not fundamentally tackle “accessibility” or “quality.”

Local practice shows that rural private inclusive kindergartens face many difficulties, including high operating costs, unstable enrollment, and insufficient policy support. If the free policy only solves the problem of “whether families can afford it” without addressing “whether there is a kindergarten to attend” or “whether the kindergarten is good,” the sense of gain among rural families will be greatly diminished. Therefore, increasing resource allocation to rural preschool education within the free policy framework is crucial for advancing educational equity.

### **3.4. Institutional Gaps in the Integration of Childcare and Preschool Education**

As the birth rate continues to decline, the reduction in kindergarten enrollment has become a common phenomenon. This change, objectively, creates a more relaxed resource environment for implementing the free policy, but it also poses new challenges to kindergartens’ sustainable development. At the same time, the supply-demand gap for childcare services for children aged 0–3 is becoming increasingly prominent, making “integration of childcare and preschool education” an important reform direction in the preschool education field.

However, the current free policy mainly targets the 3–6 age group. The free or inclusive provision of childcare services for the 0–3 age group has not yet been incorporated into the institutional framework. The two systems are fragmented in terms of management, funding, and teacher standards, lacking effective coordination. As local governments promote the integration of childcare and preschool education, how to bring childcare services into the institutional vision of the free policy and form a coherent policy framework for integrated 0–6 development is an institutional issue that requires forward-looking research.

## **4. Paths for Institutional Improvement**

### **4.1. Establish a Stable and Long-Term Funding Guarantee Mechanism**

To address fiscal sustainability, improvements can be made in three ways. First, establish a cost-sharing mechanism that aligns central and local responsibilities and expenditure authority, appropriately increasing the central government’s share for underdeveloped central and western regions to alleviate local fiscal pressure. Second, explore diversified funding channels, such as setting up special funds for preschool education development and encouraging social participation in preschool education investment. Third, establish a dynamic adjustment mechanism for free preschool education funding, regularly updating per-student subsidy

standards based on changes in price levels, per-student costs, and fiscal capacity, ensuring that funding matches developmental needs.

#### **4.2. Strengthen Teacher Compensation and Professional Development Systems**

Teachers are the fundamental guarantee of preschool education quality. It is recommended that within the free policy framework, teacher compensation be made a priority direction for fiscal investment. On the one hand, establish a tiered salary guarantee system for kindergarten teachers, ensuring that salaries of public kindergarten teachers are kept at a reasonable ratio relative to local civil servants or compulsory education teachers. On the other hand, improve the salary subsidy mechanism for teachers in private inclusive kindergartens, supporting private kindergartens in raising teacher salaries through government purchase of services and reward-based subsidies. At the same time, accelerate the construction of a teacher professional development support system, providing continuous training, teaching research, and career advancement opportunities for teachers.

#### **4.3. Improve Quality Supervision and Evaluation Systems**

Free does not mean low quality. As the free policy is implemented, public attention to preschool education quality will continue to rise. It is recommended to build a quality evaluation system covering kindergarten conditions, teacher qualifications, curriculum implementation, and safety management, and to regularly conduct quality monitoring and supervision evaluations. The law has already required the establishment of curriculum resource evaluation and quality assessment and monitoring systems; these should be implemented quickly. At the same time, the tendency toward “primary schoolification” must be resolutely curbed, ensuring that preschool education returns to its essential nature of “play as the basic activity.”

#### **4.4. Accelerate Institutional Design for the Integration of Childcare and Preschool Education**

Against the backdrop of declining birth rates, promoting the integration of childcare and preschool education is not only a pragmatic response to demographic changes but also an important direction for expanding the service functions of preschool education. It is recommended that the central government issue guidance on the integrated development of childcare and preschool education, clarifying the linkage mechanism between 0–3 childcare and 3–6 preschool education, and gradually incorporating childcare services into the inclusive public service system. At the same time, as the free policy gradually expands, the funding and resource layout for the entire 0–6 age range should be coordinated to build an integrated policy framework.

### **5. Conclusion**

From “access to kindergarten” to “affordable kindergarten” and then to “high-quality kindergarten,” China’s preschool education is undergoing a profound historical transition. The implementation of the free preschool education policy is an important institutional arrangement for responding to people’s concerns, promoting educational equity, and building a strong education nation. Nearly one year after implementation, the policy has achieved positive results in reducing family burdens, guiding rational student flow, and promoting more balanced resource allocation.

However, the free policy is not the end point but a new starting point for high-quality preschool education development. Only by organically combining fiscal investment, teacher development, quality supervision, and institutional innovation can the qualitative leap from “free” to “high-quality” be truly realized. As the Preschool Education Law establishes the principles of “public welfare, inclusiveness, government leadership, and quality improvement,” the ultimate

goal of free preschool education is to enable every child to enjoy fair and high-quality preschool education – this is not only an investment in children’s future but also an investment in the future of the entire nation.

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