

# *Research on the Policy Changes of China's Private Education Based on the Advocacy Coalition Framework*

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**Abstract:** As an important part of education, the formulation and revision of private education policies have attracted much attention. Based on Advocacy Coalition Framework, this research attempts to study the changing process of China's private education policy. According to the period of major private education policy promulgation and value orientation, the evolution of China's private education can be divided into four stages. It is significant to verify whether the ACF has applicability to China's public policy practice and then explore the applicability and effectiveness of the ACF in the process of Chinese private education change. Finally, based on the analysis, this passage provide several proposals for the china's private education and expect to enrich the theory of the ACF with the case of policy change with Chinese characteristics.

## 1. Introduction

Significant changes have taken place in Chinese private education in recent years. As an important part of education, the formulation and revision of private education policies have attracted much attention. Combing the evolution process and the changing logic of private education policies can promote the healthy development of private education.

In 2021, China's educational reform has put forward higher standards for private schools in compulsory education and implemented stricter management and supervision. Under the background of the new law and new policy, it is necessary to review and summarize the history and mechanism of the change of private education policy, and explore the logic of private education policy from active encouragement and strong support to the control and restraint process of private education, to provide policy reference for the healthy and high-quality development of private education in China.

In the existing research, most scholars carry out research from the perspective of policy interpretation, formulation process, problem interpretation and policy text. For example, Han (2004) analyzed the policy content of private education from the perspective of policy text and implementation significance. Sun (2007) underscored the content of China's education system reform policy and put forward three problems: incomplete, staggered content and lack of innovation. Zhao (2011) explored the classification management policy process of private education. Some scholars analyzed private higher education policy from the perspective of fuzzy governance. However, few scholars have explored the logic of policy changes in China's private education from the perspective of policy changes as a whole.

The advocacy coalition framework(ACF) is a theory of the public policy process, which was proposed by American scholar Paul A. Sabatier and others in the 1980s<sup>[1]</sup>. It focuses on the “advocacy coalition” composed of policy actors in the policy subsystem who are committed to coordinated action due to common policy beliefs and focuses on the relationship between policy orientation learning and policy change based on policy beliefs. Based on Advocacy Coalition Framework, this research attempts to study the changing process of China’s private education policy, which can not only verify whether the ACF has applicability to China’s public policy practice, but also explore the applicability and effectiveness of the ACF in the process of Chinese private education change, and expect to enrich the theory of the ACF with the case of policy change with Chinese characteristics.

## 2. Advocacy coalition framework(ACF) and policy changes

ACF is a representative tool to perspective the process of policy behavior<sup>[2]</sup>, which has explanatory power for policy change and policy change, and consists of five modules. Sabatier suggests that it takes at least ten years or more to understand the process of policy change<sup>[3]</sup>. To analyze policy change over such a long period, Sabatier believes that better policy analysis can be carried out with the policy subsystem (module E) as the analysis unit. The policy subsystem is a coalition formed by policy participants who have a substantial impact on a public policy, and the tension “field” is formed by the interaction between these coalitions. Subsystem participants include not only members of traditional “iron triangle” organizations, but also groups of governments, researchers, interest groups and the media<sup>[4]</sup>. These policy participants have a set of basic values, causal assumptions and problem perceptions, namely the belief system, in which policy participants with the same concept system will form an advocacy coalition. In specific policy areas, policy participants form different advocacy coalitions based on shared information systems. Competition and interaction between coalitions are expected to transform their beliefs rather than coalition interests into policy outputs, resulting in policy changes<sup>[5]</sup>. Given the above basis, it can be considered that the belief system is the causal driving force of policy behavior and policy change.

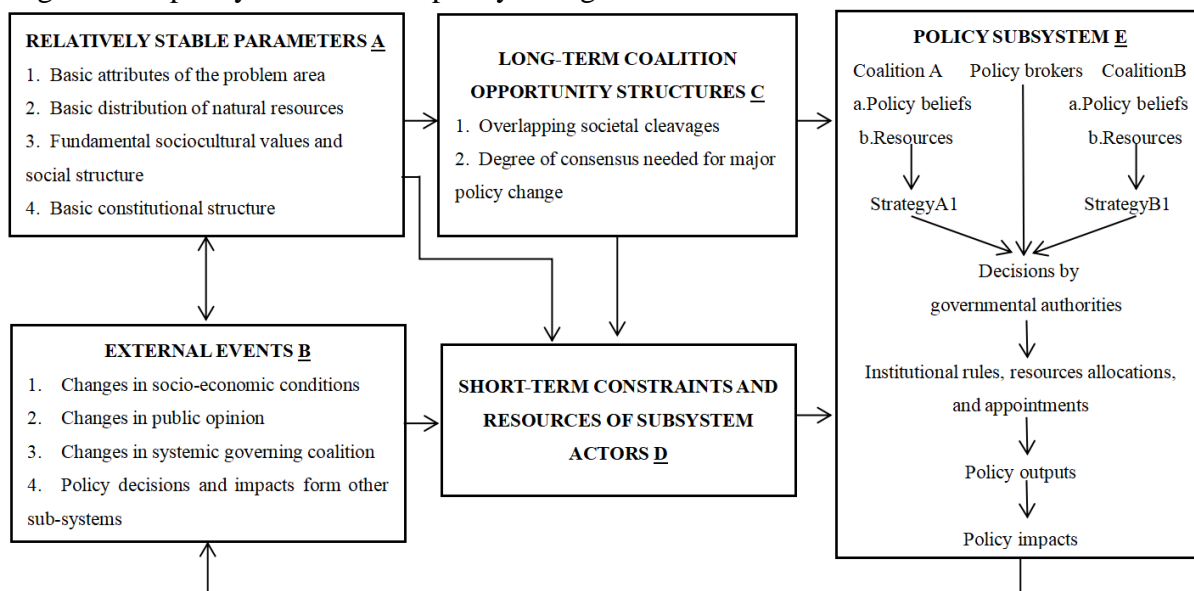


Figure 1: Advocacy Coalition Framework Flow Diagram(2007)

Sabatier proposes that most decisions are made within the policy subsystem, but there is a broader external environment system, which is composed of relatively stable parameters (module A) and external events (module B), and the policy subsystem will operate in the external environment

system[1]. Relatively stable parameters involve factors that are not easy to change such as social values, social structure and constitutional order; external events include active factors such as socio-economic environment, public opinion and the replacement of ruling coalitions<sup>[7]</sup>. The external environment generally does not directly affect the behavior of participants in the policy subsystem but takes modules C and D as the intermediary to exert influence on the subsystem. Module C is a long-term coalition opportunity structure, and its attribute is determined by module A, which describes the relatively persistent characteristics of a certain regime, and at the same time restricts the structural state of subsystems and the degree of opportunity for each coalition to play a role<sup>[8]</sup>. Module B can affect the constraints and available resources of the subsystem participants. The policy changes in ACF are divided into major policy changes and minor policy changes, including four main paths, namely, policy-oriented learning, the influence of external factors of the subsystem, the influence of internal factors of the subsystem and the consensus path<sup>[9]</sup>.

### **3. Historical evolution of China's private education policy**

In order to analyze China's private education policies, focusing on this particular model, it is necessary to study the historical evolution of China's private education policy. Over the past forty years, China has issued more than fifty central-level policy documents to promote the healthy development of private education. In this study, on the basis of the characteristics of China's private education change, according to the period of major private education policy promulgation and the stage characteristics of private education policy value orientation, the evolution of China's private education can be divided into several stages :

#### **3.1. Recovery period of private education (1978-1991)**

The feature of this period is that it actively encourages social forces to run private schools, but the policy norms lag behind the school-running practice. There are still many deficiencies in the management process. The government formulates documents for management and gradually improves the institutional environment. In December 1978, China established the basic national policy centered on economic construction and opened the prelude to reform and opening up. In 1982, China first established the legitimacy of private education. In 1987, the Ministry of Education promulgated China's first special regulations for private education, marking the beginning of the construction of the private education system. This regulation defines schools running by social forces as a supplement to state school running, and proposes to encourage and support schools running by social forces and strengthen macro-management.

#### **3.2. The Growth period of private education (1992-2001)**

With the growth of private education, it has gradually emerged new problems. Even in the absence of experience under the premise of reference, China began to take pilot exploration, and gradually formed the framework of private education laws and regulations. From spontaneous and chaotic situations to standard steadily, the government and organizers push forward with each other to promote the improvement of private education policy. In 1992, a major reform of China's education system, social forces investment in education policy support, set off a boom in private schools. Because of the irregularities in the management of enrollment, fees and licenses in some private schools, China established a school-running license system, and clearly stated that the school-running cause of social forces is an integral part of socialist education. The government actively encourages and supports social forces to run schools in various forms to meet the growing educational needs of the people<sup>[10]</sup>.

### **3.3. Legal construction period of private education (2002-2015)**

During this period, the government continues to launch relevant laws and regulations, prompting private education gradually embarked on the track of legalization and standardization. In 2002, the representatives of private education finally made a “compromise” after four years. Given the basic principles, supporting policies and standardized management of private education, laws and regulations have been issued, representing an important milestone in the legal construction of private education. In 2004, China improve policies and refine the provisions of reasonable returns, marking the construction of the private education management system to a new level. In 2010, it is proposed that private education is an important growth point for the development of education and an important force to promote educational reform, which means that the status and role of private education are highly affirmed.

### **3.4. The New Law and New Deal Period of Private Education (since 2016)**

With the rapid development of private education, there are still some problems, such as unclear legal person attributes, ambiguity in profit-making, failure to implement equal legal status, and difficulty in achieving preferential support, which seriously affect the development of private education. In 2016, China formally implemented the classified management of private education and promulgated four supporting documents. In July 2021, the policy of “opinions on further reducing the burden of students homework and off-campus training in compulsory education” was promulgated, which put forward higher standards for the running of compulsory education private schools and implemented more strict management and supervision<sup>[11]</sup>.

It can be seen that each stage of private education in China is affected by the political and economic situation at that time, and is closely related to the policy trend. Overall, from the beginning of the reform and opening up “encouragement” to “standardization”, and then to “classification management”, reform of private education policies are the liberation of ideas, economic and social changes, the growth of private education, market demand-oriented results.

## **4. Transitional logic of private education policies within ACF**

### **4.1. Private Education Advocacy Coalition and belief System**

According to Weible’s division of policy subsystems, policy subsystems include single, collaborative and confrontational Coalition<sup>[12]</sup>. Advocacy Coalition in private education was originally a single supporter coalition. On the one hand, the Chinese government actively encourages social forces to run schools, meets educational needs, enriches educational resources, and continuously improves support for private schools. On the other hand, the sponsors of private schools invest a lot of money, constantly enrich resources, operate schools efficiently, expand students and teachers, and strive to build high-quality private schools with characteristics. At the same time, with the support of policies, they continue to upgrade and spread, forming complete collectivization and capitalization of the education industry chain.

With the promotion of the policy implementation of private education and the expansion of the scale of stakeholders involved in this policy, the belief system of experts and scholars is gradually different from the belief of the investors of private education. They believe that the current development status of private education runs counter to the original intention of education. These skeptics include some education departments, experts and scholars, parents of students and mass media. The power of the skeptic coalition formed in the early stage was relatively weak. However, after the influence of internal and external factors of the subsystem, some representatives and

democratic parties concerned with education joined the skeptic coalition to make it grow and expressed their ideas in the form of publication of articles, social research and thematic reports. Their actions questioned the rationality of the profit of private education, and then promoted the ban of policies such as “reasonable returns” in private education, and transitioned to policies in the direction of classified management and standardized management<sup>[13]</sup>.

Among the assumptions, the ACF explicitly identifies beliefs as the causal driver for political behavior. At the top of the belief system lies deep core beliefs, which are the broadest and most stable among the beliefs and are predominately normative. In the middle of the belief system, hierarchy is policy core beliefs, which are of moderate scope and span the substantive and geographic breadth of a policy subsystem. At the bottom of the belief system is secondary beliefs. Compared to policy core beliefs, secondary beliefs are more substantively and geographically narrow in scope, and more empirically based. The ACF predicts that secondary beliefs, compared to deep core and policy core beliefs, are the most likely to change over time.

There are serious differences between the supporter coalition and the skeptic coalition in policy core beliefs, particularly on the profitability of private education. All issues of private education policy are focused on the issue of profitability. The divergence of opinions is that it is from the actual situation of China to give legal status to the profit behavior of private education or to distinguish between for-profit and non-profit organizations in terms of organization and system, to ensure the non-profit nature of some private education.

The secondary beliefs of different coalitions also have obvious differences. In terms of taxation, the supporter coalition believes that there is no preferential tax policy, the market competitiveness of profit-making private schools decreases, and the reduction of private investment leads to the setback of the development of private education and the failure of classified management. However, the skeptic coalition believes that if the preferential tax policy is implemented on for-profit private schools, this situation is equivalent to the private schools that require reasonable returns before the revision of the law. It is also possible for private schools to make economic behavior that violates the law of education and pursue maximum economic benefits without considering the characteristics of the education industry.

## **4.2. The Path and Mechanism of Policy Change in Private Education**

### **4.2.1. Impact of events within subsystems**

Sabatier believes that internal events in the subsystem can highlight Policy defects and make the public pay attention to problems in the subsystem, which may promote the redistribution of key resources and undermine the balance of power between the coalitions. The resources in the framework include formal statutory authority, public opinion, information, mobilized teams and funds that can have a substantial impact on policy. The resources available to the coalition greatly affect their ability to transform ideas into authoritative policies<sup>[1]</sup>.

Under the compromise of the two coalitions, the country imposes dual responsibilities of “regulation” and “promotion” on private education. In this context, the vitality and competitiveness of private primary and secondary schools are gradually enhanced. Some high-quality private schools even surpass local public schools. A few international high schools are favored by the market. Several excellent private schools have emerged, and some collectivization and large-scale school-running institutions have formed. The rapid development of private schools has been controversial, such as high fees and status discrimination. Private education seems to have formed a mature large-scale business model, especially through combination with the capital market.

The above phenomena reflect the adverse effects of improper profit-making norms of private education, which has aroused heated discussion among the public on private education. Public



discourse space has strongly questioned the industrialization and profit-making of private education and stimulated the trigger mechanism for entering the policy agenda.

#### **4.2.2. Policy-oriented learning**

Policy-oriented learning refers to the “relatively lasting alternation of ideological or behavioral objectives related to the achievement or revision of policy objectives”. To gain advantages in the competition, each coalition will absorb the reasonable factors in the internal and cross-coalition belief system.

##### **(1) Learning within the coalition**

The participants within the coalition hold a relatively consistent belief system, and they learn actively to improve the policy rationality of the coalition. For example, to get more support, private schools imitate foreign private universities to improve the school construction. Private schools use the advantages of flexible school-running mechanisms and market mechanisms, establish service awareness, and build high-quality school brands, which make the quality of education widely recognized by the public.

##### **(2) Cross-union learning**

The conflict of belief systems among different coalitions is the driving force for policy-oriented learning. While resisting the belief system of competitors, the advocacy coalition will absorb the reasonable elements of the opponent’s belief and make appropriate adjustments to its belief system. As the profitability of private education is limited and questioned, the skeptic coalition has also proposed a proper plan to encourage private education. Therefore, in recent years, support policies for private education have been promulgated. For the supporter coalition, private schools will absorb the reasonable elements of each other’s coalition. Based on the strategic goal of China's private education in the next 10 years.

#### **4.3. The path of consensus**

Symposiums and seminars provide the institutional environment for the path of consensus. Allowing the coalition to negotiate safely is an effective mechanism to break the policy deadlock and realize cross-coalition learning. Different coalitions provide a platform for expressing opinions and negotiating. The Chinese Association of Private Education has carried out forums for all walks of life. The supporter coalition and skeptic coalition have formed a consensus in the talks. Both sides believe that today’s private education is indeed inclined to the nature of public welfare. The injection of capital makes education form collectivization and industrialization, which is divorced from the essence of education. The advantage of capital is that it will accelerate the maturity of the education field. However, the quick success of capital directly leads to quick achievement and supersaturation, which will harm the educated. It is imperative to rectify the chaos of private education aiming at profit.

#### **4.4. Subsystem external events**

Sabatier points out that if there is no significant change outside the subsystem, the core belief of leading support coalitions in the subsystem is unlikely to change. With the impact of external events in the policy subsystem, the deep core belief, policy core concept and secondary belief of the supporter coalition have been shaken, and the private education policy has been changed.

From the perspective of the social and economic environment, in the early stage of reform and opening up, China’s education funds are insufficient, so the country actively encourages social forces to start schools. However, due to improper management mechanisms, serious negative effects have been caused. In the policy subsystem, this objective environmental change has shaken the deep core

belief of the development path of private education policy. The management problems of private schools seriously affect the development of students, which leads to the polarization of school quality in private primary and secondary schools. Expensive fees and enrollment chaos in private schools cause great dissatisfaction among the public. Thus, Subsystem external events heavily influence the private education policy evaluation of social masses.

## **5. Conclusion**

By using the theory of advocacy coalition framework to analyze the changes in private education policies, the belief conflicts and practical experience between the two opposing coalitions can provide enlightenment for the subsequent revision and landing of private education policies.

### **5.1. Improving social supervision mechanism**

Based on the ACF analysis, the government and education administrative departments should increase the publicity and interpretation of the policy changes of private education, and actively promote the policy objectives and value orientation of private education policy with the help of network platforms or news media, to enhance people's cognition of the policy. In addition to improving the level of information disclosure, educational administrative departments and private schools should take the initiative to incorporate social forces into the construction of the supervision system.

### **5.2. Optimizing the Quality of Personnel Training**

In the future, the educated will pay more attention to quality. China is facing the challenge of "Latin Americanization of education", and middle and higher-income parents may seek higher standards of service in the private sector<sup>[14]</sup>. Looking ahead, private schools should adhere to student-centered, strengthen the construction of teaching staff, introduce high-level teachers and promote teachers professional development; strengthen curriculum construction, develop characteristic school-based curriculum, cultivate students' core literacy, and comprehensively improve the quality of education service.

### **5.3. Innovation of Private School System**

Drawing on the experience of foreign private school governance, to promote the construction of a private school corporate governance system, the focus is to establish the school corporate property rights system, improve the internal corporate governance structure improve the external corporate governance environment. Private schools will build a modern school system, guided by the articles of association and based on the school legal person system, forming a modern governance model of "board leadership, principal execution, political core of the party committee, supervision of the board of supervisors and democratic management of teaching staff." Focusing on characteristic development strategies, private schools should establish a correct educational concept, implement the strategy of leading, differentiate the total cost, continuously cultivate the characteristics of the school curriculum, and enhance the core competitiveness of schools<sup>[15]</sup>.

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