

## **“The Failure of America’s, The Success of South Korea’s”**

As an economic superpower, America is seen as one of the top countries in the world- but what about their educational priorities? As Nicholas Butler, American philosopher, diplomat and educator once said, “America is the best half-educated country in the world”. I agree with him. Through Stanley Fish’s theory, it has been proven the “interpretation” of an “object” is manipulated by the interpreters’ community, context and prior knowledge. When looking through the lens of Americans’ and their “interpretation”, education is not seen among their top priorities. Compared to America’s interpretation, South Korea defines education as the key to discipline and success. With top test scores in the world and known for their skills, the Korean community is progressing their way to the top, as America begins to fall behind as a country. If the flaws in America’s educational system are not identified the stakes will rise as America’s “future” and status as a leading country continues to plummet. From personal experiences, statistics, history and information on America’s and South Korea’s education system, we will be given a glimpse of the “lens” each community views when education comes to mind.

To first understand America’s and South Korea’s educational systems, we must first understand how each work. According to “Asia Society”, the Korean school system is also like America’s; divided into elementary, middle and high school, but with three years in middle school, and only three years in high school. South Korea’s school year consist of two semesters, first “from March to July” then resuming from, “September to February”. A typical school day for a Korean high schooler involves starting school at eight a.m. and ending their school day around four-thirty p.m., in which private tutoring is followed up to until midnight. In America the school year begins typically in August or September and ends around June. With seven hour school days, five days a week, America’s school year length of 180 days is compared to Korea’s 220 days. “Asia Society” explains the nine main subjects in Korea are “moral education, Korean language, social studies, mathematics, science, physical education, music, fine arts, and practical arts”. In Korea, English is taught as a second language by third grade, but in America second languages such as Spanish are not mandatory until high school. By high school in Korea, students are taught twelve different subjects as Americans are usually taught around six subjects a day. As eleventh graders, Koreans are required to decide if they are to pursue an arts or science degree for college, in which their decision narrows down their studies until college. Americans are not required to declare what type of degree or major they want to pursue until their junior year in college. After a K through 12 education, both countries have opportunities for higher education.

With a personal interview with Kevin Lee, a current UW student- he provides the perspective of a student who experienced both an American and Korean education. *New York Times* also provides the insider to the educational aspect of Kim Hyun-kyung’s life as a Korean high schooler in the article, “Elite Korean Schools, Forging Ivy League Skills”. As a fourth grader, Kevin Lee was sent off to America by his parents to start in an American school as a third grader. After ten years of an American education, Kevin compares Korea’s schooling system as “twelve years of competition”, compared to “four years” in America. He described the discipline in Korea to be effective as the system once allowed teachers to

slap children with rulers on their hands. Kevin recalls, "Once I forgot my textbook and had to kneel with my arms up in the air for the whole day". What Americans would call brutal, could also be called effective. From Kevin's experience he expressed that, "One of Korea's flaws is that by the time kids reach college they are burnt out, but here in America it is not competitive enough in high school, leaving kids unready for college". He believes, "American teenagers don't realize they need college for better things, therefore slack off in high school". As for Kim Hyun-kung, she recalls to *New York Times*, of a banner hung in her school that read, "This school is a paradise for those who want to study and a hell for those who do not". That so called "hell", resulted in their school's "average combined SAT score... (to be) 2203 out of 2400" and having 34 of their students attend American Ivy Leagues. America's educational system must be credited for the opportunities higher education provides, and for not having the overwhelming pressure and its effects that Korean students face, but the consequence of Korea's discipline has imprinted the importance of schooling and of getting an education to its students- all of which is leading to a stronger future for Korea. As of America, the "lens" they perceive of education has led to the drop of graduation rates from high schools and the decrease in money being put into schools.

From the information and firsthand experience provided by Kevin Lee, we are shown that Korea's educational system is structured through discipline and priority. Korea's community views education through a lens consisting of competition and results worth the sacrifice of studying over six hours a day. Students like Kim Hyun-kung and Kevin Lee have been taught through their society that education is the key to success. The long school days and school years provide students the opportunity to advance their knowledge as far as they'd like to and to be skilled in every area. The attention Korea illustrates for their educational system demonstrates that they value their future; as with the knowledge and skills taught from their system, students will be prepared to take on the workforce.

What factors play into the inferiority of America's educational system when compared to South Korea's? One aspect that can be looked into is the teacher unions in America. With tenure- the inability to fire teachers without "lewd reasoning", American schools are filled with teachers incapable of helping students reach the standards needed to prepare them for higher education. The documentary, *Waiting for Superman* and the website, "Teacher Unions Exposed", note how, "one out of every 57 doctors loses his or her license to practice medicine, one out of every 97 lawyers loses their license to practice law", but "in many major cities, only one out of 1000 teachers is fired for performance-related reasons". These numbers are due to the protection tenure provides teachers. Attempted acts like, "No Child Left Behind" enacted since 2001 by George Bush, has left states struggling to have students reach standards. Noted by "Education Week", "No Child Left Behind" was structured for all states to have "100 percent proficiency by 2013-14" - instead "by 2010, 38 percent of schools were failing to make adequate yearly progress, up from 29 percent in 2006". By 2011, it was seen that some states had over 50 percent failure ratings. With the discipline and emphasize on education in Korea, schools there are facing their own standard test, also called the SAT, a skills test passed with high scores.

With the lack of emphasis on education and falling test scores, America's lack of priority in their educational system can be seen in budget cuts. As the economy is dwindling, Americans have seen art and music programs go out the window- now funding for higher education is ceasing. "Publicola", an online Seattle news website reported of the "\$639 million cut for higher education." Taking the biggest hit of all the states, "New Hampshire topped all 50 states with a massive 48 percent cut in higher ed funding", not far behind Washington State took a 23 percent hit. The distortion of our educational system can be seen from Forbes' statistics that remarks how states with more money are spending less on education, while states with less money are putting priority into their schools by funding more money. Striking it close to home, *The International Examiner*, takes a look at the effects the cuts are having on University of Washington. Ana Mari Cauce, an Earl R. Carlson Professor of Psychology at UW, remarked to the *Examiner*, "I'm not sure how much more we can stretch without compromising quality." It is obvious that the states and America as a country aren't making "their future" a priority. "The university's Bill and Melinda Gates Chair in Computer Science and Engineering, Ed Lazowska" commented, "Who gets hurt because of this loss opportunity? To be honest, it is not the large companies such as Microsoft and Google and Amazon.com – they recruit nationally...it is the kids who grow up here, because they are denied the opportunity to become educated for these great jobs." Lazowska makes a point how are students supposed to be prepared for technological and intensive jobs needed for the future- especially in a world becoming so dependent on technology. America's compromising their future and looking at budget cuts in the wrong areas. They not only lack discipline and an effective system like Korea's, but now the funding.

After his overseas visit to Korea, American President Barack Obama, supported the claim that America lacks educational success, especially when compared to Korea's. Huffington Post reported, "President Obama decided that American schools must look more like schools in South Korea. He wants longer school days and a longer school year to ensure extra time to prepare children for standardized tests". He explained after stating our lack of school days in the academic calendar, "That's no way to prepare them for a 21st-century economy. We can no longer afford an academic calendar designed for when America was a nation of farmers who needed their children at home plowing the land at the end of each day. That calendar may have once made sense, but today it puts us at a competitive disadvantage." As Korea has done, we must adjust to the growth in technology and the future that holds dependency on technological jobs to be filled. With budget cuts and failed acts already on their plate, the Western world will be held at even more disadvantages. 21st century jobs must be prepared for.

Each factor America beholds such as tenure, teacher unions, failing education acts and budget cuts- all play a role in America's failure in educating and preparing the next generation for the future. America's views on education make education seem optional and lack priority. Students are given the opportunities to stop their education, but what about those who want to advance their knowledge? Tenure promises teachers their jobs, but what about the students and their aspirations for a career if their teacher is not capable of educating them properly? Without the next generation's workforce prepared to take on

technological advances and growth, America will cease as an economic superpower. The interpretation of education in America portrays the lack of importance and thought we put into our future and children. The lens society has influenced on Americans diminishes what knowledge is worth and shows that putting money into foreign affairs is of higher essence.

Education is the key to the future and without preparation, what kind of future will we have as Americans? South Korea's interpretation of education has left them with stronger schooling systems and an emphasis on education that America is missing. America's own interpretation of "education" displays a lack of priority, a lack of direction and reform that jeopardizes the future of their students and future employees. Budget cuts, failed acts and the absence of discipline are all factors tallying against a better educational system for America. Stanley Fish's theory on "interpretation" along with statistics and personal experiences leaves us with the conclusion: America's "interpretation" of education contrasts from the "interpretation" Korea has for their educational system which leaves Koreans with higher test scores, self-discipline and a future prepared for.