

# SAVE OUR SCHOOLS

## Education Policy Brief

### Downsides to East Asian Education Success

[A recent report by the Asian Development Bank \(ADB\)](#) suggests that high participation in private tutoring in East Asian countries is a factor behind their education success. The report shows that 70-80% of students are engaged in private tutoring and it warns about profound education and social consequences of the “alarming” expansion of tutoring. The report adds to evidence from recent OECD studies that extensive private tutoring is increasing education inequality in Korea and Japan.

The studies raise questions about whether East Asian schools systems are a good model for Australia to follow to improve school results as advocated by the Grattan Institute. [A report published by the Institute](#) earlier this year on East Asian education completely ignored the heavy dependence on private tutoring in these countries and its impact on inequality.

The new ADB report says what is called “shadow education” is dominating the lives of young people and their families, exacerbating social inequalities and creating inefficiencies in education systems.

“Shadow education is expanding at an alarming rate. It is already most extensive in the Asian region, and increasing proportions of household income are being spent on private tutoring,” said [Jouko Sarvi](#), Practice Leader for Education in the Bank’s Department of Regional and Sustainable Development, in releasing the report.

He said that private tutoring “has some positive elements but there are very heavy negative implications of it expanding in Asia...Poorer students don't have the means to pay for private tutoring services.”

“As a whole, the trend reinforces poor education practice and inequality in education provision in societies. It also has negative implications for education planning and sustainable public and private financing of education.”

The report titled *Shadow Education* was undertaken in partnership with the Comparative Education Research Centre of the University of Hong Kong. It details the extent of private tutoring in Asian countries, discusses the drivers of demand and supply, and examines its impact. It concludes:

While some dimensions of this growth might be welcomed as ways to extend the provision of education and build human capital, shadow education brings threats to government goals of social equality. Shadow education is much less about remedial help for students to keep up with their peers, and much more about competition and creation of differentials. It may also contribute to inefficiencies in education systems, and even to elements of corruption. [p. 67]

One of the co-authors, [Professor Mark Bray, interviewed on Radio Australia](#) said that while private tutoring could help students keep up with their peers serious downsides have emerged in Asia.

The downside is pressure on young students, that they go to school all day, go to tutoring in the evenings, sleep, wake up, go to school, have a snack, go to tutoring, that it's an intensive academic regime which can threaten the rounded development of young people. And the costs of it, household costs are very high and it produces social inequalities. It's fairly obvious that well-endowed households can spend more money, acquire better tutoring and the disadvantaged households are getting squeezed.

The report says policymakers across the region need to take a closer look at how private tutoring affects family budgets, children's time, and national education systems. It recommends that policy makers should design regulations to protect consumers while focusing on improvement in mainstream schools to reduce the need for private lessons. OECD studies have also called for reduced dependence on private tutoring.

### **Private tutoring is extensive in East Asian countries**

According to the ADB report, very high proportions of Korean students receive some sort of private tutoring. In 2008, 88% of elementary school students, 73% of middle school students and 61% of general high school students were being tutored privately.

In Hong Kong, about 73% of lower secondary students, 82% of middle secondary students and 86% of senior secondary students are privately tutored. In China, a 2004 Urban Household Education and Employment Survey found that 74% of primary students were receiving supplementary lessons. In lower and upper secondary the proportions were 66% and 54%.

In Japan, a 2007 survey found that 16% of primary school children were tutored privately and that this proportion rose steadily in later grades, reaching 65% in junior secondary school. A survey of high school students in Taipei in 2001 showed that 73% of grade 7 students were receiving tutoring for an average of 6.5 hours per week.

These figures are comparable with [OECD figures \[Table IV.3.17b, pp. 237-238\]](#) which show that nearly 80% of 15 year-old students in Korea and Japan and about 70% of students in Shanghai and Singapore attend private tutoring lessons in mathematics. This compares with much less private tutoring in other high performing countries. Less than 20% of Australian, Canadian, Dutch and New Zealand students and only 10% of Finnish students participate in private tutoring in mathematics.

The ADB report found much lower proportions of students being tutored in other, poorer Asian countries. However, private tutoring is growing in these countries as well. According to various studies, 60% of primary students in the Indian state of West Bengal receive tutoring, while a similar proportion of senior secondary students in Kazakhstan attend extra lessons.

The expenditure on private tutoring in Asia is "staggering" [p. vi]. For example, in Korea household expenditure on tutoring is equivalent to about 80% of government expenditure on public education for primary and secondary students [p. 21]. In Japan, families spent \$12 billion in 2010 on private tutoring. The report says that expenditure on tutoring is lower in other countries, but they are headed in the same direction.

### **The downside of private tutoring**

The report says that there are some huge downsides associated with the growth of private tutoring in Asia. In particular, it may dominate the lives of young people and their families, reducing the time available for sports and other activities, which are important for well-rounded development.

In some cases, the time spent on tutoring can be self-defeating as in Korea where there is a problem of students going to sleep in the school classroom because they are spending so much time on tutoring. Some governments are so concerned that they are trying to make families aware of the impact of extensive hours spent on studying and tutoring for the all-round development of their children.

Cram schools, now common in China, Korea, Japan and Taipei, emphasise examination skills and drill students with rote learning and memorisation rather than developing understanding of concepts. The report cites one study on the effect of such practices:

Cram schools place emphasis on “short-cut” and “effectiveness,” and focus solely on producing the correct answers to problems rather than exploring the systematic structure of mathematical concepts. Children frequently fail to solve problems that look novel to them. They just learn to mechanically apply a formula when solving problems through drill and practice. Such rote practice may enhance their homework performance or term tests that cover only content retention, but may weaken their meaningful construction of mathematical knowledge. [p. 40]

Private tutoring is also exacerbating social inequalities. The report says that rich families are clearly able to pay for better quality and more tutoring than can middle-income and poor families. The resultant disparities may threaten social cohesion in these countries where perceptions about social inequality have led to social unrest.

It is self-evident that more prosperous families are able to purchase greater quantities and better qualities of supplementary tutoring than can low-income families. The expansion of shadow education thus has major implications for social stratification. It undermines the official statements about fee-free education and creates threats to social cohesion. [p. 70]

The report also found that extensive private tutoring can create inefficiencies in education systems. Particularly problematic are situations where teachers earn extra income through tutoring. It says that teachers may reduce their efforts if they feel that compensatory provision for students is available in the private sector; and teachers who are also tutors may choose to reserve their energies for their private work rather than their public work. Teachers who provide extra tutoring for their own students may deliberately reduce the content during regular lessons in order to ensure ongoing demand for the private lessons.

These findings are consistent with OECD analysis of the impact of extensive private tutoring in Japan and Korea. For example, [its analysis of Japan’s PISA results](#) published earlier this year makes the following observation about the large proportion of students attending private tutoring institutions called “juku”:

...the *Juku* system creates and perpetuates inequality, given that the high cost limits use by low-income families. The *Juku* also unduly dominates children’s lives and restricts their leisure activities in ways that may be detrimental to their well-rounded development. [p. 202]

[The 2011 OECD economic survey of Japan](#) found that family income is a key determinant of *juku* attendance. It says that reducing inequality in education is becoming a major challenge for Japan and reducing dependence on *juku* “...is a key to promoting equality” [p. 130].

[The 2012 OECD economic survey of Korea](#) makes a similar finding about private tutoring in that country:

...private tutoring tends to unduly dominate children’s lives and restricts their leisure activities in ways that are detrimental to their well-rounded development. [p. 135]

It also states that the widespread use of private tutoring, largely in institutions known as *hagwons*, “perpetuates inequality” [p. 128]. *Hagwons* have more teachers than the public school system and attract the best teachers with higher salaries. Participation and spending on private tutoring is highly correlated with family income in Korea and this leads to inequality in access to higher education.

The higher participation and spending on private tutoring thus allows family income to determine access to higher education, creating cycles of poverty and wealth that endure over generations. [p. 135]

### **Social competition is driving tutoring**

Government education systems in many of the poorer Asian countries are not well funded, but poor quality of public education is not the only reason for the expansion of private tutoring. The largest expansion has occurred in countries with very good public education systems such as Korea and Japan.

The ADB study says that the demand for private tutoring is about competition and creating social disparities between students.

Shadow education is much less about remedial help for students to keep up with their peers, and much more about competition and creation of differentials. [p. 67]

The issue is more about education systems that are heavily examination-oriented and where competition for places in higher education is intense. Although all education systems in Asia have greatly expanded in recent decades, not all have universal lower secondary education, and even fewer have universal upper secondary education. At the transition points between levels, decisions must be made by schools and higher level administrators about who will be permitted to proceed in the education system and who will be pushed out. Families that do not wish their children to be pushed out may invest in private supplementary tutoring to secure an edge in the competition. Competition can also be strong in systems that do have universal lower and upper secondary education as in Singapore, for example, which has a highly stratified system of secondary schooling.

The report says as long as post-secondary institutions and programs remain highly stratified, with some offering much greater rewards than others, then demand for private tutoring during the years of secondary schooling is likely to remain intense.

### **Catching up with East Asia is a questionable goal**

According to some, East Asia is now the benchmark of high performance in school education to which Australia must look to improve its education outcomes. This is the theme of the report from the Grattan Institute earlier this year called [\*Catching Up: Learning from the Best Schools Systems in East Asia\*](#).

The report attributes the high performance of East Asian school systems solely to better teacher training, mentoring and remuneration. This is simplistic in the extreme. For one, it completely ignores the unique role of private tutoring in these countries. This is a major deficiency as there is evidence that the very high participation in private tutoring is associated with higher student results, although it is not possible to establish a definite causal link.

The ADB report cites several studies which show a positive relationship between private tutoring and school outcomes in Korea and Taipei. The evidence on the impact of tutoring

across Asian countries is mixed and much depends on grade levels and specific national and local circumstances. Nevertheless, the report concludes:

Certainly there is enough evidence to indicate that tutoring *can* make a significant difference in learning achievement, even if it does not always do so. [p. 36]

There is also other evidence of a positive relationship between the extent of private tutoring and student outcomes in several East Asian countries. For example, [the OECD economic survey of Korea](#) published in April notes that after-school tutoring is exceptionally high and has contributed to Korea's high education results.

After-school education has been a major factor behind the excellent performance of Korean students in international tests, such as PISA....

In short, participation in private tutoring appears to contribute to successful education outcomes for parent able and willing to purchase such services for their children. [pp. 131, 133]

[The most recent OECD economic survey of Japan](#) found that its test scores are positively related to spending on after-hours tutoring and, unsurprisingly, that spending on tutoring is positively related to family income [p. 129]. It also says that while the overall contribution of *juku* to education outcomes in Japan is uncertain, the government should act to improve school quality so that children can acquire sufficient education without attending *juku* [p. 128].

OECD analysis of the PISA 2006 results [[PISA in Focus No. 3](#)] also showed that students who attend after-school classes in Hong Kong, Korea and Taipei achieve higher results with the improvement being equivalent to six to 12 months of learning. These benefits largely accrue to socio-economically advantaged students who participate more frequently in these classes.

Apart from this, the Grattan Institute also ignores the education and social consequences of East Asia's success. The ADB report shows that test scores dominate the waking lives of students from a young age to the detriment of their all-round development and that it is encouraging poor education practices. While the extent of education inequality in East Asia is generally less than in OECD countries, there is widespread concern in these countries about growing economic and social inequality and, in particular, that high participation in private tutoring by those who can afford it is fuelling greater education inequality.

The new ADB report and recent OECD analyses of the Korean and Japanese education systems suggest that the Grattan Institute report on East Asian school systems is seriously deficient and one-sided. It failed to consider other factors, such as the heavy dependence on private tutoring, contributing to education outcomes in these countries and it ignored the downside effects on education practice and inequality. East Asian education is not the model of success presented by the Institute.

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