

Comparing Special Education Policy vs. Practice in China
and the United States

Emily Warner

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Faculty Advisor

Professor Hilary Appel

China is considered to be one of the largest competitors of the United States. While this mostly pertains to geopolitics, technology, economic growth, and sports competitions, there are so many more areas in which their success and strengths should be compared. One specific area should be special education policy and practice. Since the 1990s, there have been significant changes in the way in which individuals with disabilities in both countries are integrated into society. This includes adding new policies that provide special needs people with the proper care, individualized support, and most importantly education. According to the U.S. government Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, special education is defined as specialized instruction that meets the needs of a student who has a disability which provides instruction in the classroom and with physical education.¹ In China, there are reportedly 83 million people who have a disability.² Of this population, six million of them are kids. However, only about 220,000 are enrolled into the education system.³ Meanwhile, the United States has a total of 54 million Americans with disabilities.⁴ Within this population, 7.3 million children receive special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).⁵ This difference in numbers is partially due to the fact that these two countries take different approaches to defining a disability. Many people consider China to be much less advanced than the US in terms of support for disabled students. While this is true in some cases , there are nonetheless some

¹ U.S. Department of Education, "Sec. 300.39 Special Education," *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, 2 May 2017, sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/a/300.39.

² Wangyun, Dai, "Invisible Millions: China's Unnoticed Disabled People," *Sixth Tone*, 4 Dec. 2017, www.sixthtone.com/news/1001285/invisible-millions-chinas-unnoticed-disabled-people.

³ Deng, Meng, et al., "The Development of Special Education in China," *The Development of Special Education in China*, vol. 22, no. 5, Oct. 2001, pp. 288–298., doi:10.1177/074193250102200504.

⁴ "Disability Impacts All of Us," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 16 Sept. 2020, www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html.

⁵ "Students with Disabilities," *National Center for Education Statistics*, Institute of Education Sciences, May 2021, nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg.

important and quite similar challenges that both countries have in common in serving the needs of students and meeting their obligations to families as stated in formal policies.

A Brief Introduction to China's Government and Special Education Policy

The People's Republic of China is a One Party state that is run by the Chinese Communist Party. Within this state, there is a Ministry of Education, which is in charge of the special education system. After the end of the First Opium War, special schools in China were allocated for students with disabilities.⁶ The Chinese government eventually expanded the educational opportunities for students with disabilities throughout the 1900s. This included implementing a special education policy in the early 1980s in which the special needs community was supported and established. It made teacher training for special education available as well as allowed students to be a part of regular classrooms.⁷ China adopted this mainstream education inclusion approach for students with disabilities from the International Human Rights Treaty. According to Hauwadhanasuk, currently there are four methods of enrollment for special needs students into the education system of China. The first approach is that they can attend a nearby regular school. If they need more assistance, they can go to a county level government designated regular school. If students cannot adapt to the general education curriculum in this county level school, they have the option to attend a special school or get individualized support if none of the school options are an adequate fit for the student.⁸ These numerous educational opportunities for students with disabilities are due to the growth that China has seen throughout the past years.

⁶Hauwadhanasuk et al., "Inclusive Education Plans and Practices in China, Thailand, and Turkey," *Educational Planning* 25.1 (2018): 29-48.

⁷ Kritzer, Jeffrey B., "Special education in China," *Eastern Education Journal* 40.1 (2011): 57-63.

⁸ Hauwadhanasuk et al., "Inclusive Education Plans and Practices in China, Thailand, and Turkey," *Educational Planning* 25.1 (2018): 29-48.

The government of China has made a lot of reforms to its policies in order to increase access to schools for students with disabilities. This includes implementing laws that ensure the equal opportunity for special needs students to go to school for 9 years. In addition, the Ministry of Education started to enforce standard teacher qualifications for special education.⁹ These laws are just a few of the changes made to the policy as a way to provide the equal opportunity for education and incentivize students with disabilities to enroll into the school system. While the policy change is one approach used, China's government also altered its funding to support special needs students. According to Hauwadhanasuk et al., "the Chinese government rapidly increased financial support to special education from RMB 55 million in 2013 to RMB 410 million in 2014".¹⁰ The increase in support for special education has been very useful in funding the education for some students living in China who have disabilities.¹¹ However, some families still end up struggling to make ends meet with financial aid for special schools.¹² For this and other reasons related to culture, government policy, and funding, many consider China to be behind the United States in special education practices and policy.

A Brief Introduction to the United States Special Education Policy

Indeed, the United States is a democratic republic that has become a very prominent leader in special education policy and practice. Within the federal government, Congress passes the acts for special education policy and then allocates the federal funding to state governments which then regulate special education programs within their local areas. According to the U.S.

⁹ Kritzer, Jeffrey B, "Special education in China," *Eastern Education Journal* 40.1 (2011): 57-63.

¹⁰ Hauwadhanasuk et al., "Inclusive Education Plans and Practices in China, Thailand, and Turkey," *Educational Planning* 25.1 (2018): 29-48. P. 31

¹¹ Zhang, Dorothy, and Vicky G. Spencer, "Addressing the Needs of Students with Autism and Other Disabilities in China: Perspectives from the Field," *International Journal of Disability, Development & Education*, vol. 62, no. 2, Mar. 2015, pp. 168–181. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/1034912X.2014.998175

¹² *Ibid*

Department of Education, federal funding has recently added \$3 billion to support kids with disabilities.¹³ This funding is for one-on-one tutoring, therapy, and technology devices that help children communicate.¹⁴ Since the start of IDEA, a lot of progress has been made in an effort to integrate the special needs community into the education system. This is due to the U.S. government's attempt to mandate policies, increase awareness and support, as well as alter a more inclusive environment in schools.

In 1975, Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act also known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.¹⁵ This act emphasizes equal educational opportunities for students while also *personally challenging* each student who meets special education requirements. The government does this by funding free special education in a school environment that is best suited for their needs.¹⁶ Additionally, they require an Individualized Educational Program (IEP), created by guardians and teachers, that identifies the learning goals for the student throughout that year and states services that the local education system will need to provide.¹⁷ While the U.S. may appear to be providing adequate special education services, many U.S. families face many of the same tough obstacles within the legal system that families in China experience.

China's Struggles in Special Education Policy

¹³ U.S. Department of Education, "U.S. Department of EDUCATION Releases More than \$3 Billion in AMERICAN Rescue PLAN Funds to Support Children with Disabilities," *U.S. Department of Education*, 1 July 2021, content.govdelivery.com/accounts/USED/bulletins/2e645e4.

¹⁴ Jones, Carolyn, "Special Education Sees 'Historic' Boost in New Funding," *EdSource*, EdSource, 2 July 2021, edsources.org/2021/special-education-sees-historic-boost-in-new-funding/657311.

¹⁵ Hauerwas, Laura Boynton, et al., "Specific Learning Disability and Response to Intervention: State-Level Guidance," *Exceptional Children*, vol. 80, no. 1, Fall 2013, pp. 101–120. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1177/001440291308000105

¹⁶ Turnage, Lydia, "Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Rural Special Education and the Limitations of the IDEA," *Columbia Journal of Law & Social Problems*, vol. 54, no. 1, Fall 2020, pp. 1–47. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/ccl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=aph&AN=147010666&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

¹⁷ *Ibid*

A main obstacle for families in the special education system stems from the fact that China's experts do not have an effective approach in determining whether a child has a disability. China has adopted a Western approach to identify disabilities. This includes using translations of Western tests to identify students such as the Binet-Simon Scale, which reviews the development of a child's intelligence, the Merrill Palmer Scale which evaluates a child's cognitive and emotional development, and the Draw A Person test which looks at the intellectual maturity of a child. However, the problem with these identification tests is that the translations can be wrong.¹⁸ Additionally, it is not required that students get reevaluated throughout the years on these tests, making it more difficult for students to be identified.¹⁹ This has a long lasting impact on students' success in school because being undiagnosed at an early age can make it difficult for students to have better outcomes in the education system.²⁰ This identification process differs from the United States in the sense that schools and experts in the U.S. usually have a clear understanding of what the tests mean as well as a standard procedure to follow. Due to the fact that tests are in the English language, it makes it easier for students to be properly diagnosed. While it is possible for students to be undiagnosed as a result of state procedures, it is more uncommon due to the fact that the U.S. educators have a clear conception of what the disabilities are and what are effective ways to identify students, putting them ahead of China in special education practices.

One area of growth that China can pursue is policy on the recognition of disabilities.

Overall, Chinese policy identifies a total of six different disabilities that qualify students to need

¹⁸ Worrell, Jamie L., and Mary Taber, "Special Education Practices in China and the United States: What Is to Come Next?," *International Journal of Special Education* 24.3 (2009): 132-142.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Jones, Carolyn, "Special Education Sees 'Historic' Boost in New Funding," *EdSource*, EdSource, 2 July 2021, edsources.org/2021/special-education-sees-historic-boost-in-new-funding/657311.

special education. This includes “visual, hearing, intellectual, physical, psychiatric, and multiple impairment”(59) disabilities.²¹ According to Wangyun, in 2010 there were 85 million people who identified themselves as having a disability, but only 32 million people were certified as having a disability.²² Even though there is a vast amount of children who identify as having a disability, China overlooks many learning disabilities that other countries, like the United States, consider to need special education. More specifically, the Ministry of Education tends to not recognize children who have severe disabilities.²³ According to Hauwadhanasuk, China did not consider learning disabilities as a priority in the 12th five year plan.²⁴ In addition, China tends to exclude students with moderate disabilities, such as students with emotional and behavioral impairments. This is one of the reasons for why China’s total number of students who are considered to need special education is lower than in the average developed country.²⁵ By being undiagnosed, many students do not receive the necessary support to succeed in the school environment. This differs from the U.S. because in U.S. public education there are a lot more defined disabilities that are considered to need special education. With the U.S. identifying more disabilities, it makes the United States more advanced than China in policy and practices for special education because the U.S. government is providing more support for struggling students.

In addition to fewer types of disabilities being identified in China’s special education policies, its goal for special education can be considered to be behind relative to the United

²¹ Worrell, Jamie L., and Mary Taber, "Special Education Practices in China and the United States: What Is to Come Next?," *International Journal of Special Education* 24.3 (2009): 132-142.

²² Wangyun, Dai. "Invisible Millions: China's Unnoticed Disabled People." *Sixth Tone*, 2 Dec. 2017, www.sixthtone.com/news/1001285/invisible-millions-chinas-unnoticed-disabled-people.

²³ Zhang, Dorothy, and Vicky G. Spencer, "Addressing the Needs of Students with Autism and Other Disabilities in China: Perspectives from the Field," *International Journal of Disability, Development & Education*, vol. 62, no. 2, Mar. 2015, pp. 168–181. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/1034912X.2014.998175

²⁴ Hauwadhanasuk et al., "Inclusive Education Plans and Practices in China, Thailand, and Turkey," *Educational Planning* 25.1 (2018): 29-48.

²⁵ Worrell, Jamie L., and Mary Taber, "Special Education Practices in China and the United States: What Is to Come Next?." *International Journal of Special Education* 24.3 (2009): 132-142.

States. According to China's policy, the goal of special education is to provide an equal opportunity to be educated. However, China's policy gives schools the choice to decline offering services to students who have disabilities.²⁶ While the issue for providing services may stem from a variety of factors, such as a lack of resources, funding, and teachers, this can have an impact on the educational opportunities for a special needs student.²⁷ This differs from the United States education policy because not only does U.S. policy require equal opportunity for education but it also mandates that the education will challenge disabled students.²⁸ Since special schools in the U.S. are standardized to provide special education, American students with learning disabilities cannot be turned down and oftentimes get the educational support that helps them grow. These two different approaches for education policy is a reason for why China is still behind the U.S. in implementing special education policy.

In addition to allowing schools to refuse special education services in China, they also have the option to opt out of using an individualized education program (IEP) that is supposed to support students certified for special education. China implemented the Western approach of learning in regular classrooms but not the policy that mandates IEPs in U.S. classrooms. However the U.S. mandates creating IEPs which China neglected to do. An Individualized Education Program can be beneficial for students because it makes teachers more involved in the learning goals of the student. However, the inconsistency of implementation of IEPs in China's

²⁶ Zhang, Dorothy, and Vicky G. Spencer, "Addressing the Needs of Students with Autism and Other Disabilities in China: Perspectives from the Field," *International Journal of Disability, Development & Education*, vol. 62, no. 2, Mar. 2015, pp. 168–181, EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/1034912X.2014.998175

²⁷ Kritzer, Jeffrey B, "Special education in China," *Eastern Education Journal* 40.1 (2011): 57-63.

²⁸ Turnage, Lydia, "Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Rural Special Education and the Limitations of the IDEA," *Columbia Journal of Law & Social Problems*, vol. 54, no. 1, Fall 2020, pp. 1–47. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=aph&AN=147010666&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

school system is due to the excessive paperwork needed to be completed by educators.²⁹ This results in many students not being given the opportunity to have an individualized education program where schools can take extra measures to promote the students' educational success. This also shows how there are inequalities in the Chinese special education system due to a highly variable amount of support that students are given in schools located around China. Oftentimes this can be considered a factor for why the U.S. is ahead of China in special education policy because the U.S. promotes the inclusiveness of special education through its policies that enforces IEPs in the beginning of each school year.

A Culture of Stigma in China

With policies that fail to ensure that students in the classroom are given the opportunity to have an education that accommodates their needs, an atmosphere is typically created in China where it is acceptable to treat students with disabilities unequally. Education culture in China is focused on testing and competing with peers. However, when it comes to individuals with disabilities, that competition between students is not an effective method for them to learn.³⁰ As a result, students with disabilities who are put in regular classrooms tend to be disregarded and, in some cases, students are even sent home because "teachers are concerned that they may disturb other students and take up teachers' time".³¹ However, according to the U.S. Department of Education, what some teachers fail to recognize is that having special needs students in classrooms is actually beneficial for students with and without disabilities.³² This neglect of

²⁹ Kritzer, Jeffrey B., "Comparing Special Education in the United States and China," *International Journal of Special Education* 27.2 (2012): 52-56.g

³⁰ Deng, Meng, and Kim Fong Poon- McBrayer, "Reforms and challenges in the era of inclusive education: the case of China," *British Journal of Special Education* 39.3 (2012): 117-122. p.120

³¹ Ibid

³² National Center for Learning Disabilities, "IDEA Full Funding: Why Should Congress Invest in Special Education?," *National Center for Learning Disabilities*, 18 Aug. 2021, nclld.org/news/policy-and-advocacy/idea-full-funding-why-should-congress-invest-in-special-education/.

special needs students can deter students from prioritizing their education.³³ Consequently, this puts China behind the U.S. in terms of special education practices due to the lack of policy implemented to ensure a positive educational environment for students with disabilities. For example, the special education policy for the U.S. (IDEA) tends to accommodate the child's needs by trying to bring an open learning environment that will challenge their thinking. It does this by having experts or teachers who welcome students into the classroom.³⁴ While the classroom culture is changing in China, there is more that can be done.

One of the most prominent issues that is preventing China from fully advancing in its policies and practice within the special education sector is the culture around special education teachers. According to Deng, this comes from the cultural barrier involving a Confucian philosophy which at times can be unaccepting towards individuals who have a disability.³⁵ This is because Confucian philosophy respects elders and individuals at the top of the social hierarchy. However, the disabled population is usually considered to be at a lower status in society.³⁶ As a result, a culture has emerged in which teachers who focus on special education are oftentimes looked down on, making it a less approachable field to go into. With a lack of interest in this subject area, many university undergraduate and postgraduate programs don't provide special education training.³⁷ According to Hauwadhanasuk et al., there are a total of

³³ Deng, Meng, et al., "The Development of Special Education in China," *The Development of Special Education in China*, vol. 22, no. 5, Oct. 2001, pp. 288–298., doi:10.1177/074193250102200504.

³⁴ Thorius, Kathleen A. King, and Brendan D. Maxcy, "Critical Practice Analysis of Special Education Policy: An RTI Example," *Remedial & Special Education*, vol. 36, no. 2, Mar. 2015, pp. 116–124. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1177/0741932514550812.

³⁵ Deng, Meng, and Kim Fong Poon- McBrayer, "Reforms and challenges in the era of inclusive education: the case of China," *British Journal of Special Education* 39.3 (2012): 117-122.

³⁶ Ellsworth, Nancy J., and Chun Zhang, "Progress and challenges in China's special education development: Observations, reflections, and recommendations," *Remedial and Special Education* 28.1 (2007): 58-64.

³⁷ Deng, Meng, and Kim Fong Poon- McBrayer, "Reforms and challenges in the era of inclusive education: the case of China," *British Journal of Special Education* 39.3 (2012): 117-122.

48,125 qualified special education teachers in China.³⁸ This differs from the United States, which has a total of 430,466 teachers.³⁹ The large gap between special education teachers in China and the U.S. shows the negative effect that some Chinese culture can have on the special education system. With a shortage of teachers in special education, it becomes exceedingly difficult for students to find teachers who can provide the extra learning support needed to help them progress in school.⁴⁰ The shortage in teachers has led to schools to hire individuals whose expertise does not align with the type of support that a student with a disability may need.⁴¹ While China is continuously working on changing the cultural norms towards individuals with disabilities, in order to provide a better school system for them, the United States higher number of teachers puts it more ahead of China in special education practices.

Last but not least, China has been struggling to deal with the stigma that some individuals have towards special needs students. This is not just an issue that students in China face, but it is an issue for countries all over the world. Living in a country with a disability is challenging enough as it is. However, living in certain areas of China where the general population is not very well educated on disabilities, can cause biases against them. According to Zhang and Spencer, one example of a stigma that students with disabilities face are that they are thought to be cursed from wrongdoings in their past life.⁴² With people still having this unintentional discrimination against students with disabilities, it becomes challenging for them to feel comfortable in the school environment. This makes it difficult for them to integrate into the

³⁸ Hauwadhanasuk et al., "Inclusive Education Plans and Practices in China, Thailand, and Turkey," *Educational Planning* 25.1 (2018): 29-48.

³⁹ Data USA, "Special Education Teachers," *Data USA*, 2019, datausa.io/profile/soc/special-education-teachers.

⁴⁰ Zhang, Dorothy, and Vicky G. Spencer, "Addressing the Needs of Students with Autism and Other Disabilities in China: Perspectives from the Field," *International Journal of Disability, Development & Education*, vol. 62, no. 2, Mar. 2015, pp. 168–181. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/1034912X.2014.998175

⁴¹ *Ibid*

⁴² *Ibid*

mainstream education system and see progress in school. This stigma towards students with disabilities in China differentiates the practices of schools in China and the United States because the U.S. not only mandates the inclusion of students in schools but also it is more uncommon to hear of these stigmas.

Dominant Models In China and Resource Constraints

China adopted the Western idea of integrating special needs students in regular classrooms as a way to increase student enrollment. However, given the culture of the classroom, this approach can hinder the ability for a special needs student to learn. Many of the regular class sizes in China, especially in the public schools, tend to range from forty to fifty students.⁴³ Given these larger class sizes, teachers tend to be unable to provide the support and individualized education necessary for a student with a disability to learn. Meanwhile in the United States, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, there is an average class size of 20.9 students in each class.⁴⁴ This is due to the fact that many states in the U.S. have a restriction on how large the class sizes can get. It is rarely seen for U.S. elementary classrooms to have more than 30 students for one teacher.⁴⁵ With large class sizes in Chinese public schools, teachers often struggle to provide support for every student and oftentimes special needs students are discouraged from participating in classes and seeking extra help that will help them improve in school. The U.S. classroom model tends to be dominant in the sense that it creates a more personalized experience and inclusive environment in the classroom.

⁴³ Hays, Jeffrey, "School Life in China: Rules, Report Cards, Files, Classes and Teachers," *Facts and Details*, Factsanddetails.com, Nov. 2012, factsanddetails.com/china/cat13/sub82/item1094.html.

⁴⁴ National Center for Education Statistics, "National Teacher and Principal Survey (Ntps)," *National Center for Education Statistics*, U.S. Department of Education , nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/tables/ntps1718_ftable06_t1s.asp.

⁴⁵ Kritzer, Jeffrey B, "Comparing Special Education in the United States and China," *International Journal of Special Education* 27.2 (2012): 52-56.

Another area in which China could improve is its regulations and processes for starting special schools. Private schools in China tend to exceed the special education support that most public schools provide because they have a more specific education plan and smaller class sizes that help special needs students get more support. However, one problem for special education schools is accessing funding. According to Liu, a principal from a private school in Beijing, the registration process for special private schools is difficult.⁴⁶ This is due to the fact that there are very specific steps that teachers and school administrators have to follow in order to get the school registered. Additionally, schools have to go through an evaluation process called the Standardised Evaluation for Privately Owned Organizations which determines whether a school will be able to get funding from the government in order to provide financial aid. This process for opening a school can be discouraging for some individuals and can even prevent some schools from opening because it is very time consuming and complex. This is one of the reasons for why there are only a few private schools located in rural areas and cities. This differs from the U.S. policy because through IDEA, students are personally funded to be in an educational environment that fits their needs. Although China is making efforts to improve its financial aid and funding for students with disabilities, the U.S. policy is more supportive of families who are financially struggling.

While it is difficult for many families to find financial support for special schools in China, they also struggle to find a better means of transportation to get their child to school. According to Kritzer, there are a limited number of special schools in China. For example, Beijing, with a population of 21.54 million people has one special school for children with

⁴⁶ Zhang, Dorothy, and Vicky G. Spencer, "Addressing the Needs of Students with Autism and Other Disabilities in China: Perspectives from the Field," *International Journal of Disability, Development & Education*, vol. 62, no. 2, Mar. 2015, pp. 168–181. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/1034912X.2014.998175

disabilities.⁴⁷ Additionally many of the special education schools are located in cities, which makes it difficult for many families to send their child from rural areas. According to Wangyun, China's most developed cities do not have easy transportation for people with disabilities. With the obstacle of inaccessible transportation, many special needs students are left behind in the education system and become a part of the "invisible millions" (1).⁴⁸ While this is a struggle that families and children with disabilities living in rural areas face in China, the United States has regulations in the Individualized Disability Education Act in which through creating IEPs, students are provided with transportation in order to be able to be educated in the least restrictive environment.⁴⁹ Being able to get to school is a very important factor in the enrollment of students in special education programs. The U.S. legislation guaranteeing transportation for students shows how its special education policy exceeds China's.

Similarities Between China and the United States

While it may seem as though the United States policy and practice are far more advanced than that of China, there are many challenges that both countries face. This includes difficulties when living in rural areas, testing for disabilities, and funding.

Struggles of Students Living in Rural Areas in the U.S. and China

Living in the rural areas of China can make it very difficult for students to get the adequate special education that they need because families lack the funds. 80% of kids with special needs live in rural areas.⁵⁰ These children who identify as special needs are given the

⁴⁷ Kritzer, Jeffrey B., "Comparing Special Education in the United States and China," *International Journal of Special Education* 27.2 (2012): 52-56.g

⁴⁸ Wangyun, Dai, "Invisible Millions: China's Unnoticed Disabled People," *Sixth Tone*, 2 Dec. 2017, www.sixthtone.com/news/1001285/invisible-millions-chinas-unnoticed-disabled-people.

⁴⁹ Kritzer, Jeffrey B., "Comparing Special Education in the United States and China," *International Journal of Special Education* 27.2 (2012): 52-56.g

⁵⁰ Deng, Meng, and Kim Fong Poon- McBrayer, "Reforms and challenges in the era of inclusive education: the case of China," *British Journal of Special Education* 39.3 (2012): 117-122.

option to learn in regular classrooms (LRC) or to join a special school. While the public classrooms have large class sizes, the special schools tend to have 10 students.⁵¹ Even though the special schools are the preferred option for providing the best education, they are very costly.⁵² The government can provide some financial aid, but usually it is not enough for the family to be able to pay for the school.⁵³ As a result, many students are forced to be a part of the regular classrooms which makes it very difficult for them to get the education that is right for them. The financial struggles that rural students face with special education is not only a difficulty in China, but also in the United States.

Families living mostly in rural areas in the United States often relate to the struggles of parents of special need's students in China due to inadequate funding for schools that offer a supportive environment for their child. Occasionally, there are families in the United States whose child with a disability does not get the proper education within the public school system. While private schools are available for these kids, some families lack the finances needed for them to send them to private school. Each of the states, as part of the Individualized Disability Education Act (IDEA), provide voucher programs for families that are not financially able to send their child to a private school. Even though these vouchers reduce the cost for most families, the schools can still be too expensive.⁵⁴ However, IDEA supports children being given free education in the *least restrictive environment* and many parents can get tuition paid for by

⁵¹ Worrell, Jamie L., and Mary Taber, "Special Education Practices in China and the United States: What Is to Come Next?," *International Journal of Special Education* 24.3 (2009): 132-142.

⁵² Kritzer, Jeffrey B., "Special education in China," *Eastern Education Journal* 40.1 (2011): 57-63.

⁵³ Zhang, Dorothy, and Vicky G. Spencer, "Addressing the Needs of Students with Autism and Other Disabilities in China: Perspectives from the Field," *International Journal of Disability, Development & Education*, vol. 62, no. 2, Mar. 2015, pp. 168–181. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/1034912X.2014.998175

⁵⁴ Turnage, Lydia, "Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Rural Special Education and the Limitations of the IDEA," *Columbia Journal of Law & Social Problems*, vol. 54, no. 1, Fall 2020, pp. 1–47. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=aph&AN=147010666&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

the government.⁵⁵ The process to do this can also be expensive for families usually because a lawyer is needed to help navigate families through the process. While IDEA ultimately provides funding for families with a special needs child, it is a much more intricate process that requires parents to know special education rights and in some cases know the legal process. This shows how the U.S. policy puts families in similar challenging situations to families in China.

In addition to the financial struggles, families also have to deal with time constraints on how much time can be spent on finding special education that best suits their child. The majority of people in China live in rural areas.⁵⁶ Many of these rural areas are made up of workers who do physical labor as a way to make an income.⁵⁷ As a result, many individuals in these areas do not have enough time to prioritize education because the labor can be intense and time consuming. Consequently, many parents of children with special needs do not have the time to advocate for their child within the special education system. This ultimately can cause students and parents to give up on the special education system and drop out of school. While this is a tough situation for parents to deal with, they are not the only ones who struggle with finding the time to help their child through the education process. This lack of availability is an ongoing issue for many families living within the United States and China.

The struggles that many families in China face with finding time to support their child in the special education system are fairly similar to families living in the United States who struggle financially. It is very time consuming for a parent to actively be involved in their special needs child's education process. According to the Individualized Disability Education Act (IDEA), the Individualized Education Program needs parents to meet with a special education teacher, a

⁵⁵ Kritzer, Jeffrey B., "Comparing Special Education in the United States and China," *International Journal of Special Education* 27.2 (2012): 52-56.g

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Kritzer, Jeffrey B., "Special education in China." *Eastern Education Journal* 40.1 (2011): 57-63.

general education teacher, and a representative from the local education agency (LEA) and provide input in order to create an effective educational plan for their child.⁵⁸ In some rural areas, many schools are limited with their resources and are forced to change their education plans to what is available rather than catering to the student's special needs. As a result, parent participation throughout this process is needed in order to ensure that basic accommodations are given.⁵⁹ However, the issue with this system is that many parents don't have the time to be able to leave their jobs. This results in many children struggling in their classes. These challenges for many working class families in the U.S. and China show the similarities in policy struggles in both countries.

Families mostly living in rural areas in the United States who struggle to find the time to support their special needs child in the education process, also tend to deal with geographic isolation that makes it difficult for them to find a network to help them understand how to help their special needs child.⁶⁰ By being in an area where a guardian is isolated from urban areas and from people who can help them find better special education opportunities, many are unaware of the actions they can take to ensure their child's education is adequate. This network includes non-profit organizations, lawyers, and experts on special education.⁶¹ As a result, many parents tend to be restricted in knowing where to start if they want to fight against a school's special education program, support, or the IEP for a student. The geographic isolation that some parents

⁵⁸Turnage, Lydia, "Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Rural Special Education and the Limitations of the IDEA," *Columbia Journal of Law & Social Problems*, vol. 54, no. 1, Fall 2020, pp. 1–47. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=aph&AN=147010666&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*

⁶⁰ Turnage, Lydia, "Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Rural Special Education and the Limitations of the IDEA," *Columbia Journal of Law & Social Problems*, vol. 54, no. 1, Fall 2020, pp. 1–47. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=aph&AN=147010666&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

⁶¹ *Ibid*

face in the United States can affect the outcome of being enrolled in special education. This can determine the progress and success seen with students who have disabilities.⁶²

Struggles with Fighting Special Education Policy in the U.S. and China

In China, there has been a push for the special education system to gain more awareness and get more support for students with disabilities. A lot of progress has been made over the past couple of years. For example, in 2006 China's Ministry of Education started to consider and identify autism as a *disability* that needs special education.⁶³ Even though policy in China now has expanded to be more inclusive for students, there are not a lot of legal routes for parents to protest the school system when it is failing to provide effective support for their child's education. This is mostly due to China's overall policy goal of providing the opportunity to be educated rather than creating policy directed towards helping special needs students reach their academic potential. While parents in China are limited in the processes they can take to fight against the education policy, families in the United States also struggle with being able to get the education they believe is necessary for their child to succeed in school.

The Western approach of learning in regular classrooms and implementing policy in order to make the education system more inclusive is considered to be difficult for many families in the United States. When the Individualized Developmental Education Act (IDEA) was created and the Individual Education Program (IEP) of 2009 was implemented, it had great intentions of being able to provide a student with the best special education in schools.⁶⁴ Additionally, it was a

⁶² Master, Grade, "What Is an IEP? Why Is It Important?," *GradeMaster*, GradeMasterLLC, grademaster.net/what-is-an-iep-why-is-it-important/.

⁶³ Zhang, Dorothy, and Vicky G. Spencer, "Addressing the Needs of Students with Autism and Other Disabilities in China: Perspectives from the Field," *International Journal of Disability, Development & Education*, vol. 62, no. 2, Mar. 2015, pp. 168–181. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/1034912X.2014.998175

⁶⁴ Kritzer, Jeffrey B, "Comparing Special Education in the United States and China," *International Journal of Special Education* 27.2 (2012): 52-56.g

way in which parents were legally allowed to get involved in their child's education. However, what the policy failed to take into account was that some schools do not have the ability to meet the requirements for this individualized education. This includes having the resources, experts, and funding for it. However, schools are legally allowed to have the final say on the individualized special education given to their students.⁶⁵ As a result, when parents want to protest the schools' decision they have to go through a legal process that is very time consuming, costly, and difficult.

Once an Individualized Education Program is established by a school official, parents can fight against these goals created through a series of "administrative and judicial devices for resolving disputes about content and implementation of IEP".⁶⁶ The problem with this is that it is a lot to deal with. The legal process has three ways in which a parent can address their concerns. The first option is to "file a written complaint with the State Education Agency".⁶⁷ The second option is to "request a mediation of disputes with the school district" and the third option is "to file a due process complaint before an administrative hearing officer whose decision can then be appealed in court".⁶⁸ Of these three options, the due process complaint is by far the most popular option because the parents have a right to a trial. Since it's a trial, they can change the outcome in state or federal court. While this due process in some cases can be beneficial to parents, for many low income families, it can also be too costly, time consuming, and in some cases an unsuccessful process. While the United States may have a standardized legal process of

⁶⁵ Turnage, Lydia, "Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Rural Special Education and the Limitations of the IDEA," *Columbia Journal of Law & Social Problems*, vol. 54, no. 1, Fall 2020, pp. 1-47. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=aph&AN=147010666&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

⁶⁶ Ibid p. 5

⁶⁷ Ibid p.14

⁶⁸ Ibid p.14

disagreements between parents and teachers over special education, it still tends to put families, especially in the lower-income areas, in difficult situations similar to families in China. When fighting policy, the U.S. has some strong advantages within its policy, however it is not as effective as it may appear to be.

Inconsistencies within the Regions in the U.S.

Even though the United States has a standardized process towards giving students with disabilities specialized help in school, the U.S. struggles to create a unified procedure of identifying disabilities. A common issue that most families and students in the United States face is the fact that states have inconsistencies in procedures in identifying a disability, like specific learning disability (SLD), that needs individualized attention⁶⁹. Due to this inconsistency in implementing special education, children tend to move in and out of learning disability categories when they go from state to state⁷⁰. This has a large effect on a student's academic progress because by moving between having specialized education and non individualized attention, it could make the academic process a lot tougher. This is similar to China's policy on education which does not have any standardizations on identifying students as well as putting them in classrooms. As a result, uneven development in special education practices are seen throughout China.⁷¹ This is just one of the ways in which the U.S. and China both struggle with special education practices.

Possible Remedies to Improve Special Education in China

⁶⁹ Hauerwas, Laura Boynton, et al., "Specific Learning Disability and Response to Intervention: State-Level Guidance," *Exceptional Children*, vol. 80, no. 1, Fall 2013, pp. 101–120. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1177/001440291308000105

⁷⁰ Turnage, Lydia, "Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Rural Special Education and the Limitations of the IDEA," *Columbia Journal of Law & Social Problems*, vol. 54, no. 1, Fall 2020, pp. 1–47. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=aph&AN=147010666&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

⁷¹ Hauwadhanasuk et al., "Inclusive Education Plans and Practices in China, Thailand, and Turkey," *Educational Planning* 25.1 (2018): 29-48.

China and the United States do have their differences in their special education policy, however there are initiatives that can be taken in both countries that can alleviate some of the burdens on families. This includes altering the funds for each of the policies, providing more support within schools, and changing the process in which families can change schools.

One way in which China can help struggling families of students within the special education system is by changing their policy to standardized special education in public schools. The ability for public schools in China to have the ability to reject teaching special education in school, is an ongoing problem. Not only does it make it difficult for families to trust the education system, but it also has consequences for the academic success of students. In order to ensure that students are not only being given the option to get an education but also be given equal educational opportunities, the Chinese government should alter their policy by stating that all public schools and teachers have to provide special education support for their students. Not only will this ensure that students can get the education that works best for them, but also creates a more inclusive environment for all students.

A way in which students can feel more included and comfortable in classrooms in China is by providing teacher training on special education. Because many of the teachers in public schools are not equipped to deal with special needs students, they tend to either ignore or send students home. This is an ineffective approach to increase the amount of students who are being educated. Therefore, a possible solution to this problem is to mandate public school teachers in China to participate in a course before school designed to have teachers understand the correct ways of teaching and integrating special needs students in the regular classrooms. Currently special education teacher training is only four weeks, so teachers in regular classrooms could go to these special training sessions two weeks prior to the start of school. This would provide a

beneficial education opportunity for the student with disabilities who are learning in regular classrooms. Not only would it help teachers understand the best way to provide support for special needs students, but also allow them to participate more in classroom settings.

Along with standardized special education practices and having regular classroom teachers be educated on special education, China could also alter its funding in order to cater to the special needs community by having more experts on special education in schools. A main reason as to why students are being neglected in classrooms is because many teachers in public schools tend to not know how to best teach a student with a disability. Due to the lack of training many teachers have with special education students, their style of teaching does not suit the student. In an effort to combat this problem, which some schools around China are struggling to deal with, China's special education should provide funding for more experts to be located at public schools within China, especially in rural areas. This would be beneficial to special needs students because it would create a more welcoming environment for them in regular classrooms at public schools. Additionally, if China changed its policies on funding, it would be less stressful than providing more funding for private schools and finding means of transportation for students.

Since policy changes can be timely, one way that China can increase the number of special needs students enrolled in school is by increasing funding for special schools. Since a majority of the population lives in rural areas, the Chinese government could increase the funds for students at schools. This would allow more students to be able to go to special schools if there was a reduced rate for families who are not financially able to pay for their kid to go to school. This would also incentivize more people to pursue being involved in the education system in China if the government takes a more active role in advancing special education. By

increasing the funding which would ultimately increase the number of students enrolled in special schools, China would be able to reposition itself worldwide as a more developed country in special education.

Last but not least, a way in which China could increase the enrollment of special schools is by improving transportation. A problem that many students with disabilities and families face when trying to figure out whether they can send their child to a special school is whether there is adequate transportation. This is because the private schools tend to be located in cities.⁷² This is an important question to address in order to ensure that the student is safe and that they can use public transportation easily. This tends to be a problem for families living in rural areas in China and by improving the transportation system to make it more accommodating to students and people with disabilities, it will most likely increase the enrollment numbers in special schools. By implementing a better transportation system for individuals with disabilities, China not only will be able to improve their special education enrollment numbers but will make it a more developed nation in terms of its disability policy.

Possible Improvements on Special Education in the U.S.

While China has areas of improvement when it comes to special education policy, the United States also has the ability to improve special education for individuals with disabilities in the school system. One area in particular is that the U.S. Government can add to IDEA definitions of disabilities that need special education as well as having standard protocols across the U.S. that will help identify students. This is an important area that can be improved due to the fact that many students with mild disabilities go between the special education system when

⁷² Deng, Meng, and Kim Fong Poon- McBrayer, "Reforms and challenges in the era of inclusive education: the case of China," *British Journal of Special Education* 39.3 (2012): 117-122.

moving out of state.⁷³ This creates a very difficult transition for students within the academic atmosphere. By changing the policy to ensure that all states are providing the same resources and identification processes, it will ensure that students living within the U.S. who have disabilities are given adequate and standardized education. This will ensure their success in school as well as challenge them to their individual standards even if they change locations.

In addition to altering the policy to make it easier on students, the public school system in the U.S. should make it easier for students to get funding for the type of school environment that will provide them with the best and most challenging education. Depending on where families are living, some families tend to think that enrolling their child in special schools instead of public schools will provide them with the best form of education. However, since the process for applying for these funds is costly and time consuming, many parents who are not fiscally able to do this end up having to enroll their child in an education that is not best suited for them. In order to alleviate this situation, the government should increase funding for special schools in each state. This will allow families and individuals to get access to the education that they are looking for and will provide the personally challenging education that IDEA is supposed to ensure. By increasing funding for special education in the U.S., many students will be able to have more opportunities for success in their education.

Conclusion

While it may appear that the United States is ahead of China in its special education system, there are a lot of common struggles that families in China and the U.S. face when it comes to enrolling their child with a disability into school. There are differences in the way in

⁷³ Turnage, Lydia, "Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Rural Special Education and the Limitations of the IDEA," *Columbia Journal of Law & Social Problems*, vol. 54, no. 1, Fall 2020, pp. 1–47. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/ccl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=aph&AN=147010666&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

which China approaches creating its policy in comparison to the U.S. but there are still improvements that can be made in both countries. However, it is important to note that China has seen great improvements in its special education system throughout the years. It has become a more inclusive society as well as has been working on changing the culture towards individuals with disabilities. There have been a lot of efforts made recently from parents as well as from the government to ensure the enrollment of students in classrooms. China is on an upward trend towards having a more inclusive education system. The U.S. in comparison has had effective education policies and practices, however there have been many improvements made in its education system throughout the years. One thing that is important to remember is that the improvements should not stop and that there is always a way to improve the special education system in both countries.

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