

## Article

# How to Dispel the Efficiency Obsession: The Value Logic of Modern School Governance

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**Abstract:** There has long been an inherent interplay between the logic of efficiency and the logic of education in school governance. The logic of efficiency seeks to maximise input-output ratios and standardise management, whereas the logic of education focuses on the all-round development of the individual and the long-term nature of growth. At present, the logic of efficiency has extended excessively, crowding out the logic of education and leading to dilemmas such as a lack of regard for the individual and a deviation from core values. This paper examines this interplay from an interdisciplinary perspective combining Marxist political economy and educational management, set against the contemporary context of high-quality development. It finds that the deep-rooted causes of the proliferation of the efficiency logic lie in the permeation of managerialism, the convergence of bureaucracy and performance-based management, and the transmission of social competitive pressures. The study argues that high-quality development represents the dialectical unity of efficiency and the logic of nurturing. The value reconstruction of school governance must shift from management to governance, and from instrumental rationality to value rationality. Under the overarching guidance of the logic of nurturing, the logic of efficiency must be rationalised to construct a system of basic education school governance that is both efficient and compassionate, and that combines quality with equity. Ultimately, this paper proposes a comprehensive framework for reorienting school governance towards a more balanced and human-centred paradigm that honours the intrinsic purposes of education while maintaining organisational effectiveness.

**Keywords:** school governance; efficiency; nurturing; high-quality development; value rationality; educational management

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Statement of the Problem

Contemporary educational policy emphasizes high-quality development as a central objective for advancing modern education systems. Foundational questions concerning educational purpose—such as the aims of learning, pedagogical approaches, and societal orientation—provide essential framing for analyzing the interplay between operational efficiency and holistic student development in school governance [1].

Currently, school management is characterized by an overreliance on quantitative metrics, including pass rates, excellence rates, and university admission rates [1]. To meet these targets, some institutions place excessive emphasis on standardized assessment frameworks and rigid performance indicators, fostering a culture summarized by the phrase: "Exams, exams, exams—the teacher's primary tool; marks, marks, marks—the student's principal concern." This prioritization of measurable outcomes and uniform benchmarks reflects a dominant efficiency-oriented approach.

Simultaneously, merit-based evaluation practices are gaining prominence across educational settings, grounded in competence assessment, competitive performance optimization, and normative expectations of individual advancement under conditions of procedural fairness [2]. However, when efficiency imperatives become overriding,

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unintended consequences may arise in personal development—excessive standardization can inadvertently constrain autonomy and contribute to affective disengagement.

Why do schools increasingly adopt organizational models resembling industrial production systems? Within the context of high-quality development, how can efficiency objectives be meaningfully aligned with the comprehensive cultivation of learners? These questions constitute the central focus of this study [2].

### *1.2. Significance of the Research*

Theoretical significance: This study moves beyond single-perspective approaches prevalent in existing research; it examines school governance through the lens of dynamic interplay among institutional elements, and draws upon foundational concepts from political economy to inform its analytical framework [3].

Practical significance: This study offers value-oriented guidance for advancing school governance modernization in contemporary contexts, aligning with the fundamental educational mission of moral cultivation and talent development; in light of national strategic priorities for education advancement, including the emphasis on renewing frameworks for holistic student development, the findings provide theoretically grounded insights for school leadership and policy implementation [4].

### *1.3. Definition of Core Concepts*

The logic of efficiency aims to maximise input-output ratios and emphasises a standardised, quantifiable approach to management, rooted in principles of scientific management [5]. Its core lies in an emphasis on efficiency, which manifests in school management through the widespread use of performance appraisals and the refinement of management standards.

The logic of education aims at the all-round development of the individual, respecting the complexity, long-term nature and unquantifiability of the educational process [2]. Its core is a people-centred approach that follows the laws of human growth to cultivate well-rounded individuals with balanced development in moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic and labour education.

High-quality development is the core requirement for educational development in the new era; it synthesises quality orientation, efficiency considerations, and the all-round development of the individual, providing new value coordinates for school governance [2].

School governance emphasises the shift from management to governance, highlighting multi-stakeholder participation, democratic consultation and institutional norms, and constitutes an important component of the modernisation of educational governance [1].

### *1.4. Brief Overview of the Current State of Research*

Academic research on school governance has primarily unfolded along two trajectories: firstly, studies examining efficiency-oriented logic, which have revealed the growing influence of efficiency-driven paradigms within school organisations, while also analysing the institutional path dependence embedded in performance appraisal systems; secondly, research grounded in student development logic, where pedagogical frameworks emphasise that the fundamental purpose of education lies in promoting holistic human growth, and other analyses explore the limitations of meritocratic approaches from the perspective of educational constraints. However, scholarly work offering a dialectical synthesis of these two logics remains limited, and the governance challenges associated with mechanistic metaphors require urgent rethinking [6].

## **2. The Tension between Dual Logics in School Governance**

### *2.1. The Expansion of the Logic of Efficiency*

The growing influence of efficiency-oriented principles in school governance is primarily reflected in three dimensions:

The broad application of performance assessments: Teaching activities—including classroom instruction, assignment feedback, after-school academic support, and pedagogical research—are systematically measured and assigned numerical values. Research shows that such assessments, often expressed in standardized work units, convert professional educational practice into quantifiable metrics for administrative oversight. Evaluation cycles have become increasingly frequent, with annual and semester-based reviews accumulating across multiple administrative levels, placing educators under sustained pressure to meet narrowly defined output targets [7].

The widespread adoption of standardization: Certain schools have implemented quality management frameworks modeled on international standards and rely heavily on indicator-driven, quantitative evaluation methods, emphasizing a narrowly defined 'high-efficiency classroom' model [8]. This approach reduces multifaceted educational processes to discrete, comparable metrics, potentially overlooking the nuanced, relational, and developmental nature of teaching and learning.

The strengthening of competitive structures: Educational systems increasingly organize individuals within hierarchical, performance-based rankings, where top performers receive significantly greater recognition and resources [9]. Such arrangements are often promoted through motivational rhetoric emphasizing effort and outcome alignment.

## 2.2. Upholding the Logic of Nurturing

In contrast to the logic of efficiency, the logic of nurturing upholds the essential aspirations of education:

The humanistic nature of education: Education deals with living, breathing individuals, not objects to be processed at will; we must respect the uniqueness of every individual life [7]. The core purpose of education lies in awakening students' inner agency, enabling them to become responsible agents capable of acting upon their own commitments. Genuine recognition of students' agency inherently accommodates "the fragility of education"—a necessary and valuable dimension that safeguards education's fundamental integrity.

The long-term nature of the educational process: As encapsulated in the classical saying, "It takes ten years to grow a tree, but a hundred years to cultivate a person," talent development is never a simple input-output mechanism [10]. Rather, it constitutes a holistic process integrating input, internalization, comprehension, transformation, and application—one that resists reduction to efficiency-based metrics alone.

The multidimensional nature of educational outcomes: The true aim of education is the comprehensive development of the individual—the integrated cultivation of knowledge, abilities, moral character, emotional intelligence, and values. These interwoven dimensions cannot be fully captured by scores or percentages alone; diverse and flexible evaluation approaches are therefore essential for meaningful assessment.

## 2.3. Specific Manifestations of Tension

Divergences arise between the logic of efficiency and the logic of education across five dimensions of school governance, as shown in the table below: (As shown in Table 1).

**Table 1.** Dimensions of Tension and Conflict between Efficiency Logic and Education Logic

| Dimension           | Manifestations of the Efficiency Logic                   | Manifestation of the Logic of Education                   | Focus of Conflict                      |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Goal Setting        | Pursuit of college acceptance rates and excellence rates | Pursuit of well-rounded development and individual growth | Instrumental Value vs. Intrinsic Value |
| Management Approach | Bureaucratic System, Command-and-Control                 | Democratic consultation, autonomous participation         | Control vs. autonomy                   |

| Evaluation Criteria           | Quantifiable metrics        | Non-quantifiable growth     | Precision. vs. ambiguity |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Teacher-Student Relationships | Management Object—Manager   | The Individual—The Educator | Control vs. Dialogue     |
| Concept of Time               | Short-Term Evaluation Cycle | Long-term growth cycle      | Fast vs. Slow            |

In terms of goal orientation, the efficiency logic prioritizes quantifiable metrics, while the educational logic emphasizes holistic student development, reflecting differing emphases on instrumental versus intrinsic value. In terms of management approaches, the efficiency logic tends toward standardized administrative procedures, whereas the educational logic supports participatory decision-making, highlighting a distinction between structured coordination and shared responsibility. In terms of evaluation criteria, the efficiency logic relies on measurable indicators, while the educational logic values qualitative, developmental progress, illustrating contrasting orientations toward precision and contextual understanding. Regarding teacher-student relationships, the efficiency logic frames interactions within organizational roles, whereas the educational logic centers on reciprocal, person-centered engagement. In terms of time perspectives, the efficiency logic responds to periodic accountability cycles, while the educational logic acknowledges the gradual, cumulative nature of learning and growth [5].

#### 2.4. *The Deep-Seated Roots of the Expansion of the Logic of Efficiency*

##### 2.4.1. Historical Roots: The Penetration of Managerialism into School Organizations

Managerialism emerged from early twentieth-century scientific management principles; its defining features include an emphasis on operational efficiency and a management-oriented perspective. Classical political economy identified a structural tension in productive activity: while output generates substantial value for capital, it may concurrently diminish the well-being and autonomy of those engaged in teaching and learning. This insight informs analysis of how intensified efficiency imperatives affect educators' professional roles.

Given the demonstrated utility of managerial approaches in industrial and commercial settings, efficiency-oriented practices have increasingly been adopted within educational institutions [2]. Organizational theory offers multiple interpretive frameworks—for instance, viewing institutions either as mechanistic systems or as adaptive, organic entities. When mechanistic models predominate in school governance, pedagogical relationships risk being recast in instrumental terms, and educational purposes may receive diminished priority relative to procedural metrics.

##### 2.4.2. Institutional Roots: The Convergence of Bureaucracy and Performance-Based Management

School administration reinforces a management-centered approach through bureaucratic structures, embodying technical rationality via quantified, standardized, and procedural management methods, with the ultimate goal of enhancing administrative efficiency [11]. The bureaucratic model emphasizes rigorous rules and a clear division of authority and responsibility.

Meritocracy in education is rooted in the "ability-based" logic of the strong, motivating students to believe that success can be achieved as long as they are strong enough. It has been argued that in the capitalist production process, the worker constantly produces objective wealth as capital, as a power alienated from them, which rules over and subordinates them. This state of "alienation" is equally evident in current school governance—the academic achievements created by teachers are, in turn, used as tools to evaluate and control them.

Once performance evaluations are institutionalized, they generate a powerful force of inertia. Against the backdrop of repeated calls to eliminate the "five exclusives," the fundamental reason why it remains difficult to break free from this vicious cycle lies in

the fact that performance evaluations have become the "driving force" of the evaluation system and a form of path dependence [12].

#### 2.4.3. Social Roots: Competitive Pressure Transmitted to Schools

The limited availability of high-quality educational resources, combined with aspirations for social advancement and longstanding cultural expectations regarding children's academic success, has intensified competition for university admissions. This societal emphasis is reflected in schools through a strong focus on college admission outcomes and academic performance metrics. Local government evaluations of schools continue to prioritize admission rates and compliance indicators, placing significant expectations on school leadership to achieve measurable results [13]. Within a broader context that values demonstrated educational outcomes, many families regard schooling as a key avenue for improving life prospects, thereby reinforcing institutional attention to efficiency and measurable achievement.

#### 2.5. *New Requirements in the New Era: The Dialectical Unity of Efficiency and Nurturing*

The theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era provides a scientific methodology for understanding the relationship between efficiency and student development. A key principle emphasizes that development must be scientific, requiring the consistent implementation of a development philosophy centered on innovation, coordination, green development, openness, and sharing [14]. This philosophy underscores that school governance should avoid one-sided efficiency pursuits and instead seek balanced alignment across multiple value-based objectives.

A high-quality education system not only enhances operational efficiency but also supports a genuine return to value-based rationality [11]. As high-quality development gains prominence, school governance is progressively shifting from an instrumental orientation toward value-oriented approaches. China's education system has entered a phase characterized by a transition from quantitative growth to qualitative improvement and from aspirational benchmarks to sustained high-quality advancement—a shift equally relevant to basic education and necessitating renewed reflection on the interplay between efficiency and student development in governance practice.

#### 2.6. *The Consequences of Efficiency-Driven Expansion: The Value Dilemma in School Governance*

The excessive proliferation of efficiency-oriented logic has engendered a fourfold value dilemma in school governance:

##### 2.6.1. "Ignoring People": The Erosion of Human Agency

At the teacher level: Teachers have become subject to performance-based work expectations. The managerial approach, originally developed in industrial settings where management focuses on processes and equipment, has been adapted to educational contexts [8]. However, when applied to teaching—where human interaction and professional judgment are central—the emphasis shifts inappropriately from pedagogical purpose to procedural compliance. Under highly prescriptive evaluation frameworks, teachers engage in persistent self-assessment, and their professional practice is increasingly reduced to quantifiable metrics, diminishing opportunities for creative instruction and eroding intrinsic motivation.

At the student level: Learners are increasingly framed by numerical indicators such as test scores and institutional admission outcomes. When management principles prioritize efficiency and standardization over developmental needs, students risk being treated as data points rather than individuals with evolving identities and capacities. Educational practices grounded solely in measurable outcomes may obscure the broader aims of learning, including self-awareness, critical reflection, and personal growth.

##### 2.6.2. "Value Deviation": Means Becoming Ends

Managerialism emphasizes efficiency as its central principle, shifting away from human-centered approaches in educational management and adopting performance-

based evaluation systems to enhance operational effectiveness [15]. When efficiency is elevated to the primary objective, the fundamental educational mission of nurturing students is diminished in priority. The increasing influence of economic logic in higher education has further reinforced efficiency as the dominant evaluative criterion.

Substituting 'nurturing students' with 'efficiency'—and using efficiency gains as the principal measure of institutional value achievement—represents a departure from the essential aims of school education. This orientation risks transforming schools into administrative units focused narrowly on procedural optimization, thereby impeding the holistic physical and psychological development of learners. When college admission rates serve as rigid performance indicators, comprehensive development becomes largely rhetorical; when publication volume drives assessment outcomes, the substantive quality of innovation is inevitably deprioritized.

#### 2.6.3. "Control-Oriented Approach": The Expansion of Bureaucratic Authority

Managementism prioritizes managerial functions, adopting a bureaucratic management model characterized by hierarchical, top-down command-and-control structures. Within this framework, the relationship between administrators and staff or students tends to be unidirectional, limiting responsiveness to grassroots needs and weakening mechanisms for accountability. The pursuit of operational efficiency in school administration reflects core features of managerialism, reinforcing rigid, centralized decision-making. As a result, teachers and students are often positioned as passive recipients of administrative directives rather than engaged stakeholders in institutional governance, and schools may experience diminished adaptability and organizational agility.

#### 2.6.4. "Technical Rationality": The Loss of Humanistic Values

Managerialism places great emphasis on technical rationality in management practice, advocating technical rules such as quantification, standardization, and proceduralization. The pursuit of efficiency in school management has increasingly centered on technical rationality, resulting in a pronounced tendency toward quantification, standardization, and proceduralization: teaching performance and academic achievement are subject to quantification; moral character and behavioral habits are similarly measured; and management and research capabilities are also rendered quantifiable [16].

To a certain extent, technical rationality has enhanced the convenience, standardization, and efficiency of school management; however, its growing prominence risks marginalizing humanistic values. Under the influence of technical rationality, technology may gradually depart from its original role of serving human development and instead assume a controlling function over human agency. Consequently, schools risk becoming environments where warmth, empathy, and individual dignity are diminished. Bureaucratic tendencies—characterized by objectification and formal rationality—can implicitly undermine human-centered perspectives, potentially reducing individuals to functional units; thus, integrating humanistic principles remains essential for balanced institutional development.

### 3. Value Reconstruction for High-Quality Development

#### 3.1. Value Guidance in the New Era

Important discourses on education provide fundamental guidance for school governance in the new era. "Upholding the cultivation of virtue and the nurturing of talent as the fundamental task" requires that school governance must center on the core value of nurturing talent; "upholding the priority development of education" requires that school governance must improve the efficiency of resource allocation. This elucidates the dialectical unity between efficiency and the nurturing of talent: efficiency serves the nurturing of talent, and the nurturing of talent is the ultimate purpose of efficiency;

without efficiency, it is difficult to achieve high-quality education, and if we deviate from the nurturing of talent, efficiency loses its meaning.

### 3.2. The Direction of Value Reconstruction

To advance the modernization of educational governance, a profound transformation from "instrumental governance" to "value-based governance" is required, entailing a shift from "instrumental rationality" to "value rationality". The specific directions for this restructuring are shown in the table below: (As shown in Table 2).

**Table 2.** The Transformation Path from Instrumental Governance to Value-Based Governance

| Dimension           | From (Expansion of Efficiency)     | to (Value Unification)                                                              |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Goal Orientation    | Pursuit of college admission rates | Pursuing a balance between well-rounded development and institutional effectiveness |
| Management Approach | Bureaucratic Control               | Multi-stakeholder Governance and Democratic Consultation                            |
| Evaluation Criteria | Single Quantitative Indicator      | Multi-dimensional evaluation, combining process and results                         |
| Teacher Roles       | Implementer, Evaluated Party       | Agent, Participant, Creator                                                         |
| Student Status      | Object of Management               | Educational Agent                                                                   |

In terms of goal-setting, schools must gradually shift from prioritizing college admission rates alone to harmonizing students' all-round development with educational effectiveness, avoiding the sacrifice of students' holistic growth for short-term test performance. In terms of management approaches, schools must transition from bureaucratic control to pluralistic co-governance and democratic consultation, empowering teachers and students as active participants in decision-making. In terms of evaluation criteria, schools must move beyond reliance on single quantitative indicators toward diversified assessment methods that integrate process-based and outcome-based evaluations. Regarding the role of teachers, schools must support their evolution from passive task-executors to autonomous agents and creative contributors in education. Regarding the status of students, schools must recognize them not as objects of management but as subjects of education, respecting the uniqueness of their developmental trajectories and the natural laws governing their growth [17].

### 3.3. Pathways to Institutional Restructuring

#### 3.3.1. Path One: From "Management" to "Governance"—Renewing the Concept of Governance

The overemphasis on efficiency in school management reflects the legacy of industrial-era managerial thinking, whereas modern school management requires a fundamental shift—from conceptualizing the school as a machine to recognizing it as a living system. This transformation entails a mindset change: moving from object-centered practices to human-centered ones, and from top-down control to fostering individuals' inherent capacity for growth. A new-era school management system must be built in alignment with the developmental nature of human life [18]. Such management must return to the core purpose of education—understanding, respecting, nurturing, and developing individuals in accordance with human nature; its practices should unfold within the realm of human meaning, cultivating an open and supportive environment for students' holistic development.

#### 3.3.2. Path Two: From "Uniformity" to "Diversity"—Optimizing Governance Structures

School management in the new era should place greater emphasis on democratic consultation and move toward pluralistic co-governance. Control-oriented management inherited from the Industrial Age is no longer adequate to meet the developmental demands of modern society. As values such as democracy, freedom, equality, and justice

become increasingly embedded in social consciousness, schools are prioritizing the modernization of their governance systems [2, 3]. A governance structure based on pluralistic co-governance must be established, fostering a governance community in which diverse stakeholders—including Party organizations, administrative bodies, and students—participate effectively. Democratic participation mechanisms, including the Faculty Congress, Parent-Teacher Association, and Student Congress, must be strengthened. The governance framework of "Party organization leadership, principal accountability, faculty academic governance, and democratic management" must be refined to achieve the organic unity of Party leadership, law-based school governance, and democratic participation.

### 3.3.3. Path Three: From "Control" to "Empowerment" — Innovation in Governance Mechanisms

The shift from performance appraisal to developmental evaluation is central to advancing school governance mechanisms. Incentive and support mechanisms are progressively evolving from a punitive emphasis toward a growth-oriented approach. Through comprehensive strategies—including systemic planning and institutional optimization—schools can advance steadily along the intended developmental trajectory. Communication and coordination mechanisms prioritize harmonizing procedural coherence with outcome alignment. By fostering inclusive dialogue and collaborative consultation, the varied interests and expectations of stakeholders are effectively integrated. The pedagogy of 'life practice' underscores that education constitutes an integrated process of 'task accomplishment and holistic development', nurturing individual growth while simultaneously advancing collective educational endeavors. This perspective offers valuable theoretical grounding for redefining the core values underpinning school governance [2, 8].

### 3.3.4. Path Four: From "Technology" to "Humanism" — The Reshaping of Governance Culture

School management in the new era must attach importance to technical rules while placing even greater emphasis on humanistic values [17, 18]. Historically, managerial approaches overemphasized technical rationality, transforming management into a tightly organized control process and overlooking the role of emotions, cognition, ethics, and values among organizational members. Contemporary school management requires cautious application of technical rationality and strengthened guidance and regulation by humanistic values. To foster a harmonious and symbiotic governance culture—particularly from the perspective of tacit governance culture—it is necessary to cultivate shared ethics and values among diverse stakeholders, establish a democratic governance space that encourages active participation by multiple actors, and develop a governance culture grounded in mutual trust and mutual benefit.

### 3.4. *The Dialectical Unity of Dual Logics*

Efficiency is not inherently opposed to education, but an excessive emphasis on efficiency can be detrimental. Schools require efficiency—such as optimized resource allocation and enhanced administrative effectiveness—but efficiency must remain subordinate to the fundamental goal of student development. The following practical principles should guide practice: initiatives that improve efficiency without compromising student development should be actively adopted; measures that sacrifice student development for efficiency gains must be firmly rejected; and approaches that yield no immediate efficiency benefits yet support long-term student development should be afforded appropriate space for implementation. The modernization of educational governance entails more than managerial optimization—it reflects the harmonious integration of instrumental rationality within a value-oriented framework.

### 3.5. *Outlook under the Strategy to Build an Educational Powerhouse*

Looking toward the grand goal of building an education powerhouse by 2035, school governance must undergo a fundamental transformation from "instrumental rationality"

to "value rationality." The core of this transformation is to find the balance between the logic of efficiency and the logic of nurturing students—ensuring that efficiency serves student development, that management remains grounded in educational purpose, and that schools function as supportive environments for holistic student growth. The "Outline of the Plan for Building an Education Powerhouse (2024–2035)" identifies "shaping a new framework for fostering virtue and nurturing talent" as the primary task in building an education powerhouse. While pursuing educational efficiency, institutions must remain committed to their foundational mission of talent development and make promoting the healthy, well-rounded growth of every student the starting point and ultimate goal of all school work [3, 6].

#### 4. Conclusion

The relationship between operational effectiveness and student development represents a persistent challenge in school governance. This study identifies an underlying conflict between the logic of operational effectiveness and the logic of student-centered education. In contemporary practice, the emphasis on effectiveness has become disproportionately dominant, resulting in challenges including diminished attention to individual learner needs, misalignment of educational values, an overreliance on top-down control mechanisms, and the dominance of technocratic approaches. These patterns stem from the increasing influence of managerial practices within school organizations, the blending of bureaucratic structures with performance-oriented accountability systems, and the transmission of external competitive pressures into educational settings.

High-quality development extends beyond incremental improvements to effectiveness-driven models; it entails the integrated balance of operational efficiency and educational purpose. Restructuring school governance around core educational values requires moving from administrative management toward participatory governance, and from instrumental reasoning toward value-informed decision-making—ensuring that efficiency serves, rather than supplants, the foundational aims of education.

Education plays a vital role in societal advancement and human development. Guided by principles of high-quality development, grounded in holistic student growth, and informed by evidence-based governance practices, schools can cultivate systems that are both operationally sound and pedagogically responsive—systems that support equitable access, meaningful learning, and the long-term well-being of all learners.

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