

Developments in China's Early Childhood Education in the Wake of the Institution of the Preschool Education Law of the People's Republic of China

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Abstract: The institution of the *Preschool Education Law* of the People's Republic of China represents a milestone in the nation's history of early childhood education. The law provides a legal framework for developing a generally accessible preschool education system, which is intended to span both urban and rural areas. This article gives a concise overview of the enactment of the law, delineates the improvements in pre-primary education in China as result of the law's introduction, and highlights challenges of preschool education development in this country.

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Introduction

PRESCHOOL education is an integral part of basic education, as well as the onset of lifelong education of the individuals. It is deemed as the most productive phase in the entire educational process. The quality and equity of pre-primary education is critical to a nation's long-term development, impacting talent cultivation at all levels.

Legislation on education is an effective device for actualizing the functions of education in that it provides mandatory regulations to adjust relationships between all stakeholders and circumvent arbitrary interference from various parties, supporting the development of a stable environment for educational practice (Liu, 2019). A healthy development of preschool education highly relies on solid legislation in this area. From the history of preschool education development worldwide, improving the legal system for preschool education is an important means for enhancing its quality and ensuring the right of young children to education. Within the international community, an increasing number of countries are adopting a "rights-based" approach to safeguard this right. They have strived to advance their preschool education systems through legislation, prompting the right to preschool education to shift from a legal entitlement to a practical reality. For example, in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Brazil, Mexico, Sweden, Hungary, China's Taiwan, and its Macao Special Administrative Region, either the preschool education-specific law has been instituted, or targeted and detailed provisions on preschool education have been stipulated in relevant legislation. Additionally, various policies on preschool education have been continually introduced to address issues arising in its popularization (Li, 2019).

China's legislative endeavors to regulate its preschool education have undergone for more than a decade, culminating in the promulgation of the *Preschool Education Law of the People's Republic of China* in 2024. This article gives a concise overview of the development process of preschool education legislation in China, delineates the improvements in pre-primary education in the wake of the law's introduction, and highlights the remaining challenges.

China's Efforts for Preschool Education Legislation

China saw a rapid expansion of preschool education in recent decades. As of 2017, it had approximately 255,000 kindergartens with a total enrolment of roughly 46 million children (Ministry of Education of China, 2018a). Based on this scale of preschool education, the government launched an action plan with the target of establishing a public system to provide generally accessible, affordable, and high-quality three-year preschool education

services and increasing the gross enrollment rate from 75% to 85% by 2020 (Ministry of Education of China, 2017).

On the other hand, the expansion was accompanied by many issues in the sector of preschool education. According to the remarks of former Minister of Education Baosheng Chen at a press conference during the First Session of the 13th National People's Congress in March 2018, preschool education was the fastest-growing area but also the weakest link in the Chinese education system (Ministry of Education of China, 2018b). Specific challenges included shortages of qualified pre-primary teachers, insufficient availability of affordable kindergartens, a lack of sound financial support and cost-sharing mechanisms, loopholes and flaws in kindergarten management and safety, and the prevalence of out-of-date notions of early childhood education. In existing regulatory papers on preschool education, such as the *Regulations on the Operation of Urban Kindergartens*, *Regulations on the Management of Kindergartens*, *Standard Procedure of the Operation of Kindergartens*, and *Regulations on Non-state Education Institutions*, there are either loopholes or overly general principles, placing relevant departments in a predicament when exercising regulation over preschool education institutions (Zhang, 2022). Hence, the lack of a binding law on preschool education constituted a severe impediment to high-quality development of Chinese preschool education. Consequently, there were widespread calls from all stakeholders for the enactment of a dedicated law on preschool education to ensure adequate funding, teacher staffing, and up-to-par management standards for this strand of basic education (Zhu, 2018).

At the same time, the National People's Congress (NPC), China's highest legislature, had placed a high premium on preschool education legislation. In 2013, the NPC's Education, Science, Culture, and Public Health Committee initiated a succession of field investigations, which involved Tianjin, Anhui, Yunnan, Jilin, and Sichuan Provinces. The effort aimed to examine the state of preschool education development across various regions, as well as to identify and assess the main challenges of preschool education legislation. In December 2015, the NPC's Standing Committee amended the *Education Law*, adding specific provisions on preschool education. In 2016, 24 proposals submitted by NPC deputies on prioritizing preschool education development were placed at the top of its agenda (Pang et al., 2018).

The Ministry of Education explicitly established the advancement of preschool education legislation as one of its work priorities in its 2018 work report. Its goal was, by means of legislation, to further clarify the responsibilities of relevant departments and governments at all levels in preschool education development and strengthen penalty and sanction measures against illicit practices in kindergartens for ensuring healthy and sustainable development of early childhood education. In September 2018,

the 13th NPC's Standing Committee included the enactment of the *Preschool Education Law of the People's Republic of China* in the priority category of legislative planning, marking the official initiation of the legislative proceedings of the Law (Hou, 2018).

In September 2020, the Ministry of Education made public the *Preschool Education Law of the People's Republic of China* (Draft for Soliciting Opinions) to solicit comments from the public (State Council of China, 2020). The Executive Meeting of the State Council of China approved the *Preschool Education Law of the People's Republic of China* (Draft) [hereinafter referred to as the Draft] in June 2023 and submitted it to the fifth session of the 14th NPC's Standing Committee for an initial review in August 2023 (State Council of China, 2023). During the session, the Ministry of Education gave a detailed explanation of the Draft in terms of the necessity of the legislation, development process, core principles, and main content. The initial version of the Draft consists of eight chapters and 74 articles, entailing general provisions, planning and establishment of preschool institutions, early childhood care and education, teaching and other staff, investment and financial guarantees, management and supervision, legal accountabilities, and supplementary provisions (Huai, 2024).

After the initial review of the Draft by the fifth session of the 14th NPC's Standing Committee, the NPC's Constitutional and Legal Committee and the NPC's Legislative Affairs Committee completed necessary legislative procedures in a timely manner. These included circulating the Draft to relevant central agencies, regional people's congresses, grassroots legislative outreach offices, higher education institutions, and NPC deputies for soliciting comments, publishing the full text of the Draft on the NPC website for public input, and jointly convening a symposium with the NPC's Education, Science, Culture, and Public Health Committee to gather opinions from preschool education experts, local education departments, kindergartens, and preschool education associations. The three committees conducted on-site research in Sichuan, Yunnan, Hebei, Henan Provinces and Beijing City, and investigated into major questions of the Draft in collaboration with relevant organizations. The NPC's Constitutional and Legal Committee held several meetings to thoroughly deliberate on the initial version of the Draft, as well as the feedback from the NPC's Standing Committee members and other stakeholders, to generate the revised second version of the Draft (Xu, 2024).

On November 8, 2024, the *Preschool Education Law of the People's Republic of China* (hereinafter referred to as the *Preschool Education Law*) was officially passed by the 14th NPC's Standing Committee (Ministry of Education of China, 2024), marking the entry of Chinese preschool education into a new era, where it is to be governed by dedicated legislation.

Improvements in Chinese Pre-primary Education in the Wake of the Institution of the Preschool Education Law

The *Preschool Education Law* provides an institutional framework for building a scientific preschool education system as a public good in accordance with the principle of general affordability; it aims to encourage the pattern of preschool education provision which features governmental dominance and supplementary roles of the private and third sectors to benefit both urban and rural young children across the board. Its goal is to ensure equitable and balanced access to preschool education services in all preschool-age children (Zhan & Du, 2025). Pilot implementation of the law has been widely played out in the wake of its adoption by the 14th NPC's Standing Committee of National People's Congress. This section is devoted to describing noticeable improvements in Chinese preschool education since its trial implementation.

Further Professionalization of Preschool Education

The *Preschool Education Law*'s emphasis on the respect for and protection of children's rights has catalyzed significant transformation of preschool education notions and curricula, prompting increasingly scientific practices in this area.

Preschool Curricula Aligned with Children's Developmental Characteristics

The *Preschool Education Law* stipulates that kindergartens should implement play-based curricular, which are closely connected with the daily lives of preschool children (Ministry of Education of China, 2024). Explicit are its opposition to the long-standing illegitimate practice of teaching primary school curricular in kindergartens and advocacy for encouraging autonomous exploration and hands-on practical engagement in preschoolers. Inspired by the law, educational authorities of Haiyan County in Zhejiang Province, for instance, introduced a program specializing in enhancing the quality of preschool education and achieved remarkable results. The preschool curriculum reform in the region highlights the important role of play in pre-primary education, paying high regards for the preferences of young children. Also, the local educational authorities have provided solid support to increase research on play-based curriculum development (Ministry of Education of China, 2025a).

Upgraded Educational Notions in Preschool Teachers

The provision in the law that the preschool teacher must listen to and understand the needs of young children is effective in raising the awareness of fully respecting the rights of children in kindergarten teachers. At Yihuijiayuan Kindergarten in Haidian District, Beijing, the teachers highly value the unique artistic expression of each individual child, appreciating their every endeavor in artistic exploration, to enable them to genuinely perceive that “my expression matters.” Through continuous observations and ample conversations with children about their works, the kindergarten’s teachers manage to comprehend their creative motives and the emotional signals embedded in their works. Also, scaffolding is given to them in an appropriate manner. Their practices allow every child the chance to feel the warmth of being understood. This notion of prioritizing children’s needs marks a fundamental shift from the traditional educational modality that features teacher-centeredness, making young children the primary actors of educational activity (Haidian Education, 2025).

Strengthened Support Mechanisms

The *Preschool Education Law* provides a solid legal basis and clear directions for improving the support mechanism for preschool education in China (Ministry of Education of China, 2024), to ensure it is supported by well-prepared budgets, regulated funding, properly divided responsibility, and rules-based grants.

Clarifying Governmental Responsibilities

Across all regions, efforts have been made to clarify governmental accountabilities in the wake of the passage of the *Preschool Education Law*, resulting in multiple departments actively collaborating to promote the development of preschool education. For example, finance department, development and reform department, and human resources and social security department in Hebei Province have coordinated their respective duties to jointly advance the implementation of the law, ensuring orderly progress of the reform and development of the region’s preschool education (Ministry of Education of China, 2025b). The provincial government of Shandong set explicit targets for the region’s preschool education development, namely, to achieve a gross enrollment rate of 99% in preschool-age children by 2035 with 80% of them to be enrolled in public kindergartens; and to popularize affordable preschool services in all counties and cities (Ministry of Education of China, 2025c).

Improving Funding Mechanics

All regions have actively worked towards the law's requirement of optimizing the fiscal expenditure structure for education and increasing financial input in preschool education, to fulfil the local government's statutory responsibility for funding affordable preschool education. The municipal government of Beijing has strengthened its policy for financially supporting generally affordable kindergartens, preferentially allocating educational resources to this category of schools. The education authorities of Tianjin City, in collaboration with relevant departments, has made continuous efforts to improve the long-term fiscal funding mechanism for the city's preschool education development to ensure that fiscal funding for preschool education accounts for a legitimate proportion of the total education expenditure. Additionally, Tianjin City has worked to optimize the sharing of subsidy expenditure between municipal and district-level authorities, clarifying the financial responsibility of governments at different levels for preschool education. Likewise, the educational authorities of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, together with other departments, has propelled the establishment of a long-term fiscal funding mechanism for preschool education development in various autonomous prefectures and cities in accordance with the law. This includes executing and gradually improving the per-student public funding standard for public kindergartens and the per-student subsidy standard for generally affordable private kindergartens (Shi & Fang, 2025)

Increased Accessibility

Popularizing Generally Affordable Services

Prioritizing the development of state-run, generally affordable preschool education is made a legal mandate by the *Preschool Education Law*, which has been seriously followed by all regions. For example, Tianjin City has adapted the deployment of public kindergartens to urban development planning to allow more preschool-age children to attend high-quality, affordable kindergartens in the proximity of their homes. Liaoning Province has implemented monthly assessment of the availability of generally affordable preschool education services, promoting the growth of public kindergartens via dynamic monitoring and timely adjustments while also encouraging the expansion of price-friendly private preschool services. This is meant to ensure adequate provision of preschool places, particularly public ones, to further popularize pre-primary education. The Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region conducted a survey of preschool-age population on a county-by-county basis, proactively increasing the number of public

kindergartens in areas with population inflows. It also strengthens the monitoring of supply and demand for preschool places in regions with significant population fluctuations and focuses on optimizing and integrating rural kindergarten facilities (Shi & Fang, 2025). Moves like these have successfully increased the deployment of generally affordable kindergartens, letting more children benefit from equitable and high-quality preschool education.

Safeguarding the Right of Disadvantaged Children to Preschool Education

Across all regions, active measures have been taken to expand inclusive early childhood education to safeguard the right of disadvantaged children, particularly those with special educational needs, to preschool education. For instance, Fujian Province has actively improved its preschool financial aid system, enabling more children with disabilities to access preschool education (Ministry of Education of China, 2025d). Shan'xi Province has also persistently bolstered its preschool education subsidy system to ensure that children from impoverished families, orphans, and children with disabilities have access to inclusive early childhood education (Shi & Fang, 2025). Measures like these have helped disadvantaged children overcome financial barriers to kindergarten attendance and secure more favorable prospects for healthy growth, thereby contributing to the improvement of educational equity.

Enhanced Professional Standards of Preschool Teachers

Preschool teacher professional competence is a key factor in the healthy development of young children. The *Preschool Education Law* provides clear guidelines for building high-quality preschool teaching forces in China. Across all regions in the country, multiple measures, including specifying teacher qualifications, regulating teacher hiring, improving compensations, and strengthening education and training programs, have been taken to raise the professional standards of preschool teachers (Shi & Fang, 2025).

Stricter Regulations on Teacher Qualifications

All regions implement more stringent regulations on teacher qualifications to ensure kindergartens are staffed with professionally competent teachers. With its Targeted Position Program (a publicly funded teacher education program), Hunan Province purposefully train pre-service teachers for

specific positions, staffing preschool institutions with highly qualified professionals. These teacher candidates agree on the designated career paths when enrolling into the program, which prepares them to become qualified kindergarten teachers by administering systematic and professional training. The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region tightens the accreditation of kindergartens and imposes stricter requirements on teacher qualifications. Only teachers with the required qualifications can be employed to work in approved kindergartens, which in turn motivates in-service teachers to continuously improve their professional skills to meet the job requirements (Ministry of Education of China, 2025e).

Augmented In-service Training

The law highly emphasizes the importance of strengthening preschool teacher in-service training. Guangdong Province have created innovative teacher training and development programs to help kindergarten principals enhance their management capabilities, assist rural kindergarten teachers in improving their teaching standards despite the presence of geographical disadvantages, train resource teachers for the implementation of inclusive preschool education, and so on (Ministry of Education of China, 2025f). Chongqing City has established long-term programs for regular teacher ethics education and developed a teacher growth support system that integrates municipal, county-, and kindergarten-level efforts to comprehensively boost professional competence of preschool teachers (Ministry of Education of China, 2025g).

Improved Employment Management

The employment and retention of competent preschool teachers necessitate the creation of favorable working environments and provision of desirable compensations. In the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, the municipal and county-level authorities are held responsible for checking teacher staffing and making up for the gaps in *Bianzhi* (a system of officially budgeted posts in China) posts in public kindergartens, and including public kindergarten teachers in the local budget system to ensure they enjoy pay parity with teachers at other levels of basic education. They also have the responsibility to oversee the salary standards in private kindergartens. Measures like these are intended to attract more talent to join the sector of preschool education and increase the retention rates in preschool teachers while also motivating them to actively enhance their professional competencies (Ministry of Education of China, 2025h).

Tightened Regulation of Preschool Education Institutions

The introduction of the *Preschool Education Law* has resulted in significant progress in the preschool education regulatory system in terms of safety management, fee charging oversight, quality evaluation, and other key areas. A comprehensive, multi-level, and effective regulatory framework is forming.

Increasing Safety and Security Efforts

In response to the law's stress on the safety and security of young children, local authorities have tightened their regulation of kindergartens' safety and security measures and accountabilities. In Gansu Province, the principal is primarily accountable for the kindergarten's safety and security, with specific responsibilities being assigned to relevant individuals, to ensure that all safety and security regulations are faithfully executed. Continuously improved are examination and inspection arrangements regarding school members' security, facility safety, fire safety, gatekeeping, food and medicine security, child daily check-in and check-out, nap-time supervision, and school event organization. Additionally, collaborative security management procedures are established through multi-agency efforts to ensure the security of the kindergarten's neighborhood. For instance, the police are engaged in maintaining the order of the kindergarten's surroundings during the "peak hours" (child arrival and dismissal times) (Ministry of Education of China, 2025i).

Monitoring Fee Charging

Reasonable fees are a chief characteristic of public, generally accessible preschool education. In the wake of the institution of the *Preschool Education Law*, general affordability became the guiding principle for regulating the fees of kindergartens and combating inordinately high charges. Hebei Province protects the rights and interests of young children and their parents by standardizing kindergarten attendance fees, inspecting the day-to-day operation of preschool institutions, and reviewing their qualification. Any illicit practices, such as arbitrary fee charging, are severely penalized in accordance with the law, which generates a great deterrent effect (Ministry of Education of China, 2025b). In Shan'xi Province, efforts are focused on improving the cost-sharing schemes for public kindergartens and introducing fee standards for day-care institutions and boarding nursery schools. A dynamic fee adjustment mechanism has been established, with which

preschool fee standards are constantly adapted to a variety of factors, such as the levels of governmental subsidies and funding, inflation rates, and economic growth rates, to allow the kindergarten to charge fees that can support its normal operation, but without imposing illegitimate financial burdens on parents (Ministry of Education of China, 2025j).

Strengthening Quality Evaluation

In response to the law's emphasis on the assessment of preschool education quality, local authorities have worked to improve evaluation frameworks for professionally and regularly assessing the educational quality of kindergartens. Based on the *Childcare and Preschool Education Guidelines*, the preschool education community in Beijing City has increased research on the evaluation framework for kindergarten education with the aim of bolstering approaches to kindergarten supervision and evaluation. Regular supervision and assessment are beneficial for the kindergarten developing comprehensive knowledge of its quality of care and education, spotting existing inadequacies, and making targeted improvement. At the same time, the assessment results are used as a criterion for determining the rating of the kindergarten and the awards it can possibly receive so as to encourage it to continuously raise its quality standards (Ministry of Education of China, 2025k). The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region has developed a process-focused monitoring mechanism for tracking the kindergarten's performance in hygiene, safety prevention, teacher ethics, fee charging, and financial management. Regular inspections and random checks are conducted to monitor the kindergartens' operation, with illegitimate practices being promptly corrected, to ensure these institutions are run in an orderly and professional manner (Ministry of Education of China, 2025e).

Remaining Challenges of Preschool Education Development in China

The institution of the *Preschool Education Law* is meant to address current issues with Chinese pre-primary education as well as providing a blueprint for its future development. The new legislation establishes the nature, objectives, pedagogy, and management mechanics of the country's preschool education, laying legal bases for efforts to professionalize it and promoting its equitable development (Zhan & Chen, 2025). However, the enactment of the law is only the initial endeavor. Currently, Chinese preschool education still faces many challenges, warranting problem-focused approaches to tackling them.

Conflicts between Accessibility and Quality

Centered on the principles of general accessibility and affordability, the legislation seeks to change the current state of unbalanced distribution of preschool education resources to enable all young children, regardless of family background or birthplace, to access high-quality and equitable early childhood education, thereby developing a solid foundation for their future development (Peng, 2025). Nevertheless, the achievement of this ideal goal may not be as smooth as expected because it involves multiple stakeholders, such as the regional authorities, parents, teachers, and preschool institutions, each of whom has their own interests and objectives. To meet the needs of all parties, there are a lot of conflicts to be resolved.

How to balance the cost and quality of preschool education is a major issue. In the context of the societal need for higher standards of preschool education, it is natural for kindergartens to increase investment in teacher training, facility upgrading, curriculum development, etc., which inevitably drives up the cost of preschool education. On the other hand, sacrificing educational quality for the sake of cost control is not in line with the purpose of developing preschool education. Currently, a portion of kindergartens struggle to maintain normal operation because of financial difficulties, let alone focusing on educational quality improvement. With the current education system in China, significant government investment is the key to high-quality development of preschool education. Meanwhile, certain researchers argue that the government should encourage private sector involvement in pre-primary education while also increasing its preschool education budget to secure plural resources of funding (Zhou, 2025).

Furthermore, uneven distribution of preschool education resources is another pronounced issue in China due to its significant regional disparities in economic development. Economically developed regions in this country have relatively abundant preschool education resources, with their kindergartens equipped with advanced facilities and staffed with qualified teachers. In contrast, economically underdeveloped regions, particularly remote mountainous areas, suffer from severe shortages of such resources. Balanced distribution of resources across regions is crucial for achieving equity in preschool education (Guo, 2025). It requires not only government policies on resource coordination but also research-based resource allocation mechanics grounded on considerations like regional differences, population distribution, and the levels of demand, which can ensure that every child has access to basic preschool education services.

Unequal Treatment in Preschool Teachers

Teaching forces are the paramount resource in the sector of preschool education, whose professional competence and commitments directly affect their educational outcomes. Despite that the *Preschool Education Law* sets forth requirements for the compensations and qualifications of public kindergarten teachers; it lacks provisions on the protection of interests and rights of teachers without Bianzhi membership and those working in private kindergartens. This legal gap has a negative impact on the retention of preschool teaching staff and is deemed a major hinderance to the stability of preschool education quality (Pang et al., 2025).

Public kindergarten teachers without Bianzhi membership and private kindergarten teachers make up a considerable share of the preschool teaching workforce and have played significant roles in preschool education development. Nevertheless, these two groups, compared to public kindergarten teachers with Bianzhi membership, have received unequal treatment in salaries and career development. In terms of compensations, they generally have lower pay without pay-rise guarantee, which severely compromises their living standards. Regarding career development, they typically have fewer in-service training and promotion opportunities. This results in their low identification with the preschool education profession, leading to a high turnover in them. A portion of excellent teachers in the said two groups, seeing no promising career prospects, choose to switch professions, which constitutes a threat to the stability of preschool education (Li, 2023).

Conclusion

The institution of the *Preschool Education Law* marks the initiation of a new phase of preschool education development in China. The legislation is of vital importance to the normalization of Chinese preschool education and sets forth directions for the development of generally accessible and high-quality preschool education in this country. In the future, it is important to further increase the publicity on the law and raise the awareness of its significance in the public for building a social environment that is supportive of preschool education development. In the meantime, it is also important to emphasize the government's responsibilities in the enforcement of the law and regulation of preschool education institutions to ensure that all stipulations of the law are fully implemented. Furthermore, legislative endeavors for preschool education should continue in order to tackle challenges remaining and emerging in this sphere.

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