

Hagwon

Hagwon (Korean: 학원; [ha.gwɔn]) is the Korean word for a for-profit private educational institution. They are commonly likened to cram schools. As of 2022, 78.3% of grade school students in South Korea attend at least one and spend an average of 7.2 hours in them per week.

Hagwon



A building containing numerous *hagwons*
in Dunsan-dong, Daejeon

Korean name

Hangul

학원

Hanja

學院

Revised

Hagwon

Romanization

McCune –

Hagwŏn

Reischauer

Most children begin attending them by the age of five, with some even beginning by age two. The schools tend to focus on individual topics, including the English language, mathematics, and the college entrance exam, the College Scholastic Ability Test. *Hagwons* also exist for adults.

Description

Hagwons are private educational institutions that are often compared to cram schools in the West.^[1] They teach a variety of subjects, for a variety of purposes, for a variety of different age

groups. As of 2020, South Korea had 73,865 *hagwons*.^[2]

Motivation

Competition for education and jobs in South Korea is widely considered to be extreme.^{[3][4][1]} Nearly 70% of students in South Korea participate in higher education, compared to 51% in the United States and 57% in the United Kingdom.^[1] This makes competition for entering university, and especially the entrance examination (College Scholastic Ability Test), highly competitive. In 2023, it was reported

that over half of test takers in the Gangnam and Seocho Districts retake the exam a year later because they were dissatisfied with their previous scores.^[1]

Demographics

A significant majority of South Korean children begin attending *hagwons* by the age of five; it was reported in 2017 that 83% of five year olds attended at least one. A minority of students begin at age two.^[5] In 2022, it was reported that 78.3% of students between the first to twelfth grade attended at least one

and spent an average of 7.2 hours in *hagwons* per week. Attendance of and time spent in *hagwon* is higher for elementary and middle school students. [6]. [3].

Some students attend until late at night. A number of *hagwons* offer private bus or shuttle services to bring the children back home, although the safety of these services due to cost minimization efforts has been criticized at times. [4].

Subjects

Parents spend the most money on English *hagwons*, with mathematics and Korean taking second and third place.^[6] Science and the humanities are also popular, although less so.^[6] *Hagwons* are also seen as a critical place to prepare for the college entrance exams.^[1]

While most *hagwons* focus on meeting educational needs, many also exist for a variety of nonacademic subjects, including music, art, swimming, and Taekwondo.^[5] A variety of *hagwons* for

adults also exist, including some to train flight attendants.^[7]

Cost and economics

Despite South Korea's now decreasing population and lowest fertility rate in the world,^[3] spending on education has only grown.^{[1][6][3]} In 2022, Koreans spent ~~₩~~26 trillion (US\$22.73 billion) on private education, at an average of ~~₩~~410,000 (US\$358.41) per month.^[3]

While some see *hagwons* as filling a need not being adequately met by the public school system,^[8] others see

them as creating an unequal footing between the poor and rich in Korea.^{[9][10]} Despite the fact that most Korean children attend *hagwon*, according to CNN, studies have still shown a measurable difference in educational outcomes based on the income of the parents.^[3]

Efforts are now being made to try and curb the amount of private spending on *hagwons*,^[6] although some observers are skeptical that they will be successful.^[1]

Health impact

The *hagwon* culture is widely viewed as extreme by both international and domestic observers.^{[3][5]} A number of experts have expressed concerns about the mental health impact on especially the younger attendees,^{[3][5]} and even on the parents who have to afford and carefully curate their children's education in order to have them be competitive.^[3] In 2017, it was reported that among OECD countries, South Korea had the highest suicide rate in the world.^[11]

History and regulations



Signs advertising *hagwons* in the Jongno District of Seoul (1971)

In 1885, Henry Appenzeller founded the Paichai school (배재대학교) as a cover for his missionary work. At the time it was illegal to preach other religions in Korea. Although his main goal was to spread his faith, it was still used by Koreans to learn English. [12].

In the 1970s and 1980s, *hagwons* were reportedly seen as optional for remedial studying.^[13] Private education, known as *gwaoe* (과외), was banned by President Chun Doo-hwan (전두환) in 1980. It was felt the advantage of private education unfairly burdened the poor and to promote equality, all access to it was made illegal. Through the years the government has relaxed the restrictions on private education by increasingly allowing more individuals and organizations to offer private education^[14] until the ban was ruled unconstitutional in the 1990s.^[15]

Korean courts have ruled that it may violate the constitution for the government to limit the amount of money *hagwons* can charge.^[16] In early 2008, the Seoul government was working on changes to the regulations to allow *hagwons* to set their own hours, citing individual choice as trumping regulation.^[17] However, the government reversed its position five days later.^[18] The regulations were criticized as ineffective because the city council possessed limited resources to monitor and enforce them.^[19]

Along with these restrictions, *hagwons* had to disclose their tuition amounts to the government so people could complain if the schools attempted to raise the tuition.^[20] The licenses of *hagwons* caught running false advertisements will be revoked.

Hagwons are required to issue cash receipts.^[21] In July 2009, to help catch violators of these new regulations, the government started a program to reward people who reported them.^[22]

The regulations were intended to reduce the cost of private education. However, some *hagwons* added

weekend classes to compensate for shorter weekday classes. Other parents have sought out private tutors to make up for lost study time.^[23] Other *hagwons* simply ignored the regulations. It was reported in April 2009 that 67 percent of *hagwons* sampled were found to have overcharged for tuition. Forty percent were found to have charged parents over two times the registered tuition amount.^[24]

In March 2008, the government prohibited school teachers from creating test questions for *hagwons*. It

had been found that some teachers were leaking tests and test questions to *hagwons*, giving the students who attended those schools advantages when it came time to take the test.^[25]

A petition was made in October 2009 by parents, teachers, students and *hagwon* owners to challenge the government's legislation regarding *hagwon* closing times in Seoul and Busan. The constitutional court ruled that the laws did not violate the constitution.^[26] The restriction was put in place for Seoul and Busan in the summer of 2009.^{[23][27]} In making the

ruling the court said, "Because it's important to secure sleep for high school students to overcome fatigue and for the sake of their growth, it's difficult to say that [the ban] excessively restricts basic rights."

In April 2010 it was reported that there were over 25,000 *hagwons* registered with the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education, with nearly 6,000 being in the Gangnam area.^[28] It was also revealed that local government councils other than Seoul had decided not to implement the 22:00 curfew. The curfew was seen as not having an

impact on education fees and not addressing the real concern with private education.^[29] Despite the curfew, there have been attempts to get around this curfew among *hagwons* in Seoul.^[30]

Impact on real estate

A higher than average concentration of *hagwons* in the Gangnam District, specifically Daechi-dong (대치동), has been cited as the primary reason for an increase in real estate costs in the area. In the 1970s the Seoul government made some top schools relocate to the area. The schools there have become associated with entry into elite high

schools and then elite universities.

Many residents feel their children need to be associated with these schools in order to reach the upper levels of business and success.^{[9][31]}

As more parents try to move to the area to allow their children to attend these schools, the prices of real estate in the area have risen to 300 percent of similar areas in Seoul.^{[9][31]} In 2003 the government had planned to develop a *hagwon* center in Pangyo to relieve some of the pressure on Gangnam,^[32] yet after heavy criticism for only shifting the problem around and not solving it,

the government canceled the plan only a couple of weeks later.^[33]

English-language instructors

Native English speakers were hired as early as 1883 in Korea, originally out of need. The first teacher hired at the government-run Tongmunhak was Thomas Hallifax.^[12] Due to the preference for having native English speakers teach English, many native English-speakers are still hired to teach at *hagwons* in Korea. These *hagwons* may be only English schools or they could also be schools which have a

variety of subjects including English. [\[34\]](#)[\[35\]](#)

The minimum requirements for foreigners for such teaching positions are: citizenship of Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom, or the United States, a clean criminal background check at the national level, and a bachelor's degree obtained in one of the aforementioned countries. [\[36\]](#)[\[37\]](#)

In return for signing a one-year contract, the institute provides an instructor with a monthly salary, round-

trip airfare from his or her country of origin, usually a rent-free apartment or housing stipend for the duration of the instructor's contract, a pension pay for some citizens, and an additional one-month "severance pay" at the completion of the contract.

Foreign instructors hold a mixed view of *hagwons*. Some have complained of poor housing, non-payment, disagreements, and getting fired on the 11th month before they receive severance pay, however many instructors have had no significant issues with the *hagwon* they've worked

at. Some recommend looking at *hagwon* blacklists or greenlists, but others say they aren't necessarily that reliable.

Hagwon owners have complained about the challenge in finding truly qualified teachers.^[38] A group of English instructors first formed a labour union at a *hagwon* in 2005.^[39]

Hagwons abroad

In some English-speaking countries, *hagwons* exist for ethnic Koreans. In North America, about 75% of Korean-language supplemental schools have

affiliation with churches.^[40] As of 2006, of the *hagwons* registered with the Korean School Association of America (KSAA), over 75% were affiliated with Korean churches. There are also secular formal *hagwons* and secular informal *hagwons*.^[41] The *hagwons* are equivalent to *hoshū jugyō kō* (*hoshūkō*) in ethnic Japanese communities and *buxiban* in ethnic Chinese communities.^[40] As of 2010, every year over 50,000 Korean Americans attend Korean heritage schools.^[42]

Korean schools were first established in Hawaii after 1903, when the first wave

of Korean immigration came to the United States.^[43] The modern generation of Korean supplemental schools were first established in the United States in the 1970s. At the time they were weekend schools that had a mission to preserve the Korean-American identity in its students. They taught the Korean language, managed the assimilation of Korean-American children, and offered afterschool tutoring programs. There were almost 500 schools registered with the KSAA by the end of the 1980s.^[41] Beginning in the 1990s there were also *hagwons* that were supplementary academic

preparation programs like the ones in Korea.^[44] Despite this, some parents viewed the quality of American *hagwons* as less rigorous than their South Korean peers. But in 2010, it was reported that some Korean parents in the United States viewed some *hagwons* in the New Jersey – New York area as being of similar quality.^[45]

Kang Hee-Ryong, author of the PhD thesis *White supremacy, racialization, and cultural politics of Korean Heritage Language Schools*, wrote that the Korean heritage schools are "not simply a means of counter hegemony against

the racializing forces" but instead the "product of compromises" between different generations of Korean Americans.^[42]

See also

- Education in South Korea
- Work – life balance in South Korea
- Ronin (student).
- Storefront school

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schools (hoshuko) also exist in certain communities." and "[...]while the large majority (around 75 percent) of Korean schools are affiliated with churches; these began to appear in the early 1970s (Zhou & Kim, 2006)."

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