



Governing Shadow Education: Private Tutoring, Educational Inequality, and Policy Limitations in South Korea

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Abstract:

Private supplementary tutoring, including the widespread use of *hagwons*, has become deeply embedded in South Korea's education system. Over several decades, the government has tried several approaches. These include regulation, publicly supported alternatives, and admissions reform. Yet, private education remains widespread and financially burdensome. Total expenditure reached 29.2 trillion Korean won (KRW) in 2024 before declining to 27.5 trillion KRW in 2025, while participation fell from 80.0 percent to 75.7 percent. This article examines why private supplementary tutoring remains strongly institutionalized despite sustained policy intervention. The article draws on government reports, national statistics, and academic research. It argues that policy has often regulated private education without sufficiently addressing the conditions that sustain household demand. These include competitive admissions, unequal educational opportunities, and families' efforts to protect their children's future prospects. The article concludes that shadow education should be understood as an interdependent institution shaped by competitive pressures and inequalities of formal education. Sustainable reform therefore requires coordination among education policy, family support, and efforts to reduce broader inequality.

Keywords: shadow education, private tutoring, hagwon, educational inequality, education governance, South Korea

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1. Introduction

Private supplementary tutoring has become a persistent policy challenge in South Korean education. In Korea, this form of tutoring is commonly called *sagyo-yuk*, or private education. It includes *hagwons*, individual tutoring, and online programs (Bae & Choi, 2024; Kim, 2016). Although these services operate outside regular schools, they remain closely connected to formal curricula and selection processes. Bray (1999) describes this relationship through the concept of “shadow education,” emphasizing that private tutoring follows and changes in response to the formal system. When formal curricula or admissions policies change, shadow education changes with them (Bray, 1999; Bray & Lykins, 2012).

South Korea provides a significant example of how private tutoring can become institutionalized within a national education system. The country’s rapid economic development was closely connected to expanded schooling. Educational credentials also gained importance and became widely viewed as paths to social mobility, secure employment, and improved economic status (Hannum et al., 2019; Kim, 2016). The expansion of higher education did not remove competition; instead, much of it shifted toward admission to a relatively small group of highly regarded universities (Byun & Park, 2017; Kim, 2016). These expectations helped sustain demand for educational opportunities beyond the regular school day.

Recent statistics illustrate both the scale and the changing pattern of private education. Total expenditure among school students reached 29.2 trillion Korean won (KRW) in 2024. The participation rate reached 80.0 percent (Statistics Korea [KOSTAT], 2025). In 2025, total expenditure declined to approximately 27.5 trillion KRW. Participation fell to 75.7 percent, and average weekly participation decreased from

7.6 to 7.1 hours per student (Ministry of Data and Statistics [MODS], 2026). Elementary students continued to record the highest participation rate at 84.4 percent, followed by middle-school students at 73.0 percent and high-school students at 63.0 percent (MODS, 2026).

These results show that private education declined in 2025 but remained widely used across the school system. The reductions in expenditure and participation are notable, particularly after several years of rising costs. However, participation still involved more than three-quarters of all students and more than four-fifths of elementary students. Private education therefore continues to play a routine role in how many Korean families organize their children's learning, even as participation and expenditure fluctuate (MODS, 2026).

Private education in Korea is often explained through strong parental aspirations, the social value placed on education, and competition for university admission (Bae & Choi, 2024; Kim, 2016; Kim & Lee, 2010). These explanations identify important features of the Korean context, but an emphasis on parental behavior alone can overlook the institutional environment within which households make decisions. Parents do not make educational choices in isolation; their responses are connected to university stratification, employment outcomes, and uncertainty about what students need to remain competitive (Byun & Park, 2017; OECD, 2024).

Building on these explanations, this article makes a governance-centered argument. Shadow education is better understood as a governance problem arising from the interaction of educational institutions, household decision-making, and policy design. It asks:

Why does private supplementary education remain strongly institutionalized in South Korea despite decades of regulation and efforts to strengthen public education?

The article argues that Korean policy has often focused on controlling the visible operation of private education. These efforts have included restrictions on providers, changes to admissions and examinations, and the expansion of publicly supported alternatives (Choi & Choi, 2016; Kim & Chang, 2010; Ministry of Education [MOE], 2023). Such measures can address excessive costs and unfair practices, but they do not fully change the conditions that sustain household demand. Competitive selection, unequal educational opportunities, and families' concerns about protecting their children's future prospects continue to sustain demand for private education (Bae & Choi, 2024; Byun & Park, 2017; Kim & Lee, 2010).

This argument does not suggest that government policy has been entirely unsuccessful. The decline in expenditure and participation reported for 2025 deserves careful consideration. Expanded public after-school and care programs may have reduced the need for some forms of private education (Bae et al., 2010; MOE, 2024). Nevertheless, the aggregate survey data do not establish how much of the decline resulted from particular interventions (MODS, 2026). Changes in the student population, household economic conditions, and family preferences may also have contributed. The 2025 results should therefore be understood as an important development rather than conclusive evidence that the underlying demand for private education has been resolved.

The article contributes to broader discussions of education governance by showing that shadow education should not be treated simply as an external commercial activity. It has an interdependent relationship with formal education. Private providers respond to changes in curricula and admissions, while policymakers seek to regulate their effects on students and households (Bray, 1999; Bray & Lykins, 2012). Government reforms may therefore change the form of private education without eliminating the competitive pressures that sustain it.

The following sections define shadow education and explain the article's analytical approach before examining the structural conditions sustaining demand, the distributional consequences of private tutoring, and the limitations of major policy responses. The discussion then considers the wider implications for education governance.

2. Shadow Education and Its Institutionalization in Korea

Shadow education generally refers to fee-based instruction in academic subjects that takes place outside regular schooling and supplements the formal education system (Bray, 1999; Bray & Lykins, 2012). It includes private academies and individual tutoring. It may also include online instruction, examination preparation, language education, and specialized admissions services (Bae & Choi, 2024; Bray & Kwo, 2014; Bray & Zhang, 2023). The term “shadow” is useful because the content, scale, and organization of private tutoring depend heavily on developments within formal education. Changes in curricula or grading practices can alter the services offered by private providers. Examination and admissions reforms can have the same effect (Bray, 1999; Bray & Lykins, 2012).

In South Korea, the growth of shadow education is closely connected to postwar educational expansion. Industrialization and rising competition for secondary and higher education also shaped its development. As schooling expanded and educational credentials became more important for employment and social mobility, private tutoring developed as a strategy for improving students' positions within the formal selection system (Bae & Choi, 2024; Kim, 2016; Park et al., 2016). Private education consequently developed alongside Korean schooling. It responds to the curricula, examinations, and

admissions processes that shape formal education (Bae & Choi, 2024; Bray, 1999; Kim, 2016).

The *hagwon* industry now provides services ranging from basic academic support to highly specialized preparation for selective schools and universities. Students may use private education for remediation or advanced study. Others seek examination preparation or individualized admissions guidance. Its role therefore extends beyond additional instruction to include acceleration, specialization, and information that families believe may improve a student's competitive position (Bae & Choi, 2024; Kim, 2016).

Three interconnected conditions help explain this institutionalization. Competition over access to highly regarded institutions increases the perceived consequences of academic performance; unequal household resources shape the intensity and type of support families can purchase; and uncertainty encourages parents to use tutoring as a form of educational risk management (Bae & Choi, 2024; Byun & Park, 2017; Kim, 2016; Kim & Lee, 2010). As participation becomes widespread, private education may appear necessary even to families that question its effectiveness or dislike its financial and emotional costs.

Shadow education should therefore be understood as a governance problem rather than only as a market outcome. The state regulates schools, private tutoring, examinations, and universities through different policies and administrative systems (Bray & Lykins, 2012; Choi & Choi, 2016). Families, however, experience these areas as one interconnected educational environment. A policy change in one part of the system may therefore redirect demand elsewhere rather than reduce private education overall.

For example, reducing the importance of one examination may redirect demand toward other admissions requirements, while restrictions on *hagwon* operating hours may

change schedules without removing the incentive to seek tutoring. Publicly funded after-school programs may provide useful academic support and reduce some household expenditure while having less influence on demand for highly specialized examination or admissions preparation (Bae et al., 2010; Choi & Choi, 2016; Kim & Chang, 2010; Lubienski & Lee, 2013).

These patterns help explain why private education has remained resilient despite repeated regulation. Understanding its institutionalization requires attention not only to the tutoring market but also to the competitive and unequal education system to which that market responds.

3. Analytical Approach and Sources

This article uses a qualitative policy-review approach to examine why private supplementary education remains strongly institutionalized in South Korea. The article does not estimate the causal effect of a single intervention. Instead, it brings together academic research and official statistics with government and international reports. These sources are used to identify recurring relationships among policy design, educational competition, household behavior, and inequality.

The academic literature was selected to examine the historical development of shadow education and the conditions shaping family demand. It also addresses links to student achievement and inequality, as well as the effects and limits of government regulation. Particular attention was given to research on South Korea, while comparative and international studies were used to clarify broader concepts and place the Korean experience within a wider policy context. The review therefore functions as an

integrative and policy-oriented analysis rather than a systematic literature review. It does not claim to include every study published on Korean private education.

Official statistical evidence is drawn primarily from the annual Private Education Expenditures Survey of Elementary, Middle and High School Students (KOSTAT, 2025; MODS, 2026). The surveys report total and average expenditure as well as participation rates and weekly hours. They also show differences by school level, household income, and region. The analysis uses the 2024 and 2025 results to examine recent changes in the scale and pattern of private education. The most recent data cover the 2025 calendar year and were released in March 2026.

Government policy documents and related studies were reviewed to identify the principal instruments used to reduce dependence on private education. For analytical purposes, these responses were grouped into four broad areas: direct regulation of tutoring providers; publicly supported alternatives, including after-school and care programs; reforms to assessment and university admissions; and targeted measures intended to reduce regional or socioeconomic disparities. These categories are used to compare the objectives of different policies rather than to suggest that each initiative belongs exclusively to one area.

The sources were reviewed thematically around three questions. First, how has private education been defined and framed as a policy problem? Second, do government responses primarily regulate the supply and operation of private tutoring, or do they address the conditions that sustain household demand? Third, to what extent do the policies reduce educational inequality rather than redirecting private investment toward different services or forms of preparation? Policies were considered in relation to both their stated objectives and the assumptions they make about why families participate in private education.

OECD publications were used selectively to provide context on tertiary attainment and instructional time. They also offer evidence on labor-market outcomes, household pressures, and other conditions connected to educational competition. These sources were not treated as direct measures of private tutoring. Instead, they were used to situate private education within the broader institutional and socioeconomic environment in which Korean households make educational decisions.

This approach has several limitations. First, the analysis relies on published research, policy documents, and aggregate statistics. It does not include interviews with students or parents. It also does not include interviews with teachers, policymakers, or *hagwon* operators. It therefore cannot directly capture how individuals interpret particular policies or make decisions about tutoring. Second, official figures may omit some informal or unregistered instruction (Bray & Kwo, 2014). Third, changes between 2024 and 2025 cannot be attributed to a single policy without further causal analysis. They may reflect demographic change or household economic conditions. Changes in public provision and family behavior may also have contributed.

The article therefore treats recent statistical changes cautiously and does not present them as evidence of the success or failure of any one intervention. Despite these limitations, the combined evidence provides a useful basis for examining why shadow education has remained resilient. It also helps identify how its role within South Korean education may be changing.

4. Structural Conditions Sustaining Demand

4.1 Competitive admissions and institutional hierarchy

Competition for admission to selective universities remains one of the strongest conditions sustaining private education in South Korea. The expansion of higher education transformed university attendance from an opportunity available to a relatively small proportion of the population into a common educational expectation (Hannum et al., 2019; OECD, 2025a). Wider participation, however, did not eliminate institutional hierarchy. Korean universities continue to differ in reputation and selectivity. They also vary in location, resources, and perceived labor-market value (Byun & Park, 2017; OECD, 2026).

Competition therefore concerns not only whether students enter higher education but also which institution they attend. Students and families may view admission to a highly regarded university as an important route toward secure employment and social mobility (Byun & Park, 2017; OECD, 2026). This perception is reinforced by labor-market differences in wages, employment stability, and working conditions between large and small firms and between regular and nonregular employment (OECD, 2024). Educational credentials consequently carry implications that extend beyond academic attainment.

Private education providers respond closely to these incentives. *Hagwons* and other services offer examination preparation and advanced study. They may also provide essay or interview coaching and guidance on admissions requirements. Their programs can also change rapidly when the government or universities revise curricula, examinations, or selection procedures. Private education is therefore able to follow shifts in the criteria through which competitive advantage is pursued (Bae & Choi, 2024; Bray & Lykins, 2012; Kim, 2016).

This adaptability helps explain why admissions reform does not necessarily reduce private education. When the importance of one selection measure declines, families may redirect their attention and resources toward another. A system centered on standardized

examinations may encourage test preparation. Greater emphasis on school records or written applications may instead create demand for individualized guidance and interview coaching. The form of private education may change even when the underlying competition remains largely unchanged (Bae & Choi, 2024; Choi & Choi, 2016).

4.2 Educational aspirations and parental risk management

South Korean families have historically invested heavily in education because of its association with economic advancement and intergenerational mobility (Hannum et al., 2019; Kim, 2016). The country's developmental experience strengthened the belief that educational achievement could improve both individual opportunities and family circumstances. Private educational investment, however, is not driven by aspiration alone; it may also help parents manage uncertainty and reduce the perceived risk that their children will fall behind (Bae & Choi, 2024; Kim, 2016).

Parents cannot always know whether a particular *hagwon* or tutoring program will produce better examination results. Nevertheless, nonparticipation may appear risky when classmates are receiving additional instruction or studying material before it is introduced at school. Families may therefore invest in private education not because they are certain that it will provide an advantage, but because they are uncertain about the consequences of doing without it (Bae & Choi, 2024; Kim, 2016).

Private education may also provide information that families find difficult to obtain elsewhere. Admissions processes can involve changing requirements and multiple application pathways. Families may also need to understand school records, examinations, interviews, and institution-specific expectations (Bae & Choi, 2024). Families with access to specialized guidance may feel better prepared to navigate these processes, while those without such access may experience greater uncertainty. The

value of private education can therefore lie partly in interpreting the formal system for families, not only in providing academic instruction.

Hagwons may also provide structured schedules and study routines. Some offer supervision and specialized guidance (Bae & Choi, 2024; Kim, 2016). These functions help explain why a public alternative offering only general learning content may not fully replace private education. To influence household decisions, public provision may also need to address the organizational and informational support that families seek.

4.3 Formal instructional time and supplementary learning

Korea invests substantially in education, and its students generally demonstrate strong academic performance (OECD, 2025a). At the same time, compulsory classroom hours are lower than OECD averages. Korean primary students receive approximately 655 hours of compulsory instruction per year, compared with an OECD average of 804 hours; lower-secondary students receive approximately 842 hours, compared with 909 hours across the OECD. Korean students also devote considerable time to learning outside regular school hours (OECD, 2025a).

These figures should not be interpreted as evidence that Korean schools are deficient or that fewer compulsory hours directly cause private tutoring. Countries organize school calendars and curricula differently. Classroom hours alone therefore do not indicate educational quality (OECD, 2025a). Nevertheless, lower formal instructional time may interact with demanding curricular and admissions expectations. Some families may perceive a gap between what regular schooling provides and the preparation they believe is necessary for competitive selection (Bae & Choi, 2024; Kim, 2016).

Supplementary education also serves different purposes. Some students seek remedial support, whereas others seek acceleration by studying future content or

receiving preparation beyond the regular curriculum (Bae & Choi, 2024; Kim, 2016). This distinction has policy implications. Schools may reduce remedial demand through timely and individualized support, whereas acceleration-oriented demand may be harder to address because it is tied to the pursuit of relative advantage rather than a common educational standard (Bae & Choi, 2024; Kim, 2016).

Even a strong public school system may therefore coexist with extensive private tutoring. When families compete for limited places at selective institutions, improvements in public education can raise general learning quality without removing incentives to seek an additional advantage (Bae & Choi, 2024; Choi & Choi, 2016).

4.4 Care, supervision, and enrichment

Demand for private education, particularly among younger students, cannot be explained only by university admissions. Families may use private academies for academic instruction or structured activities. These programs can also provide supervision and enrichment after the regular school day (Bae & Choi, 2024; Kim, 2016). For working parents, the timing and reliability of these services may be as important as their educational content (Bae & Choi, 2024; MOE, 2024).

This broader function may help explain why participation is particularly high among elementary students. In 2025, 84.4 percent of elementary students participated in private education, compared with 73.0 percent of middle-school students and 63.0 percent of high-school students (MODS, 2026). The difference should not be attributed entirely to childcare, because elementary students also receive substantial private instruction in academic subjects (MODS, 2026). Nevertheless, private programs often combine learning with supervision. This structured after-school support may be especially attractive to families with younger children (Bae & Choi, 2024; Kim, 2016).

Government policy has increasingly recognized the connection between education and care through the expansion of public after-school programs, including Neulbom School (MOE, 2024). These initiatives seek to provide accessible education and care beyond regular school hours and reduce the burden on families (MOE, 2024). When such programs are dependable and widely available, they may reduce families' reliance on private academies for supervision and certain forms of supplementary academic support (Bae et al., 2010; Lubienski & Lee, 2013).

Their influence on other segments of private education may be more limited. Expanded public care may support families with elementary-school children without substantially reducing demand for accelerated instruction, examination preparation, or specialized admissions guidance. On the other hand, admissions reforms may alter the test-preparation services families purchase while doing little to address their continuing need for reliable care after the school day (Bae & Choi, 2024; Choi & Choi, 2016).

The multiple purposes served by private education demonstrate why one policy instrument is unlikely to reduce every form of demand. Examination reform and public academic support address some household needs. After-school care and provider regulation address others. Effective governance therefore requires a differentiated understanding of why families participate and which function each policy is intended to replace or regulate.

5. Educational Inequality and the Distribution of Opportunity

Private supplementary education contributes to inequality through more than participation. Families differ in how much they spend and in the type or intensity of instruction they obtain. Access to information and geographic availability also vary (Bae

& Choi, 2024; Byun & Park, 2017; Kim & Lee, 2010). It is therefore insufficient to ask only whether students participate. The duration and strategic value of the services they receive also matter.

Research has consistently found that family socioeconomic background influences participation in and expenditure on supplementary education in South Korea (Byun & Park, 2017; Kim & Lee, 2010). Higher-income families are generally better positioned to purchase frequent instruction and smaller classes. They can also obtain individualized tutoring or specialized admissions support. Lower-income households may also participate, but financial limitations can restrict the type or duration of services they can purchase (Bae & Choi, 2024; Byun & Park, 2017; Kim & Lee, 2010). Private education can therefore widen differences among students even when participation is common across income groups.

The most recent statistics illustrate the continued financial scale of private education. Average monthly expenditure across all students declined from 474,000 KRW in 2024 to 458,000 KRW in 2025 (KOSTAT, 2025; MODS, 2026). Among participants, average monthly expenditure was 604,000 KRW in 2025. The average was 512,000 KRW for elementary students and 632,000 KRW for middle-school students. It reached 793,000 KRW for high-school students (MODS, 2026).

These figures should be interpreted cautiously. Average expenditure among participating students increased only slightly, from 592,000 KRW in 2024 to 604,000 KRW in 2025 (KOSTAT, 2025; MODS, 2026). This nominal increase does not by itself demonstrate that families purchased more intensive services. The more significant finding is that households continuing to use private education still spent substantial amounts despite declines in overall expenditure and participation. Further analysis by

household income and service type is needed to determine whether the 2025 changes reduced or reinforced inequality.

Educational inequality also operates across generations. In Korea, 85 percent of adults aged 25–34 with at least one tertiary-educated parent had completed tertiary education themselves, compared with 45 percent among those whose parents had not completed upper-secondary education (OECD, 2025a). This 40-percentage-point difference cannot be attributed to private tutoring alone. However, it demonstrates that family educational background remains strongly associated with young adults' educational attainment.

Private education may contribute to this broader process by allowing families to convert financial resources, educational knowledge, and social networks into advantages for their children (Bae & Choi, 2024; Byun & Park, 2017). Parents familiar with educational institutions may be better able to identify useful programs, interpret admissions requirements, and determine when specialized support is likely to be valuable. Inequality therefore involves not only how much families can spend but also how strategically they can use private services.

Geographic differences add another dimension. National survey data show substantial regional variation in participation and expenditure, indicating that access to private education is not distributed evenly across the country (KOSTAT, 2025; MODS, 2026). Online tutoring may reduce some distance-related barriers. Participation still depends on affordability and reliable technology. Families also need information and the ability to assess program quality (Bray & Kwo, 2014; Bray & Zhang, 2023).

Educational opportunity is also connected to residential location. Families with sufficient resources may seek housing in areas associated with desirable schools and extensive private education services. Research in Korea has found that perceived school

quality can affect nearby housing prices, illustrating how educational advantage may become reflected in residential markets (Hahn et al., 2012). Access to educationally desirable areas therefore depends not only on tutoring expenditure but also on families' ability to afford housing in those locations.

The financial implications extend beyond educational achievement. In 2023, nearly 80 percent of Korean school students participated in private tutoring, and families spent approximately 10 percent of their disposable income on average on these services (OECD, 2025b). Comparable expenditures represent a larger share of income for lower-income households, while higher-income families retain greater capacity to purchase additional or more specialized support (Kim & Lee, 2010).

Private education expenses form part of the broader economic pressures influencing decisions about marriage, parenthood, and family size in South Korea. OECD analysis identifies several interconnected pressures on family formation, including housing costs, employment insecurity, work-family tensions, childcare costs, and private tutoring expenses (OECD, 2025b). The OECD also reports that many Korean parents regard tutoring as financially burdensome and that education and care costs influence decisions about family size (OECD, 2025b). These findings do not establish that private tutoring alone causes low fertility, but they show that education costs contribute to the perceived financial burden of raising children.

Shadow education is therefore not only an educational issue. It is connected to household expenditure and residential choices. It also affects family formation and the distribution of opportunity across generations. Its effects also extend beyond whether tutoring improves the performance of an individual student.

Private tutoring may benefit students who need remediation, individualized instruction, or specialized support (Park et al., 2016). The policy concern is not that

every form of tutoring is harmful. Rather, access to perceived educational protection and advantage increasingly depends on families' private resources. When supplementary education is widely viewed as necessary for remaining competitive, differences in household income and educational information can produce unequal capacities to manage educational risk (Bae & Choi, 2024; Byun & Park, 2017; Kim & Lee, 2010).

6. Policy Responses and Their Limitations

6.1 From prohibition to direct regulation

South Korea has attempted to regulate private tutoring for several decades. The most restrictive intervention began in July 1980, when the government introduced a broad prohibition on tutoring outside regular schools to reduce educational competition and household expenditure (Bae & Choi, 2024; Kim & Lee, 2010). Private tutoring nevertheless continued through informal arrangements. The restrictions were gradually relaxed, and in April 2000 the Constitutional Court ruled that the comprehensive prohibition violated constitutionally protected parental rights and educational freedom (Bae & Choi, 2024; Lee et al., 2010).

This experience demonstrated both the practical and legal limits of prohibition. Once private tutoring had become closely connected to family strategies for educational advancement, restricting providers did not eliminate the underlying demand; tutoring continued through informal channels as the legal framework was revised (Bae & Choi, 2024; Lee et al., 2010).

Policy subsequently shifted from general prohibition toward regulation of the private education market. Governments and local education authorities introduced provider registration, operating-hour restrictions, fee reporting, monitoring, and consumer-protection measures to govern *hagwons* and other tutoring services (Choi & Choi, 2016;

Kim & Chang, 2010). Restrictions on late-night instruction became among the most visible measures, reflecting concerns about excessive study and pressure on students and families (Choi & Choi, 2016; Kim & Chang, 2010).

Direct regulation can improve transparency and discourage misleading practices. It can also restrict very late instruction and establish minimum standards for providers (Bray & Kwo, 2014; Choi & Choi, 2016). Evidence about its effect on tutoring use is mixed. Kim and Chang (2010) found that operating-hour restrictions contributed to reductions in tutoring time, whereas Choi and Choi (2016) found that a 10 p.m. curfew did not significantly reduce tutoring hours or expenditure. These findings suggest that direct regulation can influence provider and household behavior without necessarily removing the competitive conditions sustaining demand.

Direct regulation therefore remains important, but its objectives should be distinguished clearly. Consumer protection, transparency, and limits on excessive operating practices are valuable even when they do not substantially reduce participation. Policies intended to reduce structural demand must address the competitive conditions that generate it (Choi & Choi, 2016).

6.2 Publicly supported alternatives

A second policy approach has sought to provide publicly supported alternatives to private education. These measures include school-based after-school programs, Educational Broadcasting System resources, online learning materials, academic support, and expanded education and care for younger students (Bae & Choi, 2024; MOE, 2024). Their purpose is to provide accessible or lower-cost services that may reduce dependence on private providers (MOE, 2024).

Research suggests that publicly funded after-school programs can improve access to supplementary learning and may reduce some private expenditure, particularly for families with limited resources (Bae et al., 2010). Korea's school-based programs also illustrate how governments can use public provision as an alternative to conventional tutoring markets (Lubienski & Lee, 2013). More recent initiatives, including the nationwide expansion of Neulbom School, seek to provide integrated education and care beyond regular school hours (MOE, 2024).

Public and private programs, however, are not always direct substitutes. Families may use a public after-school program for care or general academic support while continuing to invest in private instruction for acceleration or examination preparation (Bae et al., 2010; Lubienski & Lee, 2013). Public provision may therefore meet a basic educational or supervisory need without replacing services purchased for competitive advantage.

The ability of public alternatives to reduce private demand depends on how families view them. Their purpose and accessibility matter, as do their reliability and quality. Programs designed to expand equitable access may not provide individualized instruction or accelerated learning. They may also lack the specialized information and admissions guidance that some families seek from private providers (Bae & Choi, 2024; Lubienski & Lee, 2013).

The decline in elementary-school participation from 87.7 percent in 2024 to 84.4 percent in 2025 is notable (KOSTAT, 2025; MODS, 2026). Expanded public education and care may have contributed, but the aggregate surveys do not allow the change to be attributed causally to those initiatives (MODS, 2026). Demographic change, household economic conditions, family preferences, and other policies may also have influenced

participation. Public alternatives should therefore be evaluated through more than annual changes in overall tutoring rates.

6.3 Admissions and assessment reform

Governments have also repeatedly changed examinations and university admissions policies in an effort to reduce excessive competition and dependence on private preparation. These efforts have included high-school equalization and revisions to the College Scholastic Ability Test. They have also changed the role of school records and sought to align examinations more closely with the official curriculum (Bae & Choi, 2024; MOE, 2023).

Such reforms can alter what students study and how families prepare for selection. However, they do not necessarily reduce private education. When the importance of one selection measure declines, families may redirect their attention toward another. Greater reliance on standardized examinations can encourage test preparation. By contrast, greater reliance on school records or complex admissions pathways can expand demand for consulting, essay support, and interview coaching (Bae & Choi, 2024; Choi & Choi, 2016).

Frequent changes can also produce uncertainty. Families may seek private guidance to interpret new rules, while *hagwons* can respond quickly by developing programs around revised selection criteria (Bae & Choi, 2024; Kim, 2016). Admissions reform may therefore change the content of private education without reducing the competitive incentives that sustain it (Choi & Choi, 2016).

The government's effort to remove unusually difficult, or so-called "killer," questions from national examinations illustrates this tension. The 2023 plan to reduce private education emphasized the need to ensure that examination questions remained within the public-school curriculum and did not encourage dependence on costly outside

preparation (MOE, 2023). This objective is important for fairness because students should not need access to specialized private instruction to encounter material expected on a public examination.

Eliminating unusually difficult questions does not remove relative competition. When many applicants meet a common curricular standard, differentiation may shift to other examination items or admissions components. Families may continue purchasing tutoring because their goal is not simply to master the curriculum but to outperform other applicants for a limited number of desirable places (Bae & Choi, 2024; Choi & Choi, 2016). Assessment reform can therefore improve fairness without necessarily eliminating private demand.

6.4 Interpreting recent change and persistent policy limitations

The 2025 survey represents a notable change from the pattern reported in 2024. Total private education expenditure declined from 29.2 trillion KRW to 27.5 trillion KRW, a reduction of 5.7 percent. Participation fell from 80.0 percent to 75.7 percent, and average weekly participation declined from 7.6 to 7.1 hours per student (KOSTAT, 2025; MODS, 2026). These changes are meaningful and should not be minimized.

Several factors may have contributed to the decline. Possible explanations include expanded public programs, demographic change, household economic conditions, changing family choices, and recent policy interventions. However, the aggregate survey data do not show how much of the decline can be attributed to any single factor (MODS, 2026). One year of change is also insufficient to determine whether Korea is experiencing a lasting reduction in dependence on private education or a temporary fluctuation.

Average monthly expenditure among participating students increased only slightly, from 592,000 KRW to 604,000 KRW (KOSTAT, 2025; MODS, 2026). This nominal increase does not demonstrate that participating families purchased more intensive services. The more important point is that participation remained widespread and expenditure among users remained substantial despite the overall decline.

Taken together, the policy record reveals three recurring limitations. Many interventions act on visible forms of tutoring more directly than on the conditions sustaining demand. Responsibility is also divided across schooling, tutoring regulation, admissions, and care. Regional development and employment policy are handled separately. In addition, reforms can redirect demand toward other services rather than eliminate it (Bae & Choi, 2024; Bray & Lykins, 2012; Choi & Choi, 2016; OECD, 2024). Publicly supported alternatives may also reduce some forms of dependence while leaving demand for acceleration, individualized attention, or specialized information largely unchanged (Bae et al., 2010; Lubienski & Lee, 2013).

Policy evaluation should therefore move beyond total expenditure and participation to examine distribution by household income, region, school level, purpose, and type of instruction (KOSTAT, 2025; MODS, 2026). Korea's difficulty in reducing private education does not reflect an absence of policy effort. The central challenge is that these interventions operate within an education and employment system that continues to reward relative academic advantage; policies that do not alter those incentives are consequently likely to have limited and uneven effects (Bae & Choi, 2024; Byun & Park, 2017; Choi & Choi, 2016; OECD, 2024).

7. Discussion: Governance and Wider Implications

Shadow education is not unique to South Korea. Private supplementary tutoring has expanded across diverse education systems. Its scale and organization vary by national context, as does its social meaning (Bray, 2021; Bray & Lykins, 2012; Park et al., 2016). Several conditions commonly support its growth. These include competitive examinations and selective educational pathways. Unequal access to desirable institutions and parental uncertainty also contribute (Bray & Lykins, 2012; Park et al., 2016). The Korean case therefore offers broader lessons about how governments understand and govern supplementary education.

The Korean case highlights two immediate governance lessons. Regulation of provider conduct remains necessary for transparency and consumer protection, but it cannot by itself remove the competitive pressures sustaining household demand (Bray & Kwo, 2014; Choi & Choi, 2016). Public alternatives can broaden access and meet important academic or care needs, yet they are most likely to affect household decisions when they are reliable and responsive to the specific functions families seek (Bae et al., 2010; Lubienski & Lee, 2013). This does not require public programs to reproduce the private market's pursuit of competitive advantage; it requires policymakers to understand why families use private services.

The Korean experience also demonstrates the importance of monitoring substitution. Regulation may reduce participation in one visible form of tutoring while demand shifts toward another service, instructional format, or selection requirement (Bray & Kwo, 2014; Choi & Choi, 2016). Changes in *hagwon* participation alone may not reveal whether demand has shifted toward individual tutoring, online instruction, admissions consulting, or other forms of supplementary education (Bray & Kwo, 2014; Bray & Zhang, 2023; Choi & Choi, 2016). Policy evaluation should therefore examine the wider supplementary education market rather than a single provider type.

This concern also has an equity dimension. Restrictions affecting relatively affordable group instruction may have less effect on families able to purchase more expensive individual or specialized services. Universal regulation can therefore produce unequal consequences when households differ in their capacity to adapt (Bray & Kwo, 2014; Bray & Lykins, 2012). Policy evaluation must consider whether interventions reduce inequality or redirect advantage toward less visible and more costly forms of provision.

More fundamentally, private tutoring policy must be connected to the distribution of educational and employment opportunities. When a relatively small group of institutions is perceived to provide disproportionate access to secure or desirable careers, families have strong motivations to compete for admission (Byun & Park, 2017; OECD, 2024). Policies focused solely on tutoring providers cannot substantially alter these incentives. A broader governance approach must therefore consider institutional hierarchy and admissions design. It must also address regional inequality and labor-market differences alongside private education regulation.

South Korea further demonstrates that shadow education can become part of the normal operation of an education system. Private providers interpret curricular and admissions changes for families, shape expectations about appropriate preparation, and influence how students allocate study time (Bae & Choi, 2024; Kim, 2016). Public policy, in turn, responds to the financial, educational, and social effects of private tutoring. Shadow education and formal education should therefore be understood as interdependent rather than separate systems (Bray, 1999; Bray & Lykins, 2012).

The growing role of digital provision adds a transnational dimension to shadow education. Online platforms allow tutors, companies, and students to connect across national borders. Families may purchase language instruction, academic tutoring, or

examination preparation from providers in other countries (Bray & Zhang, 2023). International companies may also adapt their services to different education systems. Cross-border provision can expand access and choice. However, it also creates challenges for consumer protection, quality assurance, data protection, and national regulation (Bray & Kwo, 2014; Bray & Zhang, 2023).

Digital access does not necessarily eliminate inequality. Online tutoring may extend services to students outside major urban markets, but participation still depends on reliable technology, financial resources, information, and the ability to assess program quality (Bray & Kwo, 2014; Bray & Zhang, 2023). Governments therefore need to consider both the opportunities and the inequalities created by increasingly international and technology-mediated forms of supplementary education.

The wider implication of the Korean case is that effective governance requires a system-level approach. Governments must ask not only how private tutoring should be regulated but also why families perceive it as necessary. Policies are likely to remain limited when they address individual providers without examining the educational hierarchies, selection processes, and social risks that sustain household demand (Bae & Choi, 2024; Bray & Lykins, 2012; Choi & Choi, 2016). Shadow education reform should therefore form part of a broader effort to make educational and employment opportunities less dependent on families' capacity to purchase private advantage.

8. Conclusion

Private supplementary tutoring remains deeply institutionalized in South Korea. Total expenditure and participation declined in 2025. Even so, private education continued to involve more than three-quarters of school students (MODS, 2026). These changes may

indicate that the market is beginning to shift, but one year of decline does not demonstrate that the broader governance challenge has been resolved.

This article has argued that explanations centered on parental ambition, educational culture, or market behavior are incomplete. Shadow education is better understood as a governance problem arising from the interaction of educational institutions, household decision-making, and policy design. Families make decisions within an environment shaped by competitive university admissions and institutional hierarchy. Unequal opportunity and uncertainty about falling behind also shape their choices. Private education becomes attractive partly because families expect academic benefits. It can also offer preparation and information, as well as supervision and a way to manage educational risk.

South Korean governments have responded through prohibition and market regulation. They have also expanded public alternatives and reformed examinations and admissions. These interventions address genuine concerns, but many act more directly on the provision of tutoring than on the conditions sustaining household demand. Regulation may therefore change the form, timing, or location of private education without removing the incentives that lead families to seek it.

From this perspective, shadow education should be understood as part of the wider education system rather than as a separate market. Private providers respond to curricula and admissions policies. Families, meanwhile, combine public and private education within a single strategy for managing educational risk. Policies directed at either system in isolation are unlikely to produce lasting change.

A more effective approach requires reliable public academic support and education-and-care programs, particularly for students and communities with fewer resources. Evaluation should move beyond aggregate expenditure and participation. It should

examine who uses private education and what services they purchase. It should also consider how opportunities differ by income, region, and school level. Most importantly, long-term reform must address the unequal value attached to educational institutions and employment pathways. As long as admission to a narrow group of universities is widely perceived to shape future security and status, families will continue to seek private advantage.

South Korea's experience offers a broader lesson for other education systems. Regulation can alter the size and shape of shadow education, but lasting reform depends on changing the formal institutions and inequalities that make supplementary education appear necessary.

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