

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: April 5, 2011

Published in Print: April 6, 2011, as [Excessive Testing Focus Saps Love of Learning](#), [Korean Ex-Official Says](#)

Excessive Test Focus Hurts Love of Learning, Official Says

Former education minister warns against overemphasis

By [Sean Cavanagh](#)

Seattle

A former top education official in academically high-flying South Korea has warned the United States against copying his nation's approach, which he says has grown too test-centered and often detracts from students' love of learning.

Byong Man Ahn, the former minister of education, science, and technology in South Korea, said officials in his country are attempting to scale back the heavy test emphasis and nurture broader student skills, a step some of the United States' other foreign competitors also have taken.

Mr. Ahn made his remarks here during a keynote address March 25 at the annual meeting of the [Association for Education Finance and Policy](#).

"Although the pain of memorizing is unavoidable for young students to acquire new knowledge, they should also be motivated by the pleasure of creative expression," Mr. Ahn told the audience. "However, we force the students to memorize so much that they experience pain rather than [the] pleasure [of] acquiring knowledge through the learning process."

There is a long tradition in South Korea of parents' pushing their children to excel academically, but that parental determination can be counterproductive, Mr. Ahn told the audience. That pressure contributes to families' willingness to pay for private tutoring services, or *hagwons*, he said. ("[Out-of-School Classes Provide Edge](#)," April 22, 2009.)

South Korea is typically one of the highest-scoring nations on international assessments. President Barack Obama and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have pointed to the Asian nation's strong performance as evidence of how far U.S. students have to go to compete in the global economy. In this year's state of the union speech, Mr. Obama also said South Korean teachers "are known as 'nation builders,'" and said, "Here in America, it's time we treated the people who educate our children with the same level of respect."

But Mr. Ahn, who now serves as vice chairman of South Korea's National Advisory Council on Education, Science, and Technology, said he is often "astonished" by the praise heaped on his country's education system by the rest of the world, given the steady criticism leveled at schools by the nation's residents.

[← Back to Story](#)



Seeking Balance

South Korean officials are now taking steps to try to de-emphasize exams, Mr. Ahn said, which include working with universities to retool college-entrance procedures to encourage institutions to judge applicants on having diverse talents.

And throughout the school system, South Korea is seeking to reduce the number of required courses and academic content for students, and give them more choice over their studies, he said. Officials are also trying to reduce families' dependence on private tutoring by establishing free, online lectures for students that cover material on college-entrance exams.

Near the end of his remarks, Mr. Ahn also cautioned American policymakers and the public against praising the "educational zeal" of South Korean parents. Parental involvement in education is critical to student success, Mr. Ahn said, and policymakers are absolutely right to encourage it. But he called for balance.

"Extreme parental pressure is not something to be envied," he said. "The Korean case illustrates it is possible to have too much of a good thing.

Vol. 30, Issue 27, Page 18