An Overview of the Korean Education System

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The Education System
The Korean public education structure is divided into three parts: six years of primary school, followed by three years of middle school and then three years of high school. In 1996 only about five percent of Korea's high schools were coeducational. The proportion of coeducational schools has increased by almost ten percent. However, classes in many coeducational high schools are still divided along gender lines. The curriculum is standardized so now both boys and girls study technology and domestic science.

The primary curriculum consists of nine principal subjects: moral education, Korean language, social studies, mathematics, science, physical education, music, fine arts, and practical arts. English-language instruction now begins in the third grade, so that children can start learning English in a relaxed atmosphere through conversational exchange, rather than through rote learning of grammatical rules as is still the practice in many middle and high schools.

Upon completion of primary school, students advance to middle school, which comprises grades seven through nine. The curriculum consists of 12 basic or required subjects, electives, and extracurricular activities. While elementary school instructors teach all subjects, middle school teachers, like their colleagues in the United States, are content specialists.

High schools are divided into academic and vocational schools. In 1995, some 62 percent of students were enrolled in academic high schools and 38 percent in vocational high schools. A small number attended specialized high schools concentrating in science, the arts, foreign languages, and other specialized fields. This is still the case.

The School Calendar and School Days
The school calendar has two semesters, the first extending from March through July and the second from September through February. There are summer and winter breaks, but 10 optional half days at the beginning and end of each break (which are attended by practically all students) reduce each of these biennial vacations to the remaining 10 days.

A typical day finds high schoolers studying before school begins at about 8:00 A.M. Classes run for 50 minutes each, with a morning break and a 50-minute lunch period. The afternoon session resumes at about 1:00 P.M., and classes continue until about 4:00 or 4:30, followed by the cleaning of the classroom. Students may then take a short dinner break at home, or they may eat at school. Teachers typically move from room to room, while students stay in one place.

Students return to the school library to study or attend private schools or tutoring sessions until
between 10:00 P.M. and midnight. They return home where they may have a snack, listen to music, or watch television before going to bed. Elementary and middle school students have similar but somewhat less rigorous days with shorter hours and more recreational activities.

**Visiting a High School**
The high schools that we saw were large and rather barren in appearance. Invariably, a large grassless area in front of the school serves as the playing field as well as accommodates schoolwide assemblies and other meetings. Inside, classrooms line the straight, sparsely furnished halls and are typically filled with 50 or 60 uniformed students and an instructor.

Most instruction we observed consisted of teacher lectures, with only rare interruptions for questions. If students had questions, they might speak to the teacher after class.

As we noted, discipline problems were infrequent, and great respect for teachers was evident. Students bowed, as is the custom, when passing teachers in the halls and appeared hesitant to enter faculty offices. We learned that discipline cases are generally referred to the student’s homeroom teacher, who then talks with the student and his or her family. In addition to administering discipline, homeroom teachers offer counseling, help students with college applications, and maintain contact with parents.

We were told in 1996 that in years past when teachers informed parents of discipline problems, parents responded by sending the teacher either a small amount of rice as an apology for having caused the teacher worry and trouble or a switch for the teacher to discipline the child. Since 1999, teachers no longer have the legal authority to administer corporal punishment. This change has created some confusion as to the extent of teachers’ authority.

Despite these differences, Korean teachers still have more responsibility for counseling students and controlling their behavior than do teachers in the United States. Korean culture g teachers the same authority as parents and attributes them even greater responsibility for children's moral and academic development.

School tradition and achievement is very important to Korea's principals. One high school has a large stone marker engraved with its motto, “Diligence and Wisdom,” and statues adorn the school grounds. One depicts a standing young student looking intently into the eyes of a seated female teacher. The other is of Admiral Sun-shin Yi, the heroic sixteenth-century warrior who designed and built a fleet of iron-plated "turtle boats" that were instrumental in the defeat of a Japanese invasion. In the principal's office, one wall has photographs and statements noting the qualifications of the staff. The entrance to the school is lined with pictures of past principals and a large inscription, "Teachers create the future."

Along with their strong belief in the family and cultural traditions, Koreans value education and are willing to make significant personal sacrifices to ensure that their children are afforded the best available learning opportunities. No nation has a higher degree of enthusiasm for education
than Korea, and nowhere are children more pressured to study. Evidence of major educational accomplishments, such as degrees from prestigious colleges and universities, strongly influence a person’s suitability for employment, marriage, and everyday interpersonal relations.

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**Additional Notes:**
- The practice of attending *hagwon*, after-school study centers, often keeps children in classes until midnight, which means they have little time for sleep. However, recently the government has been trying to regulate the *hagwon* so that they close at 10 pm.
- Despite many changes, the Korean educational environment remains predominately one of lecture and rote learning.
- Korean students rank very highly in international measures. However, the rate of school-age suicide, often due to grade pressure or bullying, is also very high.
- Getting into top Korean universities is extremely competitive, which is one reason Korean students often prefer to study abroad.
- The test to enter a university is multiple choice. The day of the test is sometimes considered the most important day of a Korean’s life. This test does not have essay questions, so constructing essays is often undervalued in the educational system.
- Approximately 75-80% of Korean high school students enter a university. The 20% of Korean youth who do not attend university are mainly poor rural youth. The majority of university attendees also graduate, many with majors in scientific and engineering disciplines, although in general university classes demand less active participation of students than comparable universities elsewhere.
- University majors are chosen before entering a university, and even though over 50% of university students in Korea report that they would like to change their majors, this is a difficult thing to do.
- Skills such as debate, discussion, creative writing, creative problem solving, hands on learning, independent studies and self time-management are not emphasized in most South Korean learning environments.
- Avoid writing students’ names in red; some may find this horrifying.