



REAP IMPACT REPORT



Solving China's Vision Care Crisis Through Evidence-based Policy Advocacy

Of all children with poor vision worldwide who lack glasses, half reside in China. Most of these children live in rural areas where service provision is scarce and misperceptions about myopia and glasses are common. REAP has been working on addressing this problem for nearly 15 years. When we started, 20 percent of third graders in rural areas needed glasses but did not have them; 35 percent of fifth graders needed glasses but did not have them; and nearly 50 percent of junior high students needed glasses, and only a small share had them.

Over the past decade and a half, REAP conducted more than eight large-scale randomized controlled trials on the impact of vision correction for rural students. These studies provided clear and indisputable evidence that quality vision care is the most cost-effective intervention for improving child welfare and leads to large, sustainable increases in learning and school performance. We also started a social enterprise, Smart Focus. Working with county hospitals and school systems in more than 20 counties in northwestern China, we have given out (and sold at a low cost) nearly 1 million pairs of glasses since 2014.

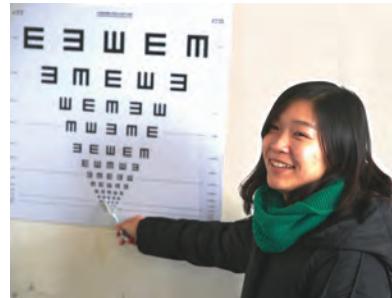
The impact of this work has extended beyond China. Our findings have contributed to international efforts to recognize vision care as a global development priority. REAP's work has helped place vision on the agenda of multilateral banks and aid agencies, supported the inclusion of "vision care" in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and ultimately helped millions of children and adults see clearly.

See Well to Stay in School (SWISH)

Our experience shows a clear link between research, evidence-based policy advocacy, better policy formulation, and better outcomes for children. The next crucial piece of evidence in the chain is clear. Having shown that glasses improve grades, we are now studying the impact of vision correction on a truly life-transforming outcome for children: the rate at which they attend academic high school.

At a time when China is trying to raise the educational quality of all students, increasing the rate of high school attendance is one of the top priorities of the country's Ministry of Education. In the past, most rural students graduated from junior high school and went directly into the labor force. Some did not even finish junior high school. Today, however, with the rise of automation, robots and AI, the demands on those who will be working in China's economy for the next several decades are higher than ever. To get a good job and contribute to the overall economy, students will need math, science, computer, and language skills — precisely the subjects taught in academic high school.

In collaboration with local government, universities, and a large eye hospital, we are currently conducting a three-year randomized trial in nearly 100 rural junior high schools in northern China. The project, called "See Well to Stay in School (SWISH)," examines whether providing free glasses can improve the rate at which students continue on to academic high school, an outcome that only half of rural children currently achieve.



Bridging the Gaps in Vision Care

Despite a 2018 national policy encouraging schools to address myopia, a significant gap remains between policy intent and local implementation. The policy set ambitious targets: by 2030, myopia rates should be reduced to below 3% among 6-year-olds; below 38% among primary school students; below 60% among junior high students; and below 70% among high school students. These targets were made a national priority and incorporated into local government performance evaluations.



In practice, however, many schools have focused almost exclusively on prevention, such as promoting eye exercises, increasing outdoor activity, and reducing homework. In some instances, in an effort to artificially lower reported myopia rates and avoid associated penalties, schools have gone as far as limiting the number of students permitted to wear glasses. Unfortunately, in China, the high rates of myopia are largely driven by genetic and environmental factors, and its prevalence continues to rise despite well-intentioned prevention efforts.

Clearly, this disconnect reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature and trajectory of myopia. REAP's research has consistently shown that corrective eyewear is the most immediate and cost-effective intervention for addressing vision loss and its consequences for children's education.

Driving Policy Change Through Local Collaboration

The SWISH study aims to close the remaining evidence gap by evaluating the long-term benefits of vision correction — specifically its potential to increase academic high school attendance among rural students. In doing so, SWISH will not only provide crucial evidence to inform national health and education policy, but also serve as a model for aligning research with local government priorities through collaborative partnerships.

In Liaoning Province, the Department of Education is partnering with REAP to embed SWISH within an existing province-wide public welfare initiative, "Revitalizing the Countryside, Vision First" (乡村振兴 视力先行). Through this partnership, our team has gained access to nearly 100 rural junior high schools across the province. In each school, local hospitals have conducted comprehensive eye exams and created digital vision health records for all students, establishing an infrastructure for both immediate care and ongoing monitoring.



By combining high-quality research with service delivery and government engagement, SWISH is a great example of REAP's core approach: use data to inform evidence-based policy, and leverage partnerships to scale effective solutions.

Next Steps

In the fall of 2025, REAP will conduct the project's first compliance check to ensure that over 80% of students are consistently wearing their prescribed glasses. Vision care specialists will also conduct follow-up visits to update prescriptions and confirm that students are using the correct eyewear.



By the end of 2025, SWISH will have generated critical new data on the broader effects of vision correction — not only on short-term academic outcomes, but also on students' mental health and long-term educational pathways, including the most important goal of SWISH: the progression of students to academic high school. These findings will equip policymakers with high-quality, actionable evidence to guide the next phase of China's myopia prevention and vision care strategy.