

## Starting Strong VIII Country Notes

# Korea

The Translating Research into Policies for Quality and Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policy review was initiated to support countries and jurisdictions in reviewing how recent research advancements on child development, learning and well-being coming from multiple disciplines could help them revisit ECEC policies and identify areas and directions for improvement. Over the last two decades, science made significant progress in understanding the factors that shape early child development, fuelled primarily by advancements in neuroscience but also benefiting from the growing attention that the education and social sciences research pays to early childhood. This knowledge holds promise for policies that set strong foundations for life-long learning and socio-emotional well-being and resilience.

However, translating research into policies is a complex endeavour. The policy review built on recurrent and structured exchanges between country representatives of Ministries in charge of ECEC policies (the OECD ECEC Network) and a multidisciplinary group of experts to engage in a collaborative review of evidence that could inform directions for improving ECEC policies. At the beginning of the project, policymakers indicated ECEC areas or challenges where they perceived a need for additional or updated research evidence to inform policy directions in their countries. This led to the identification of the theme of the policy review, which is on how to design ECEC policies to ensure that they help mitigating inequalities in the short- to long-term. The project's final report, *Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD, 2025<sup>[1]</sup>), was published as part of the OECD Starting Strong series.

Five countries (Australia, Bulgaria, Ireland, Japan and Korea) engaged more actively in the project. Representatives from these countries were invited to engage in consultation meetings to identify their priority areas and key issues for the development of the ECEC sector, aligned with the objectives and themes of the Starting Strong VIII report. Two workshops were organised to foster dialogue between experts and country representatives, focusing on the key issues identified during the consultation meetings. The information gathered during the consultation meetings and project workshops as well during the preparation of the Starting Strong VIII report informs this country note.

### Context

In Korea, 10% of children lived in income poverty in 2020, a rate below the OECD average (see Chapter 1, Figure 1.1). As in other countries, inequality of opportunity translates into inequality in students' achievements, as evidenced by the gap in mathematics scores according to the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) between children from high and low socio-economic status families. In Korea, this gap remained broadly stable between 2015 and 2022, and above the OECD average.

Korea faces critical economic, social and demographic challenges that are interlinked. The labour market is precarious for many young workers, with a significant number of Koreans working on temporary

contracts, receiving low pay and working longer hours than the OECD average. Korea also has the highest gender pay gap among OECD countries, with women earning 31% less than men in 2022. Adding to that, the costs of private schools and tutoring common in Korea further drives up the costs of raising children. These factors make it difficult to combine employment and childrearing and contribute to a declining birth rate, leaving Korea with the lowest fertility rate among OECD countries. To address these challenges, Korea has adopted two key policy strategies: i) supporting families and births through enhanced family policies, including family and child allowances, accessible fertility treatments, tax incentives to reduce the financial burden of raising children, and the provision of free education services for young children; ii) promoting gender equality in childrearing responsibilities by introducing gender-balanced parental leave schemes and addressing workplace discrimination related to pregnancy. Korea's investment in ECEC is at the centre of these strategies. ECEC can help achieve multiple goals: support both parents' labour market participation and families more globally to boost fertility rates but also equalising opportunities from the early years as the population becomes more diverse, and setting the foundations for equal and strong skills development in light of declining working-age population.

These demographic shifts and policy responses are reshaping societal structures and driving changes in the demand for ECEC services, which are now serving a growing number of children from diverse backgrounds with varying needs. To support these objectives, the Korean government introduced an integration plan aimed at consolidating the previously fragmented ECEC sector, which had been divided between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health and Welfare. This initiative forms a key component of Korea's 2022-2027 education agenda. During consultation meetings and project workshops, representatives from Korea highlighted that a key priority for the country is to support the integration process to enhance its quality and reach in support of broader economic and social policies to improve fertility rates.

The note is structured around the policy areas of the roadmap for ECEC with a lasting impact on equity and inclusion presented in Chapter 1 of the report. It also summarises some of the main findings of the report.

## Reducing gaps in participation in ECEC

With evidence showing that the early years play a key role in children's learning and development trajectories, and that learning opportunities in family environments vary widely between children (see Chapter 3), extended participation in ECEC beyond the almost-universal year before primary education is a key policy direction to address early inequalities. Despite substantial increases in total enrolment rates in recent decades in most OECD countries, some children, because of their characteristics and socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, have weaker opportunities to engage in ECEC. Enrolment rates are high in Korea, with over 95% of children aged 2 and older attending ECEC services. Notably, Korea also has the highest enrolment rates in OECD countries for children under 2 years of age, standing at 49% in 2022.

Multi-faceted and inter-related effects of personal and environmental factors influence participation in ECEC (see Chapter 5). Some barriers to participation are direct, relating to the availability, accessibility and affordability of ECEC services, while indirect barriers (complex administrative requirements, lack of awareness of ECEC benefits, social norms or a low level of trust in provision quality) hinder access to otherwise available services. Direct and indirect barriers tend to disproportionately affect families from low socio-economic and immigrant backgrounds. Reducing gaps in participation in ECEC involves addressing both direct and indirect barriers.

Providing effective support to make ECEC affordable to all families and progressively moving towards universal free access is a key direction to reduce barriers to participation. Korea's introduction of universal ECEC allowance in 2013 marked a significant milestone, providing subsidies for parents of children

aged 0-5. For families with children aged 0 to 1, the parental allowance introduced in 2023 offers financial support for childrearing, which can be also allocated towards ECEC costs or home-based parental care, depending on family preferences. These policies have improved access and contributed to high enrolment rates, while keeping the out-of-pocket ECEC costs for households in Korea well below the average in OECD countries (see Chapter 5, Figure 5.5). However, low-income families in Korea still allocate a slightly higher proportion of their earnings to ECEC costs compared to families with average incomes (Yang, Hwang and Pareliussen, 2024<sup>[2]</sup>). Evidence from research indicates that free or publicly subsidised ECEC access requires adequate ECEC investments that can drive expansion in infrastructure and recruitment of qualified staff and alleviate costs for families experiencing vulnerability.

The availability of ECEC services where families live can be a key determinant of children's participation in ECEC. In most OECD countries, lower-income regions are typically underserved while both urban and rural areas can display relatively high unmet demand due to a shortage of facilities. Declining fertility rates in Korea have resulted in the closure of many ECEC centres, particularly in disadvantaged areas and large cities. This has exacerbated existing inequalities by leaving families in these areas with fewer ECEC options and longer waiting lists for the limited available services (OECD, 2024<sup>[3]</sup>). As part of the integration plan, the Korean government aims to enhance ECEC access by developing a data-driven regional supply and demand management plan, which seeks to reduce waiting times for admission (KICCE Policy Brief, 2023<sup>[4]</sup>). Adequate funding, together with better co-ordinated ECEC network planning and quality assurance mechanisms, is critical for infrastructure expansion and ensuring that high-quality ECEC services reach the most vulnerable children.

Developing flexible ECEC provision can help address the diverse needs of families and promote greater participation in ECEC services. Korea's long working hours – among the highest in the OECD – create challenges for parents, many of whom incur additional costs to cover after-school care. While ECEC subsidies in Korea have substantially reduced costs, full-time working parents often face additional expenses for ECEC beyond standard hours (9:00 AM to 2:00 PM for kindergartens and 9:00AM to 4:00PM for childcare centres) (Kang and Huh, 2024<sup>[5]</sup>). Short opening hours and a lack of flexibility of ECEC services in Korea further restrict parents' access to formal services, often leaving them having to rely on informal alternatives (Yang, Hwang and Pareliussen, 2024<sup>[2]</sup>). These challenges influence decisions around childbearing and labour market participation (OECD, 2019<sup>[6]</sup>). The new integrated services in Korea plan to provide more diversity in the institutional operations and expand these services based on regional characteristics and needs (KICCE Policy Brief, 2023<sup>[4]</sup>). Research indicates that flexibility in operating hours, duration, frequency and types of provision can enhance accessibility for families facing various responsibilities and constraints. When designed to be accessible and affordable, flexible ECEC arrangements can support greater participation of women in the labour market (see Chapter 5)

Understanding the role of ECEC in children's lives is necessary for motivating parents to use these services and enhance ECEC participation in many OECD countries. Some parents of children under the age of 3 may view ECEC services as a childcare solution rather than as an experience supporting child development. The view that ECEC services are not suitable or of low quality for younger age groups is also related to social norms that emphasise the importance of home-based childcare, particularly provided by mothers. Despite high enrolment rates, many working parents in Korea remain concerned about leaving their children in ECEC settings after school hours (OECD, 2024<sup>[3]</sup>). As a result, informal childcare arrangements, such as care by relatives, other parents, or private babysitters, remain common. The integration plan seeks to build trust in ECEC services through improved quality, and strengthened public oversight as well as to enhance the transparency of the system for families by reducing the number of types of ECEC settings and establishing an integrated information system (KICCE Policy Brief, 2023<sup>[4]</sup>). Evidence from other countries shows that ensuring all ECEC services are of high quality could indeed foster greater trust among parents, encouraging more families to choose formal ECEC services over informal alternatives (see Chapters 5 and 6). Equally important is enhancing transparency and communication with parents regarding ECEC quality, such as through the publication of monitoring reports

(e.g. with information on quality standards, staff qualifications, safety measures) and information on the developmental benefits of formal services. Integrating information channels into frequently used early childhood services, such as healthcare, social services and other social hubs accessed by families, can play a key role in reaching vulnerable families, ensuring that even those who may not actively seek information are well-informed (see Chapter 10).

The view that ECEC services are not suitable for younger age groups is also related to social norms that emphasise the importance of home-based childcare, particularly provided by mothers. These norms assign caregiving responsibilities to Korean mothers far more strongly than in most other OECD countries (see Chapter 5, Figure 5.6). The gender pay gaps and the opportunity costs associated with having children and taking on childrearing responsibilities contribute to many women delaying family formation or choosing to have fewer children in Korea (Yang, Hwang and Pareliussen, 2024<sup>[21]</sup>). Evidence shows that policies that encourage shared parental leave combined with ECEC supports can help shift caregiving expectations more equitably between parents, further normalising maternal workforce involvement while increasing ECEC enrolment (see Chapters 4 and 5).

## Supporting meaningful interactions between staff and children

In addition to broader participation, the quality of ECEC, and particularly the quality of children's interactions with others within ECEC settings (process quality), matters for children's development, learning and well-being. However, a large body of evidence documents variability in the quality of ECEC between and within types of ECEC (see Chapter 6), which is problematic when more vulnerable children consistently receive lower quality services, as this means that children's experiences in ECEC settings are unlikely to level the playing field among children. Particularly in systems with a variety of types of provision, participation in more regulated and intense forms of ECEC tends to be lower among children from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds, often making them experience lower levels of process quality. Historically, the ECEC system in Korea is split in terms of governance, funding and types of ECEC settings: the Ministry of Education has overseen *Yuchiwons* (kindergartens catering to children aged 3-5), while the Ministry of Health and Welfare has been responsible for *Eurinjips* (childcare centres serving children aged 0-5). Although both types of centres implement the integrated Nuri Curriculum for children aged 3-5, they are subject to differing regulations, workforce qualifications and quality assurance mechanisms, resulting in disparities in both structural and process quality. Under the integration plan, these centres will be transformed into integrated centres catering to children aged 0-5. These centres will implement a cohesive approach to curriculum delivery, workforce standards, and monitoring and evaluation processes to streamline administrative oversight and reduce quality gaps (KICCE Policy Brief, 2023<sup>[41]</sup>).

Curriculum frameworks informed by the high-quality features identified by research and applicable to a broad range of settings and types of provision can strengthen quality and equity across an ECEC system (see Chapter 6). In contrast, the fragmentation of curriculum frameworks and lack of coverage of some segments of the sector can lead to inconsistencies in quality provision within ECEC systems. Korea's introduction of the Nuri Curriculum in 2013 was a pivotal step in unifying curricular standards for children aged 3 to 5 across different ECEC centres. Revisions in 2019 further aligned curricular goals to holistic developmental domains, including physical activities and health, communication, social relationships, arts and nature. As part of the integration plan, the Korean government is expected to extend the Nuri Curriculum to cover children aged 0 to 5, aligning it with the Standard Childcare Curriculum for children aged 0 to 2. The revised curriculum is planned to be implemented in all ECEC settings (KICCE Policy Brief, 2023<sup>[41]</sup>). Evidence highlights the importance of supporting children's development across a broad spectrum of early cognitive and social-emotional competencies throughout curriculum frameworks. To overcome the dichotomy between whole-child and skill-specific curricula, an integrative curriculum model can maintain a holistic approach to early learning, development and well-being, while also promoting targeted learning

focused on specific domains. Key among these principles is the recognition of play-based learning, which can foster meaningful engagement and skill acquisition.

Developing a skilled ECEC workforce is paramount to ensuring a successful implementation of the curriculum framework and high-quality interactions with all children. Initial education that includes training specifically to work with children, covers a broad range of areas, and includes a practical component can support staff in all roles and types of provision with their work. In Korea, pre-service education provides a strong foundation, with most staff completing practical training and receiving instruction on working with parents or guardians. The qualification levels of teaching staff are relatively higher in kindergartens: as of 2022, 60% of kindergarten teachers hold a bachelor's degree (ISCED Level 6), compared to 27% of childcare teachers. Continuous professional development (CPD) can also play an instrumental role in supporting staff working in more challenging ECEC settings to enhance quality for those who need it the most. This is particularly important for Korea given that a new curriculum framework will apply. In Korea, as in many other OECD countries, barriers to CPD remain significant (OECD, 2019<sup>[7]</sup>). Staffing shortages, cited by 53% of Korean staff, are a major barrier, higher than in many other countries. As part of the integration plan, the Korean government aims to strengthen teacher expertise by reorganising the initial teacher training curriculum and consolidating in-service teacher training systems. In addition, the government is expected to support CPD opportunities for ECEC staff in private settings by increasing the availability of substitute teachers, thereby ensuring sufficient time for participation in CPD activities (KICCE Policy Brief, 2023<sup>[4]</sup>). These efforts are particularly relevant for preparing teachers working with children aged 0 to 2, addressing gaps in initial training and ensuring they are well-equipped to implement the teaching guidelines and practices outlined in the new curriculum. Evidence shows that mechanisms for quality improvement, in particular for a better implementation of the curriculum, include providing opportunities for high-quality continuous professional development for all staff, prioritising centre-based delivery and peer learning and feedback (e.g. mentoring), and targeting supports for participation to staff working in settings with high shares of vulnerable children.

The monitoring and governance of private settings can present challenges for ensuring equitable, affordable access to high-quality ECEC for all children, even when private institutions receive public funding (see Chapter 6). In Korea, private centres, which enrol 71% of children in pre-primary education, often have greater autonomy in budget planning and staff recruitment than public centres. However, leaders and staff in private centres typically have lower levels of educational attainment compared to those in public settings, contributing to variations in process quality, particularly in staff-child interactions and curriculum implementation (OECD, 2019<sup>[7]</sup>). System-level monitoring and related quality support through financial incentives and capacity-building can steer improvements in programme quality in more fragmented and marketised systems (see Chapters 6 and 9). Further, making monitoring results available and considering users' views and experiences can contribute to family and community trust and engagement in ECEC (see Chapters 5 and 6).

## **Making ECEC inclusive for all children**

Increasing social and cultural diversity characterises the populations of children participating in ECEC across OECD countries. Growing levels of diversity are driven by multiple factors, including the expansion and greater accessibility of ECEC services as well as global migration and forced displacements. Further, most children with special education needs participating in ECEC do so in mainstream settings. ECEC can support inclusion by focusing on the strengths that come with diversity, leaving behind deficit views on the capacities and potential of children from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds and by combining universal and targeted approaches, in line with tiered models of support for young children. In comparison to other OECD countries, Korea's ECEC settings exhibit lower levels of cultural and linguistic diversity, with fewer than 2% of centres reporting a high proportion of children with different first languages in 2018 (González-Sancho et al., 2023<sup>[8]</sup>). However, 16% of centres indicated that at least 10% of their children

face one or more dimensions of diversity, including socio-economic disadvantage and special educational needs. While diversity is relatively lower in Korea than in other OECD countries, centres serving a high proportion of socio-economically disadvantaged children are more likely to report human resource shortages (González-Sancho et al., 2023<sup>[8]</sup>; OECD, 2023<sup>[9]</sup>).

Continuous professional development is key to support ECEC staff in developing more inclusive practices and implementing a curriculum framework that values diversity. In Korea, many staff members reported low levels of self-efficacy in 2018, particularly in working with diverse children and addressing their unique needs (OECD, 2020<sup>[10]</sup>). Further, 71% of staff expressed a need for greater support from their ECEC leader (OECD, 2020<sup>[10]</sup>). Transversal competencies and attitudes (e.g. addressing biases, valuing diversity) are a foundation for more specific and targeted skills (e.g. supporting home languages). Delivery can favour team-level, guided reflection, and practical responses to diversity in local contexts. Continuous training specifically targeted at leaders of ECEC settings can play a pivotal role in creating a school or setting-wide culture of respect and appreciation for diversity and in enabling staff to deal more effectively with diverse classrooms.

Targeted staffing is one of the main mechanisms to be mobilised for better equipping ECEC settings to serve populations of children with different characteristics (see Chapter 7). This involves allocating human resources such as support or specialised staff where they are needed most and creating multi-professional teams within ECEC settings (see Chapter 7). The presence of an additional professional in the classroom can facilitate that children receive more individual help and attention during activities, from either the support staff member or the teacher, which in turn means that their needs are more likely to be met.

In turn, system- and setting-level monitoring and assessment can help authorities and staff to better understand and identify variability in children's needs and strengths, and to assess the quality of the targeted supports provided to children, as a complement to the monitoring of more general aspects of quality in ECEC. Tools can complement the monitoring of more general aspects of quality in ECEC to support inclusive staff practices. Several observational and self-reflection tools have been developed to assess aspects of quality that support the needs and strengths of children and families from diverse backgrounds, including the K-SIED Teacher Form by the Korean Institute of Child Care and Education (KICCE) as part of a project on children at risk for developmental disabilities (see Chapter 7). Used in combination with other, more general quality assessment measures, these tools hold promise for enabling a richer picture of process quality in increasingly diverse ECEC settings.

## **Connecting ECEC services with families, schools and communities**

The co-ordination and combination of ECEC policies with policies targeting families and communities can launch vulnerable children on more favourable trajectories (see Chapter 8). Intentionally developing ECEC programmes that support parents to foster children's well-being and early learning, especially programmes that integrate well into parents' habits and do not add to existing stress burden, can amplify children's positive experiences in ECEC and lead to sustained effects over time (see Chapter 10). Among the various options for better co-ordinating services, integrated service hubs bring together an array of services to support families with young children and can be organised with different combinations of programmes and tailored goals to match community needs and interests (see Chapters 4 and 10). They can provide a soft entry point to education and care services, with which families facing adversities may not otherwise engage (see Chapter 5). In Korea, one of the goals of integrated settings is to offer services that combine care and education for the full 0- 5 age range. In addition, the Dream Start programme, introduced in 2007 and by 2024 it has been operating in 226 municipalities, integrates health, education and welfare services for children aged 0-12 from low-income families. Based on needs assessments, the programme provides a range of services, including physical health care, cognitive and language support, socio-emotional development, parental education, and prenatal/postnatal care. It links local resources, employs case

management, and conducts regular consultations and monitoring to address inequalities and support the long-term development of vulnerable children. In addition, targeted financial support such as maternity and child allowances for low-income families further enhance the safety net for children and families.

ECEC settings and their staff are also well-placed to co-ordinate with other professionals working with families, in addition to families themselves, and to engage with schools to facilitate transitions, especially for more vulnerable children. Staff and leaders need to be trained for these roles and supported to co-operate with other professionals, for instance by allocating time for work without children. While not all ECEC staff (and leaders) need to engage in these extended tasks, those who do should have explicit recognition of their role and status.

To sustain the benefits of high-quality ECEC, continuity across children's developmental stages and education settings is essential. This includes aligning curricula, learning expectations and pedagogical practices to ensure smooth transitions and gradual exposure to enriched content, particularly for more vulnerable children, avoiding unnecessary redundancy of content (see Chapter 8). The Nuri Curriculum emphasises free play and grants teachers increased autonomy in shaping their teaching practices (Lee et al., 2023<sup>[11]</sup>). However, it lacks structured guidance to help ECEC staff effectively scaffold learning and skill acquisition through pedagogical practices during play, potentially leading ECEC staff to identify this area as a need for professional development (OECD, 2019<sup>[7]</sup>) and children not being fully prepared for transitions to primary schools. As part of its integration efforts, the Korean government plans to strengthen alignment between the newly integrated curriculum and the primary school curriculum (KICCE Policy Brief, 2023<sup>[4]</sup>). ECEC curricula that are designed to build broad or “unconstrained” cognitive skills (e.g. vocabulary rather than narrow school-readiness skills such as identifying letters), social-emotional skills and skills that support learning across domains (e.g. executive functions) can be expected to produce longer-lasting positive effects for vulnerable children. Co-ordination within ECEC and between ECEC and the next levels of the education sector is critical to avoid curricular redundancy and support the continuity of pedagogical approaches, including those that emphasise active learning through play and interaction.

## Improving governance and funding

A policy mix that aims to increase ECEC enrolment, ensure that all children benefit from quality services, and provide enhanced support proportionate to children and families' needs requires adequate funding and mechanisms that steer the system towards these objectives (see Chapter 9). Total expenditure per child on ECEC in Korea has risen by nearly 5% since 2015, remaining above the OECD average (see Chapter 9, Figure 9.1). The share of private expenditure in total expenditure for pre-primary education, on the other hand, has decreased by about 4 percentage points to reach 12%, placing Korea below the OECD average (see Chapter 9, Figure 9.2). This expansion of public investments has contributed to higher ECEC enrolment rates in Korea (OECD, 2019<sup>[6]</sup>).

Most children in Korea attended private pre-primary settings, above the OECD average in 2021 (OECD, 2024<sup>[12]</sup>). Ensuring quality and equal access to ECEC in the presence of private provision requires comprehensive policies. Quality monitoring, regulation of private providers (with particular attention to for-profit players), funding conditionality and measures to limit family costs are several policy levers that can help mitigate the risks that can emerge in mixed ECEC systems and ensure the efficiency of public and private investments.

Enhanced co-ordination and alignment between different funding sources (e.g. central and sub-central) but also funding areas (e.g. measures targeting ECEC affordability, infrastructure, workforce, quality assurance) can steer the ECEC system towards enhanced equity and quality (see Chapters 5 and 9). In Korea, a large majority of ECEC funding (79%) comes from the central level. Local government share of expenditure after inter-governmental transfers is above the OECD average, with a relatively high share of funding coming from the regional level. As part of the integration plan, administrative and financial

responsibilities for ECEC from the Ministry of Health and Welfare (for childcare centres) are in the process of being moved under the Ministry of Education, which takes full responsibility for ECEC from 2025. This consolidation involves moving funding and administrative responsibilities from municipalities and regions to local and regional offices of the Ministry of Education, with funding mostly coming from the central government in the integrated system. By strengthening the central level's management and funding responsibility and moving the sector under the Ministry of Education, this reform aims to reduce regional inequalities and improve access to services, while also improving overall quality (KICCE Policy Brief, 2023<sup>[4]</sup>). The choice of specific funding allocation mechanisms can enable central authorities to steer funding recipients towards enhanced quality and equity in ECEC. Mechanisms based on detailed analyses of local population characteristics and needs, and demand for ECEC services as well as on population growth, can lead to more funds to areas or communities with insufficient ECEC services and thereby mitigate inequalities.

Workforce wages are a significant component of ECEC expenditure across OECD countries. Low compensation hampers the ECEC sectors' capacity to attract and retain qualified individuals, especially when other working conditions are also challenging. A high turnover of staff can be detrimental to process quality since children need to develop a stable relationship with a limited number of adult figures and since staff teams need time and continuity to engage in effective collaboration and peer learning. Under the split system, staff in childcare centres have lower qualification requirements and wages than those working in kindergartens. As part of the integration plan, the Korean government intends to improve ECEC staff qualifications and working conditions to ensure that they can focus on practices with children and thereby raise process quality (KICCE Policy Brief, 2023<sup>[4]</sup>). In Korea, ECEC staff work long hours, particularly in childcare centres due to the extended operating schedules. Beyond their direct engagement with children, staff also dedicate approximately 18 hours per week to administrative tasks and non-teaching responsibilities, further adding to their workload (OECD, 2018<sup>[13]</sup>). These long hours, especially for non-teaching tasks, were identified as significant sources of stress in 2018, potentially contributing to the lowest job satisfaction among the countries participating in the OECD Starting Strong Teaching and Learning International Survey. Staff-reported budget priorities included increasing salaries, reducing administrative workloads through additional support staff, and lowering group sizes to improve working conditions (OECD, 2019<sup>[7]</sup>). Designing funding mechanisms that ensure wages are aligned with ECEC staff roles and responsibilities and incentivise workforce quality, particularly in settings with high shares of vulnerable children, can help address staff shortages and staff turnover while leading to more uniform quality across settings (see Chapter 9).

To advance ECEC sector integration and service quality, a two-year study (2023-2024) was initiated to monitor the implementation of the integration plan, identify challenges and propose solutions. The first year focused on assessing the readiness and needs of central and local governments, developing outcome indicators, examining a successful local case of ECEC integration, and suggesting improvement strategies. This study aims to create a cohesive and equitable ECEC system aligned with broader social and educational objectives. Setting objectives for equity and quality at the system level can be further supported with the development of indicators to track progress and achievement of such objectives (see Chapters 9 and 10). Data systems that support monitoring and continuous quality improvement at the programme level can ensure that local flexibility is balanced with national oversight in ways that meet programme goals and quality standards. These efforts, however, require building the capacity of actors to collect and use sufficiently disaggregated data for decision-making.

Placing ECEC policies as part of a broader landscape of social and education policies can help reduce inequality of opportunity. This requires aligning funding and governance for a more integrated policy approach. In particular, a whole-of-government approach calls for high-level policies and national commitments to support co-ordinated services throughout childhood (see Chapter 10). In response to fertility decline, the Korean government introduced the *Fourth Basic Plan for Ageing Society and Population (2021-2025)*. Building on earlier initiatives, this plan adopts an integrated approach to enhance

ECEC access alongside other social policies. It addresses interconnected factors influencing fertility decisions, such as ECEC quality, work-life balance, gender disparities in the labour market, and parenting responsibilities. Key priorities include improving working conditions, strengthening prenatal support for women, and monitoring local policies to better support new parents.

### Box 1. A selection of pointers from the policy roadmap for ECEC with a lasting impact on equity and inclusion

A policy roadmap informed by research evidence and other countries' experiences can ensure ECEC leads to stronger outcomes for children (especially more vulnerable ones), supports inclusion and mitigates inequalities with a lasting impact. This box highlights key policy pointers (see Chapter 1) that are relevant in Korea's context, as well as policy examples drawn from other countries.

**Policy pointer 1: Address both direct and indirect access barriers to reduce gaps in participation in ECEC.** Korea has one of the highest ECEC enrolment rates among the OECD countries, especially for children under 3, driven by the universal ECEC subsidy programme introduced in 2013. Despite this, many working parents incur additional costs for services beyond regular operating hours, which is a burden particularly for low-income families. Social norms and concerns around the use of ECEC services and a lack of flexible ECEC options contribute to many families opting for informal care options. Policy directions to address direct and indirect barriers to participation gaps in ECEC for children in Korea are important to complement broader social policies aimed at addressing declining fertility rates and key policy directions for Korea include:

- *Enhance ECEC infrastructure planning, combining local and national investments, with a focus on areas with vulnerable children and service shortages.* Canada, for example, has developed a collaborative funding approach for ECEC expansion, aligning federal, provincial and local efforts to ensure access to affordable, high-quality services, especially in underserved areas (see Chapter 5, Box 5.1).
- *Provide flexible or alternative forms of ECEC provision to better meet the constraints for participation of vulnerable families.* Local information and support points in the Flemish Community of Belgium, for example, demonstrate an exemplary approach, offering flexible childcare options tailored to families with atypical working hours and urgent needs (see Chapter 5, Box 5.3).
- *Promote family and community involvement in ECEC to strengthen trust in the quality and inclusiveness of ECEC services.* In New Zealand, for example, the Engaging Priority Families programme collaborates with community organisations to support vulnerable families in accessing ECEC services, guiding them through enrolment, highlighting the benefits of participation for child development, and building connections with ECEC services and at-risk communities (see Chapter 5, Box 5.4.).

**Policy pointer 2: Set mechanisms for quality improvement and equitably expanding opportunities to experience high levels of process quality to support meaningful interactions between children and ECEC staff.** The split ECEC system in Korea has led to differing regulations, workforce qualifications and quality assurance mechanisms, resulting in disparities in process quality across different types of ECEC provision. As part of the integration plan, the Korean government aims to address the factors contributing to variations in quality and enhance professional development opportunities for staff. Policy directions to ensure that children consistently experience high-quality interactions in ECEC settings are important to support the integration of services and the delivery of high-quality ECEC and key policy directions for Korea include:

- *Develop a child-centred and comprehensive curriculum framework that captures all aspects of children's development (cognitive, socio-emotional and physical) and includes structured, skill-specific components within a play-based approach, and guides staff on intentional practices.* In

Boston, United States, the Boston Public Schools Department of Early Childhood has adopted a play-based, exploratory ECEC curriculum designed to enhance children's language, literacy and mathematical skills through problem-solving, positive peer interactions, and the establishment of consistent routines across grades (see Chapter 6, Box 6.1).

- *Provide opportunities for high-quality continuous professional development for all staff, prioritising centre-based delivery and peer learning and feedback, and target supports for participation to staff working in settings with high shares of vulnerable children.* In Norway, a mentoring scheme for newly employed graduate teachers in ECEC supports their transition into the profession, helping to recruit, develop and retain skilled ECEC teachers and leaders. Financial incentives are provided to ECEC providers to compensate for staff absences during training, ensuring high-quality professional development is accessible and sustainable, particularly for staff working with the youngest children and in vulnerable communities. (OECD, (2020): Chapter 2).
- *Regularly monitor both structural and process aspects of quality within settings and provide incentives and support for improvement.* In Flanders (Belgium), for example, the Measuring and Monitoring of Quality (MeMoQ) project has implemented a comprehensive pedagogical framework for children under 3, supporting continuous quality improvement in both centre-based and family-based childcare (see Chapter 6, Box 6.2). In the United States, Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) provide quality benchmarks, financial incentives and technical assistance to ECEC providers (see Chapter 9, Box 9.2).

**Policy pointer 3: Identify and respond to variability in children's needs and strengths to make ECEC inclusive for all children.** The ECEC sector in Korea serves a relatively less diverse population than in many other OECD countries. However, ECEC centres serving a higher proportion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds face greater shortages. Furthermore, staff in Korea report low levels of self-efficacy in working with children from diverse backgrounds and require more support from centre leaders. Policy directions to support diversity and inclusion in ECEC settings in Korea are important to respond to variability in children's needs and strengths and key policy directions for Korea include:

- *Ensure services for children and families provide support in which the intensity and personalisation of measures increases with the level of need, following a tiered model approach.* For example, Ireland's Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) provides targeted staffing through access to early-years specialists who can coach and mentor other staff in ECEC services (see Chapter 7, Box 7.3).
- *Monitor the inclusiveness of practices within settings and the quality of specific supports provided to children, and ensure that staff and leaders receive actionable feedback for improvement.* For example, Observe, Reflect, Improve Children's Learning (ORICL) tool developed by researchers in Australia supports educators working with children from birth to age 2 by focusing on individual children's behaviours, interactions and interests. Aligned with Australia's Early Years Learning Framework, ORICL helps personalise planning for each child's unique needs while also considering their group participation (see Chapter 7, Box 7.5).
- *Provide continuous professional development, primarily at the team level, that helps ECEC staff adopt more inclusive practices by addressing both attitudes and specific skills.* For example, Ireland's AIM promotes inclusion in ECEC through a professional development programme that equips practitioners to implement inclusive practices and trains Inclusion Co-ordinators to lead these efforts (see Chapter 7, Box 7.2).

**Policy pointer 4: Build on ECEC together with other social services and schools to better support vulnerable families.** In Korea, co-ordinated services to support families with young children are in place. The ECEC curriculum lacks guidance for staff to scaffold children's skills to facilitate

transitions from ECEC to primary school. As part of the integration plan, the Korean government aims to enhance the connectivity between ECEC and primary school curricula. Policy directions to enhance the co-ordination and integration of ECEC with policies targeting parents and families, as well as primary education, are essential to launch vulnerable children on more favourable trajectories and key policy directions for Korea include:

- *Consider the development of national quality frameworks covering an array of services around families and children, possibly applying to service hubs.* Australia, for example, is developing a collective vision for the ECEC sector across different levels of governance, guided by the Productivity Commission's recommendations, to co-ordinate policy, regulation and funding, clarifying responsibilities to support quality, inclusion and progress toward a universal ECEC system (see Chapter 10).
- *Ensure that curriculum frameworks throughout early and primary education do not expose children to unnecessarily redundant content, especially vulnerable children.* In Boston, United States, the Focus on Early Learning programme aligns content, instruction and teacher training from pre-kindergarten (age 3) through second grade (age 7) to ensure continuity while preserving the unique features of early learning, avoiding the push to make earlier years resemble traditional schooling (see Chapter 6, Box 6.1).

**Policy pointer 5: Set funding and monitoring mechanisms to steer the system towards quality and equity, and better integrate ECEC within the broader landscape of social and education policies.** In Korea, the ECEC sector is largely funded by public investments, although private funding also contributes significantly, with most children attending private ECEC centres. The split governance at the central and local levels have led to variations in the quality of services. The integration plan aims to strengthen governance and funding to steer the system towards higher quality and equity. Policy directions to support the diverse needs of vulnerable families through integrated policies, along with effective funding and monitoring mechanisms, are important in Korea and key policy directions include:

- *Design funding allocation mechanisms between levels of governments (e.g. conditional grants, equalisation systems between local authorities) that provide support and incentives to steer funding recipients towards quality and equity.* In Singapore, the Anchor Operator (AOP) and Partner Operator (POP) schemes condition funding on fee caps, quality certification and staff professional development, with additional support for disadvantaged children and those with special education needs (see Chapter 9, Box 9.2). Several countries have developed mechanisms to allocate funding from the central level of government to sub-central authorities, for instance by using funding formula that include a number of parameters to mitigate inequalities at the local level and support quality improvement (see Chapter 2 in (OECD, 2022<sup>[14]</sup>) and Box 3).
- *Design funding mechanisms that ensure wages are aligned with ECEC staff roles and responsibilities and incentivise workforce quality, particularly in settings with high shares of vulnerable children.* In Virginia, United States, the Teacher Recognition programme reduced staff turnover by providing financial support to ECEC educators. New Zealand's Equity Funding helps providers in low-income or culturally diverse communities improve quality through higher spending on staff and curriculum. Providers hiring more qualified staff receive additional resources to offset costs, encouraging workforce quality (see Chapter 9, Box 9.3).
- *Build data systems and processes that are meaningful to monitor quality and equity and inform directions for improvements.* In Australia, the *Restacking the Odds* initiative has developed "lead indicators" to help co-ordinated services to collect and share data, enabling informed policy, funding and programme decisions. The initiative also supports frontline providers in building capacity for sustained and consistent data collection and use (see Chapter 10, Box 10.3).



**Table 1. Indicators of quality and inclusive early childhood education and care**

Report ref.	Indicator	Ref. year	Indicator type	Korea	OECD average <sup>1</sup>
<b>Context</b>					
Fig. 1.1	Relative child poverty rate	2021 <sup>2</sup>	%	9.5	12.4
Fig. 3.3	Gini coefficient of income equality ( <i>ranges from 0: max. equality to 1: max. inequality</i> )	2022	Gini coefficient	0.32	0.31
Fig. 3.4	National population below relative poverty threshold	2022	%	14.9	11.1
Fig. 1.2	Socio-economic gap in maths performance, age 15 ( <i>adv. - disadv.</i> )	2022	Mean score diff.	97	93.5
<b>Policy area 1: Reducing gaps in participation</b>					
Fig. 1.3	ECEC enrolment rate, age 4	2022	%	95.2	89.1
Fig. 1.3	ECEC enrolment rate, age 2	2022	%	95.8	45.4
Fig. 1.4	Trend in socio-economic participation gap, age 4	2005-2015	Trend	Narrowed	No change
Fig. 5.5	Out-of-pocket childcare costs for a two-earner couple family	2023	% of avg. earnings	4	12
Fig. 5.6	Agreement with statement “preschool children suffer with a working mother”, adult population	see Annex B	%	64.7	33.5
<b>Policy area 2: Supporting meaningful interactions between staff and children</b>					
Fig. 6.2	Enrolment in private ECEC, ISCED 02	2022	%	70.6	32.2
Fig. 6.2	Enrolment in private ECEC, ISCED 01	2022	%	76.2	50.3
Fig. 1.5	Diff. in maths performance by ECEC participation, age 15 ( <i>&gt;2 years - =2 years participation</i> )	2022	Score diff.	-5.7	5.2
<b>Policy area 3: Making ECEC inclusive for all children</b>					
Fig. 7.1	Children reported as multilingual in ECEC, age 10 in reference year	2019	%	11.3	13.4
Fig. 7.2	Children with special educational needs in mainstream settings	2020/21	%	<i>m</i>	79.0
<b>Policy area 4: Connecting ECEC services with families, schools and communities</b>					
Fig. 3.6	Socio-economic gap in home activities for early literacy and numeracy ( <i>adv. - disadv.</i> )	2019	Percentage points	25.9	22.1
<b>Policy area 5: Improving governance and funding</b>					
Fig. 9.1	Expenditure on ECEC per child, ISCED 02	2021	PPP USD	11 792	11 735
Fig. 9.2	Share of private expenditure on ECEC, ISCED 02	2021	%	12.4	14.2
Fig. 9.5	Local government share of expenditure after inter-governmental transfers, ISCED 02	2021	%	77.0	57.6
Fig. 9.4	Local government share of expenditure after inter-governmental transfers, ISCED 01	2021	%	<i>m</i>	67.0
Fig. 9.7	Share of per capita spending on family benefits and education (0-17) for children aged 0-5	2019	%	28.7	28.4

Note: m = Missing

<sup>1</sup> Countries included in the OECD average vary depending on data availability, refer to Annex B for further information. The average for Figure 7.1 includes only the following countries or sub-national entities: Belgium (Flanders), France, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland

<sup>2</sup> Reference year differs for Korea: 2020

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