

Teacher, Leave Those Kids Alone
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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.

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