



# Letter from China

Words **Zhang Lanying**

**Despite heavy investment in education, there are big disparities in the quality of China's education, particularly between urban and rural areas**



**SCHOOLCHILDREN FOCUS ON CHINESE, MATHS AND SCIENCE**

Since 1995, Chinese schools have been through major changes: investment has increased substantially, with locally hired teachers gradually being replaced by state-trained ones; standards are enforced more rigorously; and a government commission sets guidelines for the curriculum with the aim of encouraging independent thinking, innovation and lifelong learning.

Most teaching is dedicated to Chinese, maths and natural sciences, but schools are expected to cover areas such as philosophy, personal values and physical education, as well as undertaking practical education outside the classroom (such as collecting litter to promote environmental awareness).

Free, compulsory education lasts from the age of seven to 16, but enrolment at the state schools that get the best exam results usually involves paying a sponsorship fee. The cost is five to 10 times lower than enrolment in a privately run schools.

Pupils remain at one of the 340,000 elementary schools until they are 13, when they take an exam in maths and Chinese before going to a middle school. If this is among the better-achieving schools, pupils have to pass an additional exam before enrolling.

Three years later, externally set exams in English, physics and chemistry are added to the list and the results decide whether they pursue a vocational education, in areas such as catering and secretarial skills, or go on to high school. High-school students cover Chinese, English and maths and have the option of either social science (geography and political science) or natural science (physics and chemistry).

At the end of high school, there are external exams in Chinese, maths and English plus a combined exam chosen by the student, which is in either natural science or social science. Typically, students sit these when they are 18 or 19. The results determine which university pupils go to, or the type of vocational course they take in preparation for skilled work in

areas such as IT, construction or a service industry. If they do not meet the requirements set by the university for the course of the student's choice, they can retake the exams the following year.

There is currently a debate about whether these exams, which are marked by paid examiners and teachers, are the best way to assess students. As a result, three areas – Beijing, Shanghai and Inner Mongolia – are testing an additional exam in analytical skills and logical thinking to see if this offers a better way of selecting students for university. Some of the biggest educational improvements have been in urban elementary schools, where the teaching of English has definitely helped the younger generation to integrate with the international community.

However, urban schools receive more investment and attract better qualified teachers than in rural areas where children are more scattered. The ministry of education is trying to consolidate resources there,

which often means the children need to stay in state-run boarding schools.

Pre-school education is either provided privately or, particularly in rural areas, by elementary school teachers who offer supervision and a very basic education. But these areas need more pre-school education, because widespread migration to the cities has left parenting in the hands of mothers and grandparents who already have extensive work commitments.

There also needs to be more flexibility throughout the education system. Although local education bodies are encouraged to develop their own textbooks and teaching materials, more work is needed to adapt teaching to pupils' own local experiences.

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## Emphasis on exams

The experience of Dr Yiyi Lu, now based in London, highlights how an ability to perform well in exams is crucial to determining the quality of education that pupils receive in China.

"The style of teaching is exam orientated," she says. "Although I graduated from university in 1991, I know the system is fundamentally unchanged today through speaking to friends and relatives whose children are still in school."

Although she went on to graduate from Beijing University, regarded as the best in China, her prospects initially seemed unpromising when she failed to qualify for a place in one of the middle schools that achieve better exam results.

A year later, she got in, thanks to intensive coaching from her parents.

"I studied really hard and did quite well because of the extra help," she recalls.

"Today, people spend a lot of money on private education so their children can go to the best schools. You need to work really hard at every stage, not just when you take the entrance exam for university."

Lu now works for the international affairs thinktank Chatham House in London. Although she says too much emphasis was placed on passing exams, she believes the system did generally select the most able students for university.

"You do need to be intelligent; there's no way that just having a good memory will get you there."