

LIFE



Anjing Primary School on the outskirts of Guiyang, Guizhou.

These left-behinds are in no way left behind

With the help of the city government, things improved greatly in 2012, the school being relocated to its current site, and its roll of 1,573 in the year just gone compared with just 100 eight years ago.

By YANG JUN in Guiyang and XIN WEN in Beijing

At first blush you may suspect that Anjing Primary School, on the outskirts of Guiyang, in Guizhou province, would struggle to match it with its peers in regard to academic performance. After all, 40 percent of its 1,573 students are children of migrant workers and rural villagers — the kinds of children who may fail to shine academically because of the extra pressures they face socially.

However, the students of Anjing School are an equal to their city peers with their academic levels and admission rates to higher education institutions, a reflection of the school's efforts to raise teachers' professional capacities, and the improvement in the school's facilities in recent years.

In the junior high school entrance exam last May, 98 percent of student grades were above the national average level from the Anjing School. The number was 56 percent seven years ago.

To upgrade teachers' professional skills, the school has developed multiple activities, including competitions, monthly discussions on lessons as well as evaluating teachers' classes in a certain time frame, largely improving teaching abilities, the school says.

"Teacher performance and how students have learned are monitored to evaluate how efficient the teaching is," says Wang Na, the principal.

Since the evaluations were introduced in 2011, students have performed better academically, she says, and Anjing Primary school has ranked No 1 among rural schools in the province at the same level in terms of entrance exams to middle schools last year.

Students from rural and migrant worker families — most on lower incomes and with fewer job hours — often have lower marks, and the school has developed multiple activities to involve more students in the daily school life to boost their confidence.

The school has 37 student clubs, and each student is required to do at least one hour's study in the Youth Hall, the activities of which include dancing,

wax printing and clay sculpting.

When the students took part in a recitation competition in the city in 2014 for the first time they were nervous and afraid to talk to strangers, Wang says. Zhang Aiqi, 12, a sixth grade student at Anjing School, who was then head of the recitation team, says she was extremely shy and did not know where to put her hands.

By taking part in many different activities under the guidance of teachers the school's students appear to have become much more self-confident.

"Our chorus team joined in the Ninth Chinese Children Chorus Festival this year," says Liu Jie, the school's director of teaching.

"Their performance was wonderful and gained widespread attention from various media."

Upgrading the school's facilities has helped raise participation levels and the quality of instruction. The school, at which grades one to six are taught, has been relocated twice in the past 40 years, which has no doubt contributed greatly to those improvements.

Li Daju, 44, who has taught at the school for 20 years and who was a student there in the mid 1980s, says the former Anjing School was remotely located, making it difficult to get to for students and to attract teachers. Because of a dearth of teachers, Li was forced to teach both mathematics and Chinese.

With the help of the city government, things improved greatly in 2012, the school being relocated to its current site, and its roll of 1,573 in the year just gone compared with just 100 eight years ago. The school's amenities include three five-storey buildings and a playground with a 300-meter track, and the school has been transformed over the past few years, the principal Wang says.

"Our students generally lacked confidence because their families are not well-off. I hope our school can help them find confidence and become helpful and optimistic children who not only get good marks but can contribute to society as well."

Li Hanyi and Zhao Yandi contributed to the story.

When he and she became you, the lights went on

By XIE CHUANJIAO

"Just as every maple leaf is different, every child has his or her own personality," says Liu Qun, principal of Jiayuguan Primary School in Qingdao, Shandong province.

That wonderful analogy is entirely apt given the school's location in the picturesque Badaguan Scenic Area, a historical residential area known for its European villas on the coastline of Qingdao, the boulevard on which the school sits being lined with maple trees.

The analogy also says a lot about the school's approach to teaching. Jiayuguan is one of the top-ranked public elementary schools in Shandong province, taking pride in its innovative teaching and its ability to boost students' personalized development.

"Our teachers insist on following every student's personality and helping youngsters find their own way of growing up," Liu says.

The grounds of the school, founded in 1953, cover 16,650 square meters, and it has more than 1,600 students in 37 classes and 112 staff.

Against the backdrop of reform and opening-up Jiayuguan has made great strides in exploring new methods to tap children's potential, and it gained nationwide attention in the late 1980 when it radically changed the way stu-



Teachers at Jiayuguan Primary School in Qingdao, Shandong, insist on following every student's personality. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

dent evaluations are framed.

Such written evaluations usually consist of brief comments on student performance and behavior given by a headmaster at the end of each semester. Comments used to have a solidly bureaucratic air, students being referred to in the third person he or she. But teachers at the school began addressing students directly using the second-person you.

"The move greatly reduced the distance between teachers and students," says Huang Weijing, a former vice-principal of the school who was one of the initiators of the change.

"Now when children read teach-

ers' written comments about them it's like a convivial chat rather than like someone talking down to them," says Huang, 86, who retired in 1990.

"It may seem like a trivial change, but it has made a huge difference to the children."

The practice won recognition from the country's top educational authority and later played a significant role in the reform of teaching nationwide.

The school, which the Ministry of Education named a "modern educational technology experimental school" in 2001, was a pioneer in offering computer classes in the late

1980s and was the first primary school in Qingdao to establish a classroom and campus network.

In the late 1990s the school worked with an educational research center to launch activity-based teaching that aims to inspire students to think creatively and explore more efficient learning methods. This approach was later widely adopted throughout the country.

The school is the only primary school in Qingdao that houses an oceanic science museum, one that covers 300 square meters and has 3D paintings, biological specimens and cartoon drawing programs that teach students about oceanic technology and culture. The school has also established what it calls an Academy of the Ocean through which marine experts are invited to the school to teach children about all kinds of things related to the sea.

Since the early 1990s the school has organized singing groups, percussion bands and dance troupes to develop students' flair for performing.

"The school aims to create scientists and others who can perform on the international stage," says Fan Bin, the school's vice-principal.

"Our teachers will continue to develop specific courses and provide every child with avenues through which they can find their own interests and improve themselves."

Running on the roof and ideas in a garden

By TAN YINGZI

"Our school is like a mini technology park," says Yang Hongying, headmaster of New Jindai Primary School in Liangping district, Chongqing.

"Our students can learn the concepts of green development from special designs."

The designs Tang talks of are found in a rural school that looks vastly different to most other primary schools. For a start, a running track it has is on a roof to save space, and there is a 3,000-square-meter vegetable garden in the center of the campus.

The campus uses a natural lighting system and a ground heat exchange system to save energy, and water from surrounding wetlands is purified and made potable.

In short, over the past few decades New Jindai Primary School has been transformed into a national model of sustainable development and education.

It has 553 students and 36 teachers and every classroom is linked to the internet.

However, when the school was established in 1966 conditions were so poor that students had to study at a tiny temple, sitting on broken wooden benches. The school has been moved three times, the first of these being from the temple to a decent campus in 1994.

"Thanks to reform and opening-up in 1978, our school has received more funding and support," Yang says.

After school buildings were greatly damaged in the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, it received a 21 million yuan (\$3 million) grant from the local government, Sino-US Sustainable Development Center, China Soong Ching Ling Foundation and China Environmental Protection Foundation to build a new campus, which needed to be safe, economical and sustainable.

To realize the goal, the school invited architects from Tongji University in Shanghai, which boasts of having the best architecture department in China, to design the new campus. On April 5, 2011, the students moved into the new Jindai school.

"The architects did not change the original landscape of the place, and they turned the large hilly field into a vegetable garden, which is now a great place for our students," Yang says.

Every class has a plot in the garden, in which students can learn how to plant vegetables there and observe how plants grow.

"These days most rural children do not know how to farm as their parents did, and this garden provides them with great opportunities to learn agriculture," Yang says.

With the aid of the campus' special features, the school has developed many programs on scientific technology education.

Based on students' daily lives and real work they are required to learn about environment protection and sustainable development, Yang says.

The school has started an annual campaign to encourage people to use energy-saving light bulbs, during which students can bring traditional bulbs from home and exchange them for energy-saving ones. In an annual technology festival, students also make use of waste newspaper and bottles to create pieces of art, and thanks to these technology education programs, the students have won prizes in local scientific competitions.

In order to promote green development to more people, the school also opens its gate to locals and encourages them to take part in its programs.



New Jindai Primary School in Liangping, Chongqing.