

# **The School Equalization Policy of Korea: *Past Failures and Proposed Measure for Reform***

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## **Abstract**

*This paper argues that Korea's educational equalization policy has failed to achieve its major policy goals, which are to improve educational equality and to reduce the economic burden of private tutoring and minimize the negative side effects of exam-oriented education. We also suggest that the equalization policy has lowered levels of academic achievement by limiting students and parents' choice of schools, and by strengthening the government's control over schools. We also explain the political-economic reasons why the equalization policy has been maintained over the last 30 years, despite its evident negative effects. We conclude that the equalization policy should be overhauled through a number of reform measures, such as providing school choice, disclosing the differences between schools, increasing the autonomy of school units, and strengthening governmental support for students with lower academic achievement.*

**Keywords:** equalization policy, school choice, private tutoring, educational equity

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## Introduction

The education equalization policy, which focuses on providing both equal and expanded educational opportunities, has been at the core of Korean secondary education policy since the 1970s. However, though such education equalization policies did in fact play a positive role during Korea's era of rapid industrialization, it has become apparent that such policies have failed to keep pace with the educational needs of today.

The two main strategies of equalization policies have been: (1) to limit school choice by assigning students to schools, regardless of whether the school is public or private; and (2) to strengthen government control over schools in order to maintain educational uniformity across all schools. These two strategies reinforce each other. On the one hand, if the government assigns students to school units offering markedly differing levels of educational quality, it is only natural that students who have been assigned to low-level schools and their parents would strongly oppose the government's approach. Such students and parents would then push for greater government intervention over schools in order to equalize educational quality across schools. On the other hand, if the government allows students and parents some degree of free choice in the selection of schools, the government would have less justification for intervening in the educational system, since there would be far fewer complaints from students and parents.<sup>1</sup>

When students and parents are not allowed to choose their schools, schools have little incentive to improve the quality of their education because they do not have to worry about competing for students. And the government's control buttressed by the equalization policy has severely reduced school autonomy and local initiatives. Thus, the absence of school choice and the prevalence of gov-

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1. Bak et al. (2002) reassess the equalization policy only in terms of issues relating to school choice, despite the strong correlation between school choice and authoritative control by the government.

ernment control have exacerbated many of the deep-seated educational problems in Korea, including the mushrooming of private tutoring and rote learning.

The organization of this paper is as follows. Section 2 of this paper includes a more detailed evaluation of the equalization policy. Section 3 analyzes the reasons why the equalization policy has been maintained, despite the many problems it has caused. Finally, Section 4 introduces measures designed to reform the equalization policy.

### **Failure of Equalization Policy**

#### *The Effect of the Equalization Policy on Students' Academic Achievement*

Those who assert that the equalization policy has not lowered students' levels of academic achievement often point to the results of the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) conducted by the OECD in 2000. In that particular assessment, the Korean students came in sixth in reading literacy, second in mathematical literacy, and first in science literacy.

However, such high scores in mathematical and scientific literacy mask more fundamental problems of the Korean secondary education. Since parents' spending on private tutoring has been escalated to the level that is almost equivalent to that of public spending on schools in the late 1990s, it is probable that the excellent test scores of Korean students in the PISA could be mainly driven by private tutoring rather than by public education.

A close look at the results of the PISA reveals many more problems concerning Korea's school education system. The percent of Korean students whose scores reached the highest level (Level 5) in reading literacy was only 5.7, thus placing Korea in the lowest grouping along with Greece, Portugal, and Spain. Considering that the average for OECD members was 9.5%, it is clear that the Korean education system is not doing well in educating students with high academic achievement.

Moreover, the result of a PISA survey on students' sense of involvement with their school was even more shocking. The survey asked the following questions: Do you enjoy going to school? Do you feel a sense of belonging to your school? Students in Korea scored the lowest on these questions, along with Poland. The ratio of Korean students with a low sense of belonging to their school was 41.4%, while the average for OECD members was 24.5%.

In order to understand fluctuations in students' levels of academic achievement, an annual evaluation of students' academic achievements should be carried out, and these results must be made public. However, the Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development has refused to publish any related information for fear of revealing the fact that wide gaps between schools persist despite the equalization policy.

Nevertheless, a few research projects comparing students' levels of academic achievement in the equalized and the non-equalized areas have been carried out, despite the limited data.<sup>2</sup> Some studies have concluded that, with the exception of elite students, there is no evidence that students' levels of academic achievement in equalized districts has been lower than those in non-equalized districts. However, the shortcoming of these studies is that they did not fully take into consideration the fact that, while non-equalized areas are concentrated in small and mid-sized cities and rural districts, equalized districts are mostly concentrated in the large metropolitan cities, including Seoul. The levels of academic achievement of students from equalized districts may in fact be the result of the higher education level of their parents, their higher income levels, and their larger investments in private tutoring.

Kim T. et al. (2004), which was based on the Korean National Assessment of Educational Achievement, limited its scope to students from small and mid-sized cities in order to minimize the above-mentioned problems. The study found that the equalization policy lowers

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2. See Kang and Seong (2001), Kim Y. et al. (1995), Kim Y. et al. (1978, 1979), Kim (1998).

the test scores of students by roughly a 0.3 standard deviation.<sup>3</sup> And they showed that the equalization policy harmed students' performance by similar points of test scores across ability distribution.

### **The Equalization Policy and Private Tutoring**

Private tutoring has expanded as a result of the combination of the weakening of school-based education and increasing pressure to enter a better university. As the competition to enter better university has reached extreme proportions, the demands for private tutoring geared to this end have also increased. Since the supply of the quality education cannot keep up with the demand for education, parents and students have had no choice but to turn to private tutoring. Through the application of a uniform set of regulations over schools, the equalization policy has lowered the quality of school education. School education has lagged behind in its competition with private tutoring, and the financial burden associated with private tutoring has rapidly increased.

Of course, there are problems associated with the education system, characterized by excessive and wasteful competition to enter university. While the Korean government has made efforts to reform the entrance exam-oriented education system, it is important to note that the more fundamental reason for the failure of this effort has been the equalization policy. Although the government has attempted to diversify the rules and standards of the entrance exam, improvements to the monolithic entrance exam system cannot be brought about without reforms to the equalization policy itself. Universities cannot select students based on diverse criteria such as recommendations by principals when schools are teaching students under the uniformly controlled setting. The fact that frequent changes have been made to the entrance exam, even while the equalization

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3. Their results imply that the students who are included in the top 20% can reach the top 10% within a year.

policy has been left intact, has not helped to ease the problems. In conclusion, the problems stemming from the equalization policy and the entrance exam-gearred education system should be addressed together in order to reduce parents' financial burden stemming from private tutoring.

Opposing opinions have emerged regarding the reform of the high school equalization policy. Some argue that if the equalization policy were reformed to allow for school choice at the high school level, this would give rise to increased competition over the high school entrance exam, thus increasing the demand for private tutoring even more. However, Kim and Lee (2002a) provided empirical evidence that students from non-equalized areas spent less on private tutoring than students from equalized areas. They concluded that students would continue to strive to enter universities despite any changes to the high school exam because their ultimate goal is to enter a better university, not a better high school. On the other hand, if school choice were allowed, the amount of private tutoring a student receives during high school would eventually decrease as the level of satisfaction with the school increased.

Indeed, even in the current system of very limited school choice, there has been excessive competition to enter independent private schools and specialized schools where school choice is allowed. However, the lack of schools with school choice (less than five percent out of all general high schools) has been the main cause of these problems. With more schools with school choice, we would most likely see an increased number of schools that select students based on their own educational philosophies and curriculums, in addition to schools that select only elite students. If the number of schools offering a choice increased as part of equalization policy reforms, and students were given the option of choosing from a wider variety of school types, the excessive, wasteful competition to enter better high schools would be diminished to a great extent in the long run. Likewise, private tutoring would decrease over time as well, although maybe not right away, given the addictive effects of private tutoring. In addition, greater school choice would be also expected to con-

tribute to the amelioration of the problems of middle-class parents, who have grown discontent with the Korean school system, and are increasingly sending their children overseas to study.

### *The Effect of the Equalization Policy on Educational Equality*

The equalization policy contributed to increasing educational opportunities during the period when Korea required a rapid expansion of the school system. However, once the rapid expansion phase stopped, the equalization policy seems to have worsened educational equality. Lee and Hong (2001) suggested that private tutoring has become the main channel through which the children of the wealthy families can enter elite universities. The reliance on private tutoring has damaged any previous gains in educational equality. If the equalization policy cannot stop the expansion of private tutoring—or worse, actually promotes it—the pursuit of educational equality through the equalization policy will be offset by an increase in private tutoring, a result that is the very opposite of what was intended.

In the United States, concerns about school stratification have often been raised with regard to the question of a wider school choice. If permitted a wider school choice, students with higher socioeconomic backgrounds will always choose to go to elite schools. On the other hand, students who are left behind in the “forgotten” schools might lose the opportunity to learn from their above-average peers in the same classroom. Thus, stratification across schools can contribute to a widening gap in the levels of academic achievement between different schools. In particular, educational equality would be further hampered by school stratification to the extent that parents’ income levels and students’ levels of academic achievement are closely related. However, to date there is no general agreement among scholars whether and to what extent the peer effect can damage the ideal of educational equality.

Kim Tae-jong et al. (2004) have introduced three conclusions out of their empirical analysis regarding the equalization policy. First, the equalization policy, allocating students of widely different academic

levels to the same classrooms, has raised serious problems in terms of interactions between teachers and students. This has made teachers' instruction more difficult and less effective. Second, the peer effect, in which above-average students are expected to have a positive effect on students with lower levels of academic achievement, has not been significant. Third, schools in non-equalized districts face intensified competition to attract better students, making their educational effectiveness much higher than that of schools in equalized areas.

Kim Tae-jong et al. (2004) who based their analysis on the last 30-year distribution of students who entered the College of Social Sciences in Seoul National University, one of the most prestigious universities in Korea, argued that educational inequality has actually gotten worse. Their empirical findings suggest that educational inequality has been worsened because of the proliferation of private tutoring. While students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds have been able to enter Seoul National University through the help of expensive private tutoring, opportunities for students with lower socioeconomic backgrounds have shrunk because they lack financial access to quality private tutoring and quality education in the regular school system is nonexistent.

### **Political Economy of the Equalization Policy**

By limiting school choice and strengthening the government's control over schools, the equalization policy has failed to curb the escalation of private tutoring costs and has even lowered students' academic achievement and the level of educational equality. Thus, the question is, why has the government maintained this policy for the last 30 years?

First of all, reform efforts have focused on the symptoms rather than the deep-seated roots of the problems. Frequent changes in the university entrance exam system and various measures to regulate private education have been tried without reforming the equalization



policy. Aside from the fundamental problems associated with the equalization policy, efforts to ease the problems related to the entrance exam, which have focused on diversifying the types of tests offered, have not brought any real changes to the entrance exam itself. Nevertheless, entrance exam reform has been given top priority, at the expense of reforms to the equalization policy.

Every new government has identified the need to decrease private tutoring as the top priority of educational reform. As Kim and Lee (2002b) point out, the government's strong control over schools was justified as part of its effort to ease the problems of private tutoring. However, contrary to its goals, the policy lowered the diversity and quality of school education, thus resulting in increased discontent of parents and students over the school system, and brought about even more private tutoring.

There is also a need to note that no real improvements have been made to the equalization policy, since certain groups have a vested interest in maintaining it. Because of the equalization policy's tendency to strengthen the government's authoritative control over schools, the bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education and Human Resources have been dragging their feet in implementing reform policies, and have even gone as far as to exercise their power to prevent any changes to the policy. The teachers' union has also supported the equalization policy. As Hoxby (2003b) points out, the labor market for teachers can be regarded as the upstream market that supplies the inputs to the education output of schools. As such, school choice and school autonomy can influence the labor market for teachers. The application of school choice and school autonomy heightens competition among teachers, and this competition has a positive effect on parents and students alike. However, in the short run, the implementation of these two measures may threaten some of the advantages currently enjoyed by teachers. As such, this can be understood as the reason why the teachers' union is in favor of maintaining the equalization policy in its current form. Also, founders of private schools as well as school foundations can also be regarded as having benefited from the equalization policy. They have been able to receive financial

support from the government without competitive pressures, and instead have been subjected to strong control from the government. Moreover, alumni of public schools have strongly opposed the introduction of an “independent” private education system from the very beginning, perhaps because the alumni of the prestigious public high schools wish not to see its good reputation falling behind new private schools that are granted independence.

Nevertheless, we argue that the benefits of the equalization policy, if any, are temporary, and that only a select number of groups have benefited thus far—something that will change once the equalization policy is successfully reformed. A well-designed and carefully-implemented reform of equalization policy can satisfy all parties concerned, including school principals, teachers, and school founders, as well as students and parents—the biggest victims of the equalization policy. This paper maintains that the main reason the equalization policy has not been reformed successfully stems from the unbalanced and ill-defined reform agenda set by the previous governments. More emphasis should be put on school choice and school autonomy.

### *Equalization Policy Reform*

Equalization policy reforms should move beyond simply trying to expand school choice, to employing an approach that incorporates such steps as the information disclosure of the differences between schools, the extension of school autonomy, and the strengthening of the government’s financial support for students with lower levels of academic ability.<sup>4</sup>

First, school choice should be introduced gradually. School choice should be allowed to independent private schools first. Once this is achieved, school choice should be introduced into regular public schools and private schools that are not independent. This does not imply a return to pre-equalization policy days, when school

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4. With regards to the various discussions on the reform of the equalization policy, refer to Bak et al. (2002).

choices were allowed to every school regardless of their public or private status. However, the implementation of school choice should be carried out at a much faster pace, and to a wider segment of schools, than the measures the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development is implementing presently.

Second, in addition to granting more autonomy in the selection of students, it is necessary to increase schools' ability to select their teachers, form their own curriculums, and manage their schools. School autonomy should be first extended to schools that can be selected by students or parents. Next, autonomous school management of teachers, curriculums, and administrative matters should be introduced, even in schools that cannot be freely chosen. A school autonomy system should be introduced to make various school choices possible, and to allow schools to keep up with ever-expanding educational demands. The effectiveness of school choice should not be decreased by, as is currently done in non-equalized areas, simply granting this right, while maintaining uniform regulation over schools.

Third, the quality differences between schools could be reflected in the entrance exam by individual university. If this does not happen, those schools that attempt to raise students' levels of academic achievement might be disadvantaged when it comes to the entrance exam. To promote competition among schools, individual universities should be allowed to have autonomy in weighing quality differences between schools in selecting students. Even if school choice and school autonomy are introduced, if universities are still prohibited from considering the quality differences between the high schools of their applicants, a competitive environment between schools will be unable to take root.

Fourth, important information about school performance should be disclosed in a transparent manner to enable both students and parents to fully exercise their rights to school choice, and to promote desirable competition among schools. The government should push harder for information disclosure on school performance. The information disclosure on school performance should be the first step in

reforms of the equalization policy.

Lastly, the government should strive to decrease the gap between schools, to increase financial support for students with lower levels of academic ability, and to strengthen the responsibilities of schools in educating below-average students. The government should assure school autonomy by introducing the charter school system, as has been done with charter schools in the United States. Thus, the benefits to be gleaned from the improvement of the high school equalization policy should be shared by all students.

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