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Teacher, Leave Those Kids Alone

By Amanda Ripley / Seoul

On a wet Wednesday evening in Seoul, six government employees gather at the office to prepare for a late-night patrol. The mission is as simple as it is counterintuitive: to find children who are studying after 10 p.m. And stop them.

In South Korea, it has come to this. To reduce the country's addiction to private, after-hours tutoring academies (called *hagwons*), the authorities have begun enforcing a curfew — even paying citizens bounties to turn in violators.

(See pictures of Seoul, the world's most connected city.)

The raid starts in a leisurely way. We have tea, and I am offered a rice cracker. Cha Byoung-chul, a midlevel bureaucrat at Seoul's Gangnam district office of education, is the leader of this patrol. I ask him about his recent busts, and he tells me about the night he found 10 teenage boys and girls on a cram-school roof at about 11 p.m. "There was no place to hide," Cha recalls. In the darkness, he tried to reassure the students. "I told them, 'It's the *hagwon* that's in violation, not you. You can go home.'"

Cha smokes a cigarette in the parking lot. Like any man trying to undo centuries of tradition, he is in no hurry. "We don't leave at 10 p.m. sharp," he explains. "We want to give them 20 minutes or so. That way, there are no excuses." Finally, we pile into a silver Kia Sorento and head into Daechi-dong, one of Seoul's busiest *hagwon* districts. The streets are thronged with parents picking up their children. The inspectors walk down the sidewalk, staring up at the floors where *hagwons* are located — above the Dunkin' Donuts and the Kraze Burgers — looking for telltale slivers of light behind drawn shades.

At about 11 p.m., they turn down a small side street, following a tip-off. They enter a shabby building and climb the stairs, stepping over an empty chip bag. On the second floor, the unit's female member knocks on the door. "Hello? Hello!" she calls loudly. A muted voice calls back from within, "Just a minute!" The inspectors glance at one another. "Just a minute" is not the right answer. Cha sends one of his colleagues

downstairs to block the elevator. The raid begins.

(Read about South Korean schools going paperless.)

South Korea's *hagwon* crackdown is one part of a larger quest to tame the country's culture of educational masochism. At the national and local levels, politicians are changing school testing and university admissions policies to reduce student stress and reward softer qualities like creativity. "One-size-fits-all, government-led uniform curriculums and an education system that is locked only onto the college-entrance examination are not acceptable," President Lee Myung-bak vowed at his inauguration in 2008.

But cramming is deeply embedded in Asia, where top grades — and often nothing else — have long been prized as essential for professional success. Before toothbrushes or printing presses, there were civil service exams that could make or break you. Chinese families have been hiring test-prep tutors since the 7th century. Modern-day South Korea has taken this competition to new extremes. In 2010, 74% of all students engaged in some kind of private after-school instruction, sometimes called *shadow education*, at an average cost of \$2,600 per student for the year. There are more private instructors in South Korea than there are schoolteachers, and the most popular of them make millions of dollars a year from online and in-person classes. When Singapore's Education Minister was asked last year about his nation's reliance on private tutoring, he found one reason for hope: "We're not as bad as the Koreans."

In Seoul, legions of students who fail to get into top universities spend the entire year after high school attending *hagwons* to improve their scores on university admissions exams. And they must compete even to do this. At the prestigious Daesung Institute, admission is based (diabolically enough) on students' test scores. Only 14% of applicants are accepted. After a year of 14-hour days, about 70% gain entry to one of the nation's top three universities.

(Read "Asia's Latest Miracle.")

From a distance, South Korea's results look enviable. Its students consistently outperform their counterparts in almost every country in reading and math. In the U.S., Barack Obama and his Education Secretary speak glowingly of the enthusiasm South Korean parents have for educating their children, and they lament how far U.S. students are falling behind. Without its education obsession, South Korea could not have transformed into the economic powerhouse that it is today. (Since 1962 the nation's GDP has gone up about 40,000%, making it the world's 13th largest economy.) But the country's leaders worry that unless its rigid, hierarchical system starts to nurture more innovation, economic growth will stall — and fertility rates will continue to decline as families feel the pressure of paying for all that tutoring. "You Americans see a bright side of the Korean system," Education Minister Lee Ju-ho tells me, "but Koreans are not happy with it."

South Koreans are not alone in their discontent. Across Asia, reformers are pushing to make schools more "American" — even as some U.S. reformers render their own schools more "Asian." In China, universities have begun fashioning new entry tests to target students with talents beyond book learning. And Taiwanese officials recently announced that kids will no longer have to take high-stress exams to get into high school. If South Korea, the apogee of extreme education, gets its reforms right, it could be a model for other societies.

The problem is not that South Korean kids aren't learning enough or working hard enough; it's that they aren't working smart. When I visited some schools, I saw classrooms in which a third of the students slept while the teacher continued lecturing, seemingly unfazed. Gift stores sell special pillows that slip over your forearm to make desktop napping more comfortable. This way, goes the backward logic, you can sleep in class — and stay up late studying. By way of comparison, consider Finland, the only European country to routinely perform as well as South Korea on the test for 15-year-olds conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. In Finland, public and private spending combined is less per pupil than in South Korea, and only 13% of Finnish students take remedial after-school lessons.

See 10 things to do in Seoul.

Koreans have lamented their relative inefficiency for years, and the government has repeatedly tried to humanize the education system — simplifying admissions tests, capping *hagwon* tuition, even going so far as to ban *hagwons* altogether during the 1980s, when the country was under a dictatorship. But after each attempt, the *hagwons* come back stronger. That's because the incentives remain unchanged. South Korean kids gorge themselves on studying for one reason: to get into one of the country's top universities. The slots are too few — and the reward for getting in too great. "Where you attend university haunts you for the rest of your life," says Lee Beom, a former cram-school instructor who now works on reform in the Seoul metropolitan office of education.

But this time, the administration argues, its reforms are targeting not just the symptom of the dysfunction but also the causes. It is working to improve normal public schools by putting teachers and principals through rigorous evaluations — which include opinion surveys by students, parents and peer teachers — and requiring additional training for low-scoring teachers. At the same time, the government hopes to reduce the strain on students. Corporal punishment, an entrenched and formalized ritual in South Korean schools, is now prohibited (although students told me it still happens occasionally). Admissions tests for prestigious, specialized high schools (like foreign-language schools) have been eliminated. Middle schoolers are now judged on the basis of their regular grades and an interview. And 500 admissions officers have been appointed to the country's universities, to judge applicants not only on their test scores and grades but also other abilities.

(Read "Tiger Moms: Is Tough Parenting Really the Answer?")

The Parent Trap

No one defends the status quo in South Korea. "All we do is study, except when we sleep," one high school boy told me, and he was not exaggerating. The typical academic schedule begins at 8 a.m. and ends sometime from 10 p.m. to 1 a.m., depending on the ambition of the student. To be sure, some students opt out of this system — those who go to certain vocational high schools, for example. But most cannot transcend the relentless family and peer pressure to study until they drop from fatigue. "It breaks my heart," another teenage boy tells me, "to see my classmates compete against each other instead of helping each other."

Parents remain the real drivers of the education rat race, and they will be the hardest to convert. Han Yoon-hee, an English teacher at Jeong Bal High School in Ilsan, a suburb of Seoul, says parental anxiety is profound. "I suggest to [my students] that they should quit *hagwons* and focus on school," she says. "But their parents get very nervous when they don't take classes at night. They know other students are taking classes. They have to compete with each other."

Sometimes it's hard to know who is competing with whom — the students or their mothers. In 1964 a school entrance exam contained a question about the ingredients in taffy. But the exam inadvertently included two right answers, only one of which was counted as correct. To protest this unfairness, outraged mothers — not students — began cooking taffy outside government offices using the alternative ingredient. Eventually, the mothers won the resignation of the Vice Education Minister and the superintendent of Seoul, and several dozen students received retroactive admission offers.

Still, the Education Ministry can point to one recent victory in this long fight: spending on private instruction decreased 3.5% in 2010, the first drop since the government began tracking the figure in 2007. Does the decline signal a trend? Well, Koreans still spent 2% of their GDP on tutoring, even with the downtick. Andrew Kim, a very successful instructor at Megastudy, South Korea's largest *hagwon*, says he earned \$4 million last year from online and in-person lectures. He agrees that the system is far from ideal, but so far he has seen no impact from the reforms on his income. "The tougher the measures," he says, "the more resilient *hagwons* become." In response to the government-imposed curfew, for example, many *hagwons* have just put more lessons online for students to buy after hours at home.

(See TIME's special report on what makes a school great.)

Other *hagwons* flout the law, continuing to operate past the curfew — sometimes in disguise. The night of the Daechi-dong raid, the inspectors I am following wait for the door to open. Then they take off their shoes and begin a brisk tour of the place. In a warren of small study rooms with low ceilings and fluorescent lights, about 40 teenagers sit at small, individual carrels. The air is stale. It is a disturbing scene, sort of like a sweatshop for children's brains.

This is technically not a *hagwon* but an after-hours self-study library — at least in theory. Self-study libraries are allowed to stay open past 10 p.m. But the inspectors suspect this is a camouflaged *hagwon*. The students are studying from the same work sheets, and there are a handful of adults who appear to be teachers.

One of them denies any wrongdoing. "We are just doing our own work here," she says indignantly. "We don't teach." Cha, the squad leader, shakes his head. "I've allowed your excuses before, but we're getting too many tips about this place," he says. "It's an open secret in this community that you've been operating illegally."

Afterward, the squad makes a few more stops at other self-study libraries. It finds nothing suspicious. At about midnight, Cha lights a cigarette on a corner and chats with his colleagues. Then they head home for the night, having temporarily liberated 40 teenagers out of 4 million.

— with reporting by Stephen Kim / Seoul

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