

CHAPTER

3

EXAMINING SCHOOL SAFETY IN KOREA

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Abstract: In the last five years, Korea has reported an increasing number of accidents in schools. This paper presents national statistics on school accidents and compensation paid to those involved, and describes the most recent school safety-related incidents in Korea. It also summarises the policy developments in Korea in 1996, when new student safety administration laws were enacted, and in 2002 in response to the fire in Chun An primary school. A summary of safety education for students, staff and parents in Korea is also presented.

Accidents in schools in Korea: Some statistics

According to national statistics published by the School Safety Mutual-Aid Association (SSMA), in 2001, 18 941 school accidents were reported to local education administration offices in 16 cities in the Republic of Korea. Since 2001, accidents in schools have increased: 9 265 accidents were reported in 1997, 14 481 in 1998 and 15 969 in 2000 (SSMA, 2003).

In 2001, the reported compensation paid for school safety-related accidents was KRW 8 769 340 000 (USD 7.3 million), an increase of USD 1.7 million compared with the previous year. Approximately USD 7.1 million of this compensation was paid by the SSMA, USD 150 000 by donations, USD 11 000 by education departments or schools, USD 5 000 by teachers, and USD 2 500 by student offenders. Seven lawsuits were filed relating to dissatisfaction with the amount of compensation (Korea Education Newspaper, 2002).

Data from the Seoul SSMA indicate that lower secondary schools have the highest accident rates (Table 3.1). Most accidents occurred during break times in primary schools and during physical education classes in secondary schools (Table 3.2). Concerning injury types, bone fracture was common in all schools (Table 3.3).

Table 3.1. School safety-related incidents and payment of compensation in Seoul (2001)

Level of education	Number of accidents receiving compensation			Compensation (KRW)
	Males	Females	Total	
Primary	636	314	950	289 819 140
Lower secondary	902	238	1 140	606 389 130
Upper secondary	710	208	918	528 062 320
Special schools	12	6	18	9 474 770
Total	2 260	766	3 026	1 433 745 360

Source: SSMA, 2003.

Table 3.2. Number of accidents in schools in Seoul, by location of accident (2001)

Location	Level of education				
	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary	Special schools	Total
Physical education class	348	535	408	4	1 295
Laboratories	16	5	30	-	51
Classrooms	79	103	136	1	319
Cleaning activity	33	38	17	-	88
Break time	407	320	175	8	910
Extra class	44	122	129	3	298
Others	23	17	23	2	650
Total	950	1 140	918	18	3 026

Source: SSMA, 2003.

Table 3.3. Number of accidents in schools in Seoul, by type of injury (2001)

Type of injury		Level of education				
		Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary	Special schools	Total
Death		-	3	2	-	5
Disability		1	-	2	-	3
Injury	Fracture	476	718	495	8	1 697
	Dental damage	157	97	79	4	337
	Facial injury	17	21	17	-	55
	Lacerated wound	169	96	122	3	390
	Concussion	26	33	20	-	79
	Articulated sprain	61	113	127	1	302
	Other	43	59	54	2	158
Total		950	1 140	981	18	3 026

Source: SSMA, 2003.

History of school safety in Korea

School safety incidents

The increase in student's deaths in Korea due to accidents has drawn the attention of the public and policy-makers to school safety issues. Three such incidents are described below:

- On 30 June 1999, 23 students were killed in a fire at the Sea-Land youth hostel in Hwa Sung, Kyong Ki Do. Pre-school students from the So Mang kindergarten were camping at the hostel when the fire broke out.
- On 23 August 2002, primary school student Han Sung Ji was killed when a goal post fell down during a football training session after school.

- On 26 March 2003, eight primary school students from the school football team were killed in a fire in a boarding house in Chung Nam. The students, who were sleeping, were killed only eight minutes after the fire started. The building interior was made of wood and styrofoam, which burnt easily and produced toxic fumes. The exits and windows in the building were small and narrow.

Policy development

Before Korea joined the OECD in 1996, compensation was the most important school safety issue in Korea. In 1988, the Korean government established the SSMA in Seoul to provide compensation for student and teacher injury or loss of life in school accidents, to protect schools and to create a more positive educational environment. By the early 1990s, SSMA were organised in 16 local areas.

In 1996, new student safety administration articles and clauses were created through amendments to school health and hygiene laws, which required school principals to check and improve school facilities and equipment, and safety to be taught in schools to prevent accidents. In 2001, the children's welfare law was amended to include articles on children's health and safety: safety standards were imposed on children's play facilities and school safety education taught in every school.

In 2002, the Office for Government Policy Co-ordination, which comprises seven government departments, created the Children's Protection Promotion project. "Enforcing Child Safety" was selected as one of five project areas to be promoted by all seven government departments (Children's Protection Promotion Task Force, 2002). In February 2003, children's safety was an important part of the current government's campaign policy. On 5 May 2003, 81st Children's Day, the year 2003 was declared as the first year of children's safety in Korea. By 2007, children's accidents are to be reduced by half through strong and ambitious government policies. The Children's Safety Prevention Promotion Committee was founded by the prime minister, and the Children's Safety Inspection Team was established in Cheong Wa Dea (Office for Government Policy Co-ordination, 2003).

Following the fire in Chun An primary school, for which the State Council was held responsible, each department is required to report on the progress of accident prevention activities. Several policies were also established to enforce school safety. The main government school safety policies are presented below (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2003):

- *Laws on school accident prevention and compensation* (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development). These laws establish a system for safety administration of facilities, and victim support and compensation. The bill was submitted before the National Assembly in March 2004, and was scheduled to be proclaimed and enforced in the first half of 2004.
- *Amendment to enforce school facility business promotion law* (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development). The Office of Education must approve school

buildings under 200 m² before construction begins. A legislation notice was submitted in May-June 2003, and the amendment was proclaimed and enforced in July 2003.

- *Design of school facilities and safety preparation manual* (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development). In December 2003, a safety manual for schools was drafted, which considers student's physical size, teacher's cognitive psychology and physical education facilities. Research for the manual was contracted to specialists in construction, fire fighting, electricity and gas, including non-governmental organisations.
- *Protecting vulnerable facilities against fire* (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development). Equipment such as non-flammable interior furnishings and kitchen equipment, automatic fire detectors and automatic fire extinguishers were installed in accommodation facilities in 1 124 schools.
- *Amendment to fire fighting enforcement law* (Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs). School facilities that are less than 400 m² must meet fire safety standards before construction. Departments in local governments have been working on the amendment since September 2003, and it will be proclaimed and enforced in May 2004.
- *Amendment to construction law* (Ministry of Construction and Transportation). From the first half of 2004, it is compulsory to use non-flammable building materials for interior furnishings in primary schools.
- *Regulation No. 4122* (Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education). This regulation relating to safety administration of school facilities in Seoul was enforced in October 2003 following the death of Han Sung Ji. It requires the safety administration committee of school facilities in the city education office in Seoul to establish basic plans for safety administration and maintenance of school facilities and to define safety standards for school facilities, including inspections.
- *Safety standards improvement projects*. The Technical Standards Institute in the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Energy is currently carrying out a safety standards improvement project for children's play facilities. The Education Department is continuing to implement safety standards improvement projects for school facilities and equipment. Completion of these projects is planned in 2004.

Safety education

The objective of safety education is to reduce the risk of accidents in schools. A culture of risk prevention can be fostered by teaching students about the causes of accidents and how to avoid them and by encouraging more risk-free behaviours (Christoffel and Gallagher, 1999).

Safety education for students

The 7th Education Programme states that safety education must be integrated into all curricula (Yoon *et al.*, 2002). To meet this objective, the Korean Ministry of Education and local education departments have been distributing safety education texts. Since 1996, the Korean Safety Industry Committee has also been nominating exemplary schools for safety education, and developing instructional safety education books and distributing them to schools.

Safety education for staff

Since 2002, teachers and principals must complete more than two hours of safety education in teacher training programmes. Other educational programmes have been developed for civilian organisations and school staff (Yoon, 2003a).

Safety education for parents

A compulsory safety education programme for parents of pre-primary students is being conducted by class assistants and volunteers through the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development. Other organisations are running safety-related programmes for parents of primary school students.

Conclusion

Formerly, educational policy-makers and administration in Korea had been slow to improve the school environment in terms of safety, for example to replace and repair outdated equipment and inspecting school facilities. As a result, thousands of school accidents affecting the lives of students, teachers and parents occurred every year (Yoon, 2003b).

Recently, this attitude has been changing. Korean society is now acknowledging that a students' right to a safe and secure learning environment is fundamental to the growth and development of the next generation. In the last decade, dramatic changes in educational policy on the issue of school safety have testified to the sustained commitment of Koreans to promoting a culture of risk prevention in schools.

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