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Policy brief: Enhancing public trust in South Korea's education system: Education policy insights from Flanders' education system

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Abstract

South Korea's public education system is widely recognised for its exceptional academic performance, as demonstrated by its high rankings in international assessments such as PISA. However, despite these achievements, public trust—including parental confidence—remains notably low domestically, even with a centralised government education system. In contrast, the education system in Flanders, Belgium, takes a fundamentally different approach. By granting schools significant autonomy and implementing education policies tailored to local needs and characteristics, Flanders aims to enhance both quality and equity of its public education system. This policy brief examines key elements of the Flanders' education system and presents sustainable policy recommendations that align with South Korea's unique cultural and educational context.

Keywords: Education system, educational policy, Flanders, public trust, South Korea

Context

In today's rapidly evolving global education landscape, public trust in education systems is a crucial factor in the success and sustainability of educational reforms (Rosenberg et al., 2021). Recent findings from the Korean Educational Development Institute's (KEDI) national survey on public perception of education highlight the extent of public trust in South Korea's public education system. According to the report, 36.6% of respondents expressed a negative perception of the education system, while only 22.4% viewed it positively (KEDI, 2024, p.91). This gap underscores a significant lack of trust in public education. The issue is even more pronounced in secondary education, where public trust is even lower. The survey found that 42.4% of respondents viewed high school education negatively – more than double the 20.3% who had a positive perception (KEDI, 2024, p.29). These figures reflect not only public trust but also deep-seated concerns regarding the quality and effectiveness of public education in South Korea.

This lack of public trust is further exacerbated by South Korea's exam-driven education culture, which places heavy reliance on the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT or Suneung in Korean) as the primary determinant of university admissions (Jarvis et al., 2020; Yang, 2017). This system reinforces a rigid academic structure that places immense pressure on students and contributes to growing inequality in educational opportunities. As a result, many families turn to private tutoring to supplement public education, further widening socio-economic disparities and weakening trust in the

public education system. This persistent distrust not only weakens confidence in public education, but also increases reliance on private education, deepening socio-economic inequalities and limiting equitable access to quality learning opportunities. This policy brief examines key elements of Flanders' education system to address the challenges facing South Korea's public education and enhance public trust.

What we know & critical analysis

South Korea's centralised education system offers significant strengths in ensuring policy consistency at a national level. The Ministry of Education (MOE) and central government play a dominant role in shaping educational policies through a highly developed bureaucratic system, enabling the implementation of standardised curriculum and policies nationwide (Kim, 2020; Kim et al., 2021). This structure helps maintain educational equity by ensuring that students across different regions receive a standardised education. Additionally, with direct control over funding and infrastructure, the central government provides stable and consistent support for public education, reinforcing system-wide sustainability.

However, South Korea's centralised structure also presents notable challenges. The concentration of decision-making power at the national level limits school and teacher autonomy, making it difficult to implement tailored, locally responsive education policies (Jeong et al., 2017). As policies are designed and enforced centrally, regional education offices and individual schools often lack the flexibility to adapt to the diverse needs of students (Salinas, 2014). This challenge is particularly evident in rural areas of South Korea, where efforts to restructure the curriculum towards student choice remain largely inaccessible in practice. This indicates that rural schools face significant difficulties in offering a broad selection of subjects due to limited teaching staff and infrastructure, making it challenging to implement curriculum diversification effectively (Ministry of Education, 2023a). Furthermore, the rigid application of nationally designed curriculum and operational frameworks restricts schools from experimenting with innovative teaching methods or adopting creative pedagogical approaches. Teachers also face constraints in exercising professional discretion over curriculum and assessment, limiting their ability to adapt lessons to students' unique learning contexts (Skerritt, 2020).

In contrast, Flanders' education system thrives on a balance between autonomy and accountability (European Commission, 2024; OECD, 2022a). Schools in Flanders have considerable freedom to tailor curriculum and teaching methods to local needs, fostering innovation and responsiveness (Shewbridge et al., 2019; OECD, 2015). This autonomy is matched by a rigorous accountability framework, where schools undergo regular inspections and their performance is made public, ensuring high standards are maintained (Flemish Department of Education and Training, 2022).

This balanced approach to education governance appears to contribute to public confidence in education institutions. According to the Flemish Statistical Authority (2025), education institutions in Flanders enjoy the highest level of public trust among various public institutions, with 61% of the population expressing confidence in the education system (Flemish Statistical Authority, 2025). This significantly contrasts with the low trust levels observed in South Korea's public education system, highlighting the potential impact of governance structures on public perception.

South Korea's strong focus on academic success, as demonstrated by its high performance in international assessments such as the PISA result in 2022 (OECD, 2022b), is primarily driven by the high stakes of university entrance exams, the CSAT. This pressure is further reinforced by the perception that a university degree is essential for career success, making South Korea one of the countries with the highest tertiary education attainment rates globally (OECD, 2025). According to OECD data, over 70% of young adults (25–34) hold a tertiary education attainment, making higher education the expected path for most high school students (OECD, 2025). Therefore, the public education system is often perceived as inadequate in preparing students for this exam, prompting many students and parents to seek additional support through private tutoring (Kim & Lee, 2010). As a result, 78.3% of students participate in private tutoring to supplement their schooling (Ministry of Education, 2023b). This heavy dependence on private tutoring has significant implications for educational equity, as access to high-quality tutoring is largely determined by a family's financial resources. Wealthier families can afford more and better tutoring, giving their children a competitive advantage in the CSAT, while lower-income students are at a disadvantage (Choi, 2012). This disparity further exacerbates socio-economic inequalities, reinforcing the gap between students from different economic backgrounds. Data indicates that students from wealthier households benefit the most from private tutoring, widening the socio-economic divide and perpetuating educational disparities (Kim & Lee, 2010; Ministry of Education, 2023b).

Flanders' university admission system allows students with a secondary school diploma to enrol in higher education without a standardised entrance exam, except for certain fields such as medicine, dentistry, arts, and a few science-related programs (Study in Flanders, 2025). This makes Flanders' admission process significantly more accessible and flexible compared to South Korea's exam-driven system. This commitment to an open and flexible admission system is further reflected in Flanders' broader approach to educational equity.

Equity is a cornerstone of the Flemish education system, highlighted by initiatives such as the GOK (Gelijke Onderwijskansen, directly translated as Equal Educational Opportunities) policy, which provides additional resources to schools serving disadvantaged populations (European Commission, 2023). This approach effectively reduces inequality and ensures that all students, regardless of their background, have access to quality education. Moreover, the Flemish education system includes GO! Education, the official education network organised by the Flemish Community. GO! Education operates under principles of neutrality and inclusivity, offering publicly funded education that is accessible to all students. The network is legally required to maintain neutrality concerning religious and philosophical beliefs, ensuring that education remains equitable and inclusive for all (Flemish Government, 2023; OECD, 2015). GO! Education supports a broad, balanced curriculum aimed at fostering well-rounded individuals prepared for active participation in society (GO! Education, 2023).

The contrasting approaches to school choice in Flanders and South Korea offer valuable insights for education policy. In South Korea, secondary school choice is limited, with most students assigned to schools through a lottery system based on their residential area (Hahn, 2018; Ministry of Education, 2023a; OECD, 2018). While selective schools exist, admission is determined by academic performance, making entry highly competitive – similar to the CSAT. As a result, many parents turn to

private tutoring to enhance their children's chances of acceptance to selective schools (Ministry of Education, 2023b). Beyond selective schools, secondary school options are primarily structured around university admission, making vocational education a less preferred alternative. The lack of flexibility in school choice has contributed to increasing parental dissatisfaction and declining trust in the public education system, further reinforcing reliance on private education (Byun & Joo, 2012).

In contrast, Flanders offers greater autonomy in school choice, guided by its 'Freedom of Education' policy, which allows parents to select schools based on educational philosophy, teaching approach, or specialised programs (European Commission, 2024). This autonomy fosters greater parental satisfaction and trust in public education, as families feel empowered to choose schools that align with their values and children's needs (OECD, 2015; Flemish Department of Education and Training, 2022; Penninckx, 2019). Additionally, students can choose between academic (ASO), technical (TSO), vocational (BSO), and arts (KSO) education, with greater flexibility to switch pathways (Vlaanderen, 2022). In contrast to South Korea, vocational education is well-integrated and socially accepted, ensuring that students are not constrained by school rankings. This flexible and inclusive system strengthens public confidence in education and reduces dependence on private alternatives.

Recommendations

1. Expand school autonomy with strategic support

1.1 School-level decision-making autonomy

Schools should be empowered with greater decision-making autonomy to adapt teaching methods to their students' interests and learning levels within their specific educational contexts, fostering a more engaging and student-centred learning environment. By integrating innovative teaching methods and creative pedagogical approaches within a standardised national curriculum, schools can enhance both flexibility and instructional quality. In South Korea, where the Ministry of Education holds centralised control over curriculum design and policy implementation, decentralising decision-making power at the school level could allow greater flexibility in teaching approaches while maintaining national education standards.

2. Curriculum diversification

2.1 Expanding teacher workforce and expertise for the High School Credit System

To effectively implement the recently introduced High School Credit System, the government must increase the number of subject-specialist teachers to accommodate the expansion of diverse course offerings. While this system aims to provide students with greater flexibility in subject selection, a shortage of qualified teachers may lead to existing teachers being required to teach multiple subjects beyond their expertise. This could potentially compromise teaching quality and student learning outcomes. To mitigate this issue, policies should focus on teacher recruitment, specialised training, and resource allocation to ensure that schools can successfully deliver a wide range of subjects without compromising educational quality.

2.2 Strengthening career education and personalised learning

Career education and personalised learning should play a more significant role in public schools. Rather than all students following the same rigid academic path, students should be encouraged to explore diverse career pathways through internship programs, skill-based training, and interdisciplinary courses. By fostering career exploration early on, South Korea's education system can shift away from an exam-centric model and encourage students to pursue paths that align with their individual strengths and interests.

3. Government-funded programs to improve equity and student satisfaction

3.1 Nationwide Small Group Tutoring within public schools

To reduce the heavy reliance on private tutoring and address the resulting educational inequalities, this initiative aims to ensure that all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, have access to quality learning support. A nationwide Small Group Tutoring program within public schools should be introduced to reduce dependence on private tutoring. This would provide government-funded tutoring support after school hours, led by qualified teachers or certified tutors, within public school settings. This would offer supplementary academic support to students who need it most while reducing financial burdens on families and alleviating education inequalities.

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