



## Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD)

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### **THE RIGHT TO BASIC EDUCATION OF RURAL CHILDREN IN SUIZHOU, HUBEI PROVINCE**

Report on an investigation conducted in 2005

Education policy is a fundamental and essential part of every government's long-term strategy. It is every citizen's basic human right to receive an education and have access to education on a fair and equal basis. This is one of the necessary criteria for achieving economic rights and is a prerequisite for the development of politically-related rights and freedoms. The extent to which citizens are able to enjoy the right to education is important not only for the individuals concerned, but also for the development of the nation. Due to the limitations and restrictions of China's educational system, and the severe criticism it has attracted over a period of many years, we have undertaken field investigations into the state of education in rural areas in order to assess educational conditions in those areas, with particular reference being made to the rights of rural children to basic education.

#### 1. Time, location, targets and methods of investigation

The investigation was conducted between October 1, 2005, and December 31, 2005, in Wangchong and Sangyuan Villages and Sanhedian Central Primary School, in Wushan Township, Zengdu District, City of Suizhou, Hubei Province, which is under the jurisdiction of Sanhedian Office, (also known as Sanhe Brigade).

The principal subjects of the research were parents and their school-age children. Every household in Wangchong village and Sangyuan village was visited and the research undertaken primarily with questionnaires and by personal interview. In total there were 117 households with children of school age who were, or should have been, receiving free compulsory education as of December 31, 2005. However, as some families had more than one school-age child, the total number of children covered by the survey totalled 134, all of whom were under 16 years of age at the time the investigation was conducted. The parents of all 117 households were interviewed and were asked to complete a questionnaire.



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The research in the primary school was done by interviewing the head of the school, its teachers and its students. Its purpose was to assess the nature of the education being provided and to determine whether the children's right to basic education was being properly safeguarded.

### 2. The location of the investigation

The two villages selected for this investigation are located in the Wushan Township, in Suizhou City's Zhengdu District, Hubei province. Wushan is located in the southern arm of the Tongbo mountain range; north of its border is Tongbo county in Henan Province; west of Wushan is Zaoyang City, Hubei Province.

From north to south, Wushan measures 36 km and 14 km from east to west, covering a total area 365 square km. Of this total area 8,237 acres is farmland, 63,424 acres is woodland, and 4,613 acres is covered by water. It has a population of 36,000 and the main industry of the township is microcline mining, other industries not being very well developed.

Wushan Township enjoys plenty of rain and has five medium to large reservoirs and more than 30 smaller reservoirs. It is an area suitable for growing rice, wheat, cotton and peanuts. In the year 2000, the average net annual income of peasants was 2,688 *yuan*. Wangchong Village and Sangyuan Village both fall under the jurisdiction of Sanhedian Office (Brigade). As the area is mountainous, the average arable area of farmland *per capita* in the two villages is lower than the average for the Township.

### 3. Drop-out rates of school-age children in the two villages

Of the 134 children covered by the survey, 19 left school before completing their nine-year free education, the overall drop-out rate thus standing at 14.1%. Of these 19 children, six dropped out before graduating from primary school and 13 dropped out before completing the first three years of their middle-school education. (See Appendix 1 for a list of the drop outs.)



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### 4. Why children in rural villages drop out of school

#### (i) The impact of poverty on the education of rural children

The main source of income for peasants in Wangchong and Sangyuan villages is from farming. As income from this source is extremely minimal—“Whatever we farm we feed our mouths,” commented one farmer—living standards are consequently very poor. The effect of poverty on village households appears to be the main reason children do not attend school.

Qiu Chunxia, 13 years old, and Qiu Chunqing, 14 years old, dropped out of school because their father Qiu Caijin suffers from severe haemorrhoids and arthritis in the legs and this disables him from doing any heavy work, thus causing severe financial difficulty to his family. “To tell the truth” he said, “now there isn’t any money at home, I can’t even afford to buy the children pens or notepads.” On one occasion Qiu Chunxia was forced to walk more than 10 km to reach home because she had no money for bus fare. Thereafter she refused to attend school.

Wang Qianqian, 15 years old, and Zhang Chang, 13 years old, were forced to discontinue their schooling because the cost of paying to have all the children in the family educated was too burdensome for their parents. They were forced to drop out so that their siblings, who had been doing better at school, could continue with their education. Zhang Chang’s mother said, “My son would sometimes come home and ask for maintenance and soy milk fees, but because we had no money it often took a long time to find the cash to pay these fees. Over the past couple of years, when he has asked for money to pay fees, I have had to go out and borrow it. Now no one wants to lend us money anymore. My child often worries about being laughed at in school; I feel just as low as he does.”

Shen Lanlan, 14 years old, was forced to drop out of school because her mother has cancer; the cost of surgical procedures has drained the family’s resources and they have been left without funds. Shen Xiaocui, 16, Shen Xiaojiao, 15, Liu Shicheng, 14, and Liu Leicheng, 14, have all been forced to discontinue their education because of family difficulties of one kind or another.



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### **(ii) Migrant workers' children often drop out of school**

It was found that approximately one third of the residents of both villages found it necessary to leave home in order to find work and that the children of these workers suffered from a higher drop-out rate.

The father of Shen Linxia, Shen Shangzhong, has been forced to search for work away from home and, as he earns very little, has been unable to return to his village for some time. As Shen Linxia's mother died some years ago, not only is she without money to pay for her schooling, she has to visit different relatives and neighbours for her meals.

Because Hu Shuang's parents have been away from the village looking for work and have not been able to return home during the past few years he has had to be left with relatives. During this investigation when Hu Shuang's father, Hu Dejun, returned to the village he admitted he had no idea in which year his son dropped out from school.

Wu Qian began attending junior middle school in Wushan in 2004 but as both her parents were away working nobody was able to pick her up from school. Maintenance work being undertaken on the road between Wushan and Sanhedian added more than an hour to the walk from Sanhedian to her home. On occasion she was forced to walk the entire distance from Wushan to her home, a journey of more than 30 km. She found these treks so arduous she refused to continue attending school.

Fu Baolin, Zhang Chun and Shen Jinxia have all left school because of the lack of care from parents absent from home due to the need to search for work far away from their villages.

### **(iii) The impact of school management on rural children dropping out of school**

Problems inherent to the current educational system have led to numerous flaws and abnormalities in the management of schools. Currently one of the most important areas school managers focus on is ensuring school accounts do not fall into the red. This has resulted in parents being charged arbitrary fees and generated the use of extreme measures to boost enrolment rates, causing students to drop out of school.



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Shen Jingen discontinued his education as a result of an argument between his mother and his school. Expenditure of more than 100 *yuan* during a “joint-week,” a period when students are required to attend classes continuously over a two-week period, shocked his mother. She felt that the school was wrong to force students to use cash cards and did not give them guidance, causing students to over-spend. When his mother visited the school to discuss her son’s situation she became involved in a heated argument with the teachers and the headmaster. Since then Shen Jingen has not returned to school.

Long Gongsui was in his final year of primary school. One day he failed to complete his homework and was smacked and shouted at by his teacher; as punishment he was made to stand for a long time and fainted from stress and hunger. His parents subsequently went to the school to discuss this incident with the staff. He was later diagnosed with epilepsy and stayed home for an extended period. Although his health has since improved he has not returned to school.

### **(iv) The impact of ‘refusal to learn’ on rural children dropping out**

School management personnel and teachers who were interviewed claimed the drop-out rates were very low, and said the cause of students dropping out was primarily poor grades and “lack of ability” or “refusal to learn.” The investigation confirmed that there were such cases.

Qiu Chunxia and Wo Qian were encouraged by their parents and teachers to return to their studies after dropping out, but both students refused to return to school. Shen Langlang said that one of the reasons she dropped out was simply that he “...didn’t want to go anymore.” Liu Shicheng’s class teacher told the author that when Shicheng was just two months away from graduation he decided that “...he wouldn’t attend school even if his life depended on it!”

However, further research revealed the reasons behind students’ “refusal to learn.” For instance, Qiu Chunxia refused to attend school because she “...could not afford pens or books” and also because she found the 10 km plus walk to school very wearying. The cause behind Shen Langlang’s leaving was attributed to “family difficulties—too many siblings and family debts.” Wu Qian dropped out because both parents were away working and there was nobody left to look after her at home and as well she couldn’t afford to take the bus to school and so had to walk the entire way, there and back.



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Liu Shicheng's reason for discontinuing his education was, he said, "...because sometimes we had to pay school fees and I asked my parents for this money for half a year but still I was unable to pay."

As well as poverty being a major reason for students dropping out, another influential factor was the pressure exerted on students to achieve high pass rates in exams. To achieve success means having to buckle down to intensive rote learning, thus destroying any possibility of enjoyment in study, inducing feelings of hopelessness and erosion of students' self-confidence; the cumulative effect resulting in a "refusal to learn."

Comments from students endorse this: "Going to school is pointless as there is always too much homework and I'm working from day till night," said one student. "Teachers are only nice to students with good grades," said another. "My grades are always bad—even if I study I will never make it to the next grade" remarked another student.

It is inevitable that some students will feel resentment towards school and studying. However, if a less pressured scholastic environment was more readily endorsed by society, the possibility of experiencing enjoyment and a greater sense of achievement would be possible and resentment towards the educational system would thus be less marked.

### **(v) The impact of peasants' attitude to education on rural children dropping out of school**

Every person included the investigation was asked to fill out a questionnaire. Question 2 asked "What do you think is the reason why children drop out of school?" Respondents were asked to choose between:

- A. Family difficulty
- B. Education is useless
- C. Girls do not need to go to school
- D. Other reasons



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None of the 117 respondents chose option B or option C. Of the families of the 19 children who dropped out, none chose either option B or C. The mother of Wu Qian, a girl student drop-out, quit her job and returned home with the sole purpose of persuading her daughter to return to school, enlisting the help of Wu Qian's elder sister in this task. When being interviewed, Wu Qian's mother repeatedly stated she was "...very confident that Wu Qian would return to school for the start of the next semester."

After being interviewed, Zhang Chang's mother came to us to enquire about the details of school fees, particularly the two "fee-exemptions and one supplement" scheme recently announced by the government. She also added that her son was "...far too young to work— I still want him to return to school,"

### **(vi) Some issues in rural villages and their impact on children dropping out**

In recent years many schools in rural areas have been forced to close down because of the dramatic shrinking of student numbers due to the effects of stringent family planning policies impacting on the already thinly spread population of rural villages.

There used to be a primary school in every one of the more than 10 villages falling within the jurisdiction of Sanhedian Office. Due to the drastic drop in the number of schools, children in the countryside face increased difficulties if they wish to keep up with their education. For example, rather than endure long daily treks to a school—often over much longer distances due to closures or the downgrading of middle to primary schools because of lack of numbers—many rural students have found it necessary to become boarders, thereby considerably increasing the cost of their education.

Problems related to transport are a critical issue. Common difficulties encountered include scarcity of buses on some routes, timetable irregularities, safety issues and in the worst cases a complete lack of available transport. And if a child has to travel home on a route insufficiently served with public transport they may be forced to cling to the roof of an overcrowded bus if they wish to ensure a ride home (witnessed by the author).



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Amongst the 19 children who dropped out, Shen Chunxia and Wu Qian left school because one had no money for bus ride, and the other had no available means of transport to school.

### 5. Other significant issues impairing rural children's right to basic education

The social factors described above effectively deny the right of many rural children to basic education. However, there are also other factors which contribute to this deprivation of educational rights.

#### **Corporal punishment and discrimination common in rural schools**

The toleration of corporal punishment and discrimination within the educational system contributes significantly to the erosion of students' self-esteem and sense of well-being and impact directly on learning ability.

A disturbing case of severe corporal punishment occurred in Sanhedian School in 2003. On the afternoon of the November 13 a teacher in a mathematics class was going through the questions of a mid-term examination and ordered some of the students who had failed the exam to stand in line in front of the blackboard and take turns answering some of the exam questions. One of the students, a boy called Wen, didn't understand the teacher's instructions; he was struck twice across the face by the teacher with blows of such severity that it led to the permanent loss of sight in his right eye. Such cases still occur from time to time. Instances of teachers insulting and humiliating students appear to be widespread. In many schools it is not uncommon for teachers to use abusive language toward students, calling them "pigs" or "idiots," or telling them to "...go and die."

Since exam results have a bearing on the recruitment of new students and because student numbers determine income, many schools treat the annual recruitment drive as a matter of economic life and death. As a result, the school's primary goal is to produce students who achieve good examination results, thus discriminating against students who struggle to make the grade. This phenomenon is especially acute in the third year of junior middle school.



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In the course of interviews in Team 1, Wangchong Village, a parent of a third-year graduate said, “In my child’s class there were more than 70 students but their teachers only cared about the top 15 and ignored the rest, telling the students with poor grades to sit at the back of the classroom. When the final exams were a month away, teachers separated out the good students and put them into another classroom, gave them good food and comfortable accommodation and told them to stay away from the other classmates. Students with poor grades get very little attention in school—they get frustrated and lose interest in studying.”

A student remarked that, “Our teacher always pays special attention to those who make good progress in learning. If you learn well then teachers will pay attention to you, if you are a poor student teachers just ignore you.” In other schools students are segregated into fast and slow streams, the fast streams being referred to as “experimental class,” “math Olympics class,” etc.

### 6. Other factors undermining rural children’s right to basic education

#### (i) Cost of education exceeds peasant income

Whether parents in the countryside can afford the cost of educating their children, and what proportion of family income is spent on education, are key questions related to the safeguarding of the rights of rural children to basic education. The investigation set out to establish the income and expenditure levels of local peasants.

Qiu Zhongxiang grows rice on more than 0.5 acres, and cultivates more than 0.33 acres of farmland. In 2005 year he harvested over 2,000 *jin* (1,000 kg) of rice; after putting aside enough for consumption by his family there remained 1,000 *jin* (500 kg) for sale. The purchasing price of rice was set at 0.68 *yuan* per *jin*, generating a total income of between 700-800 *yuan*. After allowing 108 *yuan* for the cost of four packs of chemical fertilizer, 90 *yuan* for seeds, 72 *yuan* for four packs of phosphate fertilizer, 60 *yuan* for three applications of pesticides and 135 *yuan* for the expense of harvesting, income from the sale of rice amounted to just 335 *yuan*.



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As well as rice, Qiu Zhongxiang also grows wheat and peanuts. About the profitability of growing wheat, he says: “I can produce more than 1000 *jin* (over 500 kg); we keep a little and sell the rest, between 700-800 *jin* (350-400 kg). Last year the price of wheat was 0.63 *yuan* per *jin*. The cost of growing wheat is similar to the cost of growing rice: one mu (0.16 acres) of field needs more than a pack of chemical fertilizer, more than a pack of phosphate fertilizer and seeds at a cost of about 20 *yuan*, plus the cost of harvesting. There is very little profit to be made; usually we produce only enough wheat for ourselves.” He added that income from peanuts comes to just 300-400 *yuan*.

Qiu has two sons in junior middle school, one in the third year and the other in the second year. About the cost of their schooling he says, “When a school term starts we need to pay fees of more than 1,000 *yuan* for the boys; as there are two terms in the school year this amounts to around 2,000 *yuan*. School meals cost about 30 *yuan* per week for each boy, plus they also drink soya milk, at a cost of 0.5 *yuan* per day and, sometimes, if the meals are better than what they ordinarily get, the food will cost more; in addition we need to buy pens and paper, teaching materials, snacks—all of this adds to our costs. Other children may spend more than 50 *yuan* per week but our boys are quite frugal. The school doesn’t run joint-weeks anymore, so each week our boys’ travelling costs amount to more than 6 *yuan*. The yearly cost for educating the two of them comes to more than 5,000 *yuan*.”

It can be seen that the income Qiu Zhongxian derives from farming cannot sustain the costs of educating his two children. In order to keep them in school he has since left his village to find work in the city.

Question number four of the questionnaire sent out to the 117 parents (see above) asked, “Can you afford the cost of sending your children to primary or secondary school?” A total of 114 respondents answered the question:

- 62 said they can barely afford it;
- 48 said they could not afford it;
- 4 parents said they could afford it.



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To many families the cost of schooling is a huge financial burden; parents say they dread the weekends, because their children invariably come home asking for money. Based on the data gathered by this investigation it is evident that the range of fees local peasants are required to pay to keep their children in school greatly exceeds their income. It is not a sustainable burden and thus threatens rural children's right to a basic education.

### **(ii) Boarding at school: the main area of concern for rural students and parents**

The final part of the questionnaire distributed to villagers asked, "What is your opinion of the rural education system?" Of all respondents, 22 people answered this question. The area which attracted the highest number of comments and elicited the strongest responses related to the conditions of life for student boarders, with particular reference being made to the very poor quality of food fed to the children by the school; comments about this were overwhelmingly critical.

Shen Chonghua of Team 1, Wangchong Village, said, "Living conditions are not good; the meals are bad and have no taste." Shen Aijun of Wangchong Team 4 said, "Boarding fees are high but students' living conditions are poor. I am not happy with this." These villagers chose their words carefully and avoided strong language. However, the majority of respondents, though not completing this part of the questionnaire, were very forthright when asked for their opinions on school food: "The children eat more poorly than our pigs do!" said one villager. "They always serve up the cheapest dishes they can," said another. Students who were interviewed said that "The dishes are all watery," indicating that most dishes are boiled; other students described the rice served up as "...very hard, it's tough to eat;" others observed that, "No oil is used in *any* of the dishes!" Some parents said that when their children came home, "They would praise the most ordinary dishes." All were of the opinion that the schools were "... only out to make money!"

A villager in Sangyuan Team 2 drew attention to another aspect of the situation: "When there is a visit from the authorities, the canteen cooks beef for the children; if an inspector is visiting, the canteen cooks *more* food; if there is no visit less food is prepared." The strong reactions of parents reflects a general and widespread dissatisfaction with the quality of food provided by the school.

In the week of 17–21 October 2005, the author of this report ate, and made a record of, the meals in served in the the Sanhedian student dining hall.



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Rice and vegetables were served for breakfast, lunch and dinner. The vegetables were cooked with minimal oil, had very little taste and were barely palatable. Only one dish was served per meal, though when occasionally two dishes were served, diners were only allowed to choose one. Meat was added to the weekly “special” meal; however, it was in such small quantities that it was barely noticeable. It was observed that the majority of students did not finish their food and ended up throwing it away. According to school personnel, students throw away almost 10,000 *jin* (5,000 kg) of food over the course of the year, an amount so large that the school doesn’t find it necessary to buy food for the 25 pigs it keeps on the school grounds.

Parents were even more angry at the school because it forces their children to eat all their meals there, even though the administration says students voluntarily choose to dine at the school. However, when a child really doesn’t want any of the food provided, they will be pressured by the teachers to prevent them from dining out. A note from a parent named Jiang said, “If students don’t pay for breakfast they are punished by being made to sweep the sanitary areas—you pay even if you don’t eat!” A parent living adjacent to the school told the author that despite this proximity his child is forced to eat breakfast at school.

The family of Shen Qin, a girl studying in junior middle school in Wushan Township, described an incident when their daughter had had to go and change her clothes because her period had come unexpectedly; when she eventually got to the canteen there was no food left but still she was pestered by the teacher for lunch money, even though she had had nothing to eat!

A typical scene can be witnessed every lunch time outside almost all middle schools in rural villages: crowds of parents can be seen milling about and jostling each other as they try to push lunchboxes through the school gates into the outstretched hands of their children, but at the same time school guards are trying to prevent this from happening. Some of the parents say that if you don’t have contacts inside, your meals don’t make it into the school.

As well as expressing strong dissatisfaction about school meals, many parents complained about the high cost of education expenses, which often far exceed what families can afford to pay. Zhang Fengyun, from Wangchong Team 2, who has two children boarding in middle school, told the investigation, “Daily expenses for the younger child are as high as 6-7 *yuan*, but the elder one is slightly better, a bit more than 5 *yuan*. When you add in other sundry fees, monthly outlay for both



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children is somewhere between 300-400 *yuan*! How can we sustain this when we earn so little from farming? The most stressful times is the weekend, when the children are at home— they are constantly asking for money.”

Compounding the problems students face are their poor living conditions. For example, Sanhedian School, where the author was based, does not provide hot water for students to wash with in the winter months, they have to use water from wells; additionally, nearly all students have to share a single bed with another student.

As a teacher, I am aware of the difficulties of running a school, especially one in a rural village. But teenagers and small children are at a stage in life where nutrition is of paramount importance; good health is essential in ensuring students have the ability to study and learn well. To deliberately impair their growth not only damages their health, but also infringes on their basic right to education.

### **(iii) Difficulties of running a rural school**

The school is the place where student live and learn; conditions within the school directly affect how well its students' right to education is realised. Economic survival should not depend on running a school as a business but the Sanhedian School, where the investigation was carried out, is nearly depleted of funds, which means the school is struggling to survive. The conditions in the school are described below.

Sanhedian School is the only school in the area under the jurisdiction of the Sanhedian Office. The school takes all primary school students in its jurisdiction and runs eight classes, for 360 students; in addition there are two kindergarten classes, bringing the total to more than 420 students. The school has 26 teachers, all of them men.

This small school is now more than 300,000 *yuan* in debt, part of which is owed to the construction company that did the school building work, and the remainder owed to the teachers who lent money for the building project; because income is so low, the school is unable to service its debt. In addition there is a lot of short-term debt: for example, the school has long been unable to pay off what is owed for the 20 plus pigs it bought in the autumn; the creditors have been to the school many times to try and collect the money owed to them.



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The headmaster and teachers revealed the school's finances to this investigator. In the autumn of 2005 all the school fees received from students were taken by Wushan Central School. The Suizhou local government covers five sixths of the salary bill for the Sanhedian School's teachers, while Wushan Central School is supposed to cover one sixth, by reimbursing the school the money it collects from students' parents under the Books & Miscellaneous fees. But this money has not been forthcoming.

With no other statutory funding available to the school, its canteen has become its main source of income. It currently provides meals for more than 300 people, but according to its workers income has declined considerably because of the decrease in student numbers. Per week, the gross income of the canteen amounts to more than 1,000 *yuan*, totalling between 50,000-60,000 *yuan* per year. The importance of income from the canteen is continually stressed at teachers' meetings: the school director frequently refers to the numbers of students dining in the canteen, insisting that the staff think of more ways to make students eat there. The school aims to get 95% of students eating in the canteen, and teachers are publicly criticized for failing to meet this target.

Further income comes from the kindergarten, which has taken in more than 60 new students. With parents having to pay 180 *yuan* per term per child, which amounts to more than 20,000 *yuan* income per annum. Supplementing this figure is the sum of 10,000 *yuan* per annum derived from students being made to drink soy milk each morning.

Obviously it is very difficult to run a school solely on income received using the methods described above. The author personally experienced the kind of difficulties this causes: when he started work at the Sanhedian School he was not supplied with basic stationery, such as ink or pen; his desk was without drawers, the chair rickety; and teachers had to bring their own water to work as there was not even a water flask in the teachers' common room. At the beginning of 2006, more than a week away from the term break, the headmaster announced in assembly that he would not be able to work in the last part of the term as he had to leave town to avoid debt collectors!

### **(iv) The impact of restructuring of rural schools on rural children's right to basic education**

The investigation found out that there used to be more than a dozen schools in the jurisdiction of the Sanhedian office, one for every village, but they have now all been shut down, or "merged," leaving



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only the Sanhedian Central Primary School. This merging of rural schools is termed “rural school restructuring.”

According to the rules laid out in the “State Council’s decision regarding the reform and development of basic education” 《国务院关于基础教育改革与发展的决定》 dated May 29, 2001:

*The structure of rural schools will be adjusted according to the local requirements and conditions. School structures will be reasonably planned and adjusted, following the principle of the primary school being local and close to students, junior secondary schools being relatively centralized, and optimization of educational resources. Village primary schools and other teaching sites will be merged as long as it remains convenient for students to attend, and even in isolated areas teaching sites will be preserved, to prevent students dropping out as a result of restructuring. School restructuring must coordinate with other plans, such as the regeneration of unsafe buildings, formal education strategy, urbanization development, and resettlement plans. School buildings and other properties must be used in developing educational enterprises after restructuring. Where the need is evident, and under suitable conditions, boarding schools may be built.*

Following this central directive each province published its own document about school restructuring. For example, the Hebei Province Communist Party Committee Secretariat and the Hebei Province People’s Government Secretariat jointly published a document titled, “Opinions on adjustments to optimize rural primary and secondary school structure” 《关于调整优化农村中小学布局结构的意见》 (November 22, 2002, Provincial Government Publication 2002 No. 37), which states:

*The restructuring of rural primary and secondary schools is guided by the principles laid out in the “State Council decision regarding the reform and development of basic education,” to focus on improving the scale, quality and efficiency of the educational system, to underpin and foster the achievement of the “nine-year free education” initiative, to advance the healthy development of basic education in rural villages, to bring into consideration the financial capacity of the state to invest and that of peasants to contribute, to bring into consideration the need for students to access school easily, to insist on the principles of local adaptability, scientific planning, efficiency, successful and stable*



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*execution; through gradual adjustment and improvement, to adapt the rural primary and secondary school structure according to the variation of the local birth rate, geography, economic factors and the standard of teachers.*

We believe that the main factor in the mass closures of rural schools was a significant decrease in the number of children of school age. In the jurisdiction of the Sanhedian office, with a population in excess of 10,000, there were only 300+ children eligible to attend school. The provincial government policy document referred to above mentions the need to consider “financial capacity,” which indicates that local governments consider the factor of “money” in the redistribution of schools.

This investigation has shown that the widespread closure of rural schools has seriously eroded the right of rural children to basic education. Because children now have to travel further, difficulties related to transportation, and therefore attendance at school, have been exacerbated; two of the children interviewed dropped out of school because of transport related problems. More critically, because of the greatly increased distances students are required to travel, a very high proportion of them have had to become school boarders, thereby greatly increasing how much parents have to pay for their children’s education. Many parents complained that their largest outlay was for the school boarding maintenance fee, which includes, for example, expenditure of between 30 to 50 *yuan* per week on food alone. Also the weekly commute to and from school requires paying for bus fares as the school is now too far away to walk to; the single-journey fare from Wushan to Sanhedian for a junior secondary student was previously 3 *yuan* but has now increased to 4 *yuan*. Some parents expressed the strong opinion that the school should revert to “joint-weeks” so students need only return home every fortnight thus keeping transportation costs to a minimum.

### 7. Government efforts to safeguard rural children’s right to basic education

In order to safeguard rural children’s right to basic education the central government has done a lot to assist impoverished children and prevent the imposition of arbitrary fees by school managers. As of Autumn 2004 all schools which provided nine-year compulsory education had to practice the “one-fee system,” whereby the total fee charged to parents is to be based on rigorous auditing of the standard cost of text books, exercise books and miscellaneous other items, with the school not being permitted to charge students more.



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In the questionnaire sent to parents as part of this investigation, question five asks: “Now primary and junior secondary schools implement free education, the arbitrary charging of fees is no longer permitted. Do you think the school still continues to charge arbitrary fees?” Of the 86 parents who responded to the question, 52 said, “Yes, but the situation is better than it was”; 22 said, “No,” and 12 said, “Yes, the situation is just as bad as before.” The results indicate that arbitrary fee-charging has diminished to some extent since the launch of the “one-fee system.” From the investigator’s own observations in various rural primary and secondary schools, the arbitrary charging of fees under labels such as information fee, interest group fee, school selection fee, fundraising fee has steadily decreased. However the phenomenon is far from being eradicated: many rural schools still force students to consume meals and soy milk on the premises in order to raise funds and other schools are still forcing students to take special classes, such as “Cambridge English,” in order to charge fees that will increase school income.

In order to improve assistance to impoverished children, the government has in recent years launched a “Two Fee Exemptions and One Supplement” policy which aims to waive miscellaneous fees and provide free text books and subsistence boarding fees to school-age children of families who face financial difficulties paying for their children’s education. The government is to be applauded for implementing this policy throughout the country.

The Sanhedian School covered in this investigation has started to implement this policy: a total of 79 students qualified for the “two fee exemptions” and had their text book and miscellaneous fees waived; in addition 20 boarders were granted a living cost allowance of 100 *yuan* per term. There were also three students who met the requirements for “destitute students assistance,” and were thus supposed to receive substantial assistance from the government. Although the work of implementing the policy has begun, substantial help is still required to boost its effectiveness in delivering assistance to impoverished children. For example, the 20 students in Sanhedian School who were granted the 100 *yuan* living cost allowance for the October 2005 term had not yet received the money by December 2005.



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### 8. Realizing rural children's right to basic education: recommendations

The phenomenon of school-age children dropping out of school is very serious as the actual drop-out rate is far higher than that stated in the official statistics. Other significant—and common—issues, such as insufficient number of classes and discrimination against under-performing students, continue to affect rural children's enjoyment of the right to basic education. Superficially it would appear that the principal factors causing infringement of children's right to basic education are village poverty and mismanagement of schools, but this is not the whole story.

We believe that overall deficiencies in the current educational system in China, particularly in terms of how investment is made in education, is the fundamental cause of the infringement of rural children's rights; it is widely accepted that the Chinese government does not invest sufficiently in education.

The total contribution of the Zengdu District government to schools in the locality covers only part of the teachers' salaries. Currently, salaries of primary and secondary school teachers in Zengdu District are made up of six components, of which the district government finances five, with the schools needing to fundraise to cover the remaining component, a living allowance. For example, the investigator received just over 1,000 *yuan* per month in salary, of which 850 *yuan* was funded by the local government. Teachers normally would receive only the latter amount, which means they never actually receive full pay. Teachers only receive the remaining portion of their entitlement if the school has surplus funds at the end of the year.

Sanhedian Central Primary School offers insights into these problems at a grassroots level. The Wushan educational authority, the Wushan Township Central School, which manages the Sanhedian Central Primary School, follows the procedure whereby at the beginning of each term all schools in the township must hand in all the fees they have collected from students, which are then used to pay the teachers' salaries. At the end of 2005, this investigator understood from his fellow teachers and officials at the Sanhedian Central Primary School that the educational authority did not have sufficient funds to pay teachers' overdue salaries and was intending to borrow money from the bank for this purpose.



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With some exceptions, such as new schools or schools in extreme financial difficulty where the government provides a small subsidy, most schools receive zero funding from the government toward running costs. According to this investigator's understanding, currently in Zengdu District that part of the government money which covers teachers' salaries actually comes from extra fees charged to parents of the pupils in the district's "key schools." At the level of policy, the Chinese government has made a commitment to realize "Three Increases" in its investment in education:

*Increases in educational funding for all levels of government must be higher than the increase of overall government regular income, to enable a gradual increase in educational funding per student, and to guarantee the gradual increase in teachers' salaries and other public spending per student.*

However, in reality the central government's commitment to increasing the proportion of funding for education to 4% of GDP (a promise made in the early 1990s, which was to be achieved in the year 2000) has not been put into practice. Education funding in the government's budget covers only 50% - 60% of the total amount required, and the other 40% - 50% has to come from teachers, students and parents. This under-investment in education creates financial difficulties, particularly for schools in rural areas; consequently many of them have little financial flexibility and are thus forced into milking parents for money and following other bad practices in school management.

We believe that investment in education is not merely a problem of money, it is also a reflection of whether a government respects and values human rights. China is a developing country and as such many people still live in poverty and are not able to ensure that their children complete their education. If the government truly realized that being able to attend school is the basic right of every child then it would not be so parsimonious in investing in the educational system; when the government truly respects the right of impoverished rural children to go to school, we would not always attribute this fact to the government having no money. Because if there is really no money, then why are there so many projects aiming to improve image of China's cities, why do government agencies have so many new buildings and expensive cars? International treaties such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ask member states to progress towards free education, to fully respect children's equal right to basic education. The Chinese government can certainly do better in this respect.



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Based on the results of this investigation and analysis, and in order to better safeguard rural children's right to basic education, we propose the following recommendations to the government:

**1. Enact laws mandating levels of spending on education; further develop the system of education funding and increase the amount of funds for the rural education system.**

Education is a right and it is a government's fundamental duty to ensure that the education system is adequately funded. For many years China has put a lower proportion of its GDP into education than many developed—and even developing—countries. When teachers and parents are forced to foot the bill for basic education, when schools have no choice but to charge arbitrary, extortionate fees, the right to basic education for young people and children, especially those in rural areas, comes under severe threat. Therefore, we recommend that the government substantially increase its financial commitment to education and fulfil its duty: realizing the goal of investing 4% of GDP in education should no longer be delayed. The government should place particular emphasis on investment in education in rural areas.

Currently in China the system of funding for education is based at county level. But since many counties are in financial difficulties, there is no guarantee that the money intended for education is actually spent for that purpose. For example, two years ago in Zengdu District, Suizhou City, Hubei province, local government revenue was so low that even if it had all been spent on teachers' salaries it would still have been insufficient to cover the amount required. In view of this kind of situation, we recommend that the government change from a county-based system of education funding to a "centralized" or "province-based" system. This would reflect the international trend of governments having a centralized, separate budget for education and would ensure that sufficient funds are available to be spent on education in rural areas.

Enacting legislation mandating levels of education funding is essential if the state wishes to improve the current system and to guarantee that money budgeted for education is spent for this purpose. In addition, such legislation would create the means to curb the seizure, appropriation and the withholding of education funding.

**2. Implement comprehensive free education for rural primary and secondary students.**



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For the majority of rural families, but especially for the poor, putting all of their children through nine years of basic education requires more resources than they have available. Although a small proportion of children are now eligible for support under the “Two Fee Exemptions and One Supplement” policy, the exemptions for textbook fees and miscellaneous fees amount to only a small portion of schooling costs, at most about 100-200 *yuan* per student per term, and thus this policy is not a real solution for poor families.

The implementation of a comprehensive, free education system will mean not only the realization of children’s right to basic education, but will also represent a real achievement which will impact on future generations and, moreover, will demonstrate the Chinese government’s commitment to its basic obligations.

### **3. Establish a “supplement or grant-based” assistance program for poor rural children**

For poor rural families, the greatest part of the financial burden they shoulder in educating their children is not school fees but boarding costs. In the two villages covered by this investigation, boarding fees, or weekly living costs, range from 30 *yuan* to 50 *yuan*. In the current economic climate, for those families who rely on farming as their only means of generating income or where farming brings in only enough to feed a family, without any surplus that can be sold for extra cash, even if these families were exempted from paying *all* school fees they could still not afford to pay for their children’s boarding fees. Situations such as this are not uncommon in rural villages, thus a substantial increase in subsistence allowances for these families should be a government priority. To achieve this we suggest establishing a “supplement or grant-based” assistance program for poor rural children.

### **4. Invest in rural school construction, safeguard students’ right to a comprehensive and quality education**

Only when rural schools have better “hardware and software,” can children’s right to basic education be said to be comprehensively guaranteed and of a good standard. Facilities such as libraries, science laboratories and music rooms, as well as the necessary accompanying equipment, are the basic “hardware” schools should have. Such facilities that do exist in rural schools are of a very low



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standard and are in need of considerable upgrading. In terms of “software,” government needs to improve standards of teaching and provide teachers in sufficient numbers. Rural schools need to evolve from the current system, where in reality only Chinese and mathematics are taught, to a system whereby a variety of subjects are taught in a sufficient number of classes to meet students’ needs and to fulfil the state’s commitment to the provision of a quality education.

### **5. Strengthen management of schools, tackle issues which infringe upon children’s rights**

In order that the “one fee” system can be fully implemented rural schools must eradicate “innovative” fees created to boost school income, such as for catering, and likewise eliminate the practice of effectively forcing students to pay for extra items, such as drinking soy milk on school premises, ordering study materials or attending special classes.

### **6. Tackle problems such as difficulties in travelling to school**

As the number of schools steadily declines and schools “merge,” many students have to travel long distances to attend the nearest school. Their struggles with public transportation and their journeys to school are very real problems. In this investigation we came across children who dropped out of school because they could not bear the costs of the long daily journey to school. Tackling transport problems such as infrequency and reliability of buses will make a great difference.

### **Appendix 1: List of drop outs from compulsory education in the two villages surveyed**

The following is the list of the 19 children who dropped out of school, the first six dropped out from primary school, and the rest dropped out from middle school. All ages are at the time of interviewing.

- Qiu Chunxia, 13, from Team 2 of Wangchong Village, she left school in 2004 in the middle of 5<sup>th</sup> grade in primary school, Qiu Chunxia now stays and plays at home.
- Qiu Chunqing, 14, from Wangchong Team 2, elder sister of Qiu Chunxia, she left school in 2003 from 4<sup>th</sup> grade in primary school. Qiu Chunqing left home in the first half of 2005 to work in a factory doing small jobs like trimming loose threads from clothes.



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- Shen Langlang, 15, from Wangchong Team 1, left school without completing 4<sup>th</sup> grade in primary school. He has been at home for a few years, when we met him he was playing cards with a group of adults.
- Long Gongsui, 15, from Wangchong Team 1, dropped out of school in 6<sup>th</sup> grade of primary school.
- Liu Shicheng, 14, also called Liu Shilong, from Wangchong Team 3, dropped out of school in 2005, only two months before graduating from 6<sup>th</sup> grade of primary school. He now looks after the cattle for the family.
- Liu Leicheng, 14, from Wangchong Team 3, dropped out of 2<sup>nd</sup> grade of primary school in 2005.
- Wang Qianqian, 15, from Wangchong Team 1, dropped out in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of junior middle school in 2005.
- Shen Linxia, 14, from Wangchong Team 3, dropped out in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of junior middle school in 2005.
- Shen Xiaocui, 16, from Wangchong Team 1, dropped out in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of junior middle school in 2004.
- Zhang Xiang, 15, from Wangchong Team 4, dropped out in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of junior middle school.
- Zhang Chang, 13, from Wangchong Team 4, dropped out of school in 2005.
- Shen Lanlan, 14, from Wangchong Team 3, dropped out of school in 2002.
- Fu Baolin, 15, from Wangchong Team 3, dropped out of school in 2004.
- Hu Shuang, 15, from Sangyuan Team 4, dropped out of school in 2003.



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- Zhang Chun, 14, from Sangyuan Team 1, dropped out of school in 2004.
- Shen Jingen, 15, from Wangchong Team 1, dropped out of school in 2005.
- Wu Qian, 15, from Sangyuan Team 2, dropped out of 1<sup>st</sup> year of junior middle school in February 2005.
- Shen Xiaojiao, 15, from Wangchong Team 2, dropped out of school in 2004.
- Shen Jinxia, 15, from Wangchong Team 4, dropped out in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of junior middle school in 2005.