

The Causes of Overheating of Private Education in the Republic of Korea and its Impact on Public Education

Jianying Lou, Yanwei Geng, Zhiqi Cheng

College of Foreign Languages, Hebei University Of Economics And Business, Shijiazhuang 050081, Hebei, China

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Abstract: The overheating of private education in the Republic of Korea has become a critical issue affecting the educational ecosystem, closely linked to sociocultural factors, educational systems, and market demands. This excessive expansion of private education has not only altered the allocation of educational resources but also significantly undermined the authority, fairness, and quality improvement of public education. By analyzing the specific causes of this overheating in the Republic of Korea private education, this paper systematically examines its impacts on various aspects of public education and proposes targeted solutions. The study aims to provide insights into understanding the challenges within the Republic of Korea's education system and exploring optimization pathways, ultimately contributing to the development of a more balanced and sustainable educational model.

Keywords: private education in Republic of Korea; education overheating; public education; educational equity; educational resource distribution

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1. Foreword

As global competition for talent intensifies and demand for higher education surges, the severe shortage of higher education resources has made privatization an inevitable trend. The prevalence of private education in the Republic of Korea has become a focal point of societal concern. While the scale of private education continues to expand with persistently high per capita costs, participation rates have been declining annually. This overexpansion has led to weakened student self-discipline, hindered development of versatile talents, exacerbated educational inequality, and resulted in significant waste of national economic resources. Root causes include parental dissatisfaction with school quality, societal pursuit of prestigious universities, higher private education ROI, and structural contradictions in social transformation. A thorough analysis of the causes behind the Republic of Korea's overheated private education sector and its specific impacts on public education is crucial for understanding the nation's educational landscape. Such insights also provide valuable lessons for other countries and regions facing similar challenges, carrying both theoretical significance and practical relevance.

2. Causes of overheating in private education in the Republic of Korea

2.1. Socio-cultural drivers

The long-standing “education-first” culture in the Republic of Korea society serves as the root cause of the overheated

private education sector. In Korean culture, education is regarded as the core pathway for individuals to achieve social mobility and families to gain prestige, which drives families to invest heavily in their children's education. From a societal evaluation perspective, academic credentials dominate career choices and social status recognition, with high-quality educational experiences becoming nearly essential prerequisites for entering elite industries. This cultural atmosphere compels parents to relentlessly pursue superior educational resources. When public education fails to meet the demand for differentiated, high-quality education, private institutions naturally become the preferred choice, thereby fueling the continuous expansion of the private education market.

2.2. Limitations of the education system itself

The standardized nature of the Republic of Korea's public education system has become a key internal factor contributing to the overheating of private education. While the unified curriculum, teaching schedules, and evaluation standards implemented in public education ensure basic educational quality, they fail to meet students' individual learning needs. Many students require supplementary tutoring due to mismatches between their academic foundations, interests, and standardized teaching approaches. Moreover, the limited coverage and depth of college entrance exam preparation in public education fall short of meeting students' demands during critical periods like securing admission to top junior high schools, high schools, and universities, leading to a surge in demand for targeted tutoring. Additionally, disparities in public education resources between regions and schools, coupled with the scarcity of premium educational resources, have forced parents seeking better education for their children to turn to private institutions. This trend has further exacerbated the overheating of the private education market^[1].

3. The impact of overheating of private education on public education in the Republic of Korea

3.1. Weakened authority of public education

The excessive expansion of private education has significantly undermined the authority of public education. As private institutions prioritize academic advancement and offer tailored tutoring, many students and parents increasingly view them as crucial for boosting grades, while reducing public education to a supplementary role. In daily learning, students tend to focus more on curriculum content from private schools, showing diminished engagement in public school classrooms. Some students even adopt passive attitudes in public classes, relying solely on private institutions for their education. This phenomenon challenges the central position of public education, erodes public trust in its effectiveness, and ultimately weakens its dominant role within the educational system, thereby compromising the proper implementation of public education policies^[2].

3.2. Unbalanced equity in public education

The overheating of private education has further exacerbated equity issues in the Republic of Korea's public education system. Private institutions typically require higher financial investment, allowing students from better-off families to access more abundant and high-quality educational resources, while those with limited means are forced to rely on public education due to financial constraints. This disparity creates a divide in academic performance and college admission competition among students from different economic backgrounds. Students from affluent families leverage the advantages of private education to excel in entrance exams and gain admission to elite schools, whereas those with limited resources struggle due to lack of supplementary tutoring^[3]. Moreover, premium private educational resources are predominantly concentrated in economically developed urban areas, while rural and remote regions suffer from lower-quality private education, further widening regional disparities in educational resources. This situation makes it increasingly difficult to achieve the fairness goals originally pursued by public education, thereby exacerbating social stratification.

3.3. The improvement of public education quality is hindered

The overheating of private education has hindered the improvement of public education quality. From the perspective of teachers, private educational institutions offer higher salaries and more flexible working mechanisms, leading some outstanding public school teachers to switch to private institutions, resulting in a brain drain of quality educators from public schools. Meanwhile, public school teachers face challenges with low student engagement due to students' reliance on private education, which dampens teaching enthusiasm and consequently lowers classroom teaching quality. Regarding public education reform, the overexpansion of private education has caused excessive resource allocation to private sectors. Although government investment in public education has increased, the optimization and upgrading of public educational resources lag behind the rapid expansion of private education. Additionally, to compete with private education, the public education system has had to adjust its curriculum content and focus more on college entrance exams, deviating from the goal of quality-oriented education. This trend restricts the development of comprehensive skills and innovative thinking in public education, ultimately impeding the overall improvement of public education quality^[4].

4. Ways to deal with the overheating of private education in the Republic of Korea

4.1. Optimize the public education system and enhance its competitiveness

Enhancing the quality and relevance of public education is a core measure to address the overheating of private education. The Republic of Korea government should increase investment in public education, not only by boosting fiscal support for hardware upgrades like teaching facilities and teacher training, but also by strengthening software development. This includes introducing advanced educational technologies and building digital teaching platforms to enable students across regions to share quality resources. Such efforts will optimize the allocation of public educational resources, narrow disparities between regions and schools, and ensure balanced distribution of high-quality public education. In curriculum design, we should break free from standardized teaching constraints by offering personalized and diversified course options. Beyond creating specialized courses based on students' interests and providing targeted after-school tutoring for those with learning difficulties, a flexible curriculum system should be established. Students can autonomously select course modules according to their learning pace and development plans, further meeting diverse academic needs. Simultaneously, the evaluation system for public education must be reformed beyond exam-centric assessments. A multi-dimensional evaluation framework should be developed that considers academic performance, comprehensive qualities, and innovative capabilities, incorporating social practice, artistic literacy, and sports skills into evaluations. Through diversified assessment approaches, excessive reliance on college entrance exams can be reduced, thereby decreasing demand for private education.

4.2. Strengthen the standardization and guidance of private education

Effective regulation of the private education market is crucial to curb its overheating. The Republic of Korea government should improve relevant laws and regulations, clarifying standards for private educational institutions' operations, curriculum design, fee structures, and quality evaluation systems. Detailed regulatory measures should be further refined, such as establishing qualification standards for teachers, requiring corresponding teaching certifications and mandatory professional training. Simultaneously, fee caps should be implemented to prevent disguised price hikes under various pretexts, thereby avoiding disorderly expansion and cutthroat competition in the sector. During supervision, enhanced content review mechanisms should be enforced to prevent excessive emphasis on exam-oriented education while guiding these institutions to fulfill some functions of quality education. A curriculum filing system could be established, mandating private institutions to submit course outlines and teaching materials for approval by education authorities before implementation, ensuring content aligns with educational principles and students' developmental needs while complementing public education. Additionally, an information disclosure system should be created, requiring regular publication of institutional qualifications, teaching quality, and fee structures. A unified online platform could facilitate

instant access for parents and students, alongside third-party evaluators providing objective assessments of educational quality. These results should be publicly disclosed to help families make informed choices, avoid blind investments, and standardize the private education market.

4.3. Change social education concepts and create a rational education atmosphere

Changing societal misconceptions about education is key to fundamentally addressing the overheating of private education. The Republic of Korea authorities should utilize multiple channels, including traditional media like TV, newspapers, and online platforms, along with community education initiatives. By distributing public service advertisements and educational articles, they should also organize experts to conduct community lectures and seminars. These efforts aim to convey proper educational philosophies to parents and students, guiding the public to adopt correct educational values that emphasize holistic personal development rather than solely focusing on academic advancement or social mobility. Schools and families should strengthen collaboration by jointly cultivating students' self-directed learning abilities and comprehensive qualities. Schools could establish regular parent education programs to teach scientific parenting methods, helping parents master effective communication techniques and understand student development patterns, thereby preventing excessive reliance on private education due to parental anxiety. Families should focus on creating a supportive home learning environment, prioritize students' mental health, avoid imposing excessive academic pressure, and reduce dependence on external tutoring services. Meanwhile, society should establish a diversified talent evaluation system. Beyond reducing the emphasis on academic credentials in career development and social status recognition, it is crucial to prioritize non-academic factors such as personal capabilities and practical experience. Policy guidance should encourage enterprises to adopt skill assessments and performance evaluations during recruitment, rather than relying solely on academic qualifications. Additionally, greater recognition and promotion should be given to skilled professionals and innovative talents, establishing role models across various fields to foster a social atmosphere of "selecting talents without rigid criteria." This approach aims to fundamentally reduce excessive parental and student pursuit of private education.

5. Epilogue

The overheating of private education in the Republic of Korea stems from the combined effects of sociocultural factors, educational systems, and market demands. This trend has undermined the authority, fairness, and quality improvement of public education, severely impacting the balanced development of the Republic of Korea's educational system. To address this issue, comprehensive reforms are required across multiple dimensions: optimizing the public education framework, regulating the private education market, and transforming societal educational perceptions. Through systematic reforms, we must reaffirm the central role of public education while achieving coordinated development between private and public education. Only by establishing a balanced, equitable, and high-quality education system can we meet society's demand for quality education, provide robust talent support for the Republic of Korea's sustainable development, and offer valuable insights for other countries and regions facing similar educational challenges.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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