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The Roles and Strategies of the District Government in Promoting Community Education

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Abstract: The history of the community education in China during the past 20 years indicates that government plays an important role in promoting community education, and has become a powerful force in creating a lifelong education system and a learning society. It is important to clarify the roles and relevant strategies of the government, particularly the roles of the district government in promoting the community education, which is the purpose of this study. This case study of Zhabei District in Shanghai City will discuss four roles and the relevant strategies of the district government in promoting the development of community education. The four roles are designers, linkers, servers and intermediaries respectively. The relevant strategies include those such as strengthening the leadership system, improving the working mechanism, completing infrastructure, guiding the full participation, and cultivating featured brands. These roles and strategies are providing reference for the booming community education all over China.

Key words: District government, community education, roles, strategies

Introduction

Community education is an important part of lifelong education system. In 1980s under the background of political, economic, and cultural reform, community education in China is a new model which integrates education and society (Huang, 2006). Twenty-year-long history of its development has demonstrated that governments of all levels have performed irreplaceable roles in the promotion of community education, and have become a powerful force in creating a lifelong education system and a learning society.

As proposed in “Education Revitalization Action Plan of the 21st Century” approved and transmitted by the State Council of China in 1999, we should “conduct community education experimental work, gradually construct and complete a lifelong education system and improve the quality of the population” (1999, p.7). In April 2000, Vocational Education and Adult Education Department of Ministry of Education established eight priority experimentation areas in Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Shandong, Shanxi, Sichuan, and Fujian etc. In December 2001, the national community education experimental work experience exchange meeting was held by Ministry of Education in Beijing, which established 28 national community education experimental areas, which further promoted the development of community

education experimental work. In November 2002, Vocational Education and Adult Education Department of Ministry of Education held a forum of community education experimental work in Xuanwu District, Nanjing City, which summarized and communicated working practices and experience of experimental work nationwide. In December 2003, Ministry of Education has established the second list of 33 national community education experimental areas, increasing the total number to 61, basically covering all Chinese provinces and cities. In July, 2006, the third list of 20 national experimental areas was established by the Ministry of Education, and in October, 2007, another 33 national experimental areas were established as the fourth list. Till now, the total number of national community education experimental areas in China has reached 114. With the extensive development of community education experimental work all over China, Ministry of Education designated 34 national community education demonstration areas in February 2008.

To promote the development of community education, the Ministry of Education uses the national experimental areas as a focal point and has formed a series of effective strategies that include the followings:

To start with, the strategy is “fanning out from one point to a larger area”, which means “promoting work in all areas gradually by drawing upon the experience gained in some key areas”. Various national community education experimental areas are established in different areas nationwide. Effective regional experience was radiated to a larger area, set examples for other areas to follow. Secondly, establishing experimental areas by units and carrying out experimental work step by step. From 2000 till now, the number of experimental areas of Chinese community education has increased from the original 8 to 114 for the moment. Each experimental area actively explored different levels of innovative approaches to community education. Third, to establish the regional development consortium through the forum, such as the Yangtze River Delta Community Education which has been held for eight times and has become a platform of communication and cooperation for community education development in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Shanghai. Later, regional community education consortium was formed in Bohai rim region and the Pearl River delta region. Fourth, extending community education from the relatively developed areas in the east to the underdeveloped areas in the west gradually.

In the initial start-up stage, governments were engaged in meeting the basic requirements for developing community education, such as building institutions, staffing, and implementation of funds. They advocated the concept of lifelong education through a variety of approaches and methods and different learning activities. Governments developed plans, identified goals, assigned tasks and emphasized assessment to support community education in the experimental areas. In the advanced stage, governments optimized the mechanism and system, established and improved network, professionalized the team, standardized educational carriers, and nurtured the brands, etc. The infrastructure of the community education has been

established and the internal functions have been expanded.

Roles Played by District Government in Community Education

District government must define its roles by specifying its management objectives, the scope and function of management, which is the starting point and goal of any public activities of the organization. The key is how to manage government's relations with market and society.

Community is a sociological concept that reflects people's social life from the spatial form. Internationally, the concept of community education was formally established and widely used after World War II. In April 2000, "Notice of Ministry of Education on Developing Community Education Experimental Work in Some Areas" (Letter from Vocational Education and Adult Education Department of the Ministry of Education, 2000) defined the concept of "community education" clearly as follows:

Community education is an educational activity which aims at improving the overall quality of all members of the community and the quality of life, serving the regional economic construction and social development by utilizing all types of educational resources in a certain area. (Vocational and Adult Education Department, 2000, p.1)

At present, in a special historic period of system transition and social transformation in China, how to solve problems and improve the life quality of common people have become important topics for the communist party. Community education has already played an active role in enlightening the public, teaching life knowledge, improving the survival skills and sustaining social stability. Based on the current national conditions, four roles should be played by district government in promoting community education: The role of designer, the role of connector, the role of server, and the role of intermediary.

District or county government should play the role of a designer in social administration. Based on regional features and people's demands, they develop plans for community education development by making the layout of the space and setting time phases. They design the focus and strategies of the work for each stage, and pay close attention to the formation of the relevant policies and identify the executive departments to implement policies. They are devoted to improving management performance of the government by reducing scale, expenses and budget.

The role of a connector is of particular importance for the development of community education (Wu, 1999). Nowadays, world is an open system, government administration should adapt to the trends of globalization and manage activities in a way which is compatible with internationally accepted practices. In some developed countries, community education has been operated for about half a century, and has formed a relatively mature management model and mechanism. It will be of great

value for us to critically absorb and draw lessons from the experience of other countries.

In China, community education is controlled by the government, rather than operated according to the market rules. District government uses “active intervention” to provide public services and public products for the local people. All the products and services provided should be non-competitive and inclusive, and be available to all the local people.

A central function of district government is macro-control and intervention. Local district government oversees the operation of the whole social system, rather than dwelling too much on the implementation of specific policies. Government as an intermediary enables the government to give local community the autonomy to manage the community education and to be more adaptable to the market mechanism. The role of the district is to prevent market chaos and vicious competition through policies and laws. A highly legalized market ensures a good social for community education. The district government is devoted to setting up rules for the development and operation of community education, and to overseeing the implementation of the community education based on rules.

Strategies of Promoting Community Education

Five strategies that aligned with the roles of the Zhabei District government were created based on eight years of experience in Zhabei community education, which will be described below.

Strengthening the Leadership System

District government integrated community education into the strategic plan of the regional economic and social development. To create a harmonious society, the district government should strengthen leadership, make overall plans, coordinate with other institutions and form the developmental strategy in which government supervises community education, educational institutions, residential district and town is in charge of community education, all social units contribute to community education, and citizens participate in community education autonomously. Specifically, three tasks should be addressed. First of all, to establish institutions and specify responsibilities. In November 2000, Zhabei district set up the leadership team for the community education experimental work to take charge of the overall planning and coordination. The goal of this leadership team is to intensify planning, guidance, inspection and service work for the community education development in the whole district. Meanwhile, it set up community education committee in each residential district and town, and was responsible for promoting the specific work. Secondly, to think systematically and to make plans. Based on the experimental task, on the one hand, the team incorporated community education development into “The Tenth

Five-Year Plan of National Economic and Social Development of Zhabei District”, which closely ties the community education experimental work with the goal of building a learning city, and the goal of Zhabei district economic and social development. On the other hand, based on surveys and investigations, the team created the plan of “Programs for Community Education Experimental Work in Zhabei District”, which set the general requirements, main goals, stage tasks, and safeguard measures for the development of community education. Thirdly, to strengthen support and increase investment. According to the principle of “four little”, that is, government invests a little, unit allocates a little, people donate a little, the society raises a little”, the team constantly expanded fundraising channels for community education. Since 2005, the District Financial Department has established special funds for community education each year, and the funds have increased year by year to over 5 Yuan (0.8 US dollars) per capita.

Improving the Working Mechanism

A complete working mechanism can promote work effectively (Vocational and Adult Education Department of the Ministry of Education, 2001). Actively following the requirements of sustainable development, Zhabei District developed working mechanism, which includes these such as: Scientific policy-making, resources integration, and evaluation. To improve the scientific decision-making mechanism, the Zhabei district combined democratic procedure with leadership decision, and established normal and standard operation procedure that can better reflect people’s needs. Through investigating the important and tough issues in the process of community education development, the government has formed the work procedure as below to ensure the scientific and effective decision-making: District Community Education Office conduct the investigation, find the problem, and provide suggestions. The leaders who are in charge of District Community Education Committee listen to the reports and form suggestions. The members of the different units have the joint meeting and discuss the suggestions. On the district government executive meeting, these suggestions will be discussed too. The district government then issue documents, and all units and departments execute the tasks.

Secondly, to improve the resource integration mechanism. To effectively utilize all the resources within the district, the Zhabei District government suggested opening primary and secondary school educational resources to the local community and recommended that local schools and residents collectively manage community education resources. To evaluate the community education, each year, the government of Zhabei District will set up a goal of community education management with all departments, and includes community education work into the government’s annual assessment as an important evaluation index for the government annual performance. Meanwhile, the district government lists community education as one of the administrative supervision projects that are conducted once every two years. The district government regularly invites the external evaluation organizations and experts

of city and district levels to conduct comprehensive evaluation and special assessment in stages over the eight residential districts and one town in Zhabei District to improve the quality of community education in the whole district.

Building Infrastructure

The government of Zhabei District has enhanced the hardware facilities construction, thus completing the interconnected, district-covering community education network with features of the community college being a leader, the community schools of the residential districts (towns) being the backbone, the educational institutions of all levels and all types being supplement. All these have laid solid foundations for the promotion of community education.

First, community colleges perform a leading role. District government has invested 27 million Yuan (one Yuan equals 0.16 US dollars) on the building of over 100-acre community college (Shanghai Xingjian Vocational College), to conduct district degree and non-degree education with higher vocational techniques. Meanwhile, backed by the community college, Zhabei District Community Education Research Center and Zhabei District Community Learning Center were established, which primarily undertake the tasks of theoretical research, information communication, developing teaching materials, faculty training, and guidance towards grass-roots level, etc. The establishment and completion of the “Two Centers” has pushed the community college into the substantial operation stage, which has fully demonstrated the leading role of community college in community education, and has further promoted the building of community schools and the overall development of community education in the whole district.

Second, community schools offer framework support. The government of Zhabei District was actively involved in the construction of community schools as a crucial support for promoting community education of the whole district. Nine community schools were built throughout the district, which are professionally guided by two centers of the community college. Over 300 courses are offered annually with the number of students reaching 150,000 per year. Meanwhile, the government formulated “Several Standards for the Standardization Construction of Community Schools in Zhabei District”, which further promoted the normalization and standardization construction of community schools. Moreover, by combining the construction of Cultural Activities Center of various residential districts and towns with the construction of community schools, the district government has greatly improved the hardware facilities of community schools.

Third, the neighborhood teaching sites have met the needs of the residents. For the convenience and benefit of its residents, the district government focused on establishing neighborhood teaching sites to ensure that there is one teaching sites with one manager in each neighborhood, and one accessible classroom or meeting-room,

equipped with education facilities of modern information and technology. At least three classes are organized each year with no less than 100 students. With the joint effort of the whole district, Zhabei District has established 242 teaching sites currently, which enables its residents to get access to rich and various resources of community education within their neighborhood.

Motivating the Full Participation

The district government continuously expands the coverage of community educational activities through extensive marketing and mobilization activities.

The Zhabei government focused on disadvantaged groups and required each residential district to organize various activities to meet their special needs, such as learning salon for the disabled people, self-aided learning salon for marginal youth in the community, literacy education for migrant women, the etiquette for the new Shanghainese, psychological counseling for solitary elderly, education, training and employment opportunities for the unemployed youth groups, learning activities for migrant workers, etc., which are “people-oriented” community education. Relevant departments and units have also organized various community education activities for different groups of people. For instance, District Federation of Trade Unions has actively organized reading activities for local people through a variety of carriers. The District Women's Federation organized the activity of “Millions of Families access to Internet” to improve residents’ spiritual life.

The Zhabei District government has organized a wide range of activities in an effort to create a good learning atmosphere. Teaching activities are organized in community schools. Different types of recreational and sports activities have been held in every community cultural activity center. Exhibition and exchange activities of community education have also been held one after another, in which each residential district or town displayed their achievements of community education. To list a few, exhibition of lifelong learning festival, live show of deepening community education, learning family talent show, experience sharing about how to establish community education counselor team, Awards ceremony for community schools’ standardization, the International Forum for Creating a Learning Community, the 18 Annual Conference of Asian Open University, On-site meeting for promoting experimental project and nurturing civic organizations to participate in community education in Shanghai. All of these activities have certain influence both on Shanghai and on the society as a whole, and have effectively promoted a learning city and enhanced the popularity of the Zhabei District nationwide. From 2004 till now, Zhabei district has held 279 important activities on community education with a total number of participants of 510,000.

Cultivating Featured Brands

The Zhabei District government has paid particular attention to nurture the community education brands with Zhabei characteristics. Since 2004, Zhabei District has received 4465 visitors of 171 groups, from other district or county of Shanghai city, from other cities and from abroad, which has increased the popularity of community education in Zhabei district, and has created favorable atmosphere and space for its further development.

Zhabei District developed distinctively featured brands of residential district community education. Led by the district government, all the residential districts and towns have organized all types of educational activities, and formed their respective characteristics, such as Five-Hand Project of West Tianmu street, Lifelong Education Day of West Zhijiang Road, Happy Families of Pengpu New Village, Lyre-playing, Chess, Calligraphy and Painting at North Station street, and so on, which are quite influential in the city and warmly welcomed by people.

Zhabei District developed highly effective community education models by different units. Each department has developed a group of featured brands for community education, which has greatly improved the overall quality of community education in Zhabei District. For example, District Civilization Office developed “Three Five” project, which combines practicing the socialist concept of honor and disgrace with “Five Virtues” of the community, (that is, education sets virtue, practice builds virtue, facts cast virtue, culture fosters virtue, and good models advocate virtue), “Five selves” of building groups (that is, self-discipline, self-protection of homes, self-service, self-entertainment and self-management) and “Five Learns” of families(that is, learn knowledge, learn law, learn skills, learn etiquette, and learn body-building). District Federation of Trade Unions first put forward “The five-step progressive method”, which has provided five standards for creating different types of learning organizations. The District Women’s Federation gradually developed the brand of “five learns and five homes” in the process of promoting community education experimental work. All these brands are like business cards that signify the excellence of the Zhabei community education.

Zhabei District has conducted researches on community education. Based on the development status of community education, Zhabei District has listed ten practical projects in 2005, such as implementing the featured course development projects on Community Education in Zhabei District, developing Zhabei District community education personnel resource, implementing the literacy program for migrants, and implementing the trainings to improve citizens’ sense of civilization. Among them, two practical projects have been rated as Shanghai key recommended project on community education in 2006, and six of them have been rated as Shanghai recommended project on community education, ranking first in the city. In 2006, 21 experimental projects of Zhabei District were denominated by City Board of Education, the content of which covers providing education to disadvantaged group, transforming some young teenagers with special needs through education, creating the

platform for community education, integrating various human resources into community education. The quantity of our projects ranks the first in Shanghai.

In conclusion, under the leadership of the Zhabei district government, community education in the Zhabei District has undergone great changes and improvements step by step. Right direction and effective implementation of the various activities is the key for the development of community education.

Early in 1997, World Bank has clearly pointed out, “The core mission of every government includes five basic responsibilities, that is, to establish the fundamentals of law, to keep a good policy environment, to maintain macroeconomic stability, to protect disadvantaged groups, and to protect the environment” (Hughes, 2004, p118). The case of Zhabei District community education development once again tells us that, “Some things should be done by the government, whereas others are not. Some things could be done very well by the governments, whereas others are otherwise meaningless.”

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Please contact the author if you need the full list of the references.