

South Korea School Enrolls Grandmothers

1 GANGJIN COUNTY, South Korea — Every morning on her way to school, Hwang Wol-geum, a first grader, rides the same yellow bus as three of her family members: One is a kindergartner, another a third grader and the other a fifth grader. Ms. Hwang is 70 — and her schoolmates are her grandchildren. Illiterate all her life, she remembers hiding behind a tree and weeping as she saw her friends trot off to school six decades ago.

2 But this year the local school was running out of school-age children and was desperate to fill its classrooms with students. South Korea's birthrate has been plummeting in recent decades, falling to less than one child per woman last year, one of the lowest in the world. The hardest hit areas are rural counties, where babies have become an increasingly rare sight as young couples migrate en masse to big cities for better paying jobs.

3 Like other rural schools, Daegu Elementary, in Ms. Hwang's district, has seen its number of students decrease. "We went around villages looking for just one precious kid to enroll as a first grader," said the principal, Lee Ju-young. "There was none." So Ms. Lee and local residents, desperate to save the 96-year-old school, came up with an idea: How about enrolling older villagers who wanted to learn to read and write? Ms. Hwang and seven other women, aged 56 to 80, stepped forward, with at least four others asking to be enrolled next year.

4 For younger people who want to stay in the area, the future of their town depended on keeping the school alive. "Who would start a family here if there were no school?" asked Noh Soon-ah, 40, whose husband quit his job in an auto parts factory in a big city and resettled his family here five years ago to take over his parents' farming business. "Children are what brings laughter and vitality to a town."

5 The local education office warmed to the idea, and Ms. Hwang started attending classes last month. Like many first graders on their first day, Ms. Hwang cried. 11 "I couldn't believe this was actually happening to me," she said. "Carrying a school bag has always been my dream."



6 Decades ago, Korean families often focused what little resources they had on educating their sons. Many girls were expected to stay home and look after younger siblings while their parents worked outside. Being illiterate brought Ms. Hwang many humiliations later in life. Posting packages was always a problem because she could not write addresses. Years ago, she and her husband, Chae Jan-ho, 72, were visiting their son in the country's

capital when they got separated in the bustling subway. Ms. Hwang could not read any of the signs and was hopelessly lost until a stranger helped her find her way.

- 7 Now she and her fellow students are determined to make up for lost time. “They are eager to learn,” said Ms. Jo, the teacher, about her first-grade students. “They are probably the only students here asking for more homework.” Ms. Hwang has already hatched an ambitious plan. “I am going to run for president of the village women’s society,” she said. “People used to ask me to run, but I always declined. It’s a job for someone who can read and write.”

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