

Analysis On Risks And Countermeasures Of Government Purchasing Of Private Preschool Education Services In Southwestern China

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Abstract: At present, private kindergartens play an important role in supporting the development of preschool education. The popularity of private kindergartens could provide more opportunities for preschoolers to access to early childhood education. The government purchasing services could effectively integrate the existing educational resources between public and private kindergartens, and dramatically overcome the difficulty of shortage of preschool educational resources. This research, taking the government purchasing of preschool education services as its perspectives, focuses on the risks and problems faced in the practice of government purchasing services in Southwestern China's Sichuan province. It is proposed that the local government should build an effectively administrative environment, refine the contents and methods of services, take multiple measures simultaneously and improve the assessment and supervision mechanism.

With the implementation of the universal two-child policy in China, the number and structure of the population have changed. A large number of emerged preschoolers pose a challenge to preschool education services.^[1] In 2018, the registered number of children in China's private kindergartens accounted for 56.69% of the total number of children in China's kindergartens, and the number of private kindergartens took up 62.17% of the whole number of kindergartens nationwide.^[2] Private kindergartens play an important role in popularizing early childhood education. Only when the government supports private kindergartens development, and gradually forms a good situation of coordinated development between public and private kindergartens, most of preschool children would have access to preschool education. To a large extent, government purchasing services can effectively integrate the high-quality education resources of public and private nursery schools and solve the difficulty of shortage of preschool education services.

Government purchasing of preschool education services refers to that the government has transformed its function from directly running kindergartens to purchasing preschool education services, through qualified social organizations or individuals, assessing and funding based on the quality and quantity of services provided.^[3] From the perspectives of government purchasing of preschool education services, this research analyzes the risks faced in the practice of Southwestern China's Sichuan Province, and puts forward the corresponding countermeasures and ideas.

1. Introduction of Government Purchasing Services in the Field of Private Preschool Education in Southwestern China

The major goal of government purchasing services is to expand the coverage of generally beneficial preschool education. As of 2019, there were 5,044 generally beneficial private kindergartens in Southwestern China's Sichuan Province, taking up 47.58% of the total number of private kindergartens. There were 732,300 children enrolled in generally beneficial private kindergartens, accounting for 48.5% of the children in private kindergartens.^[4] During the period of Three-year Action Plan for Preschool Education, the local government has guided and supported related administrative departments to strengthen public welfare of early childhood education, conducted the incentive mechanism, and funded generally beneficial private kindergartens, so as to further alleviate the problems of kindergarten crunch, and expensive access to kindergarten.

2. Risks of Government Purchasing of Private Preschool Education Services

Government purchasing services in the field of private preschool education is a new attempt, inevitably some risks faced in the practice in Sichuan Province of Southwestern China.

2.1. Slow Transformation of Government Function and Incomplete Policy System

The transformation of government functions requires the government to act as both a supporter and a server. Private nursery schools generally believe that the government should play the role of supporter and give them relatively free development choices. However, the government regards itself as the supervisor and leader, while giving private kindergartens the right of independent management, it still interferes more into the operating process of kindergartens. At present, from the central government to the local government, there is still a lack of policy and institutional documents on the development of preschool education, especially the purchasing of preschool education services by the government. It has dramatically hindered the effective development of purchasing services.

2.2. Insufficient Capital Investment and Uneven Fund Distribution

According to the data of China Statistical Yearbook and China Educational Finance Statistical Yearbook, in 2018, China's total investment in early childhood education was 367.2 billion-yuan, constituting 7.96% of the total investment in education, a gap compared with the proportion of 10% in developed countries. For example, in 2015 the financial preschool education funds accounted for 3.88% of the education funds, while the proportions of primary schools, middle schools and higher education in the same period were 32.07%, 29.38% and 19.99% respectively. The comparison shows that preschool education has not been given enough attention by the government. In the same year, the number of public kindergartens were around half of private kindergartens in China, but the financial education funds were 12.4 times of that of private kindergartens.

The statistics in Sichuan provincial general public budget expenditure arrangement indicated, in the past five years, even though the proportion of preschool education fund in education fund had increased from 5.86% to 8.96%, the total amount of preschool education budget were smaller than that of other levels of education, which greatly limited the popularization of early childhood education. Compared with the funds invested in public and private kindergartens, the public one is overinvested, instead the private one is underinvested. The unbalanced distribution of fund has become a key factor preventing the development of private nursery schools.

2.3. Single Form of Purchase is Weaker than the Integration Effect of Multiple Modes

Taking the United States as an example, its multiple modes of government purchasing services has produced the integration effect better than single form. The U.S. government purchases of preschool education services, and providing high quality education for children aged 3 to 4. The financial conditions of the subsidized families are at the bottom of the society, and their children are provided free preschool education. Meanwhile, it issues the education voucher, which is a project directly funded by the federal government and local state governments and participated by social charities and non-government organizations. The voucher can make up for the tuition and miscellaneous expenses of early childhood education, and the subsidized families have opportunity to choose high quality preschool education institutions.

In Sichuan, the local government mainly takes one single form of purchasing services, namely providing subsidies. Such as exempting tax, offering awards and subsidies, three types children subsidies (children's family with financial difficulties, orphans and children with disabilities) and housing subsidies. The single form has terribly affected the performance of the government purchasing of preschool education services.

2.4. Lack of Effective Supervision and Management Mechanism

In practice, the Sichuan provincial government reflects its lack of effective supervision on the private kindergartens, so it is difficult to guarantee that preschool education services they provided

to the public are generally beneficial and high-quality. In the process of running kindergartens, due to the lack of effective system and methods to supervise the kindergarten's finance condition, the local government cannot ensure that the related funds are all used to improve the quality of nursery schools, instead of becoming the personal income of the kindergarten itself. Obviously, the lack of effective supervision and management mechanism will lead to the inconsistency between the kindergarten's quality and the government investment.

3. Countermeasures on Improving Government Purchasing Service in the Field of Private Preschool Education in Southwestern China

Based on the practice of government purchasing of private preschool education services in Sichuan Province of Southwestern China, it is shown that the formulation and implementation of relative policy is still on the way of exploration, and some problems and risks exist. This research puts forward countermeasures and ideas that the local government should build an effectively administrative environment, refine the contents and methods of services, take multiple measures simultaneously and improve the assessment and supervision mechanism.

3.1. Establish and Improve the Effectively Administrative Environment

First, the government should clarify its own functions, assume the responsibility of supervision and serving for the public in the purchase of services. Second, government purchasing of preschool education services is an innovative measure, and the formulation of laws and regulations is the fundamental requirement for further standardizing and promoting the enforcement of relevant policies. We should speed up the process of legislation, and make provisions on areas such as: the category of preschool education, government functions, management and investment mechanism, and the mode of running kindergartens. Third, the highest law of our country on government purchasing services is the Government Procurement Law of China promulgated in 2002, but many of its provisions are not fully applicable to government purchasing of preschool education services. In order to make the government purchasing services more institutionalized and standardized, government departments should form a series of complete rules and policies, depending on the regional characteristics and actual demands.

3.2. Promote and Refine the Contents and Methods of Government Purchasing Services

Without strong support for the development of private early childhood education, as well as the absence of sufficient direct investment from the government, refining the contents and methods of purchasing services is becoming particularly significant. In areas with rapid development of preschool education, we should encourage local kindergartens to be quality improvement-oriented, using awards to replace subsidies. In areas with moderate development of preschool education, we should support teachers' professional development, providing more opportunities for their professional development. In areas with weak development of preschool education, we should solve the problems of shortage of kindergartens first, using ways of the supplement of infrastructure, the reduction and exemption of rent and taxation, and offering subsidies for kindergarten establishment, to make the newly-established private kindergartens qualified.

3.3. Take Various Measures Simultaneously and Optimize the Utilization of Financial Funds

In order to achieve the goal of government purchasing services, the government takes one single measure is far from enough. According to local conditions, it should adopt combination fist and combine various policy tools, which could optimize the utilization of financial funds. For example, we should expand the coverage of subsidized target to kindergartens, teachers and parents. Another example, it is considered to provide double form of subsidy, non-competitive funds and competitive funds subsidy. The former one is chosen to invest in meeting the basic needs of all kinds of kindergartens, and the latter one is used for assuring quality and improvement of nursery schools.

3.4. Construct Multiple Performance Assessment and Supervision Mechanism

When the government purchases preschool education services, it should construct the performance evaluation and supervision mechanism both in the government and private kindergartens at the same time. First, the government should carry out performance appraisal and supervision on the process and results of purchasing services. Second, it should conduct the system of pre-qualification examination, mid-term supervision and management, and late assessment and evaluation to assure the quality of such private kindergartens. Third, it should maintain the parallel relationship between the financial and regulatory departments, with the assistance of performance appraisal and supervision mechanism, to avoid corruption in government purchasing services.

Conclusion

China's government purchasing of preschool education services is still on the way of exploration. We need to fully anticipate the risks and difficulties of policy implementation, and actively formulate and improve relevant policies. We need to take advantages of government purchasing services, the policy tool, to enhance the supply efficiency and quality, and meet the diversified and personalized education demands of the public. The policy of government purchasing service has a positive role in promoting the overall development of private preschool education, and gained initial achievement now. Exploring a suitable path for the development of private early childhood education in Southwestern China should be based on the realistic condition of regional social and economic development. The local government should explore and struggle, taking advantages of government purchasing of education services, to develop preschool education that meets the diversified and personalized needs of the public.

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