



Allocation of Powers under the Principal-Responsibility System— An Analysis Based on PISA 2022 and PISA 2015 Results

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Abstract— *Understanding how the scope of principals' authority in China differs from international practice is a prerequisite for rationalizing the scope and structure of principals' decision-making powers. Using samples from the PISA 2022 and PISA 2015 databases, this study examines international trends in school-level decision making on major matters such as teacher personnel, budget allocation, student management, and curriculum management. The findings indicate that high-performing PISA countries/economies tend to grant principals relatively broad authority, and OECD reports show a correlation between strong principal authority and higher PISA performance. By contrast, principals in the four Chinese provinces/cities studied have, on average, less authority over major school matters than principals in the high-scoring PISA jurisdictions. The paper recommends, in line with the Opinions on Establishing a Principal-Responsibility System under the Leadership of the Party Organization in Primary and Secondary Schools (trial), strengthening principals' decision-making authority on major school matters—especially personnel, budget, student and curriculum issues—and building managerial supervision mechanisms to improve decision efficiency.*

Keywords— *principal-responsibility system; PISA 2022; PISA 2015*



I. INTRODUCTION

Although China's implementation of the principal-responsibility system is relatively recent in historical terms, its evolution carries significant implications: it reflects how the education governance system has adapted to social change and reform needs. Since 1978, when a model of principals operating under Party branch leadership was proposed for full-time secondary schools, this governance arrangement has carried the task of promoting educational development and improving school management effectiveness. The initial designs emphasized Party organizations' leadership in schools—to ensure alignment with national education policy—while also allocating certain managerial and decision-making powers to principals.

Since 1949, China's primary and secondary school leadership structures have evolved through seven stages,

including systems such as school councils, principal responsibility systems, principals operating under Party branch leadership, local Party and education authority leadership models, revolutionary committees, and variations of the principal responsibility model. Li Shufeng (2005) traced this institutional evolution and argued for the necessity of introducing principal accountability under these changing governance arrangements. In 1985, the Central Committee's Decision on Educational System Reform further proposed gradually implementing the principal-responsibility system and establishing a national education committee to strengthen Party and government leadership of education. That decision represented a major shift: it reinforced the principal's role in daily school management and teaching activities and paved the way for enhancing school governance and educational quality.

In 1993, the Outline of China's Education Reform and Development extended the principal-responsibility system

to secondary and lower levels, accelerating reforms and modernizing school governance. The system's further implementation required principals to fully implement national education policies, mobilize staff to run schools, and exercise broad responsibilities—signaling a comprehensive recognition of principals' central role in school development and quality improvement.

The Opinions on Establishing a Principal-Responsibility System under the Leadership of the Party Organization in Primary and Secondary Schools (trial), issued by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee in January 2022, mark a new milestone. The document aims to strengthen Party leadership in primary and secondary schools while progressively implementing a Party-led principal-responsibility system. It reiterates the principal's central position in school governance, clarifying their roles and responsibilities in the contemporary governance context.

While the principal-responsibility system has promoted educational reform and improved management efficiency, it has exposed several problems. Typically, principals are appointed by and accountable to higher administrative authorities, which constrains school autonomy. In such regimes, principals often operate with limited *de facto* power and therefore find it difficult to take full responsibility for school affairs, hindering autonomous development. Conversely, in some schools power is excessively concentrated in the principal's office without adequate checks and balances, producing a "one-man rule" that undermines democratic and scientific decision making and increases the risk of power abuse. Consequently, an internationally comparative perspective on the distribution of school-level decision-making powers can reveal useful lessons.

This study uses PISA 2022 principal questionnaire data concerning responsibilities for major school matters to analyze the distribution of principal authority in PISA high-scoring jurisdictions and to provide policy guidance for the allocation of powers in China.

II. MAJOR SCHOOL MATTERS IN THE PISA PRINCIPAL QUESTIONNAIRE: CATEGORIZATION AND RATIONALE

The allocation of decision-making authority over major school matters is a central component of school governance. It not only indicates how power and responsibility are distributed internally among school leaders, teachers, students and families, but also how the school interacts with external actors such as local education authorities, national ministries, community organizations, and other stakeholders. This distribution shapes governance dynamics and reveals how various parties cooperate and negotiate to influence educational policies and practices.

The PISA principal questionnaire includes items designed to capture who is responsible for twelve major school matters, which can be grouped into four domains: teacher personnel, budget, student management, and curriculum (see OECD, PISA 2022). Examining PISA 2022 and PISA 2015 data and comparing the responses from the four Chinese provinces/cities with those from PISA high-scoring jurisdictions provides an international benchmark for evaluating the scope of principals' authority in China.

PISA 2022 covered 81 participating countries/economies. For comparative purposes this study selects the top four jurisdictions by combined student test performance in the three PISA test domains: Singapore, Ireland, Japan, and Macao SAR. The combined sample includes 561 schools; the sample counts per jurisdiction range from 46 to 182 schools. Based on the PISA principal report, responsibility for the twelve major school matters examined in the questionnaire includes: appointing/hiring teachers; dismissing/suspending teachers; setting teachers' starting salaries; determining teacher salary increases; preparing the school budget; deciding budget allocation; setting student discipline policies; setting student assessment policies; approving student admissions; selecting learning materials; determining curriculum content; and deciding which courses are offered. These items are grouped into the four domains noted above. Comparing PISA 2022 and PISA 2015 allows us to position principals in Chinese provinces/cities within the international landscape.

The following table (Table 1) presents the distribution (percentages) of responsibility for each of these major school matters across the selected jurisdictions and stakeholder groups.

Table 1. Distribution (%) of responsibility for major school matters

Country / Economy	Stakeholder	Major school matters											
		Teacher personnel management				Preparing the school budget		Student management			Curriculum management		
		Appoint/ Hire Teachers	Dism iss/Suspen d Teachers	Set Teachers' Starti ng Salary	Decide Teacher Salary Increases	Prep are Scho ol Bud get	Deci de Budg et Alloc ation	Set Studen t Disci pline Policy	Set Studen t Assess ment Policy	Appro ve Studen t Admi ssions	Select Lear ning Mater ials	Determ ine Curric ulum Conten t (Decide Which Courses Are Offered
China (B-S-J-Z)	Principal	21.36	13.19	3.72	4.80	18.67	25.49	21.63	19.22	13.05	4.80	5.77	9.74
	Teachers	4.44	1.36	0.46	0.84	2.26	4.71	18.85	22.56	3.11	8.83	14.11	7.14
	School Governing Board	26.52	21.01	10.61	17.70	34.76	56.65	49.04	43.68	24.49	12.82	16.34	20.13
	Local Education Authority	47.28	61.90	75.36	65.98	42.83	12.46	8.36	12.79	58.94	68.27	51.88	49.63
	National / Regional Authority	0.41	2.54	9.85	10.68	1.49	0.68	2.12	1.76	0.41	5.28	11.90	13.35
PISA Average	Principal	16.58	15.86	5.88	6.06	26.02	41.18	32.09	38.15	61.43	23.17	27.45	45.10
	Teachers	3.03	2.85	2.32	2.50	10.87	8.91	28.52	25.67	7.68	69.16	28.88	25.67
	School Governing Board	4.99	22.28	15.51	14.62	22.64	22.10	20.68	6.06	15.18	0.53	1.07	16.58
	Local Education Authority	22.28	29.59	25.66	22.64	25.49	23.88	15.33	3.56	0.71	0.89	3.56	2.49
	National / Regional	22.82	27.45	48.48	23.71	12.83	1.96	1.43	23.89	13.04	4.10	37.08	8.20

Country / Economy	Stakeholder	Major school matters											
		Teacher personnel management				Preparing the school budget		Student management			Curriculum management		
		Appoint/ Hire Teachers	Dism iss/Suspen ded Teachers	Set Teachers' Starting Salary	Decide Teacher Salary Increases	Prepare School Budget	Decide Budget Allocation	Set Student Discipline Policy	Set Student Assessment Policy	Appro ve Student Admissions	Select Learning Materials	Determine Curriculum Content	Decide Which Courses Are Offered
	national Authority												
Singapore	Principal	19.02	17.18	6.75	7.36	32.52	71.78	35.58	15.34	53.09	12.88	4.29	27.61
	Teachers	3.07	1.84	2.45	4.91	27.61	23.93	60.12	35.58	6.79	76.69	30.06	45.40
	School Governing Board	0.00	1.84	7.98	6.75	7.36	3.07	0.61	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.23
	Local Education Authority	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	National / Regional Authority	77.91	79.14	82.82	80.98	32.52	1.23	3.68	49.08	40.12	10.43	65.64	25.77
Ireland	Principal		8.24	2.35		25.29	31.18	32.35	28.82	42.35	10.00	5.29	39.41
	Teachers		0.00	0.00		0.00	0.00	10.59	13.53	0.59	79.41	27.65	5.29
	School Governing Board		47.65	2.94		36.47	36.47	47.06	17.65	48.24	1.18	2.35	47.06
	Local Education Authority		23.53	9.41		20.59	21.18	2.35	0.59	0.59	0.00	0.59	0.00

Country / Economy	Stakeholder	Major school matters											
		Teacher personnel management				Preparing the school budget		Student management			Curriculum management		
		Appoint/Hire Teachers	Dism iss/Suspen ded Teachers	Set Teachers' Starting Salary	Decide Teacher Salary Increases	Prepare School Budget	Decide Budget Allocation	Set Student Discipline Policy	Set Student Assessment Policy	Appro ve Student Admissions	Select Learning Materials	Determine Curriculum Content	Decide Which Courses Are Offered
	National / Regional Authority		14.12	78.82		10.59	4.71	1.18	31.18	1.76	2.35	57.65	1.76
Japan	Principal	20.33	14.84	4.40	7.69	17.58	22.53	35.71	76.37	93.96	48.90	74.73	73.08
	Teachers	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.65	12.09	0.55	47.80	21.43	17.58
	School Governing Board	12.09	17.03	25.82	24.18	23.08	24.73	18.13	1.10	1.10	0.00	0.00	2.75
	Local Education Authority	67.03	67.58	68.13	67.58	58.79	52.20	44.51	9.89	1.65	2.75	2.75	6.59
	National / Regional Authority	0.55	0.55	1.65	0.55	0.55	0.55	0.00	0.55	2.75	0.55	1.10	0.00
Macao (China)	Principal	54.35	43.48	21.74	17.39	39.13	43.48	4.35	4.35	32.61	6.52	4.35	17.39
	Teachers	26.09	28.26	19.57	13.04	34.78	23.91	89.13	89.13	65.22	89.13	58.70	63.04
	School Governing Board	13.04	21.74	47.83	58.70	23.91	26.09	4.35	4.35	2.17	2.17	4.35	13.04
	Local Education	6.52	6.52	8.70	8.70	2.17	6.52	2.17	2.17	0.00	0.00	30.43	4.35

Country / Economic Region	Stakeholder	Major school matters											
		Teacher personnel management				Preparing the school budget		Student management			Curriculum management		
		Appoint/ Hire Teachers	Dismiss/ Suspension of Teachers	Set Teachers' Starting Salary	Decide Teacher Salary Increases	Prepare School Budget	Decide Budget Allocation	Set Student Discipline Policy	Set Student Assessment Policy	Approve Student Admissions	Select Learning Materials	Determine Curriculum Content	Decide Which Courses Are Offered
Authority													
National / Regional Authority	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.17	2.17	2.17	

(Source: PISA principal questionnaire items, PISA 2015 & 2022 data compiled)

III. ANALYSIS OF PRINCIPALS' AUTHORITY DISTRIBUTION

Data caveat: Ireland's responses for "appoint/hire teachers" and "decide teacher salary increases" were missing and therefore excluded from statistics for those two items.

The PISA principal questionnaire items on major school matters fall into the four domains described earlier: teacher personnel, budget, student management, and curriculum. Below we analyze each domain with respect to principals' relative authority in high-performing PISA jurisdictions and the four Chinese provinces/cities.

3.1 Teacher personnel

Across the PISA high-scoring jurisdictions, the proportion of responsibilities allocated to principals for teacher personnel decisions exceeds 10% for each measured item. This indicates that principals play a meaningful role in teacher appointments/hires, dismissals/suspensions, setting starting salaries, and determining salary increases. Macao stands out: principals there show particularly strong authority across all four teacher personnel items, with over 50% responsibility for appointing/hiring teachers. This suggests Macao principals have a large influence on teacher workforce composition and, by extension, on teacher quality and school staffing structure.

Singapore and Japan show proportions roughly in line with the international average, reflecting a cautious approach to granting principals personnel authority—possibly

balancing principal prerogatives with teacher professional autonomy and the roles of other governance actors (e.g., school management committees).

By contrast, principals in the four Chinese provinces/cities show slightly lower shares of responsibility for teacher personnel compared with PISA averages. This may reflect constraints within China's education governance—either formal limits on principal decision rights or a more collective/shared decision-making mechanism in teacher personnel matters. Such an arrangement could indicate greater reliance on collaborative decision processes or greater involvement by higher authorities.

3.2 Budget

In budget matters, high-scoring PISA jurisdictions generally accord principals substantial authority—often above 20% for budget items. Singapore, Macao and Ireland present particularly high shares of principal responsibility for budget allocation. Singapore is notable: principals account for 71.78% of decisions on budget allocation, far above many other jurisdictions. This level of financial autonomy allows principals to allocate resources responsively to meet school-level needs and can be an enabling condition for school improvement.

By contrast, Japan and the four Chinese provinces/cities fall below the international averages for budget authority, suggesting a relatively centralized administrative model where principals' financial autonomy is limited.

3.3 Student management

Principals in Singapore, Japan, and Ireland have principal responsibility shares above the international average for student management tasks. Japan is especially distinctive: principals report extremely high authority for “setting student assessment policy” and “approving student admissions” (both above 70%), indicating considerable principal control over key student management decisions.

Conversely, the four Chinese provinces/cities and Macao show lower principal shares for student management relative to international averages, with a larger proportion of responsibilities delegated to school management committees and teachers. This pattern suggests that in these jurisdictions student management responsibilities are more distributed.

3.4 Curriculum

Most high-scoring jurisdictions grant principals relatively limited authority over curriculum setting, with curriculum design and content often controlled by teachers and national/regional authorities. Japan is an exception: principals there report more than 45% responsibility over aspects of curriculum setting, indicating a strong principal role in shaping curriculum content and course offerings. Such authority can enable rapid and context-sensitive curricular adjustments but presupposes principals’ curriculum expertise.

The four Chinese provinces/cities generally show principal authority levels below the international average for curriculum matters, reflecting the dominant role that national and local education authorities still play in curriculum control—a model that supports national consistency but may limit school-level curricular innovation.

3.5 International evidence on authority and student performance

OECD analyses (PISA 2022 Report) show patterns consistent with the above: in the bottom quartile of education systems by mathematics performance, human-resource responsibilities (hiring, dismissal, salaries) tend to rest primarily at the national/regional level. Conversely, in the top-performing quartile of about 20 education systems, principals hold primary responsibility for human resources. A similar pattern is observed for budgets: in higher-performing systems budgets are largely managed at the school/principal level, whereas in lower-performing systems budget responsibilities are shared or held by higher authorities. These findings suggest that strong school-level responsibility—entrusted to principals and teachers—is associated with better student outcomes. While causality cannot be definitively established from these cross-

sectional associations, the results indicate that authorities in higher-performing jurisdictions have learned to trust principals and schools with key responsibilities and have achieved strong outcomes as a result (OECD, PISA 2022).

IV. 4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ON ALLOCATING PRINCIPALS’ AUTHORITY

Based on the comparative analysis above, the study proposes the following policy directions for clarifying and optimizing the distribution of principals’ powers in China.

4.1 Strengthen principals’ authority over personnel and budget to enhance school autonomy and education quality

Compared with PISA high-scoring jurisdictions, principals in the examined Chinese provinces/cities have comparatively constrained decision-making authority in teacher personnel and budget matters. To meet contemporary educational challenges, measures are needed to grant principals greater autonomy—particularly consistent with the 2022 Opinions on Establishing a Principal-Responsibility System under Party Organization Leadership (trial), which stipulate that principals, under Party leadership, should lawfully and responsibly exercise powers including personnel management (e.g., entering into, terminating employment contracts according to regulations) and preparing and executing annual budgets while strengthening financial management and auditing. In practice, however, principals still face limits imposed by higher administrative authorities that impede effective decision making.

Under the current governance arrangement, principals appointed by higher authorities are accountable upward; this dynamic often channels principals’ attention to higher-level directives rather than school needs, constraining context-sensitive decisions. This restricts innovations in staffing, budget allocation and local initiatives—ultimately limiting improvements in educational quality. Principals’ limited personnel authority can hinder effective teacher incentives and accountability, affecting teacher stability and instructional quality. Likewise, limited financial autonomy reduces principals’ ability to allocate resources efficiently based on school priorities.

To address these issues, policymakers should carefully increase principals’ autonomy in personnel and budget domains while simultaneously establishing robust supervision and evaluation mechanisms. This ensures principals operate within legal and policy frameworks, exercise authority in ways that improve school outcomes, and are held accountable for performance. Strengthening

both authority and accountability can boost school autonomy and educational quality.

4.2 Optimize principals' role in curriculum development and promote school-based curriculum innovation

The analysis finds that principals in the studied Chinese provinces/cities have limited authority over curriculum decisions relative to many high-performing systems. China's centralized curriculum system ensures national coherence and standards—essential aims—but expanding principals' capacity to lead school-based curriculum adaptation and development (within the national framework) could better align schooling with local needs.

School-based curriculum management allows principals and school leadership to adapt national standards to their school contexts, develop localized offerings, and innovate in pedagogy and assessment. In recent years, national initiatives—such as the establishment of the National Textbook Committee in 2017 to strengthen textbook governance—have shaped curriculum governance. Going forward, authorities could broaden schools' curricular discretion under the requirement that national curriculum standards be fully covered, encouraging principals to integrate teacher capacity, facilities, and student needs in designing complementary school-based curricula. This would foster diversified, personalized learning opportunities and support educational innovation.

4.3 Increase principals' autonomy in student management where appropriate

Relative to many PISA high-scoring jurisdictions, principals in the studied Chinese provinces/cities enjoy lower autonomy in student management. While Japan's distinctive model shows very strong principal responsibility for student assessment and admissions, China's governance emphasizes multiple stakeholder participation—including school governing bodies, teacher representative congresses, and parent committees—to promote democratic management. While this multi-stakeholder system has benefits for deliberation and standardization, it may also slow down school-level responses and limit principal leadership.

To enhance responsiveness and raise overall education quality, policy reforms could clarify and, where appropriate, expand principals' authority for internal student management decisions while preserving broad stakeholder participation. This requires a clear division of responsibilities among stakeholders to avoid ambiguity and to enable principals to exercise prompt, school-specific decisions that reflect student needs and school mission.

4.4 Establish managerial supervision and accountability mechanisms for principals

Expanding principals' autonomy must be accompanied by proportionate governance safeguards. Increasing principal authority without effective oversight risks power concentration and potential misuse. Therefore, China should establish comprehensive, fair supervision and evaluation mechanisms that ensure principals' decisions align with legal, ethical, and educational quality standards.

A robust oversight system should include regular performance evaluations, financial audits, stakeholder feedback channels, and clearly defined consequences for malpractice. At the same time, the system should provide principals with constructive feedback and professional development opportunities to strengthen decision-making capacity. Multi-channel supervision—combining internal school governance (teacher representatives, parent bodies), external monitoring (local education authorities), and transparent disclosure—can ensure that principals' autonomy is exercised in service of school improvement rather than personal prerogative.

V. CONCLUSION

This study used PISA 2015 and PISA 2022 principal questionnaire data to compare the distribution of responsibilities for major school matters across jurisdictions. The evidence suggests that many high-performing PISA systems entrust principals with substantial responsibilities—particularly in personnel, budget, and (in some cases) curriculum and student management—and that this decentralization is associated with higher student outcomes. In contrast, principals in the four Chinese provinces/cities examined generally have more restricted authority, especially in key areas such as personnel and budget. The paper recommends carefully expanding principals' decision-making powers—within the framework provided by the 2022 Opinions—while simultaneously establishing sound supervision and accountability mechanisms. Such measures can promote school autonomy, improve resource use, and enhance educational quality.

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