



Executive Summary

The story of Korean education over the past 50 years is one of remarkable growth and achievement. Korea is one of the top performing countries in PISA and among those with the highest proportion of young people who have completed upper secondary and tertiary education. Korea is continuously exploring ways to improve its education system and has dramatically increased government investment in education over the last decade. Nevertheless, further reforms are needed to spur and sustain improvements. Rapid globalisation and modernisation are also posing new and demanding challenges to equip young people of today and tomorrow with skills relevant to the 21st century.

The report *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Lessons from PISA for Korea* has a twofold purpose. Firstly, the report should help Korea to identify and address education policy challenges in an international perspective. To this end, it assesses the Korean education system through the prism of PISA, considers recent policy developments and suggests specific policy options to foster improvements. It also provides an in-depth analysis of the experience of other high-performing countries, including Finland, Hong Kong (China), Ontario (Canada), Shanghai (China), and Singapore. Secondly, the report should be a useful reference for other countries seeking to improve their education systems.

Korea has consistently performed well, ranking near or at the top in all the rounds and fields of assessment in the PISA report. In PISA 2009, Korea was the top-performing OECD country in reading (rank 1), showing relatively high proficiency in digital reading, in mathematics (rank 1) and ranking among the top-performing OECD countries in science (rank 3). In addition, the relative share of top-performing students is above the OECD average and has doubled in just one decade. Korea also has the lowest proportion of low-performing students among OECD countries, although the gap between top- and low-performing students has increased over the past decade.

Korea has put policies and practices into place that, according to OECD research, can be related to higher performance. Resources tend to be allocated where they can have a greater impact. The quality of teachers has been traditionally prioritised over smaller classes. Schools with more favourable student-teacher ratios are usually the disadvantaged ones. Schools also have significant autonomy over curricular and assessment policies, including student assessment, and deciding which courses are offered, their content and the textbooks used.

A notable feature of Korea, and more generally of East Asia, is the widespread participation in supplementary education. In Korea, 81% of primary school students are estimated to receive private tutoring. Many students participate in supplementary education to gain a head start for competitive examinations, which can facilitate admission to top universities and thus improve their life prospects. Supplementary education adds input into learning, such as time and materials, and provides opportunities for different learning arrangements and instruction methods. However, the evidence of the impact of supplementary education on academic performance is still inconclusive. Besides, supplementary education exacerbates socio-economic inequalities, can be detrimental to student well-being and disrupt the normal functioning of schools. Some countries have regulated the provision of supplementary education, broadened access by using new technologies or introducing after-school classes, and reduced the emphasis on rote learning of examination. The Korean government should encourage increasing the available evidence on supplementary education, fostering research and creating spaces for public consultation.

High performing countries share a commitment to education and a culture of continuous improvement. In these countries, students believe that education is the route to advancement and that effort pays off, regardless of their ability and socio-economic background. In addition to putting the right policies in place, the experience of other high performing countries can provide examples and lessons relevant to Korea and illustrate that improvements require a policy infrastructure that drives performance and builds the capacity for educators to implement it in schools:

- *Singapore*: education is a central priority. The supply and demand of education and skills is continuously adapted. Curriculum, pedagogy and assessments have been reformed for a greater focus on 21st century skills. Particular attention has been paid in building teacher and leadership capacity to deliver at the school level. There is a vision for the education system, coherence and alignment between actors, an emphasis on building capacity and international benchmarking to identify the best practices. A comprehensive system to select, train, compensate and develop teachers and school principals actively ensures their quality.
- *Finland*: the comprehensive school reform, which educates all children together regardless of their ability and socio-economic background, is the bedrock of the high levels of equity achieved in education. Children who are having difficulty are identified



and supported early on: each school has a specially trained intervention professional. Teacher preparation programmes focus on developing skills to diagnose problems and intervene early. Differentiated instruction engages all students in heterogeneously grouped classrooms. Moreover, teaching is a highly selective and valued profession with teachers having autonomy over their classrooms. Notably, high achievement is not equated with performance in two or three subjects in standardised tests, but the curriculum is broad and fosters an inquiry-based approach to learning.

- *Shanghai and Hong Kong-China*: education reforms in these two authorities have focused on examinations and curriculum to reduce the emphasis on rote learning and favour deep understanding. For example, Hong Kong-China has undergone a major reform that abolished public assessments after primary school, changed the curriculum at all levels to shift the focus from teaching to learning, and changed the structure of the education system. Shanghai has put into place a strategy to systematically strengthen weak schools, from improving school infrastructure to reinforcing the team of teachers and leaders.
- *Ontario (Canada)*: specific strategies were successfully introduced to increase literacy and numeracy in primary schools, improve graduation rates, and reduce the number of low-performing schools. Strong central leadership, few clear goals to align the efforts of all the actors in the system, and extensive capacity-building and trust-building among teachers, unions, and other stakeholders were essential.

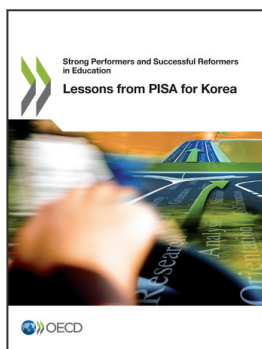
Even at the highest performance level, further improvements are possible and Korea can continue building on past reforms and explore ways to:

1. Improve the transition from school-to-work and the labour-market outcomes of education

- *Improve Vocational Education and Training (VET)* by increasing the provision, quality and relevance of workplace training, strengthening the links with the industry at all levels, recruiting teachers with previous relevant work experience, and aligning programmes with national technical qualifications.
- *Develop a curriculum for the 21st century and ensure its implementation*. The curriculum has been revised to better respond to the demands of the 21st century by, for example, fostering creativity, reducing the excessive academic burden, revising university entrance exams and introducing ‘creative experiential activities’. However, careful attention should be placed on its implementation as teachers might be under pressure to focus on the university entrance examination. Inquiry-based and student-centred learning may require substantial changes in instructional methodology.
- *Continue attracting, supporting and retaining high quality teachers*. Teachers are recruited among the top graduates and receive strong preparatory training, including induction and in-service training. Also, teachers spend less time teaching and more time on activities such as class preparation than in many other OECD countries. In addition, mutual learning among teachers is encouraged by, for example, promoting classroom observation or conducting research on teaching practices. To leverage teacher innovations and good practices, the role of school leaders is crucial and special attention on leadership development is necessary.
- *Further integrate information communication technologies (ICTs) in education*. To make the best use of ICT in learning, the Korean education system can continue building teacher capacity and school leadership to use ICT in the classroom.
- *Strengthen the use of evaluation and assessment*. It is important to sustain the current efforts to further refine the evaluation instruments, and to broaden the scope from student assessment to whole-system evaluation with a greater emphasis on accountability.

2. Promoting equity in education for strengthening social cohesion

- *Enhance access to and improve the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC)*. Financial support for attending pre-primary education should be sustained and could be particularly targeted at children from low-income families. In order to ensure even quality among providers and an effective information and monitoring system, common regulations and standards (e.g. staff qualifications, staff-child ratio) could be established for all children aged three to five, regardless of whether they attend kindergarten or childcare.
- *Explore more effective policy responses to supplementary education*. While Korea is the sole East Asian country that has persistently implemented policies to respond to supplementary education over several decades, its prevalence underlines the need for further research.
- *Promote the involvement of parents* in school matters and in helping their children’s learning more effectively. Supporting and developing the capacities of parents targeting disadvantaged families could help strengthen the parental involvement and the support to disadvantaged students.



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