

Under the project, the proportion of villages with kindergartens has risen to 100 percent from just 10 percent three years ago. More than 2,000 facilities have been built for preschoolers in Tongren's rural areas, where seven of the 12 county-level regions have been designated by the government as national-level poverty-stricken counties.

????????????????????10%????100%????????????2000????????12????????????????????

According to the China Development Research Foundation, preschool education is key to a student's learning and skill-adaptation abilities, because about 50 percent of intelligence development is completed before the age of 4. The foundation said international calculations suggest that every investment of \$1 in preschool education results in a social return of \$17.

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Building for the future

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More than 70 percent of Tongren's 4.27 million people are members of 29 ethnic groups, including the Tujia, the Miao and the Dong peoples. In 2013, the average per capita income for farmers in the city was 5,397 yuan (\$803), 40 percent lower than the national level that year.

???427????????70%????29????????????????2013????????5397??803????????????40%?

Now, the authorities are hoping that Tongren's successful completion of a huge project, despite a limited budget, will provide a template for other poverty-stricken areas.

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Instead of building new kindergartens, most of the facilities are located in disused primary school classrooms, village committee offices or houses, according to Long Lihong, director of the Tongren City Education Commission.

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Under the program, kindergartens were built in every area where it could be guaranteed that more than 10 children would enroll, and the average cost of transforming and operating them is about 18,000 yuan, she said.

??18000??

In Houzhai village, the kindergarten is based in three disused primary school classrooms. Two of them are used for educational purposes, while the other serves as a sleeping room where the kindergarten's 27 preschoolers - stly "left-behind" children from a nearby 1,400-strong Miao ethnic community, whose parents are migrant workers - ke a

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The children's behavior and hygiene have also improved. Long Jiawei, 4, and her sister Long Jiali, 6, have lived with their grandmother, Shi Qingjiao, since last year, when their parents moved east to Zhejiang province for work. Shi has rheumatism, and the 75-year-old said all she can do for the girls is cook food and wash their clothes

????????????????4????????6??75????????????????????????????

My granddaughters' awareness of hygiene has changed a lot since they started at the kindergarten. Now, they ask to change their clothes and have showers every day. They say they can't fall asleep if they don't take a shower, she said.

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Rising enrollment

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Last year, the enrollment rate in Tongren's rural kindergarten's jumped to more than 84 percent, from 45 percent in 2013. Although that's 9 percent higher than the national rate, the city government plans to raise the number further by upgrading all of the mountain village kindergartens.

??2013??45%????????????????????84%????????9%????????????????????????????

Long, from the city's education commission, said that in the coming three years the facilities will be upgraded and more fully qualified teachers will be employed. She is also drafting a plan to provide every child with a free simple lunch.

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It will take about 20 years for the full impact of the project to be seen, but education is an important way of eradicating poverty, according to Long.

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