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DAILY NK NAUH 북한민주화네트워크 NKnet NDI 통일아카데미 Unification Academy

A Human Rights Challenge in Access to Education in North Korea: Contradiction Between Laws and Reality

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Supported by
National Democratic Institute (NDI)

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INTRODUCTION

As Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states, "education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms." The importance of education is obvious for many reasons, but especially for having deep implications for individual rights and critical thinking. In North Korea, while seemingly claiming equal access to education among its citizens, the reality differs. Although North Korea guarantees 12 years of free and compulsory education for all citizens under its constitution and has ratified The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)[52], this research report reveals that structural barriers and actual conditions on the ground contradict the regime's obligations to domestic and international laws.

The two-part report, conducted by Daily NK and Unification Academy (UA) in partnership with NKnet, shows the systematic barriers and current discriminatory practices that exist in North Korea that limit access to education for all citizens. In addition, both reports reveal the intertwined nature of human rights issues that are embedded within the education system such as discrimination against children and women, forced labor, and songbun and social classification system[53]. The report includes recommendations for North Korean authorities and proposes the role that international actors can play in addressing unequal access to education and guaranteeing education rights in North Korea.

UA and NKnet, with a decade of experience in research on North Korean society, carried out research by interviewing defectors who recently left North Korea between 2017-2021 and those who have insights into the education system and administrative mechanisms in North Korea. They also consulted with academic scholars with expertise on North Korea's education and social structures to develop recommendations in addressing this issue. Backing the findings of

[52] Article 26 of the UDHR also states that "education is a basic right for all, and elementary education should be free and compulsory, and university education should be granted on the basis of merit." Moreover, according to Article 13 of The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), "equality of opportunity" should be the guiding principle for providing education services."

[53] It classifies people on the basis of State-assigned social class and birth and also includes consideration of political opinions and religion. ICYMI: UN General Assembly Resolution on DPRK: https://seoul.ohchr.org/en/node/547

UA and NKnet's research with the most up-to-date data, Daily NK conducted a survey of 50 in-country citizens by utilizing its network inside North Korea during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As part of a joint advocacy working group, findings of the report will aim to contribute to raising the awareness of the international community on the situation of education rights in North Korea, as well as seek cooperation on advocating for equal access to education for all North Korean citizens.

ABOUT THE WORKING GROUP

To address the human rights challenges regarding access to education in North Korea, a coalition of North Korean human rights organizations initiated a thematic advocacy working group supported by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) to engage in collective, coordinated, and issue-based advocacy. The coalition consists of five local human rights organizations, Daily NK, Now Action & Unity for Human Rights (NAUH), SR Production, and Unification Academy (UA) in collaboration with Network for North Korean Democracy and Human Rights (NKnet), each bringing different strengths on content production, research and documentation, and campaigns, to collectively address a thematic human rights issue in North Korea. Findings of this report became the basis of other advocacy related activities of working group partners, including campaigns and content production.

Authors of this report and other contributing organizations to the this working groups are as follows:

Daily NK

Daily NK is the world's first Internet news source on North Korea, the fastest and the most accurate to report inside news on North Korean society since its December 2004 inaugural edition. Daily NK is dedicated to realizing human rights for North Koreans and peace on the Korean Peninsula, as well as assisting the Korean government in adopting the appropriate policies on North Korea.

Unification Academy (UA)

UA aims to promote a free market economy, advocate human rights, and spread values of democracy and human rights in North Korea. To achieve its goals, UA is working on education for activists, content production tailored to North Korean audiences, and encouraging discourse on North Korea.

Network for North Korean Democracy and Human Rights (NKnet)

NKnet was founded by leading figures of the South Korean democratization movement. NKnet conducts research on the North Korean situation under Kim Jong un, the changed society since the Arduous March, and its effect on people's mindset. NKnet pursues this research analysis to be used for policy making and advocacy.

Now Action & Unity for Human Rights (NAUH)

Founded in April 2010, NAUH is an organization that works for North Korean human rights together with young people from North and South Korea and the world. NAUH aims to contribute to the promotion of universal human rights and world peace as 'voices in action'. Its activities include North Korean human rights campaigns, education on democracy, and supporting resettlement of North Korean defectors.

SR Production

SR Production is a video production company composed of North Korean defectors, providing a wide range of societal issues in North Korea through visualized media. The organization offers keen insights regarding the internal environment of North Korea based on the employees' personal experiences.

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN NORTH KOREA:

EXPLORING HUMAN RIGHTS CHALLENGES STEMMING FROM SOCIO-STRUCTURAL DISCRIMINATION

Unification Academy
NKnet

Summary

This study has highlighted factors that impede fair educational opportunities and access rights in North Korea, leading to discrimination. The factors causing discrimination in education were categorized into (1) region, (2) social class including social origin and foundation (*sungbun* and *todae*), (3) parents' economic capacity, and finally (4) gender. The study examined how these barriers, found within and outside the school system, create discrimination. These four obstacles, prevalent in various aspects of North Korean society, are structural causes of discrimination and human rights abuses. They are reflected in the education sector, resulting in the violation of children's rights and the deprivation of educational opportunities.

The study identified the 'glass ceiling' phenomenon, where political, social norms, and patriarchal biases hinder women and individuals from hostile class backgrounds from rising to political and social leadership positions. Similarly, the 'glass ceiling' phenomenon signifies situations where job placements are limited by parents' occupational categories and the origin of middle school graduates. Specifically, graduates from rural areas or remote provinces face significantly lower opportunities for higher education in major cities including Pyongyang, and also struggle to get job placements as urban workers.

Due to the inability to secure stable funding for teachers' salaries and school operational costs, the responsibility for teachers' livelihood often falls on the students' parents. Additionally, financial and material support for maintaining school facilities depends on students' labor and the submission of 'social assignments.' Consequently, students from families unable to meet the school and teachers' demands often face disadvantages in various aspects of school life, or become targets of criticism and reproach from peers and teachers. This burden of social assignments and mandatory mobilization has led to a significant number of students, ranging from 5% to as high as 10-15%, refusing to participate in school education.

In conclusion, this study addresses the need for comprehensive strategies to resolve the multifaceted challenges in North Korea's education sector, particularly those arising from geographical, economic, and social class disparities, as well as gender differences in educational opportunities. The emphasis on education has long been a political value in North

Korea. Recently, Kim Jong-un's regime has emphasized transforming North Korea's education system into a 'powerhouse of education and talent,' focusing on educational development to 'cultivate competent individuals in alignment with global trends and current demands,' thus establishing it as a central policy initiative. However, despite these policy values, the efficacy of North Korea's 12-year compulsory free education service has been undermined by long-entrenched patriarchal and pre-modern practices, coupled with challenging economic conditions.

Therefore, this study recommends increasing the opportunities for capable students from general middle schools in rural areas to gain admission to central universities and ensuring that university graduates can be placed in jobs in their preferred regions after introducing a regional student admission quota system. It also proposes an increase in teacher salaries to reduce their dependence on external sources of income. The necessity of international collaboration to enhance teachers' competencies in English and science education is emphasized to provide quality education to students, especially in rural middle schools. Additionally, the study suggests phasing out the mobilization of middle school students for agricultural support through international aid-driven agricultural mechanization projects. Furthermore, it highlights the need to introduce a female quota in public service appointments to offer more opportunities to women in administrative and party leadership roles and stresses the importance of initiating gender-sensitive education programs and campaigns from middle school to elevate the awareness of women's rights across North Korea.

Introduction

North Korea showcases a pronounced commitment to education; as evident by the content of its primary political gatherings, official documents, reports publicized to the global community, and articles from Rodong Sinmun - the official newspaper of the Workers' Party. The Eighth Plenary Session of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), held in June 2023, prominently featured dialogues on the advancement of the nation's educational initiatives. Following this session, an article published by Rodong Sinmun in late June, highlighted a statement by General Secretary Kim Jong Un which emphasized the following: "The civilization of our nation is underscored by our educational standards, and the destiny of our country hinges on the execution of our educational endeavors."

Educationalists acknowledge that public education significantly contributed to dismantling discriminatory barriers hindering the equitable dissemination of social values and experiences in pre-modern societies[54]. In essence, the primary objective of public education is to ensure that all members of a society have access to a foundational level of essential education[55]. Given this, we will assess North Korea's renewed emphasis on education to determine whether its public education system adequately prepares its young generation for a brighter future and improved quality of life. Specifically, we aim to discern if prevailing discriminatory practices within North Korean society are also evident in its educational sector, and to suggest strategies for enhancing equal educational opportunities - a core principle of public education.

In September 2012, at the Sixth Session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly, North Korea resolved to implement 12 years of mandatory education throughout the nation; and the decision to do so was rolled out in 2014. Since this inception, the regime has persistently advocated the vision of molding the nation into an "educational and talent powerhouse". Yet, much like many other human rights concerns in North Korea, there exists a noticeable disparity between the official narrative and the actual state of affairs in the educational domain. Ideally, the 12-year compulsory education should offer uniform opportunities to all eligible children. However, due to the inherent characteristics of the North Korean system, the state's

[54] The Establishment of the Public Education System, (Sep. 4, 2019), Institute for Education and Culture, https://www.edulabkorea.com/reference/general.php?ptype=view&idx=810&page=1&code=general
[55] Public Education, (Sep.. 18, 2023), Namu Wiki, https://namu.wiki/w/%EA%B3%B5%EA%B5%90%EC%9C%A1

deep-rooted societal norms, and diverse family backgrounds, there is a pervasive trend of biased access to educational resources. Such inequality dilutes the foundational essence of education as a ‘ladder of opportunity’ and leads to the perpetuation of power and economic hierarchies from childhood through adulthood.

Such practices infringe upon the universal right to education, as codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) - all of which have been signed and ratified by North Korea. Specifically, North Korean authorities overlook Article 28, paragraph 1(c) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which the country also ratified in 1990. This article stipulates that higher education should be accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means. Consequently, this study seeks to pinpoint the barriers that obstruct equitable and impartial access to educational opportunities in North Korea and to offer recommendations for improvement.

In accordance with Article 28 of the CRC, which advocates for "higher education accessibility to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means", the right to educational access should be duly recognized. This report delineates the primary factors contributing to discriminatory practices in the realm of educational rights in North Korea. These factors are organized into four principal categories and further divided into subcategories as follows:

(1) Geographic Discrimination:
    (a) Pyongyang vs. the other provinces,
    (b) Urban vs. Rural Areas,
(2) Discrimination by Songbun and Social Class
(3) Economic Discrimination:
    (a) Social Assignment and Labor Mobilization,
    (b) Students' Financial Contributions to School Operations,
    (c) Students' Financial Responsibilities for Teacher Livelihood,
(4) Gender-Based Discrimination

For the purposes of this study, we consulted with eight North Korean defectors, three females and five males, who had previously attended senior middle school in North Korea. Additionally, we spoke with two former educators and four parents to gain insights from the perspective of those who have supported their children's educational journey. Among the interviewees, four completed their senior middle school education in 2017, three in 2018, and one each in 2013 and 2015. Notably, two of the interviewees finished their schooling during the era of Kim Jong-Il.

- Interviewees

	Interviewee code	Defection year	Origin	School	Graduation Year	University	Parents' career
1	M01	2018	Bocheon-gun, Yanggang	Senior middle school	2018	-	Mother: died when M01 was a child. Father: laborer
2	M02	2014	Shinpo-si, South Hamgyong	The first senior middle school[56]	2007	Technology University	Mother: lecturer Father: laborer
3	F03	2019	Daehongdan-gun, Yanggang	Senior middle school	2017	Agricultural University	Mother: nurse & smuggler Father: farmer
4	F04	2019	Hyesan-si, Yanggang	Senior middle school	Not graduated	-	Mother: merchant Father: laborer
5	M05	2019	Hyesan-si, Yanggang	Senior middle school	2015	Military service	Mother: distributed coal Father: unknown
6	M06	2018	Hoeryong-si, North Hamgyong	Senior middle school	2018	-	Mother: defected to SK Father: farmer & currency exchange broker
7	F07	2013	Hyesan-si, Yanggang	Senior middle school	2013	-	Mother: smuggler Father: laborer
8	M08	2014	Hamheung-si, South Hamgyong	Senior middle school	2009	Technology University	Mother: merchant Father: medical doctor

[56] The First Senior Middle School is an educational institution for the gifted students in North Korea, and was adopted with the designation of the First Middle School in Pyongyang for the gifted students following Kim Jong Il's instruction in 1984. Twelve First Middle Schools have been established in each province since 1986 for the special education for the gifted.

9	F09 -mother	2018	Yeonsa-gun, North Hamgyong	Son: graduated from senior middle school Daughter: entered senior middle school	2017 2017	N/A	Herself: bookkeeper of a factory Hudsband: overseas laborer
10	F10 -mother	2018	Yeonsa-gun, North Hamgyong	Daughter: graduated from senior middle school	2017	N/A	Herself: wholesaler of medical herbs, etc. Hudsband: laborer & merchant
11	F12 -mother	2019	Rural area of Hoeryong-si, North Hamgyong	Daughter and son: graduated from senior middle school	2012 2018	N/A	Herself: cottage industry Hudsband: laborer & currency exchange broker
12	F14 -mother	2019	Sunchon-si, South Pyongan	graduated from senior middle school	2017	N/A	
13	F1 -teacher	2000	Onsung-gun, North Hamkyong		Worked at a middle school, 1987-2002	N/A	
14	F13 -teacher	2010	Chongjin-si, North Hamkyong		Worked at a middle school for 13 years, 1997-2010	N/A	

- Interviewee's origin and year of senior middle school graduation

Graduation year	Number		Origin	Number
2007	1		Yanggang Province	5
2009	1		South Pyongan Province	1
2012	1		South Hamgyong	2
2013	1		North Hamkyong Province	6
2015	1			

2017	4			
2018	3			
Not graduated	1			
Total	13*		Toal	14

* 13 include two children of an interviewee and exclude two former teachers.

Among the fourteen North Korean defector interviewees, five hailed from Yanggang Province - specifically, three from Hyesan City, the provincial capital, and the other two from counties. Six were from North Hamgyong Province; of these, one was from Chongjin City, the provincial capital, and two were from Hoeryong City The remaining three originated from local counties within the province. Two interviewees were from South Hamgyong Province. While none of the interviewees were from Pyongyang, we supplemented our research by consulting two Ph.D. holders in North Korean studies who are also defectors; as well as three journalists specializing in North Korean affairs who have access to insider information. Drawing on these interviews and consultations, the study offers an analytical perspective on the systemic factors influencing disparities in access to educational opportunities, both between Pyongyang and outlying provinces as well as between urban and rural settings.

1. The Right to Education in International Treaties

The right to education is a foundational human right, guaranteeing equitable access to educational opportunities for all. Like other human rights, it is both inherent and inalienable, applying universally without regard to age, gender, occupation, geographic location, or social class. This right serves a dual function: it confers both the privilege to receive education and the obligation upon states to provide it. As mandated by international standards, this pivotal right is codified in foundational human rights documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that "everyone has the right to education." This assertion is inclusive, extending the right to children, adults, and individuals with disabilities. It further obligates State Parties to actively safeguard this right. Specifically,

Article 26(1) of the Declaration guarantees universal access to free and compulsory primary education, as well as higher education that is equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. Article 26(2) outlines the overarching goal of education as the full development of human personality, in addition to fostering respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Article 26(3) affirms parents' prerogative to select the type of education that shall be given to their children.

Article 13 of the ICESCR recognizes the universal right to education and imposes obligations on State Parties for its realization. Article 13(1) explicitly codifies the right to education as a universal entitlement and delineates the educational objectives to be pursued. In accordance with Article 13(2), State Parties are enjoined to provide free and compulsory primary education, introduce progressively free secondary and higher education, fortify basic educational programs, and ensure adequate material conditions for teaching personnel.

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

Article 13

2. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize that, with a view to achieving the full realization of this right:

(a) Primary education shall be compulsory and available free to all;

(b) Secondary education in its different forms, including technical and vocational secondary education, shall be made generally available and accessible to all by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education;

(c) Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education;

(d) Fundamental education shall be encouraged or intensified as far as possible for those persons who have not received or completed the whole period of their primary education;

(e) The development of a system of schools at all levels shall be actively pursued, an adequate fellowship system shall be established, and the material conditions of teaching staff shall be continuously improved.

Additionally, Article 29(1) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) specifies the objectives that children's education should aim for. It suggests that the importance lies in the maximum development of a child's personality, talents, and abilities; as well as respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and the principles outlined in the UN Charter. Also, Article 28(1) of the CRC explicitly defines the right to education and equality of opportunity for children. This includes the provision of free and compulsory primary education, and elaborates on the need for the advancement of secondary education, children's access and utilization rights, financial support for free schooling, the opening of opportunities for higher education, and improving attendance and reducing dropout rates. Moreover, Article 28(2) of the CRC mandates that school discipline must operate in a manner consistent with human dignity and the principles of the Covenant. Article 28(3) emphasizes the necessity for international cooperation to promote and encourage matters related to education.

<Table 1> The right to education as required by international standards

International standards	Articles	North Korea's status
Universal Declaration of Human Rights	(Article 26, Paragraph 1) Everyone has the right to education (Article 26, Paragraph 2) The aim of education is the respect for human dignity and fundamental freedoms (Article 26, Paragraph 3) Parental choice in the type of education	State Party
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)	(Article 13) Recognition of the right to education for all and obligation for its implementation (Article 13, Paragraph 1) Universality of the right to education and the goals of education (Article 13, Paragraph 2) Free compulsory primary education and equal opportunity to access education	Signed and ratified in 1981
Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)	(Article 28, Paragraph 1) Equal opportunity and open access to higher education (Article 28, Paragraph 2) Prevention of infringement on the right to education by school discipline (Article 28, Paragraph 3) Promotion and encouragement of international cooperation in education (Article 29) Explicit goals that child education should aim for	Signed and ratified in 1990

2. North Korea's Education Policy

North Korea claims to provide free education across all educational stages, ranging from kindergarten to university. In a pivotal speech on November 3, 1945, Kim Il-Sung underscored the critical role of education, and asserted that: "to construct a new Korea, a substantial cadre of national leaders is indispensable; this remains one of our most urgent challenges." Subsequently, North Korea has persistently emphasized the vital importance of nurturing talent and has maintained its dedication and investment in the educational sector.

During the 14th Plenary Session of the 5th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, convened on September 5, 1977, Kim Il-Sung presented his seminal *Thesis on Socialist Education*. This document emphasizes the pivotal role of both education and intellectual development. Kim Il-Sung contended that the fundamental principle of socialist pedagogy is "to revolutionize, to proletarianize, and to communize people." He emphasized that a crucial objective of socialist pedagogy is to nurture new generations - who are deemed the heirs of the revolution - into passionate revolutionaries and committed communists. Kim Il-Sung highlighted that the fundamental mission of socialist education in North Korea is ideological transformation, with a focus on molding 'Juche-oriented communist revolutionaries.' Moreover, the *Thesis on Socialist Education* asserts that "every individual not only has the right to education but also carries the responsibility to be educated." In North Korea, the influence of Kim Il-Sung's *Thesis on Socialist Education* is often considered to wield more power than statutory law.

North Korea enacted its ‘Education Law’ in 1999, more than 50 years after its founding in 1948. In 2012, as part of its national development goal to build a powerful state, North Korea emphasized the importance of nurturing talent, stating that the objective of education is the "scientification and technologization of all citizens." In its *Second Periodic Report on the Implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights,* dated April 9, 2002, North Korea asserted that all citizens fully enjoy the right to education through an advanced educational system and people-oriented educational policies.

North Korea specifies in Article 73 of its Socialist Constitution that: "citizens have the right to education. This right is ensured by an advanced educational system and by the educational measures enacted by the State for the benefit of the people." Additionally, Article 43 of the Constitution states that "the State shall put the principles of socialist education into practice and raise the new generation to be steadfast revolutionaries who will fight for their society and the people; for this generation to be people of a new communist type who are knowledgeable, morally sound and physically healthy." What North Korea means by “steadfast revolutionaries” is essentially focused on fostering individuals necessary for the maintenance of its socialist system. Consequently, political and ideological education carries significant weight in the North Korean educational system.

The significance of education and talent development is clearly emphasized in North Korea's ‘Education Law,’ enacted in 1999. Article 1 of the law, with the aim of furthering socialist education, delineates the objective of nurturing individuals who possess both autonomous ideological consciousness and creative capacities. Additionally, Article 12 explicitly defines the entitlement to free education, as well as the mandate for general secondary schooling. Article 13 sets forth a 12-year system of compulsory general secondary education; and Article 14 outlines the compulsory school enrollment for children of appropriate age. Article 16 delves into the specifics of free educational services, including admission and coursework. To safeguard educational standards, the law offers comprehensive guidelines: Article 38 details budgetary provisions for the educational sector, Article 40 addresses the manufacture and provision of educational materials, and Article 41 ensures the availability of textbooks and supplemental resources.

North Korea has continually emphasized the significance of its free and compulsory education system. As stipulated in Article 45 of the Constitution, the country adheres to a "12-year compulsory education system." Originating in 1956 with a 4-year mandatory primary education, the system underwent gradual expansion, adopting an 11-year compulsory program in 1972. It further evolved on September 25, 2012, to encompass a 12-year compulsory curriculum; featuring a one-year preparatory course, a 5-year elementary program, and a divided secondary education consisting of 3 years in junior middle school and another 3 in

senior middle school. Furthermore, Article 47 of the Constitution declares that the state offers education free of charge to all students and provides university students with scholarships.

Recently, North Korea stated the following in the 8th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers' Party: "it is an important task ahead of the education sector to cultivate many competent talents with high intellectual and practical abilities in line with global trends and the demands of the times." It particularly emphasized that "party and government agencies must thoroughly establish a culture that values education throughout society, prioritize education over other projects, and strongly carry out guidance and support for the educational revolution, including party-led direction, policy guidance, and technical guidance[57] ." To this end, North Korea is emphasizing the need for party-wide and nationwide support for educational projects. North Korea's monthly magazine, *North Korea Today*, shared the story of a model case in Hwanghae Province where local agencies and officials provided the necessary experimental and practical facilities for educational projects. Multiple agencies at city and county levels within the province reported that they have "allotted the division of tasks for schools and equipped them with educational materials and facilities." In other words, they are fulfilling what is stipulated in Article 40 of the Education Law, where institutions, enterprises, and organizations “send necessary machinery and instruments to the respective educational institutions.[58]”

This example can be attributed to North Korea's policy of local autonomous operation, as outlined in the "City and County Development Law." According to this law, enacted in 2021, Article 70 specifies plans for "school construction and sponsorship projects" to facilitate the production and supply of educational equipment in rural areas and provinces. In other words, the local administrative bodies, known as the City and County People's Committees, are required to modernize the educational facilities of schools and designate sponsorship organizations to provide material and technical support to the assigned schools.

[57] Gong Ro-Hyuk, “Tasks Set Forth by the 8th Plenary Session of the 8th Central Committee of the Party for the Education Sector,” *Rodong Sinmun*, June 30, 2023, http://www.rodong.rep.kp/ko/index.php?MTJAMjAyMy0wNi0zMC1OMDE4QDE1QDJAQDBAMTg==

[58] “Heightened Enthusiasm for Education Support in North Hwanghae Province,” *DPRK Today*, April 7, 2023, https://dprktoday.com/news/64673

<Table 2> Current Status of North Korea's Laws and Systems Regarding the Right to Education

Law	Details
Socialist Constitution (amended in 2019)	(Article 43) Cultivation of Steadfast Revolutionaries and Pioneers of Socialist Construction (Article 45) Implementation of 12-Year Compulsory Education (Article 47) Provision of Free Education for All Students (Article 73) Right to Education as a Citizen
Education Law (amended in 2015)	(Article 12) Obligation for General Secondary Education and the Right to Free Education (Article 13) 12-Year Compulsory Secondary Education System (Article 16) Regulations for Free Education with regards to Educational Admission and Classes (Article 38) Budget Allocated for the Education Sector (Article 40) Production and Supply of Educational Equipment (Article 41) Guarantee of Textbooks, Reference Books, Extracurricular Books, and Educational Audio-Visual Materials
Thesis on Socialist Education (released in 1977)	- Announced in September 1977 as an educational decree that embodies the Juche ideology. - Specifies the principles, content, methods, and systems of socialist education, aiming to cultivate all people into “people of a new communist type.” - Articulates citizens' right to education and mandates compulsory education.
City and County Development Law (adopted in 2021)	(Article 70) School Construction and Sponsorship Projects: The City and County People's Committees are responsible for modernizing educational facilities by utilizing local resources. They are charged with identifying sponsorship organizations to provide schools with material, technological, and labor support.

3. Discriminatory Factors in Accessing to Education in North Korea

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the success or failure of an education policy is determined by whether educational opportunities are provided irrespective of the conditions students are born into; and whether, as a result, students can overcome personal constraints based on merit, such as their abilities and talents. North Korea decided to introduce a 12-year free compulsory education system in 2012 and has been implementing it nationwide since 2014. Additionally, Article 16 of the Education Law (adopted in 1999, amended in 2015) on 'The Content of Free Education' states: "all education is free," and "educational institutions cannot receive any fees related to admission, tuition, practice, field trips, or study tours from the student or their parents or guardians." However, it has been found that the ‘free’ compulsory education service in North Korea is not truly ‘free’, as students and parents have to provide a significant amount of cash and in-kind contributions to schools. Therefore, this poses a significant barrier to students, who are ostensibly the intended beneficiaries of free compulsory education, in actually accessing educational opportunities

After consulting with North Korean defectors who graduated from senior middle schools during the Kim Jong-Un era, as well as parents, teachers, and experts in North Korea's education system, we identified a series of factors that lead to discriminatory access to education for students. To summarize, the core issue lies in the national climate where North Korean educational services fail to function as a ‘ladder of opportunity’, which is a pivotal role of education. Students ought to be able to transcend the social limitations inherited from their parents' generation through the ‘ladder of opportunity’. By amassing more such exemplary instances, we can anticipate fostering societal advancement and growth.

However, in the educational reality of North Korea, the ladder of opportunity hardly exists. Instead, we found that glass ceilings and glass walls are placed everywhere, preventing the ladder of opportunity from fulfilling its role. This can be seen as a social factor that has shaped the discriminatory application of the right to access education. In that context, this study has categorized the factors that serve as obstacles to the fair and equitable application of

educational opportunities that North Korean students realistically confront. Specifically, we plan to examine discrimination based on four social conditions: geographical division, social class and family background, household economic status, and gender.

Discrimination exists in every society, but in a healthy, growing society, education serves as a 'ladder' to overcome social disparities. If, on the contrary, existing discriminatory factors are applied in accessing education, it perpetuates a vicious cycle of discrimination, hindering social change and development. The factors causing discrimination in North Korea's right to education, discovered through interviews with consultants, naturally appear to be conditions of social discrimination prevalent throughout North Korean society. Therefore, a breakthrough is needed to disrupt the cycle in the operational mechanism of North Korea, which is stuck in this vicious circle of perpetuating discrimination.

3.1 Discrimination Based on Region

The national report submitted by North Korea for the 3rd cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2019 also describes the efforts of North Korean authorities to bridge the educational gap between cities and rural areas. It reported that "in 2016 1~2 rural schools in each city and county were transformed into model schools with fine educational conditions and environment [59]." However, in the testimonies of defectors, who graduated from senior middle schools between 2017-2019, the contents of the UPR national report could not be found.

The phenomenon of regional disparities affecting access to educational opportunities in North Korea can be divided into two main issues. First, there is the absolute lack of educational infrastructure in rural areas, particularly when compared to the central regions. Second, the geographical location of schools and student residences plays a pivotal role in shaping the future career paths and societal roles of graduates.

[59] "National report submitted in accordance with paragraph 5 of the annex to Human Rights Council resolution 16/21," A/HRC/WG.6/33/PRK/1, Para. 46, "In 2016 1~2 rural schools in each city and county were transformed into model schools with fine educational conditions and environment, and efforts are being made in accordance with an annual plan to generalize their examples to other rural schools." https://digitallibrary.un.org/nanna/record/3798135/files/A_HRC_WG-6_33_PRK_1-EN.pdf?withWatermark=0&withMetadata=0&version=1&registerDownload=1

The educational disparity caused by the urban-rural and Pyongyang-province gaps appears to be an issue that has recently caught the attention of North Korean authorities. Contrary to the content of the national report for the 3rd cycle of the UPR, the report submitted by North Korea to the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in June 2021, identified the urban-rural educational gap as a significant challenge experienced by the country. In the “North Korea Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda” under the goal of SDG 4, which aims for “inclusive and equitable quality education,” North Korea assessed its challenges and stated and that: "there exist issues like low level of innovating educational content and methods, prone to forms rather than improving educational environment according to the pedagogical requirements, distinction in secondary education between the rural and urban areas, etc[60]."

It appears to reflect the recent interest of North Korean authorities, who have made the development of rural areas and local cities and counties a national reform agenda.

3.1.1 Lack of Educational Infrastructure in Rural and Local Areas

The issue of inadequate infrastructure in rural and local areas is not limited to the education sector but is a phenomenon that appears across North Korean society. The harm caused by the lack of educational infrastructure in local areas naturally manifests dramatically among the beneficiaries of educational services in rural and local regions. Due to policies that focus national resources and capabilities on Pyongyang and central areas, national financial investments are concentrated in the capital's educational infrastructure. On the other hand, the educational budgets for local schools are the responsibility of local administrative units.

The North Korean “Education Law,” amended in 2015, specifies in Articles 40 and 41 that institutions, enterprises, and organizations must plan and supply educational materials and experimental equipment needed for educational activities. Additionally, Article 70 on “School Construction and Sponsorship Projects” in the “City and County Development Law” (enacted

[60] “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for the Sustainable Development,”June 2021, 21-22 p, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021_VNR_Report_DPRK.pdf

in 2021) assigns responsibility to local people's committees to equip school educational facilities using local materials[61].

However, experts generally agree that it is almost impossible for North Korea's local governments, whose administrative autonomy at the city, county, and district levels is critically low, to allocate educational budgets to schools. As a result, the burden of operating schools without adequate educational budgets is largely passed onto parents, and it is only natural that this leads to significant disparities in education between regions given the reality in North Korea.

This reality is also well-reflected in interviews with defectors. A witness (M01) who graduated, in 2018, from a senior middle school in a Ri unit of Bocheon County, Yanggang Province, said: “until I graduated, my school didn't even have a computer.”

> *"In 2015, the authorities mandated that all schools should have computers. However, the principal allocated a certain number to each class teacher, who then either collected them from parents or earned money elsewhere to buy the computers. Because of this, rural schools are incredibly lacking. The quality of school facilities varies tremendously depending on the region." — F12-mother, mother of a 2017 graduate from a senior middle school in Suncheon City.*

> *"The directive to provide students with uniforms, school supplies, and the like starts first in Pyongyang and then is implemented in other provincial capitals. Therefore, it's difficult to fully execute these directives in distant rural areas and countryside locations." — F13-teacher, a defector who was a teacher until the early 2000s.*

Experts in North Korean education have noted that, in certain provincial or rural schools, it is not uncommon to find students who are unfamiliar with the English alphabet or who have never

[61]Article 70 (School Construction and Sponsorship Projects) of the City and County Development Law (enacted in 2021): "City and County People's Committees must mobilize local materials as much as possible to modernize schools and extracurricular cultural centers, including student youth halls, according to the demands of the new century. They should also be equipped with modern educational facilities. City and County People's Committees are charged with identifying sponsorship organizations to provide schools with material, technological, and labor support, establish a regularized form for sponsorship projects, and develop appropriate countermeasures.”

conducted an experiment. This is due to the absence of specialized teachers in subjects like English and Chemistry.

An interviewee who is a parent of a 2017 graduate (F12-mother) stated that rural schools are in a dismal state because responsibility for the school facilities is being placed on local organizations, factories, and enterprises. She elaborated that the collective farms in rural areas are financially strained and unable to provide adequate resources for school equipment. This regional disparity ultimately results in substantial disparities in opportunities for higher education and future employment for graduates.

This discriminatory environment is also clearly visible in private education.

> *"In Yeonsa County, private education is not well-developed so the children of officials are sent to Chongjin City where private education is more advanced. Simply having power is not enough, parents also need money to provide education." — F09-mother, mother of a son who graduated from a senior middle school in 2017.*

3.1.2 Regional Discrimination in the Career Paths of Graduates

The reality that freedom of movement is restricted by one's place of residence, naturally acts as a limiting factor on the career paths of high school graduates. According to research[62] from the Korea Institute for National Unification, which analyzed, from 2012-2020, North Korean publications related to education and the Rodong Sinmun newspaper, it was found that a total of 271 universities exist in North Korea. When classified by type, 21 out of 37 central universities[63](60%) are located in Pyongyang. Furthermore, all five comprehensive universities in North Korea, such as Kim Il-sung University and Kim Chaek University of Technology, are also located in Pyongyang.

[62] Cho Junga etc., "*North Korea's Universities and Higher Education in the Knowledge-Based Economy Era*," KINU, 2020, https://www.kinu.or.kr/pyxis-api/1/digital-files/dbf1e78b-cb84-449a-84df-350acbcfc045

[63] 'Central universities in the DPRK' refers to universities that are directly overseen by the Ministry of Education in the Cabinet. They are also sometimes referred to as "central-level universities." Korean wikipedia, https://ko.wikipedia.org/wiki/중앙대학_(조선민주주의인민공화국).

<Table 3> Number of Universities by Region

Region	Number of Univ.	Region	Number of Univ.
Pyongyang	52	Kangwon	16
South Pyongan	38	Chagang	11
North Pyongan	26	Yanggang	8
South Hwanghae	18	Nampo	13
North Hwanghae	17	Kaesong	5
South Hamgyong	38	Rasun	3
North Hamgyong	26	Total	271

<Table 4> Number of Universities by Type

	Comprehensive Universities	Sector-specific Universities	Vocational Technical Colleges	Factory, Agriculture, or Fishery Colleges	Total
Number	5	125	48	93	271

The concentration of major universities in Pyongyang acts as a source of regional discrimination that is affecting high school graduates. For graduates who have attended central universities, career advancement tends to be faster after job placement. However, it is exceedingly rare for students from ordinary middle schools to gain admission to central universities, and it is mostly graduates of the elite 'No. 1 Middle Schools' who enter them[64]. Additionally, there are practical limitations for graduates of regional middle schools to attend central universities in other regions. An interviewee (M05), who graduated from a senior middle school in Hyesan City in 2015, explained that money is needed in every aspect of college life. From bribing professors during exam periods, which is an ordinary or necessary practice in North Korea, to covering living expenses and dormitory fees, money is required at every turn. Therefore, it is even more difficult for students from rural areas to study in Pyongyang. Unlike

[64] Kim Jong Won, etc., "*Study on Comparison between North and South Koreas and Strategies for Integration*," Korean Educational Development Institute, December, 2015, 231 p.

South Korea or other countries, it is not possible in North Korea to work your way through college. Therefore, without financial support from one's family, sustaining college life is unfeasible.

> *"If there's no guaranteed money, it's difficult to sustain college life in big cities like Pyongyang... Children in Sunchon City, who usually take multi-subject private tutoring lessons to go to college, generally end up attending local vocational or technical colleges for 1-3 years before going to the military; even if they can't get into comprehensive universities or central-level universities." — F12-mother, mother of a son who graduated from a senior middle school in 2017.*

The quality of life and educational services varies drastically between urban and rural areas, making it understandable that graduates of senior middle schools often aspire to move to larger cities. Since job placement after graduation often determines one's lifelong location and career, paying bribes to secure a move to a major city is seen as a beneficial investment for the future.

> *"Given the significant disparity between industrial and agricultural sectors, many aim to transition to industrial units after graduating from senior middle school. The desire to attend a university often stems from the same motivation—to escape rural life. That's why I enrolled in an agricultural leadership college." — F03, a 2017 graduate from a senior middle school in a rural area.*

> *"I bribed the school to obtain my daughter's transfer certificate and academic records, enabling me to send her to a big city. My sisters lived there and could look after her. Although I secured her administrative documents from her middle school, I chose not to register her in a new school in the big city. This wasn't a major concern for us because my sister served as the chairwoman of the local people's unit, allowing my daughter to live there without official residence registration. I believed that for her future, gaining hands-on experience in trade within a big city would be significantly more beneficial than having her remain in the countryside after graduation." — F10-mother, mother of a*

daughter who graduated from a senior middle school in a county in Yanggang Province in 2017.

The interviewee (F10-mother) explained that not registering her daughter's residency and academic records anywhere was a temporary but deliberate measure to keep her free from obligatory involvement in school life and political organizations, like the youth league. Although it is impossible to live without a registered residency in the long term, she believed that even a few years of proper training in trade and business from her aunts would be helpful for her daughter's future stability. Therefore, she prioritized hands-on market experience in a big city over schooling in the countryside.

This issue is not solely about restricted access to education based on geographic location; it also arises from limitations on regional transportation, human and material movement, and the freedom to relocate residences. Additionally, the lack of mobility between professions further intensifies these regional disparities. Another interviewee (F13-teacher), who served as a middle school teacher in Onsung-gun (County), North Hamgyong Province until the early 2000s, noted: "students in rural, county-level middle schools generally believe that attending college is one of the few avenues for escaping life in the countryside."

3.2 Discrimination Based on Songbun and Social Class

Discrimination in access to educational services based on social status and class is also a human rights issue found throughout North Korean society. According to the 'Resident Registration Project Reference[65]', published in 1993 by the Social Safety Agency (currently the Ministry of Social Safety), North Korea's system of social origin is divided into three main classes (*todae*): the core, the wavering, and the hostile. Furthermore, one's "social component" (*sungbun*) is determined based on the profession that has had the most significant influence on shaping their worldview, such as laborers, soldiers, office workers, farmers, petit bourgeois, merchants, etc.

[65] PARK Seung Min, BAE Jin Young, "[Breaking] North Korea's Social Safety Agency Publication," *News Room of Monthly Chosun*, July, 2007, http://monthly.chosun.com/Client/News/viw.asp?ctcd=&nNewsNumb=200707100015.

The interviewee, F11-mother, who has a daughter who graduated from middle school in 2012 and a son who graduated in 2018, succinctly explained the impact of social class on the future social and career paths of her children, including their prospects for formal job placements. "There is no case where laborers end up better off. If the father is a laborer, the son can't escape being a laborer either," she stated. Although officially registered as a ‘housewife’ with no institution listed for economic activities, she earned money through home-based handicraft manufacturing. Her husband, registered as a ‘laborer’, held formal employment in a factory but also worked as a currency exchange broker in the private sector. She explained that, to their father’s ‘social component’ as a laborer there were no other career options for their children besides following in their father's footsteps as laborers.

Social origins, namely the family foundation (social classes or *todae*), and social component, act as a ‘glass ceiling’ that obstructs advancement and promotion in one’s social life; including admission to higher education and job placement. It also plays a decisive role as a ‘glass wall’, limiting the career paths of children based on their parents' professions and vocational categories. Furthermore, according to the interviews, if one's origin traces back to the generation of a great-grandfather who was a ‘landowner’, ‘rich farmer’, or a ‘sectarian’, and thus belongs to the hostile class, they are completely excluded from legal or political careers after graduating from school.

> *“If one is among the very few exceptional students, there are no restrictions on going to university. However, if there is an issue with one's family foundation (social classes or todae), then naturally, they can't become high-ranking officials in the party or in the legal sector. In other ordinary professions, job selection can be based on one's abilities. However, youths whose great-grandparents originated from South Korea during the Korean War era (those from the hostile class) are not assigned any administrative or political tasks.*" *— F12-mother*

An interviewee who served as a teacher for 13 years, starting in 2010, explained how one’s family background affects access to higher education and entry into professions.

"In the past, students attended art and foreign language academies mainly based on their abilities. However, today, the children of officials are the ones who mostly attend such special academies or universities. Teachers go to great lengths to help students from privileged backgrounds get placed in prestigious military units. Meanwhile, students from families classified as being from the 'hostile class' can only go as far as technical colleges; they are barred from entering comprehensive and central-level universities. Regardless of background, students must have exceptional academic records and high rankings on scholastic aptitude tests to succeed." — F14-teacher

"Because my grandfather was purged and relocated from Pyongyang to a rural area, my family's social class was negatively affected. I had aspired to apply to specialized programs such as "the No. 5 department," or Kim Jong-Il's Escort Brigade, as well as the Kim Jong-Il Political University, when I was in the 5th grade of middle school (equivalent to the 2nd year of senior middle school). However, I was excluded from the special selection shortlist. Despite excelling in physical health, academic achievement, and overall school performance, I was barred from participating in the preliminary physical examinations for the political college. It was at this point that I experienced discrimination based on my social class." — M08

"My brother-in-law has a favorable social standing due to his association with the escort command. This family status stems from his grandfather's participation in the anti-Japanese armed struggle. As a result, my nephew was assigned to the escort command in Pyongyang. Nonetheless, it is still standard practice to pay over a million won in bribes for such placements. Children from particularly impoverished families sometimes even petition to join dolgyeokdae (the military-style construction brigade)." — F09-mother

3.3 Discrimination Caused by Economic Disparity

Article 47 of the North Korean Socialist Constitution declares that under the 12-year compulsory education system, "the state offers education free of charge to all students and provides university students with scholarships." However, in reality, various fees, in-kind

contributions, and labor are extracted from students; essentially making education a fee-paying enterprise. Consequently, students who are unable to meet the demands for contributions set forth by teachers and schools face restrictions in their access to educational services.

It was found that on average, about 5 out of 30-35 students in a regular middle school classroom face socio-economic related difficulties. Students who are in the bottom 10-15% in terms of their parents' economic status, social influence, and political power are often marginalized or bullied by teachers and classmates. Interviews revealed that such students frequently skip school without permission to both assist with their family's livelihood and to escape the pressure they experience at school. In other words, not only are they marginalized from educational access due to their family's poor economic situation, but teachers' verbal abuse and neglect also further alienate these lower-group students from the educational environment.

One of the root causes of these phenomena appears to be the failure to properly implement the provision of the Ordinary Education Law[66], which stipulates that the state or social cooperative organizations should guarantee the necessary finances and budget for education. Additionally, the City and County Development Law[67] stipulates that the People's Committee of the city or county should designate a sponsoring organization to modernize schools. However, in reality, school maintenance and management still largely rely on financial support from parents.

The various requirements for cash, in-kind contributions, and labor from students can be broadly categorized into three main areas: social assignments and labor mobilization demands; requirements for school maintenance; and demands for the teachers' own livelihood.

[66] Ordinary Education Law (amended in 2015), Article 49 (Financial budget for the ordinary education sector): "Financial resources required for the general education sector are guaranteed through the budget of the state or social cooperative organizations."

[67] Article 70 (School Construction and Sponsorship Projects) of the City and County Development Law (enacted in 2021): "The People's Committee of the city or county should maximize the use of local resources to renovate schools and extracurricular cultural centers, such as student-youth halls, in line with the demands of the new century. They should also equip them with modern educational facilities. The People's Committee of the city or county should promptly designate a sponsoring organization to actively assist schools both materially and technically. They should also properly implement sponsorship project plans and strategies."

3.3.1 Social Assignments and Labor Mobilization

It appears that students are required to submit social assignments approximately 2-3 times a month. These assignments can vary by season or time and can include requirements for labor to raise funds for school operations, kid's assignments, and support for the People's Army. As a result, it is nearly impossible for both parents and students to accurately recall what type of social assignments were submitted, at what cost, and how frequently based on their memory as interviewees. The majority of testimonies suggest that these demands are made almost every day. However, closer inquiry reveals that North Koreans are pressured daily to fulfill the social assignment requirements that are submitted 2-4 times a month. From this perspective, it appears that students experience considerable psychological stress.

The methods of admonishment used by teachers, as described by interviewees, for students who have not submitted their social assignments are as follows:

> *"Teachers make students who haven't submitted their social assignments stand up and shame them by questioning why they haven't completed them." — F04*

> *"Teachers have all the students sit down and then make those who haven't submitted stand up. They verbally attack these students by comparing them to their peers. Students are required to submit assignments almost once a week, and those who fail to do so are consistently berated by their homeroom teacher." — M06*

> *"If they don't submit on time, teachers make them repeatedly stand up to humiliate them. Additionally, students who haven't completed their social assignments are told to leave their backpacks at school and go home to bring the assignments after school." — F07*

> *"If you don't submit, you have to experience continuous criticism, and it's really hard. I did everything that was asked to ensure my son would not suffer such humiliation from the teacher. If he can't submit, the teacher doesn't give the students their backpacks*

and sends them home to bring the social assignments. So the children are really struggling." — F11-mother

"Teachers question the students almost every day. In front of the entire school, they make the students who haven't completed their assignments stand in a line to humiliate them." — F12-mother

It can be confirmed that teachers subject students to emotional abuse through their scolding in the process of demanding students' fulfillment of social assignments. Due to such admonishment and pressure from teachers, it has been found that, in a class of 30-35 students, as few as two and as many as five students refrain from attending school. Interestingly, the first middle school, which is a school for gifted students, is cited as an exception. "There are no students who can't attend school due to such issues," says an interviewee (M02).

"It was between 2014 and 2016 when I attended a senior middle school. To raise funds for school management, we only had morning classes, and in the afternoon we had to pick mushrooms, gather grain from fields, and harvest tree fruits - basically, the school assigned us tasks that could generate money. We did such work on weekends and afternoons. We did this more than ten times a month. For wealthy families, teachers sometimes exempted their children from these labor mobilizations. In our class, which had a total of 50 students (the school was in a rural area, so they combined two classes), 3-4 students didn't attend school due to these burdens." — F03

"The teacher asked us to bring rabbit skins for making padding winter coats for soldiers. If we failed to do so, we had to pay money based on the current market rate. We received such requests about 3 times a week. In the winter, because we had to buy firewood, we contributed 50-100 Chinese Yuan; and in the spring, another 50-100 Yuan for classroom improvements, such as painting the floor. This happens 2-3 times a year on a larger scale. On smaller occasions, we pay around 5-10 Yuan (equivalent to 5,000 North Korean Won). Out of 30 students, 5-6 can't afford to pay. These students

frequently skip school. In each class, about 1-2 students find this burden too much to handle and don't come to school at all." — F04

"In a class of 30 students, around 2-3 students are from families who are struggling to make ends meet and are always in debt. Such kids are often ostracized in class and face discrimination from the teachers. They also experience such abuse for not being able to meet the school's demands. If they skip school for even a single day, they are indiscriminately beaten, whether on the face, arms, or legs. As a result, about 1-2 students end up not attending school at all and instead work in the fields or in the market to make money." — M01

"Firstly, if you're economically disadvantaged, there's a tendency for both teachers and classmates to discriminate against you. If you can't fulfill tasks assigned to students, like submitting rabbit skins or scrap metal, you face discrimination. About half the class experiences struggles due to these social assignments.There are only 23-24 officially enrolled students, and about 5 could not attend the school at all." — M06

There were various ways to cope with the nearly daily after-school labor activities. While some could regularly skip these by paying money, there was also a formal way to opt out. One interviewee (F10-mother) bribed the teacher and enrolled her son in the youth center's volleyball team to exempt him from after-school labor. By doing so, her son could spend his afternoons participating in volleyball activities and thus be excused from the labor. In other words, children from wealthier families who are in the top 10% could skip by paying money, and those who could not afford to do so had to directly participate in labor work. At the same time, students from the poorest households, roughly the bottom 10%, opted not to attend school at all."

3.3.2 Social Assignments and Labor Mobilization

According to the principle of free education, the responsibility for funding school maintenance and operations rests with the state and local cooperative organizations. As outlined in the City

and County Development Law as well as the Ordinary Education Law, it is a standard practice for local people's committees to assign sponsorship organizations to schools in order to provide educational materials and facilities.

The article from the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), dated April 7, 2023, and titled "Surge in Educational Support in North Hwanghae Province[68]," outlines instances where local institutions and enterprises have provided educational facilities with essential materials. According to the article, officials from the Provincial Rural Economic Committees have equipped the Agricultural College with experimental and practical facilities. Meanwhile, the Provincial Post Service Office and Provincial Trade Management Department have supplied items such as flat-screen TVs and computers. Additionally, employees from the Provincial Land and Environmental Protection Department, the Provincial Prosecutor's Office, and the Provincial Water and Electricity Department have also made contributions to local schools. Legally, this system enables local factories, organizations, and enterprises to serve as sponsors responsible for providing schools with necessary equipment.

However, experts involved in this study caution that the approach outlined in the article about North Hwanghae Province—namely, national investment in pilot or model schools with the expectation that other schools across the country will follow suit—is insufficient to address the widespread material shortages in the North Korean education system. This method aligns with the traditional North Korean strategy of social campaigning, which involves selecting a specific period to concentrate support on model schools and then encouraging other regions to emulate these ‘best practices’. However, experts note that such intense focus on the target schools often leads to resource shortfalls in surrounding areas, rendering this approach unsustainable for the stable management of educational funding.

The students and parents interviewed were unaware that local factories and enterprises serve as sponsorship organizations, responsible for supplying educational materials to schools. While it is possible that students and parents may lack a full understanding of the aid provided by these local sponsors, many parents confirmed that they have contributed various educational

[68] "Surge in Educational Support in North Hwanghae Provincek”, *Korean Central News Agency*, April 7, 2023, http://kcna.kp/kp/article/q/1ad394a579b390a938aa5578059334a8.kcmsf.

resources themselves, including computers. Additionally, school maintenance projects, which are supported by the labor and contributions of students, are carried out several times a year. This includes tasks such as painting school walls and classroom floors.

> *"In 2015, the North Korean authorities ordered that computers be placed in every school. However, the principals only allocated a few to each classroom teacher, who then had to either collect money from parents or earn money elsewhere to purchase the computers." — F12-mother*

> *"In the fall and winter, we have to provide firewood and in winter we have to carry out school maintenance tasks like supplying lime." — M05*

> *"Due to a lack of funding, parents are left responsible for all aspects of school operations. As a result of social assignments, teachers focus less on students' academic achievements and daily life, and more on collecting social contributions or materials. Because of this, the nickname for homeroom teachers among both students and teachers is either 'collector' or 'collecting leader.' Encountering a parent with influence can somewhat alleviate the burden on a teacher." — F14-teacher*

Students from ‘influential families’ often gain a special trust relationship with their homeroom teachers by helping teachers solve assignments that they need to submit to the school. As a result, these students gain an advantage in various aspects compared to other students in the classroom.

> *"Children from families with substantial influence act in a leadership role even as students, giving directions to other kids, and it's taken for granted that the other students should follow them. Those who have donated large sums of money, paint or wood to the school or teachers do not participate in classroom cleaning, several labors, or afternoon tasks assigned by the school." — F03*

3.3.3 Demands for the Teachers' Livelihood

Teachers' monthly salaries are approximately 3,000 won, equivalent to roughly 500 grams of rice, with the exchange rate about 8,200 won per USD[69]. Given these circumstances, it is virtually impossible for teachers to sustain a day-to-day life solely on their monthly income. Due to these extremely low wages, it has become customary for teachers to rely on the parents of their students for financial support. Some reports indicate that teachers receive rice from nearby collective farms as part of educational aid programs.

> *"Mothers have to make sure to take good care of the teachers, celebrating their birthdays and special occasions. The class leaders (usually consisting of about 8 students per class) also typically give gifts to the teachers. These gifts include food items, rice, and other essentials for one's livelihood. As of around 2019, a teacher's monthly salary was less than 3,500 won, so parents have to contribute to the teachers' livelihood. Teachers are also connected to farms and receive rice from nearby agricultural cooperatives." — F09-mother*

Due to the inability to sustain themselves solely on their wages, teachers are driven to prioritize making a living over providing educational instruction and student guidance. With monthly salaries being extremely low, and no opportunity for additional income during work hours, accepting gifts and bribes from students' parents appears to be the only avenue for financial support. This compromised environment has led to a decline in the quality and skill levels of educators. Consequently, this dual impact infringes on students' rights to quality education and undermines trust in the North Korean public education system.

> *"Since education is mandatory, the system itself doesn't impose any restrictions on academic studies. However, teachers don't invest much effort into their teaching because the state fails to provide a sufficient monthly salary. Teachers also have to sustain themselves, and their monthly wage of approximately 3,300 won is inadequate for a living. Students genuinely interested in studying often opt for private tutoring*

[69] Latest market prices in North Korea, Asia Press Osaka, https://www.asiapress.org/korean/nk-korea-prices/.

instead of relying on school education. Teachers, lacking both skill and motivation, are primarily focused on their own livelihood." — F12-mother

"You must take good care of the teachers, particularly during special occasions such as their birthdays or significant family events (such as a teacher's wedding or the birthdays of a teacher's parents). My child's father earns money through a business that the state disapproves of (currency exchange brokering). To preempt any potential issues, I give approximately 100 Yuan to the homeroom teacher 2-3 times a year." — F11-mother

Students whose families provide personal benefits to teachers naturally receive various forms of favoritism. For example, they can receive recommendations to participate in youth events held in Pyongyang, which is considered a lifelong honor for North Koreans; and their school life becomes much easier due to the consistent support from teachers.

"Even if a student had very poor grades, if the parents are wealthy, maintain good relations with teachers, and make generous donations, the student received awards like the Kim Il-Sung Youth Medal." — M08

"It goes without saying that if parents maintain a good relationship with the homeroom teacher, the teacher is more likely to look out for their child. In our case, the teacher often visited our home, forming a friendly relationship with my child's father. Each time he visited, we offered him gifts, which in turn made my child's school experience more pleasant." — F10-mother

"Financial resources certainly ease the experience of school life. Even families with influence find that if they don't offer something of value to the teacher, their children are less likely to receive favorable treatment. For example, the supply of new textbooks often falls short of the total number of students in a class. If a class of 25 students receives only 20 new textbooks, those are first allocated to students who promptly pay for required materials and to those whose families are generous toward the teachers. The remaining five students are left with the option of using outdated textbooks or attending school without any textbooks at all." — F11-mother

3.4 Discrimination Against Women

The North Korean Gender Equality Guarantee Law stipulates that gender equality must be ensured in schools at all levels with regards to education admission, accessing a higher education course, and job placement after graduation. It explicitly states that women should not be limited based on their gender, except in special fields of study. However, the problem of discrimination in education based on gender is also pervasive, appearing alongside other widespread societal issues. In other words, due to the prevalent misogyny and patriarchal mindset in society, there is a clear “glass ceiling" that hinders female students from advancing to college or finding employment.

Many explained that it is not that there is systematic discrimination against female students in the realm of education, but rather the overall atmosphere of the society is not favorable towards them. Interviewees recall a discriminatory atmosphere in the teachers' attitudes towards female students. For example, while teachers often encouraged male students with phrases like “How can a man not study?” or “You have to go to university,” they did not take female students’ academic performance seriously. In other words, they often told female students to study if they wanted to but left them to their own devices. Additionally, an interviewee (F07) added that even adults in the community, such as her father's friends, often said: “What's the point of a girl studying so hard?”

> *"While there is no explicit discrimination that prevents women from going to university, the remnants of Confucian thinking still persist; spreading the perception that 'women should just get married.' Also, jobs are divided by gender and so are universities. Only men can apply for jobs as party officials and for jobs in the Ministry of State Security and the Ministry of Social Safety. Female students from poorer families generally prefer farm work or easier jobs. It's a social norm for women to work in fields like kindergarten education, telephone exchanges, or as security staff in military supply factories. Hence, the disparity starts as early as college admissions." — F03*

The differentiation of gender roles in such professions is well-reflected in the nature of North Korean universities, which are primarily focused on engineering and technology. Except for

teacher's colleges, major city universities, like Hamhung and Chongjin, are engineering-focused; and only teacher's colleges are dominated by women. Male students have a broad range of fields they can specialize in without restrictions on their career placement or prospects. However, for women, the atmosphere is such that they are expected to choose only from a few limited fields, such as education, healthcare, or light industry.
Moreover, due to the male-centric culture that is pervasive throughout North Korean society, even in the premier middle schools aimed at fostering future leaders, the proportion of male students is high.

> *"When I enrolled in the first middle school, there were roughly 4-6 female students in a class of about 30. However, the female students who attended the first middle school often came from families with significantly better economic capabilities or social status compared to the average male students. Therefore, they received better treatment in terms of advancement to higher educational levels or day-to-day school life. Since the goal of the premier middle school is to train ethnic leaders, I think they are deliberately adjusting the number of female enrollees based on the proportion of female leaders they aim to produce." — M02*

At the 8th Party Congress in 2021, attended by 5,000 central party officials and organization representatives, it was boasted that the number of female participants had increased by 200 from the previous year. However, with only 501 women attending, they made up just 10% of the total[70], a figure that aptly reflects the leadership status of women within North Korea. This phenomenon is also mirrored in the educational leadership sector. According to a teacher and interviewee (F13-teacher), gender discrimination is not evident in the educational curriculum but manifests later in professional life. She explained that there are hardly any women in leadership positions, whether as factory or enterprise managers or as school principals.

Consequently, the career aspirations of female students are limited, showing a significant disparity from the career paths preferred by male students. Notably, there is an absence of women who aspire to enter politics, the legal profession, or become party officials.

[70] Jung Yong-Soo, January 7, 2021, "Kim Jong-Un admits 'We have fallen incredibly short of our economic development goals,'" Chosun Ilbo, https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/23963464#home.

SURVEY ON THE CURRENT STATE OF ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN NORTH KOREA:

HAS NORTH KOREA'S ACCESS TO EDUCATION IMPROVED IN KIM JONG UN'S TIME?

Daily NK

DAILY NK

Summary

Given that the COVID-19 pandemic has widened the social class divide in North Korea - a key factor influencing access to education - the significance of this research lies in capturing the perspectives and needs of North Korean parents. This study surveyed 50 insiders currently living in North Korea with school-age children, employing a snowball sampling method in which key informants help recruit additional participants. The final sample included residents from different provinces: two people from Ryanggang, five people from North Hamgyong, seven people from South Hamgyong, three people from Kangwon, three people from Chagang, six people from North Pyongan, eight people from South Pyongan, four people from North Hwanghae, five people from South Hwanghae, and seven people from Pyongyang. The gender distribution within this group was 19 males and 31 females.

With the introduction of the Ordinance on Enforcing Universal 12-Year Compulsory Education, the North Korean authorities publicly announced their plan to achieve substantive effects in both the content and methods of education. The positive effects of extending compulsory education to "school-age" children are closely linked to the credibility of schooling. Parents, however, had low expectations regarding the improvement of the quality of education.

In terms of "career prospects" (*jinro*), the extension of compulsory schooling by one year was seen as beneficial for parents who wanted their children to gain admission to university or join the military. Among parents with female children, early graduation was seen as preferable so that these children could contribute to the family's support sooner. Thus, respondents' views on their children's educational opportunities were largely shaped by career prospects influenced by "social classification" (*songbun*) as well as gender.

In addition, parents perceived the extension of the education period negatively, from the reasons of financial burdens imposed on parents as "non-tax compulsory payments." The main reason for students not attending school was identified as "labor mobilization" (*noryok dongwon*) and task burdens (33.3%)," underscoring the gravity of this issue. Other reasons included a loss of interest in school life (24.4%), opting to work and earn money (14.6%) due to the inability to secure desired jobs because of their foundation (15.4%), dissatisfaction with the

education content (11.4%), and other reasons (0.8%).

In particular, attendance rates of over 50.0% (40.0%) and over 80.0% (40.0%) were observed during the COVID-19 outbreak.[71] The main reason for absenteeism was identified as family financial difficulties, accounting for 43.4% of cases.[72] This suggests that parents experiencing financial difficulties may not prioritize sending their children to school.

Social class, encompassing elements of "social classification" (*songbun*) and financial resources, plays a significant role in respondents' educational interests. Parents focused primarily on improving their children's knowledge and skills (40.7%) or preparing them for subjects relevant to college admissions (32.3%).[73] To achieve these goals, parents often arrange private lessons for their children. In addition, the need for computer, science & technology, and foreign language education has increased under the North Korean policy of "making all people well-versed in science and technology" (*jonmin gwahak gisul injaehwa*). Parents showed great enthusiasm for education tailored to university entrance exams, seeing successful results as a strong basis for "social development" (*sahoejok baljon*).

The quality of education in key subjects depends heavily on the caliber of teachers and the availability of adequate equipment. Without these resources, students in local schools, especially those from families unable to afford private education, face marginalization. In computer education, children are more likely to progress in their computer skills if they are identified as "gifted students" (*sujae*, 22.0%) or if they receive private tuition or own a personal computer (61.0%).[74] This situation underscores the disparity in learning opportunities between

[71] Of the total responses (100.0%), the attendance of the classes attended by the respondents' children varied: 6.0% of the classes had 30.0% or more attendance, 40.0% had at least 50.0% attendance, another 40.0% had 80.0% or more attendance, and 14.0% reported full (100.0%) attendance. This means that 46.0% of the classes had less than 80.0% attendance.

[72] Other reasons include social distancing measures (32.1%), no major change (18.9%), stricter attendance control leading to higher attendance (3.8%), and strengthened political education leading to higher attendance rate (1.9%).

[73] There was less interest in subjects chosen for the child's own interest in learning (10.2%), those contributing to assessments in school life (5.1%), or subjects related to the development of workplace skills (3.1%).

[74] There is a significant class difference in computer education. A much higher proportion of students who studied with a private tutor and had a computer at home demonstrated computer proficiency (61.0%), compared to gifted children who were mainly educated in specialized institutions (22.0%). Only 13.6% benefited from intensive courses at school, and only 3.4% of respondents reported that all students exhibit computer proficiency.

affluent students in the Pyongyang metropolitan area and their disadvantaged counterparts in rural and provincial areas.

Crucially, it was found that schools (58.0%) and parents (19.2%) were primarily responsible for covering the overall school finances.[75] Shortages were not limited to digital equipment (32.4%) but also included essential supplies such as firewood for winter heating and drinking water (29.4%) and textbooks (25.0%).[76]

Overall, it is clear that there is a significant lack of government action to mitigate classroom inequalities and maintain a minimum level of student motivation to learn. Parents often find it difficult to express their opinions or make complaints. In addition, the implementation of educational policies in various sectors is fiscally challenging. This underscores the need for a fundamental adjustment of the national education policy framework to make it more responsive to prevailing realities.

[75] The organizations identified as financially responsible for school operations include the school itself (58.9%), parents (19.2%), the Ministry of Education (8.2%), the Socialist Patriotic Youth League (8.2%), the provincial party committee (2.7%), and N/A (2.0%).

[76] Other items needed by students include basic supplies such as desks, chairs, blackboards, and educational materials (8.8%), followed by sports and music equipment (4.4%).

Introduction

1. Research Background and Purpose

The “right” to education means that everyone should have the opportunity to receive universal education and specific education based on need and want. Opportunities for accessing education must be provided fairly to all, and the state has the obligation to oversee and make the necessary adjustments.

After Kim Jong-un assumed power, North Korea’s education policy has undergone a series of notable changes. However, it has not been clearly analyzed how these policy changes are actually being implemented in the field. North Korea’s education system is undergoing improvements to embrace international mechanisms with the intention of demonstrating progress to the international community. However, there is a concern that these changes may remain largely rhetorical due to the inability of the state to apply the policy “universally” across the general population.

The international community is concerned that North Korea continues to be isolated and that it has been difficult to obtain reliable and verifiable information on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its residents due to border closures.[77] Furthermore, strict restrictions on movements, a sharp decrease in the number of North Korean defectors, and the government’s new restrictive measures on freedom of expression are also acting as obstacles to the outside world’s access to information inside North Korea. It can be said that it is of great social value to call attention to and criticize deficiencies in external society without neglecting the environment in North Korea, where collecting opinions and expressing them is difficult.

Furthermore, research focused on addressing the policies and practical challenges in North Korea’s education system has been predominantly limited to the perspectives of authorities and teachers. As previously mentioned, it is essential to analyze which areas urgently need

[77] Kim, Young-kwon, “UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights, Salmon, Submits First Report to UN: China, Russia Should Apply Non-Refoulement Principle to North Korean Defectors,” *VOA* (October 15, 2022). https://www.voakorea.com/a/6790547.html [accessed November 20, 2023]

improvement from the perspective of “students,” who are the primary subjects of education, and to develop alternative approaches. In this process, examining the needs and limitations of students and families, who should be the main stakeholders in education, will provide new insights and implications for future efforts in this field.

It is also necessary to urgently examine how North Korea’s educational environment has been impacted during a period when overall social dynamics have diminished, and the self-sustaining economic activities linked to the market have decreased due to COVID-19. Ultimately, this survey will serve as a foundation for assessing whether the country’s policy direction and line align with the actual educational realities in North Korea and preparing appropriate alternatives based on these findings.

1.1 Methodology and Participant Information

1.1.1 Methodology

The survey content draws from the responses of 50 internal residents of North Korea, with the aim of capturing the overall situation through quantitative research. Participants were recruited evenly throughout different regions in an effort to avoid regional bias. This study adopts an “intrinsic approach” to address the limitations commonly associated with research based on North Korean defectors and seeks to assess the actual realities of insiders’ lives and their social experiences in North Korea. The survey method began with a small group of key informants and was expanded through a snowball sampling methodology, where the informants assisted in recruiting additional participants. The target demographic is ordinary citizens and includes internal informants who serve in North Korea’s public security agencies and the Party Center.

Gender, age group, residential area, highest level of education, and occupational cluster are the basic questions used to categorize the respondents by their characteristics. When answering the questionnaire, the participants drew from their experiences in sending children attending primary and secondary schools. Since we cannot directly protect the respondents who are exposed on-site, our first priority is to avoid causing harm to the victims or those involved. This

is why this report discloses personal information and the method of acquiring information to the minimum necessary level. During the survey, we promised confidentiality to all survey participants, supplemented by not disclosing the time of the survey and the information identifying the subjects. Therefore, we inquire about the gender and age of the students, as well as the area and level of the school, while refraining from requesting specific information such as student names and school names in order to protect the privacy of the individuals surveyed.

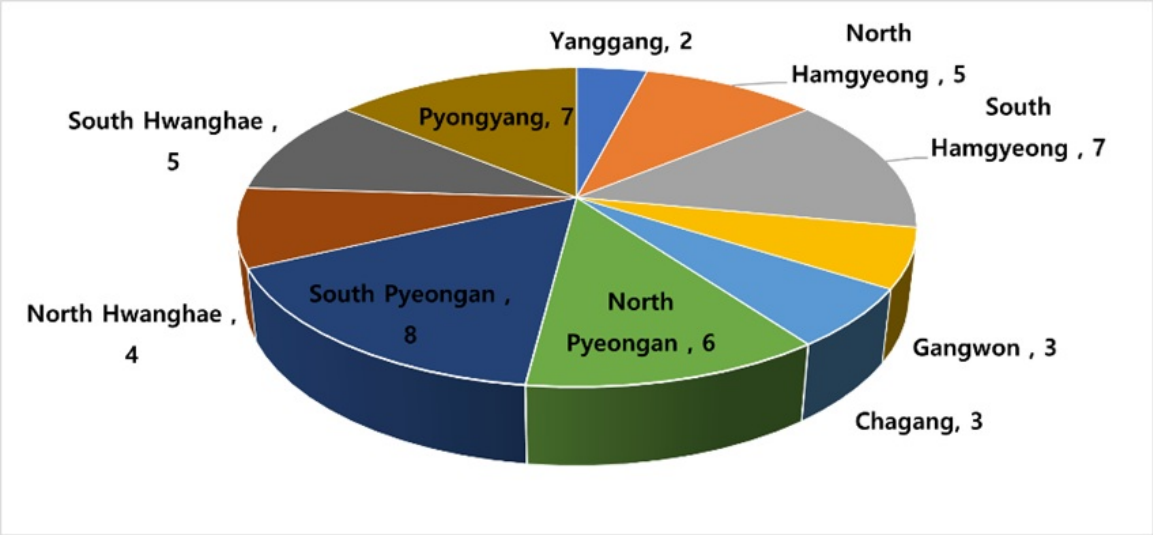
In our effort to comprehensively understand the social context of North Korea, we formulated key discriminatory factors into question. These factors were identified through an analysis of changes in North Korea's education policies and a thorough review of literature pertaining to existing educational conditions within the country. Our objective is to analyze data from official North Korean publications, such as the Rodong Sinmun, to discern the underlying motivations behind national policies and to assess the current state of North Korea's education thoroughly. By doing so, we aim to shed light on and present an appropriate direction for educational policy in North Korean society.

1.1.2 Participant Information

The survey subject information is summarized as follows: the survey included 50 residents of North Korea, each with school-age children. These participants were selected based on the regional household proportions determined by the 2008 UN North Korean Population Census. For the safety of the participants, specific dates of the survey are not disclosed. The survey was diligently conducted to meet the survey criteria.

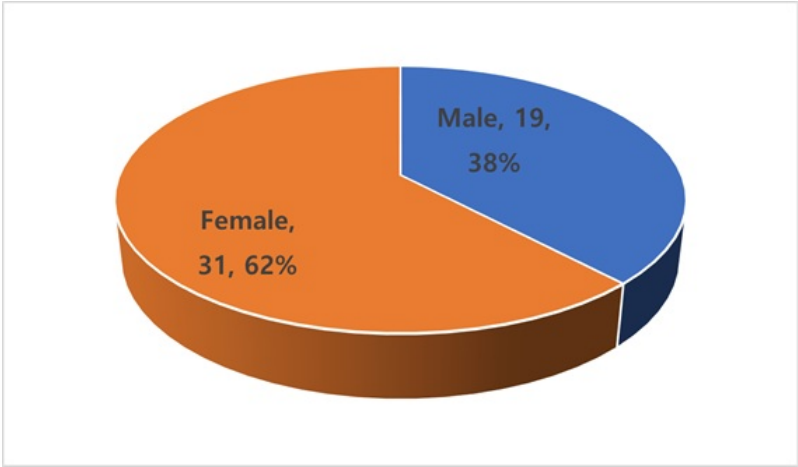
The regional distribution of participants is as follows: two people are from Ryanggang, five people are from North Hamgyong, seven people from South Hamgyong, three people from Kangwon, three people from Chagang, six people from North Pyongan, eight people from South Pyongan, four people from North Hwanghae, five people from South Hwanghae, and seven people from Pyongyang [Figure 1].

[Figure 1] Regional Distribution of Respondents



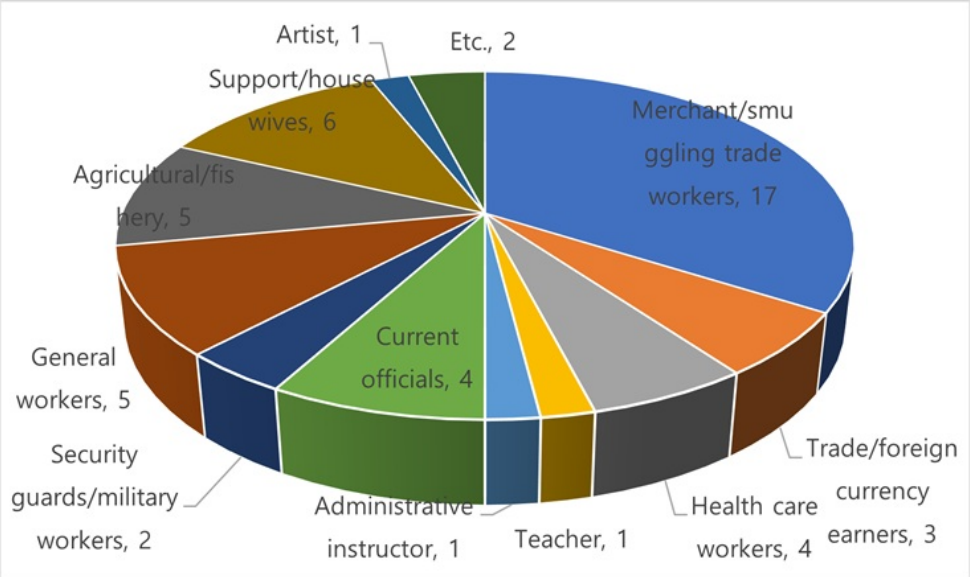
The gender distribution among the survey subjects includes 19 men and 31 women. Regarding age groups, 17 people are in their 30s, 25 people are in their 40s, and six people are in their 50s, respectively.

[Figure 2] Gender Distribution of Respondents



The distribution of occupations is 1 teacher or researcher, 5 laborers, 5 agricultural/fishery or forestry worker, 4 party organ officials, 3 trade/foreign currency earners, 3 health care personnel, 2 Public security officials or Military personnel, 6 support/housewives, 17 merchant/contraband, 1 culture and art workers, 1 administrative worker and others 2.

[Figure 3] Occupation Distribution of Respondents



The academic background of the survey participants includes 19 graduates of "senior middle schools" (*gogeup junghakgyo*), six graduates of "colleges" (*dangwa daehak*) or "general colleges" (godeung jonmun daehak), six university dropouts, 17 university graduates, and two graduates or dropouts of "postgraduate schools" (*baksawon*) or "postgraduate research institutions" (*yeonguwon*), respectively.

The monthly income surveyed is as follows: nineteen people earning less than KPW 300,000, 13 people earning KPW 300,000-500,000, six people earning KPW 500,000-1,000,000, six people earning KPW 1,000,000-2,000,000, and five people earning more than KPW 2,000,000, respectively.[78]

The distribution of the respondents' children is as follows: out of the total students surveyed, 26 are male, and 24 are female. In terms of age groups, nine children are under the age of ten, 35 children are in their teens, and six children are in their twenties. Only three children have different places of origin and the location of schools they currently attend.

[78] In general, a North Korean's income is divided into the monthly salary (living expense) received from the state and additional income. Because it is difficult to measure monthly income from (1) commerce/smuggling or (2) trade/foreign currency earning activities, the respondent's reported annual income was divided into 12 months for a monthly estimate. In the case of dependents, the husband's income was calculated on a monthly basis. Teachers and workers reported their official monthly income. In cases where respondents reported both unofficial and official income, these figures were combined to calculate the monthly income.

The distribution of origin is as follows: two people are from Ryanggang, five people from North Hamgyong, seven people from South Hamgyong, three people from Kangwon, three people from Chagang, six people from North Pyongan, eight people from South Pyongan, four people from North Hwanghae, five people from South Hwanghae, and seven people from Pyongyang City, respectively.

The distribution of school locations is as follows: nine schools in Pyongyang City, four schools in North Hamgyong, six schools in South Hamgyong, two schools in Ryanggang, three schools in Kangwon, three schools in Chagang, six schools in North Pyongan, eight schools in South Pyongan, four schools in North Hwanghae, and five schools in South Hwanghae, respectively.

Educational institutions included in the survey are two kindergartens, 13 primary schools, 11 junior middle schools, 17 senior middle schools, one college, one general college, and six universities.

1.2 Literature Review

The issue of education in North Korea requires a multifaceted approach. Prior research on North Korean education has predominantly focused on the study of North Korean political thought or a comparative approach through an analysis of the North and South Korean education systems and the proposal of alternatives. While there are detailed studies on education content conducted individually, discussions on the right to education in North Korea, especially access to education, have only been briefly addressed within international mechanisms and have not developed into an in-depth research topic.

Aiming to become a "thriving nation" (*gangsong gukga*), North Korea embarked on the mission of "making all people well-versed in science and technology" (*jonmin gwahak gisul injaehwa*)[79] and enacted the Ordinance on Enforcing Universal 12-Year Compulsory Education[80] in

[79] Article 8 of the 2015 Education Law states, "Ensuring that all people are well versed in science and technology is an important goal of socialist education. Kim, Jisoo, "Kim Jung Un Regime's Education Policy Seen through the 7th Workers' Party Convention in North Korea," *Education in Reunified Korea,* vol. 14 no. 2, (2017) p. 1.

[80] The main features of the Ordinance on Enforcing Universal 12-Year Compulsory Education are as follows: (1) extend compulsory education to 12 years in general; (2) prepare students with the self-learning skills necessary for daily life so that they can easily integrate into university, military and social life after graduation; (3) set goals at each school and class level, focusing on the ultimate goal and specifying the required subjects and the scope and

September 2012. This initiative marked the most pronounced change during the time of Kim Jong Un's ascension to power. The reorganization of its compulsory education system[81] by the North Korean authorities indicates their high level of interest in education. In particular, the reform of the school year seemed to align with global trends. This raised expectations for significant changes in the structure of North Korean education. These institutional changes have brought into focus the issue of ensuring equal education rights for students in North Korea. The emphasis on creating "opportunities" for sci-tech talents and "achieving universality" through expanded compulsory schooling makes it seem as if the North is genuinely pursuing "equality" in education.

Given that policy changes usually bring about social change, the process of education policy formulation and implementation needs to be examined in terms of the education authorities' intentions, execution, and resulting effects. Research in this area has increased with the changes in education policy since Kim Jong Un came to power.

Kim Seok-Hyang and Kim Kyung-Me (2017) reviewed Rodong Sinmun's articles from September 1, 2014, to October 31, 2016, to examine the authorities' intentions and influence on 12-year compulsory education. The study examines whether the leader Kim Jong Un's intentions are effectively disseminated throughout society and analyzes North Korea's intentions behind the formulation of the compulsory education system reforms. According to their study findings, the implementation of the new system aims to enhance the "quality level in talent development." It emphasizes the improvement of "educational conditions and environment" as the mode of implementation and a commitment to increasing "national

level of content for each school year; (4) ensure a systematic, sequential, balanced, continuous, harmonious and relevant approach in the content and methods of education at each school and class level; (5) establish a structure of "deepening through repetition" in the content and methods of education; (6) adopt a comprehensive teaching method for integrated subjects; (7) organize the curriculum to cultivate the Juche spirit and national character in students; (8) plan the content and teaching process to fully implement enlightened teaching methods; and (9) have the character of a legal document (as a regulation) that ensures continuity and stability in the development of education.

[81] Some of the major education reform policies implemented by the Kim Jong Un regime include the extension of compulsory education (from 11 to 12 years), the reorganization of school years (from the 4-6 system to the 5-3-3 system), the revision of the curriculum, and the establishment of technical senior middle schools. In addition, the North has enacted the Education Law, the Law on the Implementation of Teaching Programmes and the Law on Vocational and Technical Education. Kim Byeongyeon and Kim Jisoo, "A Study on the Educational Conditions and Environmental Changes to Improve the Quality of North Korean Education in the Kim Jong-un Era," *North Korean Studies Review*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2019), p. 176.

investment" in education projects.[82] Since 2015, however, the responsibility for improving educational conditions and the environment has been assigned to teachers, workers at relevant institutions, or local officials. Since 2016, parents have been brought in to play the main roles through the "70-day battle" (70 il jontu).[83] This raises the possibility that the project to improve school conditions may itself impose an economic burden on the North Korean people.

Kim Byeongyeon and Kim Jisoo (2019) focus on the changes in schools under Kim Jong Un through North Korean document reviews and interviews. They examine the extent to which these changes align with educational goals and analyze the nature and changes in North Korean society, including its people. Interviews with students of North Korean backgrounds revealed regional variations in the multifunctionality of educational facilities. Additionally, the findings indicated a lack of skills among teachers for effectively utilizing the facilities in the changed environment. The study inferred that, instead of pursuing projects with central government support, a school-level responsibility system was being pursued despite limitations. This approach pressed teachers to become the main actors in improving the school environment.[84] Furthermore, in the absence of central government support for teachers' welfare, the authorities have emphasized the role of "sponsoring organizations," focusing on relevant institutions, state-owned companies, and organizations.

Kim Jisoo (2019) focuses on the study of pre-school, elementary, and secondary education in North Korea during the Kim Jong Un. Her analysis encompasses the changing trends in education policy alongside shifts in the social system. Focusing on the increasingly competitive aspects of North Korean education, Kim Ji-soo describes how global trends are reflected. These include an emphasis on English language education, expansion of IT courses, and encouragement of multimedia use in teaching and learning activities. Accompanying these trends are changes in teacher policy, as evidenced by the Teachers Law and the Law on the Implementation of Teaching Programmes. These laws stipulate support measures for the

[82] Kim Seok-Hyang and Kim Kyung-Me, "An Analysis of North Korea's 12-Year Compulsory Education System, from Rodong Sinmun," *The Korean Journal of National Unification*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2017), p. 122.

[83] Ibid., p. 125.

[84] Kim Byeongyeon and Kim Jisoo, op. cit., p. 192.

professional development and livelihood of teachers.[85] Moreover, local sponsoring organizations and parents have played a significant role in improving educational conditions and environments at schools. This indicates a recognition at the state level of the serious situation, characterized by significant regional and school-level disparities.

Jun Ilgu (2018) examines the role of after-school activities, aiming to contribute essential data to the educational integration process between North and South Korea. Drawing upon findings from a comprehensive literature review, interviews, and surveys, he observes that after-school activities have shifted from being effective tools for promoting diversity in educational activities to becoming instruments of control for regime maintenance by the authorities.[86]

Furthermore, Jo Hyunjung (2022) highlights that parental support for children's private education leads to the justification for the societal exclusion of families who should otherwise receive an equitable level of support. This finding underscores the role of educational zeal among North Korean parents that reflects educational disparities and class divisions within sociocultural contexts. [87]

Therefore, changes in North Korea's education policy, including the expansion of compulsory education, necessitate a thorough examination of whether education is effectively fulfilling its fundamental objectives, which involve nurturing individuals to embody the virtues expected of a society's members, defining the social talents envisioned by the state, and evaluating whether the state is employing appropriate methods to achieve these aims.

1.2.1 Research Scope

The study on the right to education necessitates a broad review. Consequently, this study examines the changes in North Korean schools' educational environment during the COVID-19

[85] Kim Jisoo, *Analysis of Primary and Secondary Education in the Kim Jong Un Era*, KEDI Report RR 2019-11 (2019).

[86] Jun Ilgu, "A Research on After-school Activities of North Korea: Focusing on the Analysis of Extracurricular and Small Group Activities in the Education Newspaper Since Kim Jong Un's Regime (2012-2017)," *Journal of Peace and Unification Studies*, vol. 10 no. 2 (2018), pp. 241-288.

[87] Jo Hyunjung, "The Application of Private Education in North Korean Education and Its Meaning," *Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. 53 no. 4 (2022), pp. 101-130.

pandemic, with a focus on the difficulties voiced by parents on behalf of their children. It identifies discrepancies between the actual state of North Korea's education system and the goals set by its authorities. This identification serves as a foundation for an initial effort to evaluate and establish indicators assessing the realization of the right to universal access to education.

To this end, it is necessary to define the concept of the right to education. First, the compulsory education system is a system that aims at ensuring the right to education by facilitating its realization. Therefore, students' right to education should not be violated at schools, where this and other basic rights must be upheld. The right to be free from interference in education encompasses the essence of the right to liberty and is firmly rooted in the principles of human dignity and the right to pursue happiness.[88] In North Korean schools, for example, the excessive emphasis on ideological education[89] and forced mobilization deprives students of opportunities to cultivate emotions through basic subjects, as well as to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to function as members of society.

Next, the right to access education refers to the right to equal educational opportunities based on individual ability. An important aspect of ensuring this right involves examining whether discriminatory mechanisms based on "social classification" (*songbun*), class,[90] and gender are present and operational in North Korean society.[91]

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[88] Jeong Jae-Hwang, "The Constitutional Review on the Right to Education through the Analysis of Constitutional Cases," *World Constitutional Law Review*, vol.20, no. 2 (2014), p. 25.

[89] According to the 2014 DPRK COI report, "the State operates an all-encompassing indoctrination machine that takes root from childhood to propagate an official personality cult and to manufacture absolute obedience to the Supreme Leader (Suryong)." Students are no exception from being controlled by the Workers' Party of Korea in "virtually all social activities undertaken by citizens of all ages." UN Human Rights Council, Commission of Inquiry (COI), *Report of the detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 25th session, A/HRC/25/CRP.1 (*February 7, 2014), p. 7.

[90] The 2014 DPRK COI report states that North Korea "presents itself as a State where equality, non-discrimination and equal rights in all sectors have been fully achieved and implemented." In reality, "it is a rigidly stratified society with entrenched patterns of discrimination" and "state-sponsored discrimination in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is pervasive, but is also shifting." Ibid., p. 8.

[91] Access to education for individuals with disabilities was not included in this study to maintain a specific research focus.

Access to education should be supported by the quality of educational content, which should include students' access to schools with superior resources and high-quality education. Differences in the quality of education across various regions or schools can be divided into differences in material and human resources. As evidenced by the literature review, it is essential to analyze disparities in teacher expertise, urban-rural disparities, the prevalence of private education, and persistent bribery practices to determine whether they indeed play a role in undermining equal educational opportunities for North Korean students.

This broad-based research is intended to investigate the present state of the right to access education. Chapter II of this paper will focus on identifying and presenting the current status of universal 12-year compulsory education. This will be accomplished by assessing the implications of extended compulsory schooling on parents and identifying the primary reasons for students and parents exiting the school environment.

Moreover, this study gathers parents' opinions on the quality of school education and ways to improve it. Also examined is the actual role of "extracurricular and small group activities" (*gwaoe mit sojo hwaldong*) and the level of economic burden on them. The financial burden on parents is not solely linked to private lessons; it can also be compounded by the government's inability to fully implement its free education policy fully, placing excessive strain on parents. In this context, this study will investigate which material resources are in short supply, assess the degree to which they contribute to parental burdens, and examine the level of labor mobilization among students.

Excessive financial burdens and student fatigue can erode their motivation to pursue education, resulting in missed opportunities and school dropouts. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the approach of parents regarding access to education. Next, this study will examine private lessons for preschool children and students, their access to higher education opportunities, and the concerns tied to parents' perceptions of regional and urban-rural disparities.

In conclusion, this study will evaluate societal perceptions of education to measure the awareness level of educational issues and willingness to improve access. Drawing upon these findings, we will articulate our response and propose a direction for future actions.

2. Survey Results

2.1 Introduction and Actual Status of North Korean Policy on the Expansion of Compulsory Education Period

Parents' opinions on expanding the compulsory education period are an indicator of North Korean parents' perception of education and knowledge level and what are the main considerations surrounding the North's educational environment. With the expansion of compulsory education, reading, and literacy become basic skills that everyone has, and they have equal qualities in achieving "social development" (*sahoejok baljon*) with the minimum knowledge necessary in life.

2.1.1 Differences in Perception of Improving "Education" Quality

Parents' opinions on the extension of the compulsory education period [Question 2-1] did not show a significant difference between positive and negative.

Thirty-two percent of parents thought that the expansion of compulsory education had a positive impact on school-age students. Parents are fully aware of the purpose of compulsory education to develop basic knowledge, saying, "It's good to learn at least one when you're young (South Hamgyong 3)," "It's best to learn at school (South Hamgyong 5)," and "There's nothing bad about studying more (South Hamgyong 7)."

[Table 1] Opinion on Expanding Compulsory Schooling [Question 2-1]

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. Good	16	32
2. Bad	18	36
1.2 Both	16	32

While the compulsory education period was expanded, other policy changes were also implemented. These included dividing secondary education into junior and senior middle schools and enhancing the focus on "experiments and practice training." Examples of positive evaluation include comments like "School is not boring because it is divided into junior and senior levels" (Pyongyang 7) and "Education quality has improved" (North Hwanghae 2 and North Hwanghae 3). The respondents are fully aware of the relevance and effect of the changes in education policy and the reform of the compulsory education system.

Negative evaluations, accounting for 36.0% of the responses, reflect respondents' critical perceptions of school education. Examples of such feedback include: "The number of school years has increased by one, but the expanded course plan, teaching plan, textbook, and education format lack substantive content" (Chagang 3); "The primary school curriculum has been completely reorganized, yet there hasn't been a notable increase in students' capabilities" (South Hwanghae 2); and "There is no improvement in education quality despite the addition of an extra school year" (Kangwon 2). These expressions of dissatisfaction are in line with the difficulties people face in pursuing customized learning for their children.

2.1.2 Relevance to "Career Prospects"

The expansion of the compulsory education period has led parents to consider its implications for their children's future "career prospects" (*jinro*) after graduation from senior middle school. Usually, students are expected to complete the mandatory course [Question 5-2] up to senior middle schools (83.6%). However, depending on the parents, the desired educational institution appears to be different [Question 5-3]. The most preferred educational institutions among survey respondents were the Pyongyang Foreign Language Academy (37.9%) and Kumsung School (13.8%). This preference suggests that parents are hopeful their children will attend these prestigious schools alongside students from families with superior "social classification" (*songbun*).

The next preferred choice among parents was technical senior middle schools (17.2%). This indicates a high regard for schools that are nationally encouraged and select students based

on merit rather than "class background" (*todae*). The evident opportunity these schools provide for a student's career prospects highlights why prior learning and private education are popular in North Korea. Still, only two parents (Pyongyang 1 and Pyongyang 3) recognized the senior middle school course as a preparation period for college entrance exams and expressed positive opinions about the additional year given for this preparation.[92]

On the other hand, a significantly higher proportion of parents expressed expectations not for their children to advance to universities but to become general workers or enlist in the military. This perspective reflects sympathy for their children having to start social life at a young age. For instance, one parent said, "The reason is that I can take care of my child at home for a longer period" (South Pyongan 6 and South Pyongan 8), and another noted, "My child is too young to be graduating from middle school at 16 to 17" (Kangwon 3 and Chagang 1).

Financial constraints were also cited as a barrier to university education for their children. One respondent commented, "Men should enlist in the military, but it is too young to become a new soldier at 16 or 17. Therefore, it is good to have my son stay at home one year more before enlisting" (South Hwanghae 1). Thus, parents whose children are likely to join the military welcome the extension of the compulsory education period.

The link between career prospects and the negative opinion on expanding compulsory education is more pronounced. Some parents responded that "Considering the long-term military service, male students should graduate early" (South Hamgyong 1 and Pyongyang 4). Similarly, it was suggested that female students should also graduate early to pursue careers as merchants (South Hamgyong 6) or workers (South Hamgyong 4 and South Pyongan 5), enabling them to earn money and prepare for marriage. These responses clearly reflect the distinct gender-based social roles prevalent in North Korean society.

[92] These parents, being residents of Pyongyang City and possessing at a college or above degree, either enjoyed a substantial income from foreign-currency-earning businesses or served as an "administrative supervisor" (*haengjong jidowon*) with lower incomes.

2.1.3 Burden of "Additional Tax Burden" and "Mobilization of Labor Force"

One key factor affecting parents' evaluation of the extended compulsory education period was the "additional tax burden," which translates to increased financial responsibilities for them. The prolongation of the education period means an extension of the time during which parents must financially support their children. Expressing this burden, one parent stated, "Eleven years is good, like when we were in school. There is so much that I have to pay until my child graduates" (Pyongyang 2). Another shared a similar sentiment, "I have to support my child (money-wise) until he or she graduates from school" (South Hamgyong 4 and Other 6).

The pronounced impact of the additional financial burden was evident in the responses of parents who selected both positive and negative options regarding education policies. While they acknowledge the benefits of these policies, they are also overwhelmed by the education-related expenses, non-tax compulsory payments, and financial support for teachers.

When asked about the necessity of compulsory education, the vast majority of parents recognized its importance. Ninety percent of respondents affirmed, "My child must go to school. It is better to send my child to school," with none expressing the view that "There is no need for schooling" [Question 2-2]. The primary reason was to enable their children to achieve good grades and gain admission to prestigious universities (27.0%) [Question 2-3]. On the other hand, the main concern among the minority opinions was the urgency of economic challenges [Question 2-4], suggesting that financial difficulties might lead to students leaving school prematurely.

2.1.4 Absenteeism Rates and Policy under COVID-19

The adverse external factors brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic seem to have significantly affected the attendance rates of students [Question 2-8]. More than 50.0-80.0% of the total students are present at a high rate. Attendance in a class is below 80.0% in 46.0% of cases. A follow-up article from DailyNK supports the research findings, noting that unlike in the past when the attendance rate averaged around 70.0%, the lowest official attendance rate

recorded recently turned out to be 50.0%.[93] However, in its response to the fifth DPRK CRC report dated June 15, 2017, North Korea stated that school attendance at all levels was stable at over 98.0%, suggesting that the report may not reflect the actual situation.[94]

[Table 2] Attendance under Coronavirus [Question 2-8]

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. 100%	7	14
2. Over 80%	20	40
3. Over 50%	20	40
4. Over 30%	3	6
5. Little attendance	0	0

The most significant factors influencing changes in student attendance during the pandemic [Question 2-9] include family financial difficulties (43.4%), followed by distancing measures (32.1%), no change (18.9%), stricter attendance management (3.8%), and rigorous political education (1.9%).[95] These findings indicate that the current crisis is leading to a substantial increase in the number of students dropping out of compulsory education.

As for the extent of family economic hardship, it is common for families to be overwhelmed by the cost of school supplies and basic preparations at the beginning of the school year.[96] However, there are also cases where children are left as teenage heads of households due to the death of a parent or the disappearance of a parent to South Korea or China,[97] or where

[93] Lee Chae-eun, "New School Year Commences with Poor Student Attendance Attributed to Family Financial Hardships," *DailyNK* (April 7, 2022). https://www.dailynk.com/20220407-1/ [accessed November 20, 2023]

[94] Democratic People's Republic of Korea, "Addendum. Replies of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the List of Issues," in UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), *List of Issues in Relation to the Fifth Periodic Report of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, CRC/C/PRK/Q/5/Add.1. (June 28, 2017), p. 3.

[95] According to a recent article, the main reason for the 60.0% attendance rate in Hamhung City's elementary schools is that students refuse to go to school after being criticized by their teachers for not fulfilling the economic tasks posed by the school. Lee Chae-eun, "Only 'Certain' Students in Elementary School Classes Bear the Expense of Flower Baskets for Party Founding Day," *DailyNK* (October 11, 2023). https://www.dailynk.com/20231011-1 [accessed November 20, 2023]

[96] Kim Jong Un ordered the provision of high-quality school uniforms and bags for students as a task to be accomplished at the March 2022 plenary session of the Party Central Committee. Lee, Chae-eun, op. cit. (April 7, 2022).

[97] There was a boy who took on the role of breadwinner after his mother, who was the main breadwinner of the family, passed away due to illness. Previously, the mother had provided for the family, but after her death, he

children are unable to attend school because they are required to help their parents with the household chores, or where the burden of school work is such that they are less motivated to learn. In these situations, girls, in particular, are often expected to help their mothers or take on the role of supporting the entire family, as North Korean women are responsible for the household finances.

This low attendance rate is supposed to be reported to the city education department. However, the local education department took no action and instead asked the school principals to ensure the attendance of their students. The responsibility for this situation was therefore shifted to the teachers.

It was revealed that prolonged absenteeism from school education leads to ineligibility for graduation after a certain period [Question 2-6].[98] To address absenteeism, schools have implemented measures [Question 2-7], such as having class teachers and fellow students visit the homes of absentees to give them attendance notice (58.0%). Additionally, parents are often coerced, through methods like "a review of one's life" (*saenghwal chonghwa*) and punishment, to ensure their children's participation in compulsory education (30.0%).[99] However, some responses indicate the existence of "preferential treatment," suggesting that students who do not meet "graduation requirements" can still obtain diplomas through "material contributions" to improve school conditions. This points to a discriminatory structure where students from wealthier families in North Korea receive preferential treatment.[100]

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reportedly faced a dire situation in which the entire family faced starvation due to the lack of any source of income in the household. Lee Chae-eun, "Teenage Boy in Chongjin Becomes Breadwinner at a Young Age, Pulling a Wheelbarrow," *DailyNK* (September 18, 2023). https://www.dailynk.com/20230918-2/ [accessed November 20, 2023]

[98] Students are allowed to be absent from school when a family member dies or when they are hospitalized for illness and are able to return to school after being discharged from the hospital (South Hamgyong 3); students are allowed to be absent for a maximum of three days out of 25 school days in a given month (Chagang 1); and students with illness are allowed to be absent for a maximum of 10 days per semester (Kangwon 2).

[99] Of those who chose "other," 4.0% said that students face no problems if they meet the minimum number of days of attendance, and 8.0% said that wealthy children face no problems if their parents offer bribes.

[100] Examples are as follows: Students can graduate without meeting attendance requirements if their parents negotiate and make a deal with the principal (South Hamgyong 6); graduation is possible for students who contribute to "school modernization" or participate in national competitions (Kangwon 1); and students can graduate if their parents make donations to the school or kindergarten (South Hwanghae 5).

2.2 Quality of Education and Supplementary Measures

2.2.1 Awareness of Important Subjects

The subject that is deemed most important by children at school [Question 3-1] serves as an indicator of the direction of North Korea's education policy and reflects parents' perspectives on it.

[Table 3] Subject Considered Most Important [Question 3-1]

Subject	Reply	Subject	Reply
Korean	19	Basic Technology	2
English	26	Music	6
Mathematics	41	History	0
Natural Science	15	Geography of Chosun	1
Morality	3	History of Revolution	3
Art	2	Computer	20
Physical Education	5	Etc	3

The primary reason parents select certain subjects as important for their children's education [Question 3-2] is that they help in developing children's knowledge and abilities (40.7%), while the second reason is their utility in gaining admission to prestigious universities (32.2%). Interestingly, only 10.0% of respondents prioritized their children's interests in this decision. Notably, English and Mathematics, which are the first and second choices, respectively, are emphasized more intensively in senior middle schools. They are also central to university entrance exams and are key subjects in private education.

Other popular subjects in North Korea include Computer Education and Natural Sciences. The approach of the North Korean education system is to elevate the knowledge level of students and align with international trends, aiming to "make all people well-versed in science and technology" (*jonmin gwahak gisul injaehwa*). Consequently, this focus on the two subjects can also be found in private education.

In particular, since the opening of technical senior middle schools in 2017, there has been a

requirement for students to learn at least one contemporary technology. Basic Sciences and Computer Education are emphasized in the education policy, including the direction of educational content and the creation of practical opportunities. This trend in the educational focus is also reflected in the perceptions of parents.

[Table 4] Evaluation of Computer, Science and technology, and Foreign Language Education [Question 3-4]

Category	Computer Science	Science and Technology	Foreign Language
1. Good education	47	42	40
2. Unnecessary education	3	8	10

Most parents acknowledge the value of Computer Education, Science & Technology, and Foreign Languages as important subjects that need to be emphasized [Question 3-4]. However, the education level in these subjects may not meet the expectations of parents due to challenges posed by COVID-19 and economic difficulties experienced in schools.

2.2.2 Poor Educational Content and Reliance on Tutoring

In fact, when parents were asked about teachers' abilities in the above three subjects [Question 3-5], the responses varied. They ranged from believing that a teacher's ability depends on individual effort and preparation (42.1%) to noting an imbalance in teacher quality between regions (36.8%) and observing that teachers are not well-prepared for the classes (17.5%).

[Table 5] Evaluation of Education Quality [Question 3-5]

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. Insufficient	10	17.5
2. Teacher's personal preparation	24	42.1
3. Levels vary by region	21	36.8
4. The implementation of education at the national level	1	1.8
5. Not interested.	1	1.8

so, it is necessary to have a realistic understanding of which students have the specialties of the subject [Question 3-6]. Parents recognized that students who are actually proficient in computers often learned with tutors or had access to computers at home (61.0%).[101] Alternatively, it was revealed that they handled computers well when students received intensive education (including those for "gifted students" (*sujae*)) at school (22.0%). Although high-quality education within the school curriculum is acknowledged as important, it is evident that there is a considerable reliance on private lessons for developing computer skills.

The survey responses also indicated a preference for expanding practical subjects such as Computer Education and Foreign Language regarding the question on increasing the proportion of Political Thought Education [Question 3-7]. A significant 90.0% of respondents stated that it is unnecessary to increase the focus on Political Thought Education. The reasons cited for objection [Question 3-8] include being already covered in the curriculum (40.4%) and expanding practical subjects such as Computer Education and Foreign Language being more important 36.2%.

In response to the question about what options parents can choose if the school is incapable of implementing national education policies [Question 3-8], a significant number of parents indicated that they opt for arranging "private lessons" (*gwawe*) for their children (39.2%). Given the difficulties in transferring to another school, such as restrictions on freedom of movement, taking private lessons emerges as the most practical choice for many (24.1%). However, the option of private lessons is not viable for all parents who cite financial constraints as a barrier (15.2%), suggesting that the level of learning development varies with economic disparities. Notably, only a small fraction of respondents mentioned they would approach the government or school to address the issue (2.5%).

[101] Students who have received private lessons and have a personal computer at home are much more likely to be proficient in computer skills (61.0%) than those who receive their education primarily in specialized institutions (22.0%), highlighting a significant class divide. Only 13.6% of students benefit from intensive computer training at school. In addition, only 3.4% reported that all students achieved a high level of computer proficiency.

2.3 Current Status of Free Education

2.3.1 School Finances: Who is Responsible?

A key feature of North Korean education is its principle of "free education." However, understanding who bears financial responsibility for school management and to what extent is a crucial part of the agenda in determining the government's commitment to actualizing "free education."

[Table 6] Organization Responsible for School Finances [Question 4-1]

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. Provincial Party Committee	2	2.7
2. The Ministry of Education	6	8.2
3. School	43	58.9
4. Youth League	6	8.2
5. Parents	14	19.2
6. None	2	2.7

In response to the question about who bears the financial responsibility for schools [Question 4-1], the majority of parents indicated that the schools are financially responsible (58.9%). The second most common view was that the financial burden falls mainly on the parents (19.2%).

However, despite the perception that schools are primarily responsible for their own finances, there seems to be a trend where this responsibility is indirectly shifted to parents. As many as 39 out of 50 respondents reported that parents are periodically coerced to cover various expenses [Question 4-2].

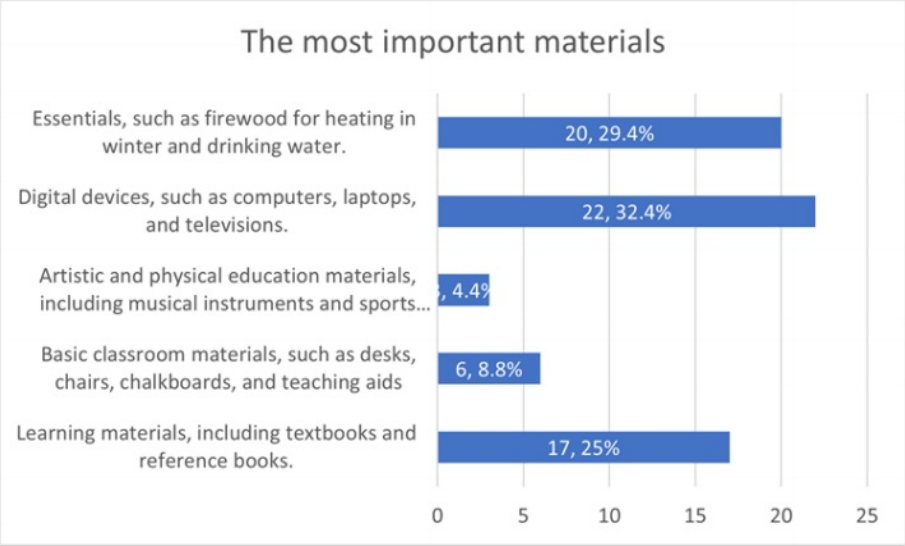
2.3.2 Insufficient Material Resources

In exploring the financial challenges faced by schools [Question 4-3], the most pressing needs identified were for digital devices such as computers, laptops, and televisions (32.4%),[102]

[102] In its response to the fifth DPRK CRC report, North Korea stated that computer and foreign languages have been successfully taught in all elementary schools since 2008. Democratic People's Republic of Korea, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

followed by essential resources like drinking water and firewood for winter heating (29.4%),[103] and learning materials, including textbooks and reference books (25.0%). These findings underscore a significant gap in North Korea's free education system, particularly the lack of basic operational necessities like firewood and drinking water, coupled with a high demand for modern digital devices in line with recent changes in education policies.

[Figure 4] Urgently Needed Materials and Supplies



The survey revealed that students' access to computers and laptops varies significantly, largely because schools are unable to provide these in sufficient quantities.[104] According to the responses on the method of preparing the devices [Question 4-4], children from affluent families generally have access to these devices at home (47.5%). Meanwhile, only some specialized schools across the country provide them (23.7%), and in regular schools, access is often contingent on parents purchasing the devices for the school (20.3%). These findings

[103] Some students refuse to attend school because they are forced to pay for firewood for winter heating. Every year, starting in October, students are required to contribute to the cost of firewood for winter heating. Previously, local people's committees and state-owned factories and enterprises covered these costs on behalf of schools, but this practice has been discontinued. Lee Chae-eun, "Truancy Among North Korean Students Increases over Concerns of Firewood Expenses," *DailyNK* (December 5, 2022). https://www.dailynk.com/20221205-4/ [accessed November 20, 2023]

[104] On April 12, 2020, the Supreme People's Assembly passed the Law on Distance Education. In late December 2021, and Kim Jong Un ordered to strengthen non-face-to-face distance education not only for schools but also for workers as an emergency measure to prevent COVID-19.

highlight a marked imbalance in learning opportunities and an increased financial burden on parents.

To demonstrate its commitment to addressing the shortage of educational resources, North Korea has chosen a school to serve as a "model school," using its improvement outcome as evidence of improvement. North Korea mentioned this initiative in its response to the fifth DPRK CRC report, in which a rural school in North Pyongan Province was renovated and reorganized to serve as a "model school" for other rural schools to follow.[105]

Despite the modernizing efforts, there is ongoing evidence of support being concentrated in specific regions. According to a report by DailyNK, primary schools in Pyongyang City and Haeju City (of South Hwanghae Province) have a significant computer possession rate of 63 percent. In stark contrast, schools in Kogen County of North Hamgyong Province and Kosan County of Kangwon Province lag behind with a mere six percent. This data underscores a substantial disparity in the rate of modernization and access to technological resources across different parts of the country.[106]

National efforts to enhance the educational engagement of students from vulnerable families in North Korea [Question 4-5] appear to be lacking. In response to the survey question about support for vulnerable groups, a significant portion of respondents indicated that providing support at the national level is challenging (47.1%). This difficulty is primarily attributed to the high number of students who are unable to attend school due to economic hardships in the family.

Moreover, the majority of parents reported that the absence from classes made it difficult for some students to continue their learning effectively (33.3%). Notably, only four respondents mentioned that their schools provided support to these students (7.8%). This situation highlights a significant gap in nationwide measures to address the disparities in class

[105] Democratic People's Republic of Korea, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[106] Chung, Tae-joo,"IT Classes Crucial in Primary schools: But Should Facility Renewal Costs be Borne by Beneficiaries?," *DailyNK* (December 19, 2022). https://www.dailynk.com/20221219-4/ [accessed November 20, 2023]

attendance and maintain a basic level of learning motivation among students.

2.3.3 Cost Shifted to Parents

In this context, the survey also revealed the various daily "tasks" that schools impose on parents. A brief analysis of the tasks list includes (1) contributing to school facility maintenance expenses, (2) providing laptops and experimental tools, (3) offering support for teachers, (4) arranging for heating, and (5) procuring rabbit skin.

Parents of middle school students typically pay an average of KPW 200,000 annually for the maintenance of school facilities. However, the burden becomes more pronounced for lower-income families. For instance, families with an annual income of only KPW 800,000 are required to pay KPW 30,000 each month, 12 times a year (South Pyongan 1). This situation indicates that schools decide and impose minimum financial contributions in fixed amounts to parents without considering their differing financial circumstances.

Families with an annual income between KPW 1,000,000 and 2,000,000 are obligated to pay KPW 150,000 for school facility maintenance four times a year, provide five cartons of cigarettes once a year, and contribute sand, gravel, and steel bars once a year (Pyongyang 3 and Pyongyang 5). In contrast, families with a monthly income of less than KPW 1,000,000 face requirements of an average payment of KPW 50,000 seven times a year, two cartons of cigarettes twice a year, 100 kg of cement once a year, and one wooden panel board four times a year (Pyongyang 1, Pyongyang 2, Pyongyang 4, and Pyongyang 6).[107] It can be seen that there is a two-fold difference depending on the economic circumstances, leading to discrimination in the treatment of students. Moreover, it is evident that a two-fold disparity in parents' contribution could lead to discrimination in the treatment of students. Moreover, parents are expected to support teachers, typically by providing one carton of cigarettes, 10

[107] The financial burden on parents to support their children's education is excessive. This includes paying for various school operating expenses such as maintaining facilities, purchasing laptops and laboratory equipment, supporting teachers, and heating costs. In addition, parents have to provide in-kind support such as rabbit skins and even participate in various mobilization activities organized at their children's school.

liters of alcohol, and 15 kg of rice twice a year, or alternatively, KPW 100,000 in cash annually and KPW 10,000 four times a year. Such forms of support to teachers could also lead to their discriminatory treatment of students.

In the winter season, parents are expected to provide the essential materials required for heating the school. The specific amount of support varies by region, but parents are typically asked to contribute either one batch of firewood three times a year or 20 perforated briquettes once a year. Despite the challenging school environment, new educational policies necessitate the use of laptops and experimental tools in schools. Below are the specifics of the support provided by parents to junior and senior middle schools, categorized by region:

[Table 7] Parental Contributions to School Expenditures on Laptops and Laboratory Equipment in the Past Three Years [Question 4-6]

Area	Junior High School	Area	Senior High School
South Hamgyong 1		South Hamgyong 3	0
		South Hamgyong 4	0
		South Hamgyong 6	0
Chagang	-	Chagang 3	KPW 100,000 once a year
Gangwon	-	Gangwon 2	KPW 10,000 twice a year
		Gangwon 3	KPW 30,000 for modernization twice a year
Pyongyang 1	0	Pyongyang 3	KPW 300,000 once a year
Pyongyang 4	KPW 200,000 once a year	Pyongyang 7	0
South Hwanghae 4	KPW 200,000 once a year	South Hwanghae 1	KPW 80,000 once a year
North Hwanghae 2	KPW 100,000 once a year	North Hwanghae 1	KPW 50,000 twice a year
North Hwanghae 3	KPW 50,000 twice a year		
North Hamgyong 3	KPW 130,000 once a year	North Hamgyong 2	KPW 130,000 once a year
North Pyongan 1	KPW 130,000 once a year	North Pyongan 3	KPW 100,000 once a year
North Pyongan 5	KPW 130,000 once a year		
North Pyongan 6	KPW 110,000 once a year		
Ryanggang	-	Ryanggang 2	KPW 150,000 once a year
South Pyongan 4	KPW 50,000 twice a year	South Pyongan 1	KPW 100,000 8 times a year
		South Pyongan 3	KPW 60,000 3 times a year
		South Pyongan 7	KPW 100,000 once a year
		South Pyongan 8	KPW 50,000 twice a year

The implementation of educational policies by North Korean authorities, which are ill-suited to the actual conditions and only serve to increase the burden on parents, is a point of significant criticism.

2.3.4 Actual Status of Student Mobilization of Labor Force

On top of these burdens, students are also required to participate in “labor mobilization” (*noryok dongwon*) activities [Question 4-7]. The primary tasks assigned to students include support work at construction sites and farming villages (30.8%), as well as manual work related to livestock and tree nurseries (23.8%). This work can be characterized as intense labor mobilization, in contrast to the relatively simpler tasks such as collecting firewood and acorns (16.2%) or participating in simple beautification and village maintenance (4.6%).

Officially, North Korea includes “labor mobilization” (*noryok dongwon*) in its school curriculum. In 2023, as reported by DailyNK, Gaechon City set May 10 to May 31 as a general mobilization period for rice planting. Students paused their studies for 11 days, specifically from May 20 to May 31, to participate in the planting. Beginning on May 10, students took part in rice planting after school hours from 14:00 to 20:00. Following May 20, they halted their educational activities entirely to concentrate on this task.[108] Such practices of mobilization clearly infringe upon the students' right to education.

[Table 8] Student “Mobilization of Labor Force” in the Last Three Years [Question 4-7]

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. Firewood, acorn picking	21	16.2
2. Construction sites, rural support	40	30.8
3. Livestock and tree planting	31	23.8
4. Simple beautification and village maintenance projects	6	4.6
5. Parental support	29	22.3
6. Other	3	2.3

[108] Lee Chae-eun,“North Korea Violates Education Rights in ‘Rice Planting Battle’: Classes Suspended for 11 Days,” *DailyNK* (June 7, 2023). https://www.dailynk.com/20230607-3/ [accessed November 20, 2023]

Some students are exempted from “labor mobilization” (*noryok dongwon*) when their parents offer alternative support (22.3%). It has been confirmed that they receive different treatment based on the level of school donation their parents can afford.

It is important to note that during the COVID-19 pandemic, some students were not only mobilized for hard labor in the midst of their families’ economic struggles but also faced criticism regarding their ideological standing.

[Table 9] Reasons for Absconding from School [Question 2-5]

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. Limitations of the Social Backgrounds	19	15.4
2. Unsatisfied with the education	14	11.4
3. Mobilization of labor force and burden of tasks	41	33.3
4. A low interest in school life	30	24.4
5. Maintenance of livelihood	18	14.6
6. Other	1	0.8

The main reason students choose not to attend school [Question 2-5] is fatigue from forced labor mobilization (33.3%), followed by a decreased interest in school life, such as friendships (24.4%). This trend may reflect the peculiarities of North Korean education, including the role of the Socialist Patriotic Youth League, “small group activities” (*sojo hwaldong*), and a strong focus on Political Thought Education. Notably, the fatigue resulting from forced labor is also associated with financial problems within schools.

In response to the question of whether parents’ opinions or complaints are adequately communicated [Question 4-8] when the “free education” policy is not fully implemented, the majority of respondents indicated that they are not aware of how the overall discussion is conducted (44.0%). Others said that the opinions of parents or students are not taken into account at all (26.0%). Even when opinions or complaints are adequately conveyed, some respondents noted that financial shortage problems persist (14.0%). Only two individuals reported that their opinions or complaints were adequately communicated to the authorities.

2.4 Questions about Approaches to Complement Access to Education

2.4.1 Preparation for Preschoolers

In the case of preschoolers under the age of six, we inquired about how parents receive assistance in preparing their children for primary school entry [Question 5-1] and whether they request policy support from authorities. The majority of parents reported experiencing no significant difference in access to education because they either educate their children at home (40.0%) or enroll them in kindergartens (28.2%). However, there are also cases where parents hire tutors for preschool children when they can afford to do so (22.7%). In 2013, North Korea established a system to enhance the quality of preschool education, aiming to better prepare children for primary education. On the other hand, only one respondent stated that preschool education is not necessary at all, serving as an outlier that underscores the increasing recognition of the universal importance of early learning.

2.4.2 Grades and Covering Tutoring Cost

When asked about the requirements for admission to the desired educational institution of their choice [Question 5-4], respondents identified outstanding academic performance as the most important requirement (54.0%), followed by the economic ability to pay bribes (18.0%), “family background” (*jiban baegyong*) and power (16.0%), and “social classification” (*songbun*) and “class background” (*todae*, 8.0%).

Although family background, power, social classification, and class background are closely related, parents perceive the influence of social classification and class background to be relatively weak. The fact that academic performance is considered the most important indicator for admission gives the impression that there is equality of opportunity in North Korea.

However, one must consider the necessity of “private lessons” (*gwawe*) to achieve excellent

grades in North Korea [Question 5-5]. Private tuition is available throughout the country, with English being the most popular subject. Twenty-six parents responded that they usually arrange for their children to receive private lessons in foreign languages, such as Chinese, from tutors in their residential areas. In addition, 23 people chose mathematics, 11 people opted for physics and chemistry, and 10 people selected computer education as their choice of private lessons. Despite the significant expenses associated with private tutoring, there were cases where students received lessons in multiple subjects. In the South Pyongan region, senior middle school students are found to take private lessons-based on their needs-in English, Chinese, Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry. Parents paid RMB 800 to 1,500 every month for these lessons. Parents of junior middle school students spent RMB 500 on average per month.

In addition, students took private lessons in various subjects, including dance and reed organ (*sonpoonggum*) for a monthly fee of USD 25.00 or 15 kg of rice, piano for USD 15.00, vocal music for USD 15.00, singing for USD 8.50, violin for USD 30.00, guitar for KPW 150,000, and soccer for 10 kg of rice, respectively. It is worth noting that the tuition fee tends to increase as the student's age decreases.

The demand for private tuition seems to be lower in Pyongyang City than in other regions. This is because Pyongyang parents are sufficiently satisfied with the school curriculum and other "small group activities" (*sojo hwaldong*). Pyongyang students tend to take more private lessons in arts and sports (guitar, violin, soccer, singing, etc.) than in entrance exam subjects. English and Mathematics classes are known to cost around USD 25.00 per subject. Tuition is no more expensive than in other regions. Since the level of education, including the quality of teachers, varies from region to region, and the government provides different levels of support, parents from non-Pyongyang regions are burdened with the tuition fees they have to pay to make up for the differences.

2.4.3 Obtaining University Enrollment Opportunities

When it comes to entering higher education [Question 5-6], on average, 2.56 male students and 2.34 female students out of a typical class size of 26.5 are admitted to colleges and universities. Although there is a slightly higher proportion in the number of males, the difference between the numbers of male and female admissions is not significant.

It is worth noting that a substantial number of male youths join the military, which contributes to the relatively low number of female students entering colleges and universities. In North Korean society, enrolling in higher education is not easily attainable, and it holds considerable social value as it can lead to promotions to "cadre" (*ganbu*) level positions and better job opportunities, making it highly valued by North Koreans compared to our society.

2.4.4 Overcoming Regional and Urban-Rural Disparities

When asked whether there are regional differences that affect the college enrollment rate [Question 5-7], parents mentioned that there are differences in the qualifications and educational levels of rural and urban teachers (36.1%). In addition, the relatively small number of farmers who want to go to university (35.2%) may make students less willing to pursue higher education.

However, given the apparent value of the opportunity to attend university and the confirmation that such considerations exist in national policy, the issue of urban-rural disparity can be said to persist in North Korea. In addition, some parents expressed concern about regional divide rather than urban-rural disparities (12.3%), while other parents found problems with differences in family circumstances and bribery leading to a wider divide within North Korean society (15.6%).

2.5 Social Perceptions of Education

2.5.1 An Examination of the Ultimate Cause

When asked about the ultimate reason for their children's low chance of entering colleges and universities [Question 5-8], the participants responded that the predominant opinion is the low academic performance of their children (49.3%). This is consistent with the belief that "merit" is a primary requirement for admission to prestigious universities. Parents also cited the incapacity to pay bribes (22.5%), the limitations imposed by their poor class background (*todae*, 15.5%), and the inability to afford private tutors (9.9%).

When asked whether they were concerned about bribery, resulting in "preferential treatment and fraud in college admissions" (*gyowon mit bujong iphak*), responses varied [Question 5-9]. Many felt that nothing could be done about it due to insufficient education funding (35.4%), while others advocated cracking down on admission fraud (34.4%). In addition, a significant number of parents expressed indifference to illegal enrollment through bribery, reflecting the weak criticism of the issue in North Korea. Interestingly, only one person supported the view that illegal enrollment should not be allowed, even though respondents were given the opportunity to select multiple answers. This underscores the prevalence of bribery in North Korean society.

Some parents responded that bribery has made it possible for students to get into school even if their "social classification" (*songbun*) is not good (12.5%), suggesting that they recognize the influence or even the "positive function" - in North Korean terms - of bribery on the limitations imposed by social classification.

2.5.2 Perceptions on Educational Opportunities

What are the ultimate goals and values of education in North Korea? When asked how they felt about their children's compulsory education through senior middle school [Question 6-1],

parents responded that it was an essential course for becoming "cadres" (*ganbu*, 33.3%) and evidence of completing ideological education (15.8%), reflecting the peculiarities of North Korean society. Some parents' views turned out to be aligned with the goal of universal compulsory education in expecting their children to broaden their worldview as required for human development and acquire the necessary knowledge (28.1%). However, the relatively small number of parents who perceive it primarily as a means to secure a decent job (14.0%) or as a way to acquire the knowledge and skills needed in their chosen fields (8.8%) suggests a need for further improvement in the "effectiveness of education" in helping students pursue their "career prospects" (*jinro*). Recently, North Korea has placed increased emphasis on developing student competencies through "inquiry activities" (*tamgu hwaldong*) and has announced plans to strengthen vocational technology education in secondary schools.

When asked why it is important for children to receive a college education [Question 6-4], the majority said it was important for their children to become "cadres" (*ganbu*) and hold important positions in society (40.4%). The next group said it was important for their children to get a decent job (31.6%). It can be said that there is a gap between the role of compulsory education and the value parents place on college admission. Only 15.8% of parents said it was important for their children to get a good education.

Ensuring compulsory education is the primary step to prevent students from leaving school [Question 6-2]. The high proportion of respondents emphasizing essential support for "gifted students" (*sujae*) regardless of their status (40.0%) suggests that "merit" is considered the fairest and most equitable standard in North Korean education. However, many parents also emphasized essential support for the poor (25.5%) and areas with poor educational conditions (27.3%), indicating a notable level of awareness about the need for targeted support for groups that align with the original purpose of compulsory education.

2.5.3 Perceptions of Ways to Improve Access to Education

When asked what efforts have been made at the Party and state levels to eliminate inequality in

education [Question 6-3], respondents chose more intensive education for students with falling or low grades (37.0%), education reform to introduce 12-year compulsory education (18.5%), equal treatment of girls and boys (16.7%), and providing support for students from low-income families (13.0%).

This indicates a growing expectation of fairness in the college admissions process for the sake of their children's future. When asked about college selection criteria that address inequality [Question 6-5], 47 out of 50 parents chose academic grades, demonstrating a high level of awareness of the influence of financial resources and "class background" (*todae*).

Also analyzed are the practical limitations that caused women not to receive enough education in North Korea [Question 6-6]. Girls are advised not to go to college because they have to contribute to the family economy (32.0%). Some parents also expect girls to undertake household chores and raise children in the future (23.7%). A significant number of respondents believe that girls should give up their opportunities to attend college and secure decent jobs to male students (20.6%). Notably, awareness of discriminatory treatment of women and gender inequality is low.

Regarding the adequacy of education for vulnerable groups [Question 6-7], the largest group of respondents said that active support measures and scholarships should be provided for the education of students from vulnerable groups (52.8%), while others responded that educational support should be focused on gifted students, given the limited resources of the state (28.3%).

The next question was on how North Korean students decide their future careers [Question 6-8]. The parents responded that their children would get a university diploma and become "cadres" (*ganbu*) if they have a good "social classification" (*songbun*, 45.1%), join the military and gain a party membership (30.4%) or be assigned to jobs they do not want if their social classification is not good enough (21.6%).

As a crucial point of this study, it was confirmed that parents do not have a clear idea about

the life of a student who goes to university and becomes a “cadre” (*ganbu*) and the life of a student with a low social classification who is bound to be assigned to undesirable jobs is closely related to education.

Regarding when students recognize their social classification [Question 6-9], respondents said that it is when their children do not get the desired job (32.8%) when they are excluded from the selection process for “outstanding talents” (*usuhan injae*) in elementary and secondary schools (16.4%), when they are unable to enlist in the military (19.7%), or when they recognize it later after starting a social career (14.8%).

When asked how they felt about their children’s jobs being determined by “class background” (*todae*) [Question 6-10], the largest group of respondents said it was unfair and should be improved (48.0%), followed closely by those who thought it was not right, but nothing could be done about it (38.0%). These two responses were of similar proportions. Therefore, there is a need to outline directions for improving inequality in the system, help people overcome a sense of helplessness, and motivate them to actively seek responsive measures in North Korea.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Education is a basic human right that works to raise individuals out of poverty, level inequalities, ensure sustainable development, and nurture critical thinking. Education is a building block to guaranteeing other fundamental rights. As seen in this report, while the North Korean regime guarantees equal access to education through its laws, the reality differs. Structural barriers based on regions, family origin, economic disparity, and discrimination against women have created discrepancies between laws and reality.

Changing this system, whether from within or from the outside, will be challenging due to its entrenched nature and will only be achieved through socio-cultural improvements. Nonetheless, this report has examined the internal context and operation of education in North Korea to explore ways to bring about tangible improvements in access to education within the laws and policies of North Korea. Against this backdrop, this report puts forward recommendations to North Korean authorities and the role that the international community can play to advance education rights, thereby human rights in North Korea.

Recommendations to North Korean authorities

- **Actively share their on-site findings with the international community, focusing particularly on whether the right to education is being upheld.**

According to its fifth CRC report, North Korea plans to reinforce the roles and responsibilities of relevant organizations and has enhanced its data collection system regarding children. Key areas identified for improvement include attendance, violations of the right to education, and particularly, the strict enforcement and punishment of actions that violate students' fundamental rights, such as excessive effort mobilization, bribery, and severe discrimination by teachers.

- **Provide opportunities for expanded career prospects, free from barriers related to family origin and class.**

The admission quota for central-level universities should be increased for senior middle school graduates from rural areas, particularly children of laborers and farmers from remote provinces. This increase should correspond to the population distribution. Such a step will gradually help middle school graduates of remote provinces and local residents recognize and appreciate the benefits of introducing a regional admission quota system.

Graduates from rural areas who gain admission to central-level universities through the quota system should be given opportunities for job placements in their desired regions. A policy that ensures freedom of choice in job placement for the graduates can help mitigate issues arising from the songbun system or regional discrimination; and thus aid in realizing the freedom of movement.

- **Do not let structural discrimination against women and girls limit their educational and career choice.**

It should not limit girls to a few majors but actively encourage girls to enter all majors at the same rate as boys. Remove barriers to girls, not only in terms of access to higher education but also in terms of providing a range of opportunities for talented students.

The principles for personnel management within the Party, administration, institutions, and enterprises need to be revised to open up opportunities for female college graduates. Specifically, the existing principle that requires meeting three conditions - being a military veteran, a Party member, and a college graduate - should be changed. Instead, competent women should be initially appointed to executive roles, and their job performance should be regularly evaluated before deciding on Party membership. If opportunities for women to join the Party increase, there will be a rise in the social advancement of capable women after graduation.

The Central Committee's Department of Science and Education of the Workers' Party of Korea is proposed to conduct gender-sensitive education for teachers as part of a teacher capacity enhancement program, with the support and cooperation of UNICEF. The collaboration with UNICEF would involve sharing educational materials and teaching methods. By enhancing gender equality awareness and gender sensitivity among teachers, gender equality can be integrated into teaching and student management. Following the implementation of gender-sensitive education for teachers, it is recommended to simultaneously conduct sex education along with gender equality education for junior middle school students. Gender-sensitive education for both teachers and students will have the effect of raising awareness about women's rights across North Korea.

- **Strengthen fiscal accountability in education.**

After assessing the total financial contributions to education from local institutions, sponsoring organizations, and parents, the authorities should report their contribution ratio and increase their share to enhance fiscal accountability.

To actualize the implementation of the Law to Prevent Extraneous Financial Burdens, the sponsorship organizations and agencies designated by the city and county People's Committees must regularize their support of educational materials. To do so, firstly, an immediate initiation of providing firewood for school heating during the winter months is necessary to alleviate the burden of firewood collection on students. Secondly, it is essential to define the provision of paint and lime for the annual “School Maintenance Project” as a mandatory item to be supplied by regional sponsorship organizations.

Teachers' salaries should not be managed by the sponsorship designated by city or county People's Committees, but should instead be managed by the central education budget and increased in proportion to the current market prices. It is recommended to initially adopt a system that applies the cost of 600g of rice per day as the monthly salary for one teacher. Such a policy could help alleviate the practice of teachers depending on bribes or gifts from parents for their livelihood.

- **Expand technology and other learning tools.**

It should provide tablet computers dedicated to educational books to rural and remote country unit middle schools. Supplying tablet computers, priced around 25-30 dollars, only for reading purposes to these marginalized schools should not pose a financial burden on the authorities. Collaborating with UNESCO, a UN agency for education and culture, to include books related to health, sex education, and hygiene issues will likely earn good reviews as a model for international cooperation projects

- **Gradually reduce and ultimately eliminate the mobilization of child labor.**

The month-long rural mobilization of students, which involves accommodating them near collective farms during the farming season, should be gradually phased out following a three-year plan. The practice of mobilizing senior middle school students for rural work should be raised by one grade each year, with the aim of completely eliminating middle school student mobilization for rural areas within three years. To compensate for the reduced labor force of students in collective farms, agricultural mechanization should be promoted with the cooperation of the international community. However, the provision of agricultural machinery should be contingent on the complete abolition of child labor in the collective farms, subject to monitoring by international organizations.

Roles of the International Community

- **Provide capacity building programs for teachers.**

It is recommended that UNICEF or UNESCO work with the Central Committee’s Department of Science and Education within the Workers' Party to develop plans for strengthening the capacity of teachers in provincial schools. In particular, international cooperation is important to enhance the expertise of teachers in rural and provincial areas of North Korea focusing on English and science. Online distance learning is expected to be sufficiently effective for teacher training and can ensure the regularity of education.

- **Support regular English classes for students in rural areas.**

While education for current teachers is practically necessary, it is recommended to regularly conduct English education for students at provincial colleges of education. For this purpose, a collaboration between teacher training colleges in North Korean regions and universities in countries with diplomatic relations, such as the United Kingdom and Germany, could be initiated. Online English education for students at provincial teacher training colleges is expected to have a positive impact on talent development in rural North Korea.

- **Provide cooperation for ultimate elimination of child labor.**

International cooperation and attention are required to gradually reduce and ultimately eliminate the mobilization of child labor in North Korea's collective farms. It is proposed that a collaboration with the Agriculture Food Program (AFP),as part of a project aimed at realizing the mechanization of agriculture in developing countries, be introduced. In pursuit of eradicating forced child labor and securing the right to food, it is necessary to discuss a strategy for the agricultural mechanization of North Korea with relevant international organizations and the UN Security Council Sanctions Committee. Collective farms that implement and execute this policy should be subject to regular monitoring during the farming season; and procedures should be in place to verify that the ‘rural support battle’ of middle school students has been abolished.

- **Conduct monitoring by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) or the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)**

To oversee the implementation of the aforementioned recommendations, it is advised that the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) or the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) conduct monitoring of rural schools in North Korea. This should be done in cooperation with the education departments of provinces, cities, and counties of the Workers’ Party, and the relevant People's Committees. A format similar to the 2017 visit to Pyongyang by the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities could be adopted. Specifically, a delegation of experts from the CRC or ICESCR, to which North Korea

is a party, could inspect the situation in rural middle schools. Such an inspection would provide realistic assistance in advancing towards the North Korean government's aspiration of achieving “world-class education.”

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TABLES

FIGURES

[APPENDIX] QUESTIONNAIRE

Survey on North Koreans' Access to Education

ID			

Thank you for participating in this survey, designed for parents of school-attending children. Our goal is to improve access to education for the people of North Korea. Please be assured that your responses will be used exclusively for research purposes. We are committed to ensuring that your participation in this survey does not lead to any disadvantages for you. We value your honest responses and once again appreciate your participation in this important research.

Part I. Basic Questions

1-1. What is your gender? (1) Male (2) Female

1-2. What is your year of birth? Year (____)

1-3. Which region (province) do you live in? Please select only one.

(1) Chagang Province (2) North Hamgyong Province (3) South Hamgyong Province
(4) North Hwanghae Province (5) South Hwanghae Province (6) Ryanggang Province
(7) Gangwon Province (8) North Pyongan Province (9) South Pyongan Province (10) Pyongyang

1-4. What is your occupation?

(1) Merchant or contraband trader
(2) Trader or foreign currency earner
(3) Healthcare personnel (doctor, pharmacist, etc.)
(4) Teacher or researcher (at primary schools, middle schools, universities, etc.)

(5) Administrative worker (administrative supervisor, diplomat, etc.)

(6) Party organ official

(7) Public security officials or military personnel

(8) Laborer

(9) Agricultural, fisheries or forestry worker

(10) Dependent (housewife)

(11) Student

(12) Unemployed

(13) Culture or art worker

(14) Retiree

(15) Other: _____

1-5. What is your highest level of education? Please select only one.

(1) No education

(2) Dropped out of primary school

(3) Graduated from primary school

(4) Graduated from junior high school

(5) Graduated from senior high school

(6) Graduated from college

(7) Dropped out of university

(8) Graduated from university

(9) Dropped out or graduated from postgraduate schools or postgraduate research institutions

(10) Other _____

1-6. What is your monthly income level in North Korean currency?

(1) Less than KPW 300,000

(2) KPW 300,000 - 500,000

(3) KPW 500,000 - 1,000,000

(4) KPW 1,000,000 - 2,000,000

(5) KPW 2,000,000 or more

(6) Other _____

1-6-2. Alternatively, please enter your annual income in KPW _____.

1-7. What is the gender of your eldest child? If you have multiple children, please select one child only and provide the gender of the selected child.

(1) Male (2) Female

1-8. What is your child's year of birth? Year (____)

1-9. In which region (province) does your child attend school? Please select only one.

(1) Chagang Province (2) North Hamgyong Province

(3) South Hamgyong Province (4) North Huanghai Province

(5) South Huanghai Province (6) Ryanggang Province

(7) Gangwon Province (8) North Pyongan Province

(9) South Pyongan Province (10) Pyongyang City

1-10. Which school does your child attend? Please select from the following.

(1) Primary school (2) Junior high school

(3) Senior high school (4) College

(5) University (6) Other _____

Part II. General Questions on Compulsory Education

With the announcement of the Ordinance on Enforcing Universal 12-Year Compulsory Education in 2013, North Korea introduced a new education policy. This policy extended the mandatory education period from 11 to 12 years and modified the number of teaching hours allocated to individual subjects. As a result of this policy change, senior high school has become compulsory for all students.

2-1. What is your opinion on the expansion of the compulsory education period?

(1) Positive (Please explain your reasons)

(2) Negative (Please explain your reasons)

2-2. How do you feel about students going to school during regular times?

(1) They should always attend school. (Please proceed to Question 2-3.)

(2) They could preferably attend school. (Please proceed to Question 2-3.)

(3) They don’t necessarily need to attend school. (Please proceed to Question 2-4.)

4) They don't need to attend school at all. (Please proceed to Question 2-4.)

2-3. If you must send your child to school, why? Please select multiple answers if applicable.

(1) School education will help my child get good grades and gain admission to prestigious universities.

(2) School education is important for achieving a good social status (family origin).

(3) (If my child is a boy) School education is a must.

(4) School education will help my child secure a good job and improve their standard of living.

(5) School education is important for developing a student’s character and values.

(6) Other (Please explain your reasons)

2-4. Why do you have a negative view of school education? Please select multiple answers if

applicable.

(1) Small groups or extracurricular activities are more helpful for my child to gain admission to prestigious universities.

(2) School education doesn't benefit my child because our family origin is not favorable.

(3) School education is not considered important for girls.

(4) School education is not advantageous for my child due to our challenging family situation.

(5) School education does not contribute to building my child's character and values.

(6) Other (Please explain your reasons)

2-5. If students do not attend school voluntarily, what are the reasons? Please select multiple answers if applicable.

(1) They can't secure the job they desire due to their background.

(2) They are dissatisfied with the educational content.

(3) There is a significant amount of mobilization of the labor force and tasks beyond regular classes.

(4) They lack interest in school life, including making friends.

(5) They believe it's more beneficial to work and earn money.

(6) Other (Please explain your reasons)

2-6. Is it possible to graduate without attending school?

(1) Attendance does not significantly impact graduation.

(2) Yes, as long as the minimum number of days is met. (If yes, how many days are required?)

(3) Yes, under special circumstances. (If yes, please specify the reasons.)

(4) Generally, it is not possible

(5) Never. It is impossible.

2-7. What action does the state and school take when a student is absent from school?

(1) Ensure the student receives compulsory education through a “review of school life” and

punishment.

(2) Arrange for teachers and classmates to visit and persuade the student.

(3) Allow the student to continue without intervention as long as he/she meets the minimum required attendance.

(4) Allow the student to continue without intervention if he/she is from an affluent family and offers bribes.

(5) Take no action.

2-8. What is the student attendance rate under the COVID-19 pandemic?

(1) Nearly 100% attendance.

(2) More than 80% attendance.

(3) More than 50% attendance.

(4) More than 30% attendance.

(5) Almost no attendance.

2-9. If the attendance rate changed before and after the COVID-19 outbreak, why?

(1) It hasn't changed much.

(2) Students were often absent when they didn't feel well due to social distancing.

(3) Students were often absent due to family economic difficulties.

(4) More students attend school because schools actively manage absent students.

(5) More students attend school due to stronger control stemming from the expanded political thought education.

Part III. Questions about Educational Content

3-1. Please choose and number the three subjects you consider most important for your child to learn at school.

(1)

(2)

(3)

① National language (literature) ② English

③ Math ④ Natural science (physics, chemistry, and biology)

⑤ Socialist morality ⑥ Art

⑦ Physical education ⑧ Basic skills

⑨ Music ⑩ History

⑪ Korean geography ⑫ Revolutionary history

⑬ Computer science ⑭ Other (Please explain your reasons)

3-2. Why did you choose the above subjects?

(1) To improve my child's knowledge and abilities.

(2) To help my child receive good evaluations (report cards) during their school life.

(3) To assist my child in gaining admission to prestigious universities.

(4) To equip my child with skills needed for the workplace.

(5) To align with my child's interests.

3-3. If you are aware of your child's typical school day activities within the past week, please provide a brief description, including the names of the subjects.

	(Please Enter) Subject Name	Mobilization of Labor Force (O)	Children's Union or Youth League Activities (O)
Class 1			
Class 2			
Class 3			
Class 4			
Class 5			
Class 6			
Extracurricular or small group activities 1			
Extracurricular or small group activities 2			

3-4. The education reform emphasizes computer, science and technology, and foreign language education. What is your opinion on the importance of these subjects for students?

1) Computer education

① Beneficial for students

② Not necessary for students

2) Sci-tech education

① Beneficial for students

② Not necessary for students

3) Foreign language education

① Beneficial for students

② Not necessary for students

3-5. Do you believe that your child's school is effectively teaching the subjects mentioned above?"

(1) Teachers are not well prepared for classes.

(2) It depends on the teacher; some prepare diligently on their own.

(3) The competence level of teachers varies depending on the region where the school is located.

(4) The state provides training for all teachers to prepare for classes.

(5) I have no information as I am not interested.

3-6. Which group of students excels at using computers?"

(1) Ordinary students excel at it.

(2) Gifted students who were educated in special institutions excel at it.

(3) Students who have received intensive training at school excel at it.

(4) Students with access to a private tutor or a personal computer at home excel at it.

3-7. What is your opinion on the increase in the teaching of political thought in the classroom?

(1) Beneficial for students (Please proceed to Question 3-9.)

(2) Not necessary for students (Please proceed to Question 3-8.)

3-8. If you find it unnecessary, why?

(1) There is no need to expand it because students are already receiving sufficient education in this area.

(2) It is not being taught well in schools.

(3) More emphasis should be placed on expanding practical subjects such as computer science and foreign languages.

(4) The proportion of basic subjects required for university entrance should be increased.

(5) Emphasis should be on teaching good values and virtues needed in society.

3-9. If there is a difference in educational content between schools, how do you resolve it? Please select multiple answers if applicable.

1) Transfer my child to another school to align with the new curriculum.

(2) Organize extra-curricular activities for my child to complement the curriculum.

(3) Take no action because changing schools is challenging, given my family origin.

(4) Forgo any action due to financial constraints.

(5) Raise the issue with the government and school authorities to address the problem.

Part IV. Evaluation of Free Education

4-1. Which organization is financially responsible for the operation of your child's school?

(1) The county or provincial party committee

(2) The Ministry of Education

(3) The school itself

(4) The Youth League

(5) Parents

(6) None

4-2. How much money does the school request from parents?

(1) No amount is requested.

(2) Families pay voluntarily based on their financial capability.

(3) I recently contributed to partially cover the cost due to difficulties stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.

(4) The school asks for contributions occasionally.

4-3. What are the most important materials that students currently need?

(1) Learning materials, including textbooks and reference books.

(2) Basic classroom materials, such as desks, chairs, chalkboards, and teaching aids.

(3) Artistic and physical education materials, including musical instruments and sports equipment.

(4) Digital devices, such as computers, laptops, and televisions.

(5) Essentials, such as firewood for heating in winter and drinking water.

4-4. How were new computers and laptops provided for in your child's school as required by the curriculum reform?

(1) The state distributed them evenly across schools nationwide.

(2) The state provided them only to special schools in select regions.

(3) The school procured them independently.

(4) Parents were responsible for providing for them.

(5) Only students from affluent families use their own at home.

4-5. Is there any support available for students from poor families?

(1) The state operates a national scholarship program.

(2) The school offers support.

(3) Assistance comes from fellow students and neighbors.

(4) Some students do not attend school, and therefore, they have no information about support measures.

(5) Many students are unable to attend school due to poverty, making it challenging to provide them with support.

4-6. As a parent, what school-related expenses have you paid? Please specify the types of expenses, the amounts, and how frequently you paid them over the last three years.

	Type of Payment & Amount	Frequency (Times per year)	Other (Please feel free to elaborate on any additional contributions such as mobilization of labor force, hiring services, etc.)
1) School facility renovation	Cash: KPW _____ Rice:_____kg Tobacco: ____cartons Cement: _____ Other: _____	No. of times	
2) Laptops and laboratory equipment	Cash: KPW Other:	회	
3) Teacher support	Cash: KPW Rice: kg Cigarettes: cartons Other:	No. of times	
4) Heating	Firewood	No. of times	
5) Rabbit skin	No. of pieces	No. of times	

4-7. If the school forced your child to provide “labor mobilization” in the past three years, what

kind of work were they assigned to? Please select multiple answers if applicable.

(1) During the winter season, students collect firewood and acorns in the mountains for heating.

(2) Students are dispatched to work on construction sites and farms.

(3) Students are mobilized for school tasks, such as tree planting and livestock breeding.

(4) Students are assigned only simple tasks like beautification and village repair work.

(5) Students can be exempted from mobilization of the labor force if their parents make a payment on their behalf.

4-8. Are the opinions of parents and students, if any, effectively communicated to and addressed by the school?

(1) They are discussed centrally and communicated in a top-down manner.

(2) They are effectively conveyed and reflected in school operations.

(3) They are well-received but not adequately addressed due to financial constraints.

(4) The opinions of parents and students are not reflected at all.

(5) Overall, I am not aware of how discussions regarding school operations are conducted.

Part V. Questions about Access to Education

5-1. How are children under the age of six prepared for entry into primary schools? Please select multiple answers if applicable.

(1) All children under six have access to preschool education.

(2) Parents educate their children under six at home.

(3) Parents hire a tutor for their children if they can afford one.

(4) Most parents do not actively prepare their children before entering primary school.

(5) No specific pre-school education is considered necessary.

5-2. Up to which level do students typically attend school?

(1) Until graduating from kindergarten.

(2) Until graduating from primary school.

(3) Until graduating from junior high school.

(4) Until graduating from senior high school.

(5) Until graduating from university.

5-3. Please select the educational institutions you would prefer for your child to attend, if any. Please select multiple answers if applicable.

(1) Gumsung School

(2) Pyongyang School of Foreign Languages

(3) School of Foreign Languages in other cities and provinces

(4) No. 1 Senior High School

(5) Technical Senior High School

(6) Regular Middle School

5-4. What conditions do your child need to fulfill in order to be admitted to each of your desired educational institutions? Please list two in order of importance. (①~⑥)

(1)

(2)

(3)

① Outstanding grades
② Family origin and foundation
③ Bribes (financial resources)
④ Admission policy information
⑤ Family background and power
⑥ Other (Please explain your reasons)

5-5. What subjects does your child learn from tutors, and how much do you pay each month for these services?

(1) Subjects: _____ (Please list all subjects your child is taught.)

(2) Payment: Rice / Chinese currency / other

5-6. In a typical classroom, what is the ratio of male to female students enrolled in universities?

(1) Out of the total number of students in the class: _____

(2) Number of male students: _____

Number of female students: _____

5-7. What are the reasons, if any, for the difference in the number of urban and rural students enrolled in universities? Please select multiple answers if applicable.

(1) Teachers in rural areas tend to be less qualified and have lower levels of education.

(2) There is a lower inclination among students from farming households to pursue university education.

(3) On the contrary, more students from rural areas enter university due to preferential treatment.

(4) Family finances and the capacity to offer bribes play a more significant role than urban-rural disparities.

(5) Regional differences within the country have a more substantial impact than mere urban-rural disparities

5-8. If your child finds it difficult to gain university admission, what are the reasons?

(1) My child's poor grades make it difficult for him/her to gain admission to the desired university.

(2) Our family’s modest “foundation” makes it challenging for my child to enter the desired university.

(3) I couldn’t afford a tutor to help my child prepare for university admission.

(4) I lack the financial means to pay bribes for university admission.

(5) It is because my child is a female student.

5-9. What is your opinion on the prevalence of teacher involvement and fraud in college admissions? Please select multiple answers if applicable.

(1) The state must crack down on admission fraud.

(2) Such fraud is inevitable due to inadequate funding in education.

(3) Bribery has enabled students without good family origin to enter prestigious universities.

(4) I don't care if there is bribery in university admissions.

(5) In reality, admission fraud and bribery are not significant issues.

(6) Other (Please explain your reasons)

Part VI. Social Perceptions of Education

6-1. What is the implication of having completed compulsory education up to senior middle school? Please select the most important one.

(1) It serves as proof of having completed ideological education.

(2) It is essential for qualifying as a cadre.

(3) It is necessary for securing employment.

(4) It provides the knowledge and skills needed to excel in the workplace.

(5) It broadens your worldview as a person and equips you with essential knowledge.

6-2. Which group do you think should receive more support to ensure compulsory education in North Korea?

(1) Gifted students, regardless of their social status

(2) Students from elite classes with good family backgrounds

(3) Female students

(4) Economically disadvantaged or vulnerable groups

(5) Students in regions with poor educational conditions

6-3. What actions should the party and the state take to eliminate educational inequality at the national level?

(1) Expanded compulsory education period to 12 years.

(2) Provide support to students from economically disadvantaged families.

(3) Ensure equal treatment of girls and boys without any discrimination.

(4) Offer additional educational support to students with low or failing grades.

(5) Take no action because there is no inequality.

6-4. Why is it important for your child to enter university?

(1) To ensure my child receives a quality education.

(2) To increase my child’s chances of finding a good job.

(3) To enable my child to attain cadre positions and key roles in organizations.

(4) To improve the overall livelihood of our family.

(5) To fulfill societal expectations for male students.

6-5. What should college admission be based on to reduce inequality?

(1) Academic grades

(2) Family origin and foundation

(3) Family wealth

(4) Preferential treatment for male students

(5) Other (Please explain your reasons)

6-6. What are the reasons for undereducation among women? Please select multiple answers if applicable.

(1) Girls should focus on household chores and child-rearing.

(2) Girls don’t have to complete senior middle school because they need to enlist in the military.

(3) Girls shouldn't enter university because they must become the breadwinner.

(4) Boys should enter university so that they can secure more prestigious jobs.

(5) Girls should be given the first opportunity to secure decent jobs, including cadre positions.

6-7. What is your opinion on the sufficient educational opportunities provided to vulnerable groups?

(1) They are already receiving adequate support for education.

(2) Underprivileged groups should receive more active support, including scholarships.

(3) The focus should be on gifted students, as resources for support are limited.

(4) Educational support is not essential, as it is unlikely to change their socioeconomic

status.

(5) Educational support should primarily focus on students with disabilities.

6-8. How do students typically determine their future (job path)? Please select multiple answers if applicable.

(1) Most students aspire to enlist in the military and become a party member.

(2) Students from a good family origin often aim to enter university and pursue cadre positions.

(3) Some students are placed in positions based on their family origin, which may not align with their personal desires.

(4) Family origin is not easily accessible information, and students are placed in positions in consideration of academic grades.

(5) Students can choose any position they want.

6-9. When do students typically become aware of their family origin?

(1) When they fail in the gifted student selection process in primary school or senior middle school.

(2) When they fail to enlist in the army.

(3) When they encounter difficulties in gaining admission to university.

(4) When they fail to secure their desired job.

(5) When they fail to get promoted to cadre positions in their workplace.

6-10. What is your opinion on the idea that your job (workplace) is determined by your "foundation"?

(1) It is entirely appropriate.

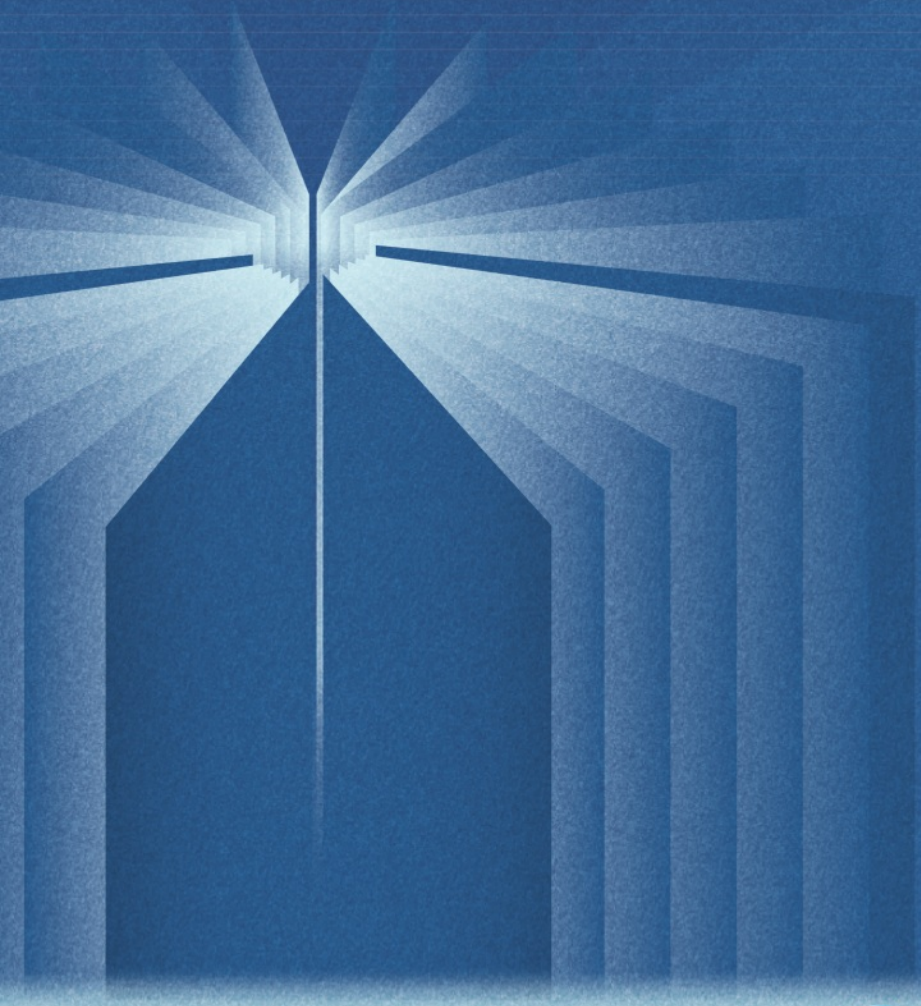
(2) It is a preferable practice.

(3) It is somewhat unfair.

(4) It is unfair and needs to be changed.

(5) It is not right, but it seems unchangeable.

Thank you.



DAILY NK NAUH 북한민주화네트워크 NKnet NDI 통일아카데미 Unification Academy