In September 2012, the General Office of the State Council has issued *The Opinion on the Regulation of the Mapping of Rural Schools* (《关于规范农村义务教育布局调整的意见》), officially suspending the one-decade-long nationwide policy of regulating the mapping of primary and secondary schools in rural areas (called “removal and merge of schools”). Schools are required to report to provincial government level by level for examination and approval if they have any removal and merge plans. It is also required that the removal and merge of rural schools of compulsory education should be suspended before the specified plan of the mapping of rural schools are put on record. Instead, rural primary schools and teaching centers should be run properly and pronounced problems emanating from the removal and merge of rural primary schools should be handled.

*The Decision on the Reform and Development of Basic Education* (《关于基础教育改革与发展的决定》) was issued by the State Council in 2001 and the policy of removal and merge of schools started. The document requires that “the mapping of rural schools of compulsory education should be adjusted according to local conditions and school mapping should be planned rationally based on the following principles: geographical proximity for primary school and relatively concentration and optimized allocation of resources for junior high schools.” Underlying this policy was the background that a reduced number of school-age children in rural areas and the flow of population resulted in the lack of students in many rural primary schools. Added to that, the pressure from tight educational budget forced the departments in charge to advocate a concentrated approach of school-running so as to improve education quality and efficiency.

The death of 18 children due to the school bus accident, happened in Qingyang city of Gansu province in November 2011, demonstrated one of the consequences of massive removal and merge of rural schools. After that, more and more researches were focusing on and trying to disclose the more profound

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and complicated impact of this policy. In 2012, the 21st Century Education Research Institute conducted a deep research into this problem through surveying in 10 provinces and autonomous regions, in an effort to explore and improve the direction of the development of rural education.

I  The Massive Removal and Merge of Rural Schools of Compulsory Education

One important backdrop against the adjustment of school mapping was the huge decline of school-age population of both primary and secondary education in the recent 10 years.

The changes of primary and junior high schools and students in those schools were demonstrated in Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2. The number of students in junior high schools nationwide decreased to 50.668 million in 2011 from 66.1842 million in 2003, the highest point in history, a decline of 23.44%. Meanwhile, the number of junior high schools slipped to 54 thousand from 63.7 thousand, a decrease of 15.23%.

For ordinary primary schools, the number of students decreased to 99.2637 million in 2011 from 139.9537 million in 1997, the highest point, a 29.07% decline. During the same time period, the number of primary schools sunk from 628.8 thousand to 254 thousand, a reduction of 59.6%.

During the 11 years of official adjustment of school mapping, the number of students in junior high schools was reduced by 19% and that of junior high schools was down by 15.34%, a decrease a little bit lower than students.

FIGURE 4.1  Changes in the number of ordinary junior high schools and the number of students from 1990 to 2011 in China
SOURCE: EDUCATIONAL STATISTICS YEARBOOK OF CHINA