The policies on supplemental education in Korea

Children complain that school teachers are ineffective in comparison to instructors at supplemental education institutions who teach in an engaging and interesting manner... Students do not have high expectations of teachers and schools... While school is a place to sleep, “hagwon” is a place to learn... Schools do not take responsibility for their students. Supplemental education is not the problem; so called “failing” or “failed” schools that push students into markets for supplemental education is the bigger problem.1

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BLAMING PUBLIC EDUCATION for many social woes is becoming a habit in many nations throughout the world. Although Korea has ranked highly on international achievement tests such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, when examined more closely, maybe this is the result of the government's investment, not of public education. Dependence on markets for supplemental education is growing as parents are becoming more dissatisfied with the basic education system. In this context, what the Korean government can and should do is to either let schools outperform the market for supplemental education or let public education embrace the market. A short, but intense history

The Joseon dynasty which lasted for about five centuries was characterized by a caste system severely restricting educational opportunities coupled with a pronounced emphasis on learning. In the early 1900s, the colonial era brought about a modern education system not based on birth and gender. After the Korean War in the 1950s, the newly established government in South Korea emphasized a system in which people's positions and responsibilities in society depended on their intelligence and abilities, not on their parents or wealth.

In such a situation, education became the key to social mobility. University entrance exams have been regarded as the most impartial and fair way to guarantee better educational opportunities and social success. Nevertheless, the growing interest in education, conditions in the 1970s were hopeless where the number of students per class numbered about 70 and the annual expenditure per student in public education amounted to only US$10 to US$30. Supplemental education came into the spotlight in this context to give students further instruction in various subjects and help them prepare for college entrance exams.

Two forms of supplemental education dominate in Korea, private tutoring (한·하원) and hagwon (학원, 好望). One form of supplemental education is taking private tutoring. In Korea, everyone who wants to teach can be a private tutor for individuals or small groups. Because there are no regulations and guidelines for private tutoring concerning time, location, method or tuition fees, the government cannot obtain relevant information on private tutoring. Another form of supplemental education is enrolment in hagwon. After school, students go to school-like hagwon where they are taught by qualified and experienced instructors. Unlike schools, students can choose which hagwon they will attend, if at all, and tuition differs between hagwon.

To stop the steadily increasing dependence on supplemental education, the Korean government in 1980 prohibited students from taking part in any kind of supplemental educational service for purpose of test preparation. A person who notified the government of students, parents or tutors who were taking part in supplemental educational services received a reward, and the reported people were punished by the law. This prohibition did not allow even students who really needed remedial learning to take supplemental education. Only graduates who failed in the previous year's university entrance exams were and preparing for the next chance and a few very students who needed arts and physical education could legally use supplemental educational services. In conjunction with this policy, the government abolished several entrance exams, changed the school curriculum and national standards, and established diverse schools.

Despite these efforts, nothing has changed. The demand for supplemental education services has been increasing until now, and the expenditure and participation rates have been pushed up fast. Furthermore, the Supreme Court in 2001 ruled that prohibition of supplemental educational services was unconstitutional. As a result, the number of hagwon and private tutors has drastically increased, and almost all students are using and willing to pay for their services; no longer are supplemental education services just for the rich.

Facts about supplemental education

The number of hagwon—legally private, for-profit entities—increased from 1,421 in 1970 to 67,649 in 2007. About 66 percent of total supplemental educational institutions are concentrated in the metropolitan areas such as Seoul, and in total they employ over 180,000 tutors. Still, taking account of the difficulty involved in collecting data of private tutoring, the actual number of people working for supplemental educational services is estimated to surpass 200,000. This implies that a significant share of human resources with university degrees is concentrated in supplemental educational services.

In Korea, school teachers—government employees holding a teacher's certificate—should not have another job and therefore cannot be either private tutors or instructors in supplemental educational institutions. Unlike teachers who are paid on the official salary schedule, tutors' earning in markets for supplemental educational services depends on their expertise and reputation. Similar to a merit pay system, this market structure is attractive enough to draw job seekers (see figure 1).

Almost 80 percent of registered supplemental educational institutions offer test preparation and subject areas for K-12 students. 75 percent of primary and secondary school students have used their services. However, according to another study conducted in 2009, 95.5 percent of K-12 students in Korea had experienced supplemental education. As supplemental education becomes more popular, students begin to take supplemental education at an ever younger age. This reason, elementary school students in Korea are taking part in private tutoring and hagwon more often than high school students, who spend more time in school (see figure 2).

A survey of 624 households in 2010 showed that among the main reasons expressed by parents and students for using supplemental education were the governments’ failed educational policies and dissatisfaction with schools. With the notion that excessive competition in entrance examinations will result in demand for supplemental education, the government has been steadily and deeply involved in entrance examination policies in many different ways. For instance, the government varied admissions criteria, not limited to test scores, and changed required courses and tests for university entrance. In order to improve the quality of public education, teacher evaluations and school choice programs have been introduced.

Yet, parents regard the government’s policies as makeshift rather than fundamental solutions. One interesting point is that parents recognized their responsibility for the excessive expansion of the supplemental education to some extent. Motivations such as “my child must be better than the others” and “if that student goes to a hagwon, my child also has to go” are seen as some of the causes for the growth in supplemental education (see figure 3).

Cost and expenditure

The cost of supplemental education has been a contentious issue throughout the 1980s and 1990s until today. While the number of students using supplemental educational services is higher in primary schools than in high schools, the average monthly expenditures for high school students are higher. In 2007, the officially reported monthly expenditure of supplemental education per family by the National Statistical Office in Korea approached US$148 (equivalent to about 240,000 Won in Korea), while the average monthly expenditure per student ranged from US$330 to US$520. Total expenditures nationwide were estimated at US$11 billion, almost 3 percent of GDP. This almost equaled the public sector expenditure on education, which was 3.4 percent of GDP.

Note:

1. The prohibition on supplemental educational services by the government was initiated in 1980, and the Supreme Court ruled that the prohibition policy was unconstitutional in 2000.
However, another study by a non-profit organization estimated the average monthly expenditures per student to be US$154. Moreover, families earning over US$50,000 spent 2.5 times more on supplemental education than families with incomes below US$30,000. Considering that annual earnings for high-income families are considerably higher than for low-income families, the difference in expenditure on supplemental education by income level should not be overlooked. This study also estimated that the market for supplemental education to be around US$3.4 billion, about 3.8% of the GDP in 2010. Based on this information, we can easily understand why some families are spending two jobs to pay for their children's hagwon and private tutoring costs.

As shown in the two studies, there is a non-negligible discrepancy in government initiatives and independently conducted studies. Of course, the inconsistent findings regarding research on supplemental education may be rooted in definitions of key terms and the survey methodology used. The largest reason is the ripple effect of supplemental educational services on Korean society. Since private tutoring and hagwon have long been considered to be social problems regardless of their initial purpose and contribution, the government tends to underestimate the size and cost of supplemental educational services.

In contrast to the past when hagwon were usually localized and small in scale, several hagwon have been franchised and expanded across the country. These supplemental educational services are operated by the government not independently with its own various companies in the printing and broadcasting industries. In addition, other tutoring institutions like Jongro Academy and Academy Jongro expanded their businesses nationwide and came to own various companies in the printing and broadcasting industries. The government’s policies toward supplemental educational services have the following broad objectives:

1. To reduce the cost of supplemental educational services
2. To decrease the reliance on private tutoring and hagwon
3. To realize equal opportunity in education
4. To improve the quality of public education, and
5. To dispel a deep mistrust of schools

Governments in many countries generally exclude private schools from school policies. Even though the public school system in Korea distinguishes public schools from private schools, there is no de facto difference between public and private schools. That is because most private schools (which account for over 15% of total schools) are run on a for-profit basis. Although the public entity, a private school is still governed by public funding. Since private schools are operated by the government not independently with its funding, there is a public-private partnership. For example, to ensure that a student attends a public or a private school, and private schools cannot select their students. Hence, the government’s policies to decrease supplemental educational services are targeting every student, whether in public or private schools.

Recently, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology placed greater emphasis on After School Programs (수업 외 학습, or 수업 외 학습 시간). By revising the existing educational policies in 2004, the basic idea was to meet the demand for supplemental educational services at school. Each school would design a curriculum, hire instructors either within or outside of the school, and charge a small tuition fee from students who registered in the program. In doing so, the government tried to absorb the demand for supplemental educational services into public education rather than regulating and prohibiting these services. Initially, the government did not allow schools to make contracts with for-profit institutions for After School Programs. However, the government has now expanded the range of eligible for-profit, supplemental educational institutions for the schools.

In Korea, everyone who wants to teach can be a private tutor for individuals or small groups. Because there are no regulations and guidelines for private tutoring concerning time, location, method or tuition fee, the tutor can obtain relevant information on private tutoring.

For a long time, the Korean government has struggled to narrow the gap of access to supplemental educational services by creating alternative hagwon and private tutoring. Where disaffection with schools leads to a dependence on supplemental education outside of the school system, students are expected to decrease the cost of supplemental educational services by creating an alternative to hagwon and private tutoring.

In essence, After School Programs are operating on the basis of the fees that students pay. Of course, it is difficult for a school to run high quality After School Programs solely with a small tuition fee from students. For this reason, the government supports a shortage in operating funds for After School Programs. Nevertheless, After School Programs must distinguish themselves from public policies and operate without additional user payments. The first reason for charging a tuition fee is to avoid the creation of moral hazards that free program brings. As students pay extra charge for After School Programs, they take the responsibilities of the programs. Yet, looking at After School Programs in greater depth, you can easily see that schools are trying to follow market principles. Just as with hagwon and private tutoring, students as consumers can select what course they want to take and pay a small tuition fee.

The downside to After School Programs

Unfortunately, if Private School Programs are the main agents and organizers are schools that are already seen as failing or failed. Schools have disappointed students and parents by not achieving their core task of teaching the official curriculum. As well, students and parents have thought that schools lacked the preparation for university entrance exams based on the official curriculum. As noted above, many parents choose private tutoring and hagwon because of their disaffection with schools. In this context, how can we expect After School Programs designed and operated by these schools to succeed? In order to solve the problems of supplemental education, the government is burdening falling schools with more and more roles.

To provide students equal access to supplemental educational services, the government has emphasized three key strategies: recruiters for disadvantaged students, support for students in rural areas which have fewer supplemental educational institutions, and daycare services at the primary school level. 53 percent of students participated in the After School Programs in 2008, and participating students paid an average of US$242 (equivalent to about 26,800 Won) a month. Families with incomes below US$30,000 stated that the After School Programs helped them reduce their expenditures for hagwon and private tutoring. Still, there is no clear and reliable evidence showing how much the After School Programs contribute to realizing equality in education and decreasing the reliance on supplemental education. Because of the relation between politics and evaluation, study about After School Programs is very different from other fields. Each study focusing on different findings depending on who initiated the evaluation and who was involved in the research.

Furthermore, parents tend to regard After School Programs as just another type of supplemental educational service rather than an alternative to hagwon and private tutoring. After School Programs definitely help low-income students and students who already passed entrance exams based on the official curriculum. As well, students and parents cannot choose which school the student will attend, the only option for them is supplemental education.

Although supplemental education is a big social problem in Korea, it is not desired that all schools become cram schools in order to decrease the cost of supplemental education. Schools are not there just to prepare students for university entrance exams. Even though parents and students seek specialized schools to pass entrance exams, schools do not neglect their duties in a society. In schools that fail to balance public benefits and private interests, subjects like democracy and citizenship are disregarded by parents, and increasing suicide rates and bullying at school are reported as a side effect of failing public education.

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Like the condornum of the chicken and the egg, there is no exact answer to say which comes first. The market and public education creates a demand for supplemental education or whether the excessive demand for private tutoring and hagwon causes public education to fail. At least, schools in Korea are trying to provide more equitable opportunities for supplemental education, and at the same time are struggling to compete with supplemental education services. As long as the negative effects of supplemental education are not resolved, the Korean government will keep a weather eye on hagwon and private tutoring by creating and modifying relevant policies.

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References

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