



The Early Advantage

Republic of Korea System at a Glance

Demographics

In 2017, there were 3,153,489 children aged 0-5 in the Republic of Korea (South 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 the population 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 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 a portion of pregnancy-related 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, in addition to two unpaid days, are provided to fathers, and a one-year paid parental leave is available to all parents of children under age 8. However, few fathers take this parental leave, so the government recently increased the leave benefit of the second user (who is most commonly the father) 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 service 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. Incentivized by the government, a growing proportion of child care centers are based in parents’ workplaces. Kindergartens, which serve children between

the ages of 3 and 5, operate four to five hours a day and often provide three to four additional hours of afterschool programs. Kindergartens can be public or private, but over three-quarters of kindergarteners are served in private programs, most of which are for-profit. Some, but not all, public kindergartens are attached to elementary schools.

Governance

The Republic of Korea's ECEC system has a split system of governance. The Ministry of Education 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 in-service teacher training program.

Finance

Annual governmental expenditures on child care and kindergarten were approximately 14 trillion KRW (US\$12.7 billion) in 2015.

Since 2012/2013, 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(child)-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 220,000 KRW (US\$200) per month subsidy, intended to cover half-day 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 Korea: the Child Care Accreditation System (CAS), introduced in 2005, and the Kindergarten Evaluation System (KES), introduced in 2008. Participation in CAS and KES, in their entirety, 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, and then acquire a First-Level teacher license after three years of field experience and in-service 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 kindergarten 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. Passing a national exam is required in order to become a public kindergarten teacher whose status and salary standing are equivalent to those of elementary school teachers.