

Recent Reports of Student Suicide Attempts Highlight Challenges in China's Education System

Chinese students are feeling increasingly frustrated and helpless due to the heavy burden of academic pressures and the stresses of daily life.

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Students take part in the college entrance exam in an exam room in a middle school in Xian of Shaanxi Province, China, on June 7, 2005. China Photos/Getty Images



By Lynn Xu and Pinnacle View Team
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News Analysis

An increasing number of schoolchildren in China have been taking their own lives in recent years. Chinese educators point to the high-pressure, exam-oriented education model as a major factor, further exacerbated by the country's economic downturn.

Multiple sources recently told the Chinese language edition of The Epoch Times that at least 30 middle school students in Wuhan attempted to commit suicide by jumping off school buildings within three months, from September to November last year.

Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province, is known for its high ratio of high school graduates who get accepted into China's Ivy League colleges. The admissions race starts early in elementary, as gaining entry into a reputable middle school is crucial for securing a spot in a top-tier high school.

A 2023 report from the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention [shows](#) a substantial increase in suicide mortality rates among young people aged 5 to 14, with a fourfold increase between 2010 and 2021, and the suicide mortality rate for those aged 15 to 24 “increased significantly after 2017.”

The high risk of student suicide, according to the report, owes to the educational beliefs held by Chinese parents and teachers that “academic performance in school is more important than anything else,” which has generated “immense pressure” and “severe mental disorders” among the youth population.

Due to Chinese authorities' past record of underreporting and covering up information, it is difficult to assess the actual number of students who have committed suicide across the country in recent years.

In April 2023, China's Ministry of Education rolled out a plan to better monitor students' mental health and education, but the measure was ineffective. Instead, problems persisted, prompting schools to protect themselves from potential lawsuits.

On Dec. 25, a social media post revealed that the administration at a middle school in Meizhou City of Guangdong Province required all students to sign a contract stipulating that the school would not be held liable for any incidents of self-injury or suicide.

Another post disclosed that students at other middle schools in the province had also signed similar contracts, sparking widespread criticism online.

Amid mounting public pressure, the local educational bureau intervened and told the schools to drop the student contracts.

'Chinese Students Are the Victims'

Some local educational authorities have suspended examinations and reduced the academic workload to help students manage their stress levels.

In early December, the Suzhou Industrial Park Education Bureau announced a homework curfew plan in an open letter to all parents in the school district. Suzhou is in the coastal Jiangsu Province and is known for its students' high academic performance.

The district's new plan sets specific timeframes for when students are expected to be done with their homework: 9:20 p.m. for elementary students, 10 p.m. for middle schoolers, and 11 p.m. for high schoolers. Students can go to bed after the cutoff times, even if they haven't completed their assignments, but the parents must notify the school the following morning to ensure their child won't be penalized.

The new policy was implemented following reports that three middle school students in Suzhou Industrial Park, overwhelmed by academic

pressure, allegedly jumped off a building together while holding hands. Chinese state media reported on the incident last month and said police dismissed it as a rumor.

The Epoch Times could not independently verify the incident.

An educator in Shanghai, who requested anonymity due to concerns over retaliation from the authorities, told The Epoch Times that China's intense education system and heavy academic workload make it the "world's most flawed learning model."

"Chinese students are the victims," she said.

The teacher said that many middle schoolers must study from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily, with only one day off every two weeks. These grueling schedules, which average more than 100 hours per week, have "severely impacted the students' mental health," she said.



Students read from newly issued textbooks at a primary school in Zhangye City, in Gansu Province, China, on Aug. 28, 2023. STR/AFP via Getty Images

Over the years, authorities have made several attempts to address the issue of students' heavy academic workloads.

In July 2021, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council issued a notice calling for a reduction in students' homework load and extracurricular training, known as the "Double Cuts."

Yang Hua, a ninth grader from Wuhan who used a pseudonym for security reasons, said the measure did not help reduce the burden on students.

"We feel like it's even getting worse as the difficulty of the exams has not decreased," she told The Epoch Times.

In China, college admission is solely determined by the applicant's scores on a series of six-subject exams taken in early June.

Yang said that students could use after-school tutoring to cope with tough exams, but that option is no longer readily available.

China's private tutoring industry [has](#) been under crackdown since July 2021, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) [fears](#) that it undermined the state-owned monopoly education system and its communist ideology, which has been incorporated into the national curriculum.

The CCP industrialized its education system in 1999, intending to shape students into its successors.

More Pressure on Students

The economic downturn is a key driver behind the rise in student suicides, according to Shi Shan, a China expert and contributor to the Chinese language edition of The Epoch Times.

"Life stress would evolve into psychological pressure. This pressure would then be transmitted to society's most vulnerable groups—

children and teenagers,” Shi said.

The property market’s sharp decline in the past two years has shrunk the wealth of Chinese families. Homebuyers have invested a large portion of their savings into property, with estimates indicating that nearly 80 percent of the total household debt is concentrated in property assets mortgages, according to an official financial research report.

In addition, the youth unemployment rate reached a high of 46.5 percent in March last year, according to a research [report](#) by Chinese scholar Zhang Dandan, an associate professor at Peking University.

Yang, a Wuhan middle school student, said she and her classmates feel that their worth is solely tied to their academic performances because “the current social environment has forced people to think that studying is the only way to have a successful life.”

“But so many college graduates cannot find a job; we have lost the sense of purpose in studying,” she said, referring to China’s high youth unemployment rate.

Zhai Deyun, a former teacher in Jiangxi Province, said an education system must foster a healthy environment for children, both physically and mentally. However, the CCP’s education system has hindered this, he said.

“China’s education system evaluates students based on an exam grading system and discriminates against those who fall behind,” he said, adding that the CCP has involved students in its pursuit of global dominance.



Middle school students participate in a military training ceremony in Anyang, Henan Province, China, on Aug. 28, 2023. STR/AFP via Getty Images

In the 1990s, then-CCP leader Jiang Zemin initiated the “985 Project” and the “211 Project.” The “985 Project,” named after its launch in May 1998, selected 39 universities to become top-tier institutions on a global scale. The “211 Project” aimed to support 100 institutions oriented toward the 21st century.

Current CCP leader Xi Jinping abolished the two projects in 2015 amid a purge of the educational system to target his political rival Jiang and his faction. Despite this, these university classifications remain widely used in student recruitment, and many parents place significant pressure on their children to gain admission to a “985 university” for a better future.

In some instances, the entrance exam for becoming a government official requires a diploma from at least a “211 university,” while some agencies may only consider graduates from “985 universities.”

“It is a societal norm that ultimately leads parents to believe that if they don’t follow this path, their children will have no future,” Zhai

said.

In 2017, Xi introduced the “Double-First Class” plan, focusing on 42 universities and 95 subjects, particularly those related to national security and vital Party interests. The plan aims to develop these institutions and fields to world-class standards with state support by 2050.

Neither Jiang’s nor Xi’s educational reforms have altered the hierarchical classification system in colleges and universities, which continues to foster a test-oriented educational environment in primary, middle, and high schools.

Chinese parents invest heavily in their children’s education but are affected by the CCP’s policies, said Zhai.

“Parents believe that only top universities selected through the state program can offer their children a brighter future, thus placing immense pressure on them to succeed,” he said.

In June, a record 13.42 million students took the 2024 college entrance exam, an increase of 510,000 from 2023, according to official data. For college applicants, the pressure to gain admission is higher than ever.

Luo Ya contributed to this report.

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