



Opinion: China's education arms race

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Beijing (CNN) -- Last week, China unveiled a list of wide-ranging reforms to the "gaokao" -- the hyper-competitive and grueling college entrance examination that represents most families' best shot at the Chinese dream.

Chinese media have hailed these reforms as a panacea to China's education woes: The poor will have a better shot at a top school, and students won't feel so stressed out all the time.

However, as someone who's either observed or worked in Chinese education since 1999, I believe that unless the government decides to cancel the gaokao, no systemic reform will matter.

According to the State Council, English is no longer mandatory. Students must take the Chinese and math exams, but they can choose the other four subjects to be tested, and they can take these examinations separately (much like the Advanced Placement system in the United States.)

Colleges can no longer recruit artists and athletes, a system that has been prone to abuse. Finally, universities are encouraged to increase their quota of students from the poor inland provinces, and to make public their quotas.

Education liberalized

To understand China's current education system, we have to go back to 1999. That's when former Premier Zhu Rongji decided to liberalize the housing and education markets. Government subsidies to Chinese universities were cut, forcing universities to increase tuition and student enrollment.The effect of this change was dramatic: in 1991, only 4% of the cohort of Chinese college-aged students attended universities; today, according to ministry of education statistics, it's about one quarter.To meet this demand for a college degree, vocational colleges were folded into universities, universities were merged to create super-universities, and super-universities built satellite campuses.

This decision had severe consequences for how Chinese parents perceive education, and how employers perceive university degrees:

- 1.) With a glut of university degree holders flooding the marketplace, employers began demanding university degrees for jobs that previously only required vocational training. This puts even more pressure on families to send their only child to college.
- 2.) This means that a university degree is severely diluted, and middle-class families feel that it's no longer enough to send their child to university -- he or she must get into a "key" or, best of all, a "top ten" university in China.
- 3.) This has led to an escalating arms race in which families put pressure on their child to succeed from day one. In China, there's now a considered track for academic success: Students get into the best elementary schools, which then secures them a place in the best junior high schools, which allows them to test into the best high school,s which gives them the best shot at testing into a top university. If students fall off this elevator to

