

South Korean Official Advises Caution in Following His Country's Model

By [Sean Cavanagh](#) on March 27, 2011 7:53 AM | [3 Comments](#) | [Recommend](#)

A former top education official in academically high-flying South Korea has warned against U.S. officials attempting to copy his nation's approach, saying it has grown too test-centered and often detracts from students' love of learning.

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Byong Man Ahn, the former minister of education, science, and technology in South Korea, said government 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 during a keynote address Friday at the annual meeting of the [Association for Education Finance and Policy](#), in Seattle.

"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 pleasure [of] acquiring knowledge through the learning process."

There is a long tradition of parents in South Korea pushing their children to excel academically, but that parental determination can be counterproductive, Mr. Ahn told his audience. The pressure to succeed in school can be seen in families' willingness to pay for private tutoring services, or *hagwons*, he noted. (I took a look South Korea's private education industry in a 2009 [Education Week story](#).)

Much of the pressure comes from students' desire to score well on college entrance exams, which is "all important" in admissions, he added.

South Korea is traditionally one of highest scoring nations on international assessments like the Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA, and the Trends in International Math and Science Study, or TIMSS. President Obama and 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.

Mr. Ahn, who now serves as vice chairman of South Korea's National Advisory Council on Education, Science, and Technology, said he was often "astonished" by the praise heaped on his country's education system by the outside world. That's partly because South Korean leaders and the public are often their school systems' biggest critics.

South Korea is not the only Asian nation to attempt to reduce its emphasis on testing. Chinese officials have also sought to [revamp curriculum and teaching](#) to instill a broader set of skills in students.

South Korean officials have taken several steps to try to de-emphasize exams, Mr. Ahn said. The government, in cooperation with universities, is retooling college entrance procedures to encourage institutions to judge applicants on having diverse talents and interests, a movement that Mr. Ahn said is "gaining momentum."

And throughout the school system, South Korea is seeking to reduce the number of required courses and academic material students are expected to cover, and give them more choice over their academic studies, he said.

National leaders are also trying to create more educational options for students, particularly in rural areas. South Korea is establishing more boarding-style high schools in rural areas, Mr. Ahn said, that focus on building skills that are valuable in their home communities and that will allow them to secure jobs directly after

graduation.

South Korean officials are also trying to reduce families' dependency on private tutoring. They're establishing free, online lectures for students that cover content that students are likely to see on college entrance exams. The idea is to give students from more diverse economic backgrounds the same access to high-quality academic services.

Near the end of his remarks, Mr. Ahn also cautioned against American policymakers and the public praising the "educational zeal" of South Korean parents, and he said it was a mistake to suggest that "American parents should be more like Korean parents."

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has urged U.S. parents to become more involved in education. In a **speech last year**, he noted the contrast between South Korea's challenge in trying to get parents to dial down the pressure and some American parents' lack of engagement in their children's education. (To be fair, Mr. Duncan wasn't calling for grafting the South Korean parenting model on U.S. households.)

Mr. Ahn said that parental involvement in education is critical to student success, and policymakers were 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."

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