



The Early Advantage

South Korea System at a Glance

Demographics

In 2017, there were 3,153,489 children aged 0-6 in Korea. A looming “population cliff” derived from persistent low fertility rates—the lowest among OECD countries—has compelled the government to explore a range of child-rearing support policies. Nearly all—96.6 percent—of children are ethnically Korean. Of the rest, the largest proportions are Korean ethnic Chinese, Chinese, and Vietnamese.

Support for Children and Families

A wide range of health services are available for young children and their families through the National Health Insurance (NHI) Service, which covers almost 100 percent of the population. During a woman’s pregnancy, the government provides Citizen-Happiness Vouchers (worth 500,000 KRW, or approximately US\$500), intended to cover health care costs at designated medical centers. Further financial supports are available to young and low-income mothers. Female workers are granted a total of 90 days of paid maternity leave, which can be taken before and after childbirth. Three days of paid paternity leave are provided to fathers, but few fathers have taken parental leave., so the government recently increased the leave benefit to cover 100 percent of the normal wage in the first three months. The number of fathers taking leave has been increasing since 2010.

Enrollment in ECEC

Overall enrollment rates in ECEC services are high and increase as children grow older, from 15.9 percent of children under 1, to 70.1 percent of 1-year-olds, 85.8 percent of 2-year-olds, 89.5 percent of 3-year-olds, 90.8 percent of 4-year-olds, and 91.1 percent of 5-year-olds. Compulsory school begins at age 6.

Service Providers

Child care centers, which serve children aged 0-5, provide full-day care for 12 hours a day. Child care centers may be public or private, although most are private; public centers cater to just 12.1 percent of children. Just over half—51.9 percent—of child care centers are family day cares, where children are served in the home of a certified child care provider. Under a 2016 government policy, large employers (those with more than 500 employees or 300 female employees) were required to establish child care centers in the workplace. Kindergartens, which serve children between the ages of 3 and 5, operate four to five hours a day and often provide three to four hours of afterschool

programs. Kindergartens can be public or private, but over three-quarters of kindergarten children are served in private programs. Private kindergartens may be nonprofit or for-profit. Some, but not all, public kindergartens are attached to elementary schools.

Governance

South Korea's ECEC system has a split system of governance. The Ministry of Education (formerly the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, or MEST) oversees all kindergartens, while the Ministry of Health and Welfare oversees all child care centers and family day cares. Beginning in 2004, child care was the responsibility of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family but this was switched to the Ministry of Health and Welfare in 2008. The education and health ministries have worked together since 2011 to develop and implement the Nuri Initiative, a project that represents the core of early childhood education policies for children aged 3-5, including a common curriculum, a common government-provided subsidy, and a common teacher-training program.

Finance

Annual spending on pre-primary education in South Korea is US\$6,227 per pupil, less than the OECD average of US\$8,162. Of the total, 78 percent is from public sources, lower than the OECD average of 82 percent.

Since 2015, the Korean government has been offering substantial subsidies to cover child care and education for all children aged 0-5, irrespective of household income or background. Some money is given directly to providers, but Korea has largely adopted a demand-side approach, with vouchers called "i-Happiness Cards" provided directly to families who apply for them. Each child aged 0-2 is entitled to a subsidy intended to cover free full-day care in public or private child care centers. Children aged 3-5 are entitled to a 200,000 KRW (US\$200) per month subsidy, intended to cover half-day of Nuri Curriculum education in child care centers or kindergartens. Despite the subsidies, many parents bear some of the cost, particularly in costly private kindergartens, where fees are unregulated. Kindergartens also charge additional fees for afterschool programming.

Regulation of ECEC

Reflecting the split system of ECEC governance, two systems of ECEC monitoring currently exist in South Korea: the Child Care Accreditation System (CAS), introduced in 2005, and the Kindergarten Evaluation System (KES), introduced in 2008. Participation in CAS and KES is voluntary, but participation is tied to government subsidies, so 96.3 percent of kindergartens participated in KES in 2015 and 78.8 percent of child care centers achieved accreditation through CAS that year. Both systems involve a self-evaluation, a written evaluation, and an on-site evaluation, with results ultimately made available to the public to inform parental choice and incentivize improvement.

Teacher Quality

Currently, significant disparities exist in training requirements between the child care and kindergarten systems; kindergarten teachers are generally trained more intensively than child care teachers. Like primary school teachers, prospective kindergarten teachers graduate from an early childhood education department at a two-, three-, or four-year college or university with a Second-Level teacher license, the same entry level license primary and secondary teachers receive, and then acquire a First-Level teacher license after three years of field experience and inservice training. In contrast, prospective child care teachers may graduate from a two-, three-, or four-year college or university with a Second-Level license but may also instead complete a one-year training after high school graduation and receive a Third-Level teacher license, lower than what primary and secondary teachers receive. Compensation varies between the two sectors as well. Kindergarten teachers are generally paid better than child care teachers, but disparities exist between public kindergartens—where salaries are set by the government—and private kindergartens, where salaries are set by private providers. Public kindergarten teachers receive pay equal to that of elementary and secondary teachers.