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# Idle School Buildings in Rural Areas: Will they Be Useful?

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**Abstract** Taking the case of Enshi City, we survey the supply of public services in rural areas from education, health, culture and social security; reveal the relationship between the use of idle school buildings in rural areas and the improvement of public services in rural areas. On the basis of expounding the status quo of idle school buildings and public services in rural areas of Enshi City, the following recommendations are put forward: using the idle school buildings to develop rural public education; using the idle school buildings to develop rural public health and medical services; using the idle school buildings to develop public cultural undertakings in rural areas; using the idle school buildings to develop social security undertakings in rural areas.

**Key words** Idle school buildings, Public services in rural areas, Enshi City

Due to the transfer of rural population to urban areas, "educational transfer" of migrant workers' children and other factors, the total number of school-aged children has significantly decreased, and all areas have generally increased efforts in layout readjustment of the primary and secondary schools. In 2001, the State Council promulgated *Decisions of the State Council on the Reform and Development of Basic Education*, and "closing and merging schools" was carried out nationwide. Nationally, the number of primary schools in rural areas decreased from 0.598 million in 2000 to 0.305 million in 2009. Over a decade, 0.293 million schools are closed and merged<sup>[1]</sup>, the total number decreasing by almost 50%. These closed, merged and even idled school buildings are great resources. From the perspective of perfecting public services in rural areas, using these idle school buildings, can not only avoid a serious waste of educational resources, but also conduce to the progress of farmers, agricultural development, new socialist countryside construction, and coordination of urban and rural areas.

Enshi City, located in the southwest of Hubei Province, is a county-level city under the jurisdiction of Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture in Hubei Province. In 2001, Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, along with 12 western China's provinces, municipalities, autonomous regions, Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in Jilin Province, and Tujia – Miao Autonomous Prefecture in western Hunan Province, was included in the range of western region development, thus making Enshi City develop by leaps and bounds. We take the case of Enshi City, to conduct thinking and exploration on how to optimize the use of idle school buildings in rural areas to improve the rural basic public services.

## 1 Analysis of the feasibility of applying idle school buildings in rural areas to public services in rural areas

**1.1 The management and use of idle school buildings in rural areas needs to be strengthened** Due to unclear responsibilities and rights of institutions and coordinating staff, the work of dealing with idle school buildings in rural areas is difficult to be implemented. In addition, in some places, the local cadres' sense of responsibility is not strong, who easily nod or set price arbitrarily, even do not fulfil any procedure of transfer. They dispose the buildings and transfer them at low price according to their wishes; buy in some school buildings and sell at a profit in disguised form; occupy without compensation some large-scale idle school buildings with good location, and benefit from it, resulting in the loss and "depreciation" of educational assets in the disposal process.

**1.2 Public services in rural areas need to be improved** First of all, the rural preschool education in the past was to hold preschool classes, and most of them were not standardized. Subsequently, the preschool classes were spun off from the nine-year compulsory education, thus rural preschool education became almost become blank. Therefore, we should improve public services in rural areas to meet the development needs of farmers, agriculture, and countryside, increase investment in rural preschool education. Secondly, in China where the countryside accounts for 70% of land area, it is very important to strengthen rural health care construction to meet the vast majority of farmers' needs for health care, but China's input into rural health care construction is clearly inadequate. Thirdly, with integrated urban-rural development and proposal of the policy of public services in rural areas, culture has thrived in many of China's rural areas. Cultural centers and courtyard libraries are emerging, in many remote areas, there is the problem of uneven regional development.

**1.3 The role of idle school buildings in rural areas for public services in rural areas** The main role of idle school buildings in rural areas is to provide venue for public services in rural areas. Taking the case of Enshi City, survey shows that in many administrative villages having idle school buildings, preschool education and adult education are nearly blank; in some administrative villages, there is no clinic, or because there is no special hospital site, people's house is rented as clinic for medication; in many administrative villages, there is no library, and even if there is a library, the scale is too small for the masses; in most of administrative villages, elderly people of no family are concentrated in the town's nursing home, but conditions of the nursing home are poor, and many old people are left unattended, thus the issue concerning "a sense of security" in the elderly has not yet been reasonably resolved. As for the public services not complete enough due to lack of site and those not covered, the relevant departments can use the idle school buildings by way of lease or auction, to provide venue for these public services.

Another role of idle school buildings in rural areas is to provide financial support for public services in rural areas. Through lease or auction of idle school buildings in rural areas, a sum of

benefit can be obtained from the lessees or bidders. The benefit can be used for funding rural compulsory education, organizing rural preschool education and vocational education, improving health and medical conditions, constructing public service infrastructure, and improving public services in rural areas.

## 2 The status quo of public services in rural areas and the use of idle school buildings in Enshi City

The survey takes 15 administrative villages in three townships of Enshi City as the object; collects statistics on the total number of schools, merging of schools and the idling state in each administrative village; from education, health, culture and social security public services, collects information on preschool education, adult education, clinics, library, nursing homes, etc.

**2.1 The status quo of public services in rural areas of Enshi City** According to the survey results, the data of education, health, culture, and social security on all administrative villages can be shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 Public services in rural areas of Enshi City**

Item	Class	Service form	Number of administrative villages	Ratio//%
Rural education	Preschool education	Public kindergartens	2	13.3
		Private kindergartens	5	33.3
		Preschool classes	4	26.7
		Blank	4	26.7
	Adult education	Technical training	3	20.0
		Blank	12	80.0
Rural health, and social security services	Village clinics	Good	7	46.7
		Poor	2	13.3
		No address	3	20.0
		In building	1	6.7
		None	2	13.3
	Nursing homes	Good	1	6.7
		Poor	1	6.7
		None	13	86.7
	Cultural activities)	Occasionally	4	26.7
		Never	11	73.3
Rural cultural services	Library	Small	3	20.0
		None	12	80.0

From Table 1, we can find that the preschool education is blank in 26.7% of administrative villages in Enshi City; the adult education is blank in 80% of administrative villages; 13.3% of villages have no village clinics; 86.7% of villages have no nursing home; 73.3% of villages never hold cultural activities; 80% of villages have no library. Although the number of various kinds of public service facilities in rural areas of Enshi City is increasing, the total is still insufficient, and public services in rural areas need to be improved.

**2.2 The status quo of idle school buildings in rural areas of Enshi City** In 15 administrative villages surveyed, there is a total of 14 primary schools (one of the administrative villages does not set primary school). At present, 8 primary schools are in operation, and the remaining 6 primary schools are closed and merged under the policy of "closing and merging schools", with merge ratio up to 42.9%. In the 6 primary

schools that have been closed and merged, 1 dilapidated school building with security risks due to disrepair, has been removed. As to the remaining 5 primary schools not in operation, 3 of them are leased and used for the residence of the local fruits and vegetables cold storage construction workers and other public infrastructure construction workers; the other 2 schools are still idle. The use of idle school buildings in rural areas of Enshi City is not complete, and some school buildings are still in idle state, which neither play the role of educational resources for rural preschool education, compulsory education, vocational education and adult education, nor give play to the advantages of economic benefit by auction and lease.

**2.3 The status quo of public services in the villages where there are idle school buildings** Many schools closed and merged have no advantage in the geographical location, and most of them are located in remote administrative villages.

Compared to the administrative villages close to the urban areas, the development of remote areas is relatively slow; the supply and improvement of public services in remote rural areas also lag behind that of other regions. Therefore, in the administrative villages with idle school buildings, the rural public services are often not complete. Condition of public services in the villages where there are idle school buildings can be seen in Table 2.

From Table 2, we find that there are flaws in the health and medical conditions of the administrative villages where the primary schools are closed and merged ( the sanitary conditions are poor in 1 village; 2 villages have no medical venues; 1 administrative village even has not yet set up clinics) , and health

and medical conditions can neither meet the farmers' health and medical needs, nor create conditions for the provision of public health; there is a serious shortage of preschool education and adult education, thus the development needs of rural children, farmers and agriculture can not be met; holding cultural events and constructing the rural library is imperative, in order to enrich spiritual and cultural life of farmers, and improve the overall quality of the farmers; it is necessary to increase investment in the nursing home, not only focusing on the investment in the site to meet the needs of a growing number of elderly people, but also paying attention to improving the internal conditions to perfect conditions of caring for the aged.

**Table 1 Condition of public services in the villages where there are idle school buildings**

Village	Condition of primary schools	Village clinics	Preschool education	Adult education	Cultural activities	Library	Nursing homes
Taishanmiao	Merged and rented	No site, renting houses	Blank	Blank	Occasionally organized	None	None
Xiaba	Merged and rented	No site, renting houses	Blank	Blank	Never organized	Small	None
Wuchi	Merged and rented	Poor conditions	Preschool classes	Agricultural technique training	Unaware	None	None
Hejia	Merged and idle	No site, doctor's house	Blank	Blank	Never organized	None	None
Longtang	Merged and idle	Not set	Private kindergartens	Blank	Never organized	None	None

### 3 Concrete measures for the use of idle school buildings to improve public services in rural areas

**3.1 Using the idle school buildings to develop rural public education** In 2001, the State Council promulgated *Decisions of the State Council on the Reform and Development of Basic Education*, making it clear that after the readjustment of the rural compulsory education schools, the school buildings and other assets should be used for developing educational undertaking. *Notice of the Ministry of Education on Well Adjusting the Layout of Rural Primary and Secondary Schools Realistically* in 2006 also pointed out that the educational resources after adjustment should be mainly used for setting up preschool education, adult education institutions.

**3.1.1** Using the existing school buildings to develop preschool education. We should ensure that the children in rural areas can also enter public kindergartens to learn, and ensure the quality of early childhood education on the basis of reasonable fees, so that the children gradually learn some knowledge, laying the foundation for their education at the stage of compulsory education.

**3.1.2** Using the existing school buildings to develop adult education. We should set up agricultural technology training, party classes, and literacy classes for farmers on a regular basis, so that farmers understand the matter of common sense in the life, master some agricultural technologies, keep pace with the times, and timely learn national policy. This can not only improve the overall quality of farmers, but also create more benefits for farmers and rural areas, promote rural economic development.

**3.2 Using the idle school buildings to develop rural public health and medical services** In China, the health care institutions at the grass-roots level, namely the village clinics, are in the dominant position in rural public health services. In 2003, there were 515 000 village clinics in China, and the number of villages that set up clinics accounted for 74.1% of the total number of administrative villages; in 2009, there were 633 000 village clinics in China, and the number of villages that set up clinics accounted for 90.4% of the total number of administrative villages<sup>[2]</sup>. The absolute total is increasing, but there are still nearly 10% of administrative villages having not set up village clinics.

Taking the case of rural areas in Enshi City, in the administrative villages where the primary schools are closed and merged, the basic conditions of clinics in 16.7% of villages are poor; the clinics have no diagnosis and treatment sites in 50% of villages, and the houses are rented for diagnosis and treatment; 33.3% of the administrative villages have not yet set up clinics, and the farmers' health and medical care can not be guaranteed. For the clinics with poor sanitary condition conditions or the clinics having no sites for diagnosis and treatment, they can use the idle school buildings by means of lease or auction, and fees paid by the clinics are used for the development of local compulsory education.

**3.3 Using the idle school buildings to develop public cultural undertakings in rural areas** We can use the idle school buildings to develop rural public cultural undertaking. First of all, we can expand and use the existing school libraries, by

## 4 Policy recommendations

**4.1 Formulating relevant policies to encourage enterprises to establish the traceability system** For young enterprises, we should give them enough financial and policy support, in order to make them respond to the government's call to establish and improve the quality safety traceability system of agricultural products. For the older companies, we should give them special lectures and training about the traceability system to change their concepts, making them pay enough attention to the traceability system. For the enterprises with different ownership structures, we should formulate different policies. Especially for those old private enterprises with certain strength and size, many of them believe that the establishment of the traceability system has little impact on them, due to the old management philosophy.

**4.2 Strengthening publicity of the enterprises establishing the traceability system** We should carry out real-time reporting of enterprises' establishment of the traceability system, to help enterprises to expand products' market breadth by enhancing their reputation.

**4.3 Enhancing the popularization of traceable product knowledge and improving the evaluation system of enterprises' performance** We should widely use the media to spread the knowledge of traceable products to consumers, and increase consumers' acceptance of the products and willingness to pay them, in order to increase the sales and promote the edible agro-product enterprises to continuously establish the

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purchasing books of various disciplines and industries, especially the agricultural technology teaching materials and agriculture-related magazines, in order to update the farmers' knowledge and technology. Secondly, we can often organize the farmers to watch some movies on travel safety, environmental protection and all kinds of new movies updated with the theater, so that farmers can also watch the latest movie in rural areas. Thirdly, we can regularly organize the villagers to hold activities and competitions on painting, photography, calligraphy, reciting and other themes, in order to foster cultural atmosphere in rural areas, and enrich farmers' spiritual and cultural life. In this way, we can not only use the fees obtained to support the development of local compulsory education, but also provide a good cultural environment for the villagers, to promote the new rural cultural construction, and further improve the development of rural public cultural undertaking.

**3.4 Using the idle school buildings to develop social security undertakings in rural areas** Establishing the sound rural social security system is an important step in building a new socialist countryside<sup>[3]</sup>. With the growing number of young migrant workers working in the cities and moving to the cities, the number of the elderly left behind in rural areas also shows an upward trend. In addition to the change in the concept of many old people, they are willing to go to the nursing home, but the nursing homes in rural areas can not meet the needs both from quantity and quality. On the one hand, in terms of quantity, the nursing homes can not meet more and

traceability system. Moreover, we should include the completeness degree of the traceability system in the indicator system for measuring the enterprises' performance, and strictly implement it.

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more old people's needs for living a retired life. On the other hand, the conditions of the existing nursing homes are generally "dirty, chaotic, and poor", and the quality of service provided is also poor, thus the elderly can not enjoy a life in retirement.

We can use the idle school buildings to develop rural social security undertaking. The main form is to provide sites, for example, the buildings can be used to set up the nursing home. First of all, the number should be increased to meet the old people's growing needs for living a retired life. Secondly, on the basis of increasing the number, we should improve the facilities for the elders. The primary schools closed and merged are usually located in the heart of the administrative villages, which is a gathering place for a variety of small shops and clinics, therefore, it is sagacious to use the idle school buildings to set up the nursing homes, which can make the elderly enjoy a life in retirement, and improve the level of social security in rural areas.

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