

## BRIDGING THE DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDE: SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES AND REFORM PATHWAYS FOR RURAL EDUCATION IN RUSSIA

*Yang Bochen,*

*Ph.D. student at Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russian Federation*

*Senior Member of the Chinese Society of Technology Economics, Beijing, P.R. China*

*Scientific supervisor – Vilisov M.V., Ph.D. in Political Science, Associate Professor*

*(Supported by the China Scholarship Council under Project No. 202508090085)*

Ключевые слова. Депопуляция, сельское образование, государственная политика, человеческий капитал, региональные различия.

Keywords. Depopulation, rural education, public policy, human capital, regional disparities.

Demographic challenges represent fundamental, long-term, and strategic challenges that every nation must confront. In Russia, these challenges are manifested through population decline, structural imbalances, and qualitative deficiencies. The severe demographic situation not only constrains economic development and exacerbates the burden on social security systems but also poses challenges to the quality and equity of education. In rural regions, in particular, obstacles in school education development directly impede the improvement of population quality and the effectiveness of population policies, resulting in a complex scenario of mutual constraints.

The objective of this study is to analyze the current state and developmental challenges of rural schools in Russia with a specific focus on the severe deficit of psychological-pedagogical resources, identify key issues affecting educational quality and population competencies, and propose systematic countermeasures.

**Material and methods.** The analysis is based on a comprehensive review of statistical data, policy documents, and academic publications related to rural education and demographic trends in Russia over the past two decades. Methods include descriptive analysis, comparative analysis, and qualitative assessment. A specific focus of the methodological approach is the evaluation of the availability and quality of psychological-pedagogical resources, such as the presence of specialists like psychologists, speech therapists and the support systems for teachers in addressing socio-psychological tasks.

**Results and their discussion.** The development of rural schools in Russia exhibits fundamental features such as a continuous decline in total numbers, a high proportion of small-scale schools, significant regional disparities, and strong sociocultural attributes. Over the past two decades, the number of rural schools has decreased by more than half, now accounting for approximately 55.9% of all schools nationwide [1]. However, their average size is only 184 students per school, far below the urban average of 786 students per school, with about 60% classified as officially designated small-scale schools [2]. This trend toward miniaturization and hollowing out not only affects the concentration and efficiency of educational resources but also undermines the role of schools as sociocultural hubs in rural communities, thereby accelerating rural out-migration and forming a vicious cycle of educational setback and demographic crisis.

The development of rural schools faces multiple practical issues that severely constrain the improvement of educational quality and population competencies.

Firstly, the continuous reduction in school size leads to wastage of educational resources and a decline in teaching quality. Influenced by the per-student funding system, small-scale schools suffer from insufficient financial resources, forcing them to merge or close [3, 4]. This increases the distance students must travel to school, raises safety and time costs, and adds to the burden on teachers.

Secondly, there are serious deficiencies in the staffing structure of rural schools. It is common for teachers to cover multiple subjects, while specialized support staff such as

psychologists and speech therapists are scarce [5]. Although the student-teacher ratio is relatively low, the actual workload of teachers does not decrease, and limited opportunities for professional development adversely affect teaching standards and educational outcomes.

Thirdly, the development of infrastructure and digital education environments lags behind. A significant proportion of rural schools lack stable water supply, heating, and internet access. The shortage of modern teaching equipment makes it difficult to meet the requirements for building a "digital education environment," further widening the gap between rural and urban students in terms of information technology application and resource access [3, 6].

Fourthly, the teaching methodology support system is underdeveloped. Rural teachers lack effective teaching research organizations and professional training mechanisms, often relying on trial and error or informal exchanges [3, 5]. This makes it difficult for them to address complex educational and socio-psychological tasks.

Finally, the current educational evaluation system fails adequately to reflect the unique characteristics and sociocultural functions of rural schools. Overreliance on exam results and competition rankings, while neglecting their contributions to community integration, cultural preservation, and holistic student development, leads to evaluation outcomes that deviate from reality. This, in turn, affects policy support and the actual allocation of resources [3].

To break this vicious cycle, systemic interventions are required.

Initially, efforts should focus on promoting innovative organizational models and functional expansion of rural schools. Encouraging the development of diverse forms such as "school-sociocultural complexes" can integrate resources from education, culture, and social security, thereby strengthening the school's central role in rural communities. Establishing coherent systems covering preschool and basic education will optimize resource utilization and enhance the completeness of educational services.

Concurrently, improving mechanisms for attracting, training, and supporting rural teachers is essential. Expanding programs such as "Zemsky Teacher" with increased allowance standards, optimized housing conditions, and career development guarantees will help attract and retain young teachers and professionals. Furthermore, establishing cross-regional and inter-school pedagogical support networks, along with promoting remote teaching research and online training, can mitigate professional isolation caused by geographical barriers.

Additionally, accelerating the construction of digital education environments and modern facilities requires increased financial investment. Ensuring all rural schools have access to high-speed internet and necessary digital teaching equipment is critical. National projects such as "Modern Schools" and "Growth Point" Centers should drive improvements in natural science and technology education infrastructure, thereby narrowing the hardware gap between urban and rural areas.

Moreover, developing an educational evaluation system tailored to rural realities is necessary. Introducing sociocultural performance indicators to assess schools' contributions to community services, cultural preservation, and holistic student development is vital. Moving beyond a narrow focus on academic achievement to emphasize educational process quality and the health of regional educational ecosystems is equally important.

Lastly, encouraging innovation in teaching methods and research on small-scale educational practices is recommended. Promoting educational models suitable for mixed-age teaching, group collaboration, and personalized learning will enhance teachers' capabilities in small-class settings. Supporting evidence-based school-specific innovations can yield replicable and scalable best practices in rural education.

**Conclusion.** The issues surrounding rural education in Russia are inextricably linked to its demographic crisis. The Russian experience demonstrates that rural education challenges cannot be resolved through isolated policies or short-term projects alone, but require systematic planning and sustained investment at the national strategic level. Only

through structural reforms and policy innovation-enhancing the appeal and sustainable development capacity of rural education-can the outflow of population be effectively curbed, the quality of human capital improved, and balanced development in both educational and demographic terms between urban and rural areas ultimately be achieved. Russia's exploration offers valuable insights for other countries facing similar pressures of urban-rural educational disparity and demographic structural challenges, including ways to strengthen the endogenous motivation and developmental resilience of rural education through institutional innovation, technological integration, and evaluation reform – all ultimately serving the long-term goals of improving population quality and achieving regional balanced development.

1. Citation: Indicators of Education : 2024 : a statistical collection / N. V. Bondarenko, T. A. Varlamova, L. M. Gokhberg et al.; National research. University of Higher School of Economics, Moscow : National Research University of Higher School of Economics, 2024.

2. Yin S., Qin Yu. A study of challenges and models of development of small rural schools in Russia // Foreign studies of education. – 2018. – No. 7. – pp. 90-104.

3. Gorbushov A.A. At the crossroads: rural schools in Russia facing a choice of development paths. Yekaterinburg : Ural Federal University, 2016.

4. Forward to the past: there are fewer schools in Russia than churches // Novye Izvestia. - 2024. – URL: <https://dzen.ru/a/ZctHDup0yg8-3b3A> (date of reference: 09/07/2025).

5. Obnosov V.N. Socio-psychological problems of rural schools // Science and education. – 2022. – No. 5. – pp. 11-17.

6. Pavlova I.V., Zhirkova Z.S. Digitalization of the educational space in rural schools // Modern pedagogical education. - 2022. – No. 10. – pp. 147-152.