

Update on Shanghai Reforms for Migrant Education Stepping Stones June 2010

Although children of migrant workers still face many obstacles, migrant education in Shanghai continues to improve. In February 2010, the city of Shanghai declared that it will become the first city in China to provide nine years of free compulsory education to migrant children, and it allocated 3.69 billion yuan (\$543 million) toward helping local schools with the enrollment of migrant children in 2009. According to government statistics, 97.3 percent of Shanghai's 400,000 children of migrant workers are currently receiving a free education either in regular public schools, in public schools dedicated solely to migrants, or in special private ("minban") schools for migrants.

The approximately 120,000 migrant children that have been integrated into Shanghai's public schools still face considerable challenges, especially those who must adapt to a new curriculum. Shanghai has its own curriculum and examinations, different from the national curriculum which is employed in the rest of the country. Regardless of which kind of school they are in, migrant children still do not generally receive the same standard of education as their Shanghainese peers and are often in different classrooms due to differing education standards. Most migrant families are unable to afford the extra tuition required to keep up with their Shanghai counterparts.

Conditions in schools for the children of migrant workers have also generally improved, with better facilities and better trained teachers. However, funding for the private schools for migrants may still be less than half the funding received by schools for Shanghai students. Class sizes are still much larger than at the Shanghai schools, teachers have a heavier teaching schedule, and their English level is still low. Many of the teachers transferred with the students from the formerly illegal grassroots migrant schools.

Migrant schools in the worst condition have been closed, sometimes leaving their former students with no feasible educational alternative other than to return to their "home" provinces for their continued education. Some migrant children, including some of those born outside the family planning policy are entirely without a *hukou*, which is one of the necessary registration documents for any legal school. Families also no longer receive some of the benefits on which they depended from the grassroots migrant schools, such as free transportation and before and after school care for their children, making moving their child to another school even less viable.

Migrant students based in Shanghai also face discrimination after completing nine years of compulsory and mostly free education. Parents with a sufficiently high education status and income, with a stable work unit, can apply for a Shanghai residence permit, which allows their child to remain in Shanghai for their senior high school education, follow the Shanghai curriculum and compete in the Shanghai university entrance examinations. However, the majority, who do not qualify for a Shanghai residence permit, are forced to return to their home province for their senior high school education, which follows the national curriculum, and compete in the university entrance exams in their home province. High school tuition fees are not paid by the government, and are beyond the means of many migrant families, especially as they generally will also need to pay for board and lodging at the school. There are fewer university places open to candidates from rural China than for candidates living and studying in the major urban centres. Many migrant students opt to receive a vocational education in Shanghai instead.

In general, the situation is vastly better than it was several years ago, with the majority of migrant children now receiving nine years of free education in a fully registered school. Several former grassroots schools have been brought together into one better equipped and often better managed facility.

Stepping Stones has adapted to these changes by moving with the students out of the grassroots schools into the mostly private (and one or two public) schools exclusively for children of migrant workers. Because English is one of the three core subjects in the Chinese education system (along with Chinese and mathematics), plays an important role in the employment market, and remains the biggest differentiator between migrant or rural children and their urban counterparts, English education is as important as ever to migrant children. As long as the need continues to exist, Stepping Stones will continue to provide individuals in Shanghai with meaningful volunteering opportunities which will make a difference to the lives of the under-privileged.

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