

Pandemic widens learning gap in education-obsessed S. Korea

By **Hyung-Jin Kim**
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — When South Korea began its delayed school year with remote learning in April, that spelled trouble for low-income students who rely on public education, get easily distracted, and cannot afford cram schools or tutors used by many in the education-obsessed country.

Students like Han Shin Bi, who struggled to concentrate.

“Online classes were really inconvenient,” said Han, a high school senior in Seoul. “I ended up with a bad grade (in an exam) because I didn’t really focus on studying while online. It was a blow.”

Like legions of other students around the world, kids in South Korea are struggling with remote learning, taking online classes off-and-on from home as the nation battles the coronavirus pandemic.

Experts say the reduced interaction with teachers, digital distractions, and technical difficulties are widening the education achievement gap among students in South Korea, leaving those less well off, like Han, at even more of a disadvantage.

Students who were doing well before the pandemic, often from middle- and upper-class families, have an easier time keeping their grades up and plenty of family support if they run into trouble.

In South Korea, Asia’s fourth-largest economy, which university you attend can determine nearly everything about your future: career prospects, social status, and even who you can marry.

“One’s academic background doesn’t always match his or her capacity. But an incorrect view that they are the same is prevalent in this society,” said Gu



Bonchang, a policy director at the World Without Worries About Shadow Education, an education NGO in Seoul.

A government survey of 51,021 teachers released last month showed about 80% of respondents saw a widening gap between their strongest and weakest students. To address the problem, the Education Ministry has hired part-time instructors to help 29,000 underprivileged students at elementary schools. Some teachers have been assigned to work one-on-one temporarily with about 2,300 high schoolers who are struggling.

With teachers mostly posting prerecorded lectures online, Han couldn’t ask questions in real time, and her family cannot afford to hire a tutor or send her to a cram school, like most of her friends.

“I don’t want to compare myself with others,” she said. “But if I had had lots of money, I think I could have learned many things (after school) ... and I actually

wanted to learn English and Chinese at cram schools.”

Even some model students say distance learning is tough.

“I felt I was trapped at the same place and I got lots of psychological stress,” said Ma Seo-bin, a high school senior at an elite, expensive foreign language school near Seoul. “What was most difficult is that I didn’t have my friends with me, so it was hard to be dedicated to my studies.”

When South Korea resumed in-person classes in phased steps in May, authorities let high-school seniors return first to allow them to prepare for the national university entrance exam in December — a crucial test in their lives. Younger students returned later, but in a limited manner that still requires most of them to regularly take online classes at home.

In June, when hundreds of thousands took a nationwide test to practice for the December exam, the number of students

INCREASING INEQUITY. Han Shin Bi, a high school senior in Seoul, demonstrates how to take on-line classes after an interview in Seoul, South Korea. “Online classes were really inconvenient,” said Han. Experts say the reduced interaction with teachers, digital distractions, and technical difficulties are widening the education achievement gap among students in South Korea, leaving those less well off, like Han, at even more of a disadvantage. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)

with high-ranking scores increased in the three key subjects — Korean, English, and math — suggesting questions were easier than a previous test.

But those with the worst scores also increased, suggesting that “educational polarization has become severe,” lawmaker Kang Minjung, a member of parliament’s education committee, said in a statement.

Such disparities may deepen as the pandemic drags on, since the crisis is worsening inequality between the haves and have-nots, said Lim Sung-ho, head of the private Jongro Academy in Seoul.

A government survey of tens of thousands of parents and teachers last year found that 75% of South Korean students participate in some form of private education, spending an average of \$377 a month. The survey by the Education Ministry and the national statistics office shown middle- and higher-income families spent five times more for such private education than lower-income families.

Ma’s parents — who both work for a private English institute — said they pay about 2 million won (\$1,750) a month for their daughter’s private education, and 20 million won (\$17,550) a year for her schooling and dorm fee. While it is a burden, they said it’s worth the expense given how important education is to her

Continued on page 4

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