

# Advancing 21st Century Competencies in South Korea

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for International Understanding (APCEIU) under the auspices of UNESCO



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Overview of the National Curriculum of South Korea</b> .....	1
Creative Experiential Learning (CEL).....	2–3
Four Components of CEL .....	3
Number of CEL Class Hours/Total Class Hours .....	3
Exam-Free Semester .....	3–5
An Example Working Model of the Exam-free Semester .....	5
Roles of Each Stakeholder in Exam-free Semester (EFS) .....	5
Character Education Promotion Act .....	6
Governance of the Character Education Promotion Act .....	6



## OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM OF SOUTH KOREA

The national curriculum of South Korea is revised on a periodic basis to reflect the emerging needs of a changing society and the new frontiers of disciplines. Since the Republic of Korea was established, there have been seven major curriculum revisions (1954–1955, 1963, 1973–1974, 1981, 1987–1988, 1992–1995, and 1997–1998). Partial revisions were introduced in October 2003 in order to respond to rapid social changes, and since then, there have been four partial revisions (2006, 2007, 2009, and 2015).<sup>1</sup>

The 2009 revised curriculum continues to be in effect until the 2015 revision comes into effect in 2018. Both versions of the national curriculum of South Korea provide the general framework for primary and secondary school curriculum and provide the full curriculum by subject. The curriculum for each subject prescribes in great detail its characteristics, objectives, content organization, and achievement standards, as well as directions for teaching, learning, and evaluation.

According to the 2015 revised curriculum, the ideals and objectives of education are related to the concept of Hongik Ingan (弘益人間, contributing to the overall benefit of humankind—the founding spirit of the first kingdom in South Korean history).<sup>2</sup> As such, the objectives of South Korea’s education are to assist all people in perfecting their individual character, developing the ability to achieve an independent life and acquire the qualifications of democratic citizens, and being able to participate in the building of a democratic state and promoting the prosperity of all humankind.

In the 2015 revised curriculum, the goals for the development of individual character include:

- An independent person who establishes one’s identity and carves his or her future life, based on holistic growth and development;
- An ingenious person who creates new things by applying various ideas and exercising an indomitable spirit, built on basic knowledge and skills;
- A refined person who relishes and develops human cultures, grounded on cultural literacy and pluralistic values;
- A democratic citizen who interacts with the world with a sense of community and lives together with other people in the spirit of caring and sharing.

To reach these goals, the 2015 revised curriculum identifies the key competencies for development through primary and secondary school education:

- Self-management competency—the ability to lead a self-directed life with personal identity and confidence, and with basic abilities and qualifications necessary for life and career;
- Knowledge/information processing competency—the ability to process and utilize knowledge and information from diverse fields to solve problems in a rational way;
- Creative thinking competency—the ability to create something novel by integrating knowledge, skills, and experiences from diverse professional fields on the basis of broad foundational knowledge;

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Publications/WDE/2010/pdf-versions/Republic\\_of\\_Korea.pdf](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/WDE/2010/pdf-versions/Republic_of_Korea.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>[http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Publications/WDE/2010/pdf-versions/Republic\\_of\\_Korea.pdf](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/WDE/2010/pdf-versions/Republic_of_Korea.pdf)

- Aesthetic-emotional competency—the ability to discover and appreciate the meaning and value of life, based on an empathetic understanding of other people and cultural sensitivities;
- Communication competency—the ability to effectively express one’s thoughts and feelings in various situations, and listen attentively to and respect other people’s opinions;
- Civic competency—the ability to actively participate in community development with values and attitudes required for being a member of local, national, and global communities.

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## CREATIVE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING (CEL)

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Creative Experiential Learning (CEL) has a long history in the national curriculum of South Korea, although it has not always been referred to by that name. The concept was first introduced in the 1992–1995 curriculum, when discretionary hours were added to the primary curriculum only. In the 1997–1998 curriculum, discretionary activities were introduced, which was a change in name only from discretionary hours. In the 2007 curriculum, discretionary activities were continued. In the 2009 curriculum, CEL was introduced as a combination of discretionary activities and extracurricular activities. CEL is continued in the 2015 curriculum.

### Organization of Curriculum

- 6th Curriculum: Subjects/ Discretionary Hours/ Extracurricular Activities
- 7th Curriculum: Subjects/ Discretionary Activities (composed of Discretionary Activities for Subjects and Creative Discretionary Activities)/ Extracurricular Activities
- 2007 Curriculum: Same as the 7th Curriculum
- 2009 Curriculum: Subjects/ Creative Experiential Learning (combining Discretionary Activities and Extracurricular Activities)

By voluntarily participating in CEL, students are expected to cultivate their talent and potential, build their self-regulation, and develop a sense of community and diverse and high-level qualifications necessary for being a global citizen by practicing sharing and caring based on understanding of others. By putting stress on creativity, CEL encourages students to think, feel, and experience through numerous in-school and out-of-school activities. It attempts to bridge the gap between the indirect way of learning through knowing (which is prominent in subject-related activities) and the direct way of learning through doing (which is prominent in CEL).

CEL aims to foster well-rounded persons who harmoniously embody all aspects of development—cognitive, affective, and functional. Unlike subject-related activities, it demands students’ active participation in its entire process from planning, organization, and operation to evaluation. Therefore, it also allows autonomy and flexibility to each school in organizing and implementing the curriculum, enabling each school to meet its students’ specific needs.

## Four Components of CEL

COMPONENT	DESCRIPTION
1. Self-regulated activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reacting proactively in a changing environment</li> <li>• Playing a role as a member of a community</li> </ul>
2. Club activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing hobbies and special skills</li> <li>• Fostering cooperative learning skills and creative attitudes</li> </ul>
3. Volunteer activity	Learning the value of living together by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practicing sharing and caring in the community</li> <li>• Conserving the environment</li> </ul>
4. Career exploration activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishing self-identity</li> <li>• Exploring various information for study and work</li> <li>• Designing one's career and preparing for it</li> </ul>

## Number of CEL Class Hours/Total Class Hours

		2009 CURRICULUM	2015 CURRICULUM
Primary	Grades 1–2	272/1,680	336 (64 reserved for Safe Living)/1,744
	Grades 3–4	204/1,972	204/1,972
	Grades 5–6	204/2,176	204/2,176
Lower secondary	Grades 1–3	306/3,366	306/3,366
Upper secondary	Grades 1–3	408/3,468	408/3,468

According to the 2015 revised curriculum, several cross-curricular themes are expected to be integrated throughout subjects and CEL, including safety/health education, character education, career education, education for democratic citizenship, human rights education, multicultural education, unification education, Dokdo education, economic and financial education, and environmental education/education for sustainable development.

## EXAM-FREE SEMESTER

Recently, a great amount of emphasis has been placed on 21st century skills such as cooperation and communication in OECD countries. In the same vein, PISA 2015 intends to assess collaborative problem-solving competencies such as communicating, managing conflict, organizing a team, building consensus, and managing progress. In South Korea, there was an acknowledgment that rote learning, memorization, and the

emphasis on the college entrance exam have contributed to students' low level of interest and confidence in learning in spite of strong international test results on TIMSS in 2011.

#### **TIMSS 2011 Results for South Korea**

South Korean fourth grade students earned an average score of 605 in mathematics, ranking second behind Singapore. In science, they were first with 587 points. The percentage of fourth grade students who fell short of the baseline achievement level stood at zero in mathematics and 1% in science.

Eighth grade students earned an average score in mathematics of 613, the highest out of 42 countries. They were third highest in science with a score of 560. The percentage of eighth grade students who fell short of the baselines in mathematics and science stood at 1% and 3%, respectively.

In addition, the achievement of even the lowest-ranking South Korean students is still understood to be generally high. The performance in the two subjects by the lowest 5% ranked highest among the 50 countries surveyed.

On the other hand, South Korean students' confidence level and their level of interest in learning were found to be near rock bottom. In a survey that assessed students' interest in mathematics, South Korean fourth grade students ranked the lowest out of 50 countries with only 23% responding "very much" in response to the statement "I enjoy studying mathematics." In terms of interest in science, South Korean students ranked 47th with only 38% expressing an interest.

The survey also showed that South Korean students lack confidence in learning. In the evaluation of confidence in mathematics, with seven questions, including, "I am generally good at mathematics," only 11% of South Korean fourth grade students were found to have confidence in their abilities, which places them 49th out of 50 countries.<sup>3</sup>

An increasing number of lower secondary school students do not know their future hopes. In one survey, 31.6% of lower secondary school students responded "I have no future hopes" (12.9% in primary, 29.4% in upper secondary).<sup>4</sup> It is understood that they have no time for self-reflection and self-discovery, and lack motivational support.

In 2014, suicide became the leading cause of death among adolescents, second only to accidents (Statistics Korea). 25.1% of students from primary 4–6, lower secondary 1–3, and upper secondary 1–3 said they became suicidal from time to time because of the following reasons: school grades (43.6%), family disputes (23.9%), and conflicts between peers and between seniors/juniors in school (9.5%) (National Youth Policy Institute, 2015).

In order for lower secondary school students to discover their dreams and talents free from the pressure of mid-term and final exams, South Korea allows teachers to make flexible use of the curriculum for a period of one semester, which encourages student participation through discussion and practice and enables various activities such as career exploration. The exam-free semester was introduced in 2013, pilot-tested for two years, and then implemented nationwide in 2016.

The exam-free semester aims to provide opportunities for lower secondary school students to discover their dreams and talents and continuously self-reflect and self-improve by exploring their aptitudes and designing their future. It attempts to shift from knowledge-based and competitive learning to self-directed learning and future-oriented competencies (creativity, character, sociality, etc.). As a result of the exam-free semester, the intent is to realize "happy learning," satisfying all members of the school community—including students, parents, and teachers—through cooperation and trust among them.

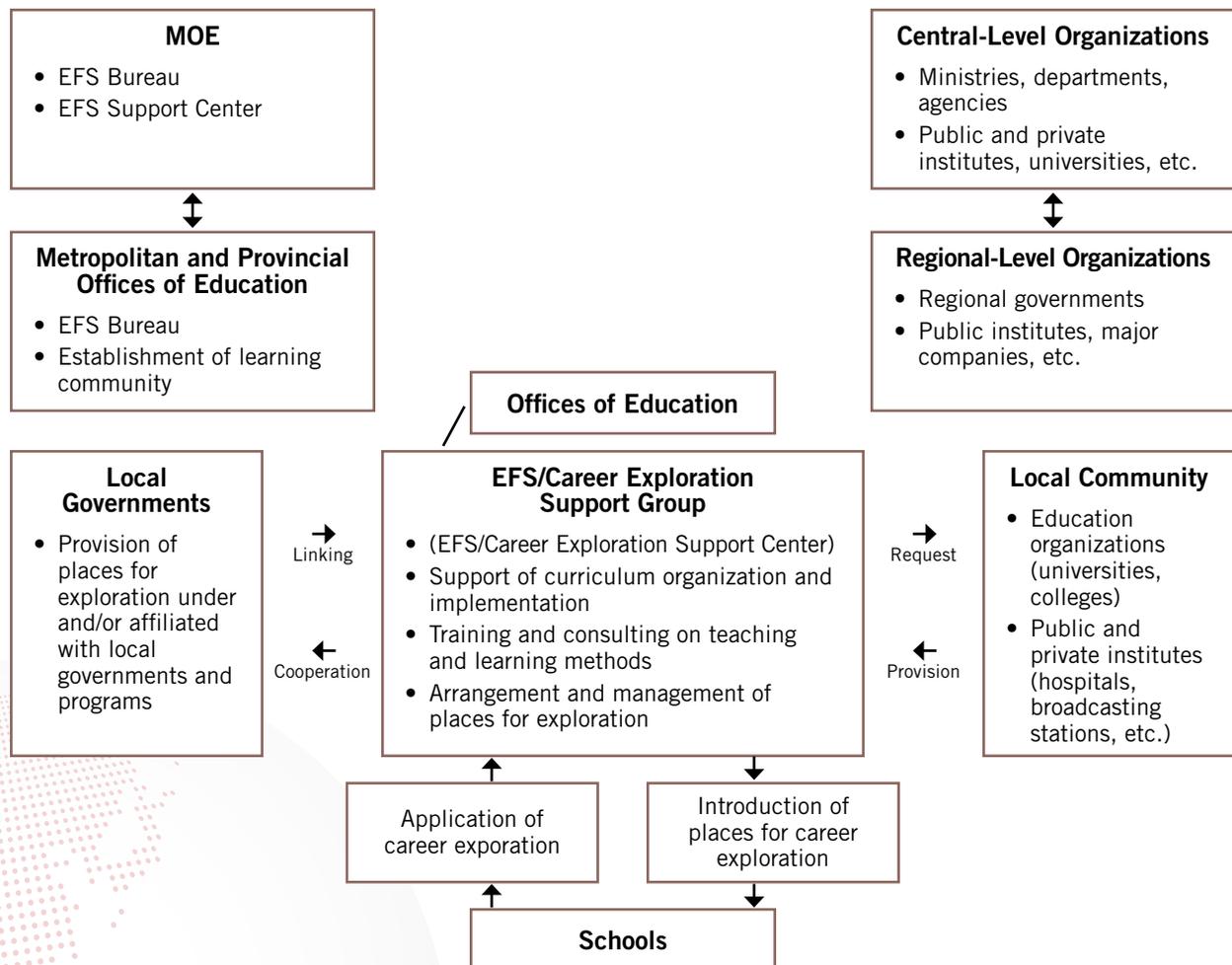
<sup>3</sup>[http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/565023.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/565023.html)

<sup>4</sup>Korean Research Institute for Vocational Education and Training, 2014

## An Example Working Model of the Exam-free Semester

	<b>CURRICULUM</b> (learner-centered)	<b>TEACHING AND LEARNING</b> (participation- and activity-oriented)	<b>EVALUATION</b> (process-focused)
Morning	<b>Subjects</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomy in curriculum organization and implementation</li> <li>• Curriculum reorganization</li> </ul>	<b>Subjects</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-curricular class</li> <li>• Discussion, problem solving, communication, experimentation, practice, project-based learning</li> </ul>	<b>Subjects</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formative assessment, cooperation-based performance assessment, portfolio</li> <li>• Assessment based on growth and development</li> </ul>
Afternoon	<b>Exam-free Semester Activities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career exploration activity</li> <li>• Theme-based activities</li> <li>• Arts/Physical Education activities</li> <li>• Club activity</li> </ul>	<b>Exam-free Semester Activities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program organization catering to students' interests</li> <li>• Provision of active and self-initiated learning experience</li> </ul>	<b>Exam-free Semester Activities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level of participation, cooperation, enthusiasm, and description of special activities</li> <li>• Reporting students' activities (in relation to their dreams and talents) on school records</li> </ul>

## Roles of Each Stakeholder in Exam-free Semester (EFS)



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## CHARACTER EDUCATION PROMOTION ACT

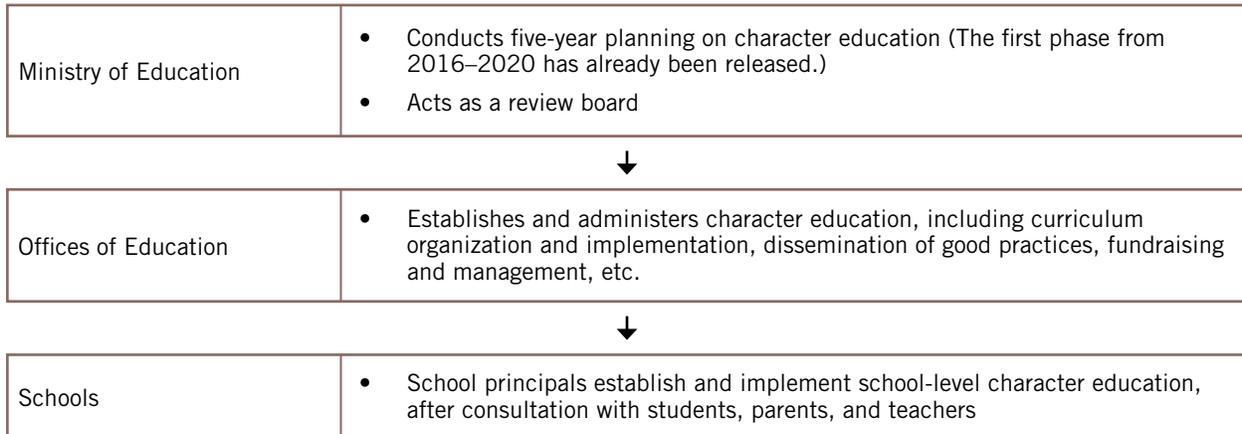
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The Character Education Promotion Act has been in force since July 2015. It was triggered by the sinking of the Sewol ferry in April 2014, which left 304 dead, mostly 11th grade students. The disaster led to a national reflection on what South Korean society falls critically short in, including respect for life, humanity, morality, trust, etc.<sup>5</sup>

It is widely accepted that students have become consumed by competitive and egoistic individualism because of fierce competition around the college entrance exams. At the same time, there is a societywide concern that violence and bullying in school have increased.

The Character Education Promotion Act requires all South Korean kindergartens and primary and secondary schools to teach students to develop “human character and corresponding competencies.” It refers to teaching students how to “develop the mentality and attitude necessary for living with others, and in nature.” Key values include etiquette, filial duty, truthfulness, responsibility, respectfulness, caring, communication, and cooperation.<sup>6</sup>

### Governance of the Character Education Promotion Act



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<sup>5</sup>[http://www.koreafocus.or.kr/design2/layout/content\\_print.asp?group\\_id=105450](http://www.koreafocus.or.kr/design2/layout/content_print.asp?group_id=105450)

<sup>6</sup><http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/Article.aspx?aid=2999131>