



# Korea

This country note provides an overview of key characteristics of the education system in Korea based on *Education at a Glance 2024*. In line with the thematic focus of *Education at a Glance 2024*, it highlights issues of equity in education. Data in this note are provided for the latest available year as indicated in *Education at a Glance 2024*.

## Highlights

- In 2023, the share of 25-34 year-olds without upper secondary educational attainment in Korea was very low at 1%, 13 percentage points below the OECD average.
- Tertiary attainment is more common for young women in Korea, but the gender disparity in the employment rates exists even with a tertiary qualification. In Korea, 77% of women aged 25-34 had a tertiary qualification, while 63% of their male peers did. However, women with tertiary attainment were 7 percentage points less likely to be employed than men, similar to the corresponding average gender gap of 6 percentage points across the OECD.
- In Korea, 25-34 year-olds with short-cycle tertiary attainment earned on average 5% more than their peers with upper secondary attainment, while those with a bachelor's degree earned on average 17% more. These earnings advantages were lower than the corresponding OECD averages of 11% and 31% respectively.
- In 2022, about two-thirds of children under the age of 3 were enrolled in early childhood education and care programmes, the highest rate across the OECD. Between ages 3 to 5, nearly all children were enrolled in educational institutions as in most OECD countries.
- Compulsory education in Korea lasts 9 years until the age of 14, shorter than the average of 11 years across the OECD. However, most students in Korea continue to study well beyond the ending age of compulsory education with 85% of 15-19 year-olds enrolled in education, at par with the OECD average of 84%.
- There are large gender differences when choosing the fields of study. In 2022, 17% of female students entering tertiary education in Korea chose science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields, while 45% of their male peers did so.
- In 2021, Korea spent 5.2% of its gross domestic product (GDP) on educational institutions at primary to tertiary levels of education, higher than the OECD average of 4.9% of GDP, despite a decline in the number of students. The average annual expenditure per student from primary to tertiary education (USD 15 858) was also higher than the OECD average (USD 14 209).
- Compared to other OECD countries, Korea has more variation across schools in the number of students per grade. The largest 5% of primary schools in Korea had 197 or more students per grade, while the smallest 5% of primary schools had 3 or fewer students per grade. The median

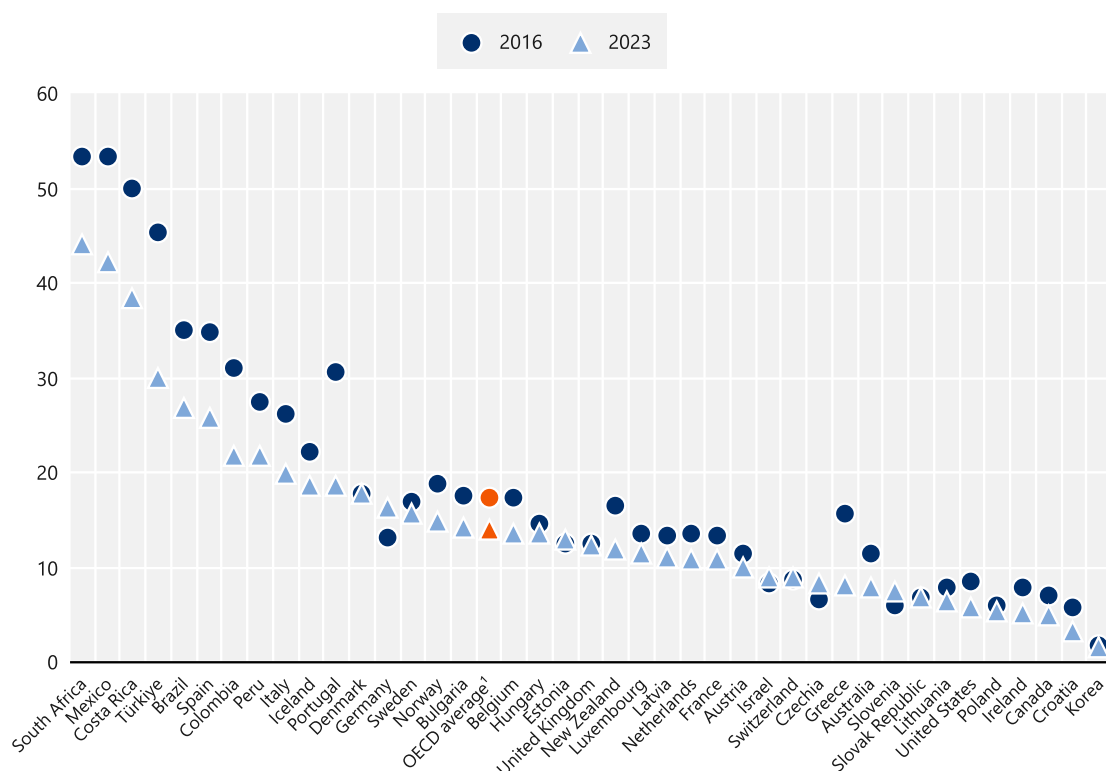
number of students per grade in primary schools was 52 students per grade, the second highest figure after the United States.

### The output of educational institutions and the impact of learning

- Adults without upper secondary qualification are at considerable risk of poor social and labour-market outcomes throughout their lives. Reducing the share of young adults without an upper secondary qualification has been a priority in many countries, and their share had decreased between 2016 and 2023 in 28 out of 35 OECD member countries with data available for both years. In Korea, the share of 25-34 year-olds without upper secondary educational attainment was at 1% in 2023, 13 percentage points below the OECD average, and was similar to 2016 (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Trends in the share of 25-34 year-olds with below upper secondary educational attainment (2016 and 2023)**

In per cent



1. The OECD average is derived from the unweighted mean of all countries with available and comparable data for both years. Countries are ranked in descending order of the share of 25-34 year-olds with below upper secondary attainment in 2023.

**Source:** OECD (2024), Table A1.2. For more information see *Education at a Glance 2024 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).



- The difficult labour-market situation faced by young workers in Korea is reflected in employment rates among 25-34 year-olds, even for those with upper secondary or tertiary qualifications. In Korea, 69% of 25-34 year-olds with an upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary qualification are employed and 79% of those with a tertiary qualification in 2023. These figures are 10 percentage points and 8 percentage points lower than the OECD average respectively.
- Young people continue to tertiary education in the hope of better earnings prospects. However for 25-34 year-olds in Korea, the earnings advantage associated with tertiary qualifications is not as pronounced as that observed in other OECD countries. In 2022, short-cycle tertiary attainment resulted in on average 5% higher earnings than upper secondary attainment, and those with bachelor's degrees earned on average 17% more (across the OECD 11% and 31% respectively). With at least a master's degree, they then enjoyed 61% higher earnings than their peers with upper secondary qualification (compared to an OECD average of 56%).
- By almost all available measures, girls and women have better educational outcomes than boys and men, and in many cases the gap is widening. Gender gaps in educational attainment reflect this. In all OECD member countries, women aged 25-34 are as likely or more likely than their male peers to have a tertiary qualification (54% compared to 41% on average across OECD countries in 2023). In Korea, 77% of women had a tertiary qualification, compared to 63% of men.
- Although girls and women clearly outperform boys and men in education, the key measures of labour-market outcomes are generally worse for women than for men. Women aged 25-34 are less likely to be employed than men, with the gap typically widest for those with below upper secondary educational attainment and narrowest for those with tertiary attainment. In Korea, only 44% of young women with below upper secondary attainment were employed in 2023, while the corresponding share for young men was 67% (the corresponding OECD averages were 47% and 72%). Among those with tertiary attainment, 76% of young women were employed, compare to 83% of men (the corresponding OECD averages were 84% and 90%).
- Tertiary attainment does not help to eliminate the wage gap between men and women, but in Korea, it reduces the gap. Among 25-34 year-olds with upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary attainment, women in Korea earned on average 83% of the wage of their male peers in 2022, similar to the OECD average of 84%. With a tertiary qualification, the wage gap between young men and women reduced to 88% in Korea, while the corresponding fraction was 83% on average across the OECD.
- The share of young economically inactive population in Korea is higher than many other OECD countries, regardless of educational attainment and gender. Among 25-34 year-olds in Korea with tertiary attainment, 13% of men and 21% of women were inactive in 2023, which were the top four inactivity rates among the OECD countries for both men and women.

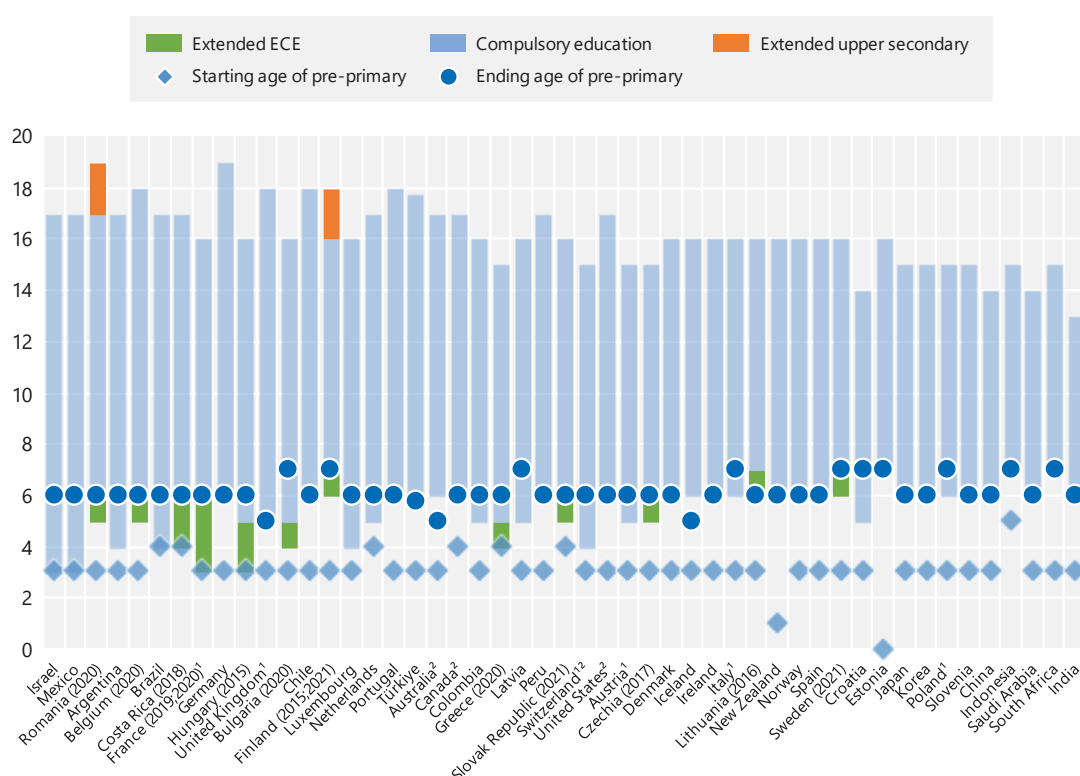
## Access to education, participation and progression

- Childcare and parental leave policies vary considerably between countries. Of particular importance for low-income families is the so-called childcare gap, the period between the end of paid parental leave and the start of free early childhood education and care or compulsory education. In eight OECD countries, including Korea, there is no childcare gap as free early childhood education or compulsory education starts immediately following the end of paid parental leave. In 2022, 66% of children under the age of 3 were enrolled in early childhood education and care (ECEC) programmes, the highest across the OECD. Then 96% of children aged 3-5 in Korea

were enrolled in educational institutions, 13 percentage points above the OECD average. These high enrolment rates could be explained by some free ECEC services available from birth, as well as women returning to work quickly due to concerns on their job security.

- Early childhood education can help to reduce the developmental gaps that put some children at a disadvantage when they enrol in primary school. In most OECD countries, the large majority of children are enrolled in early childhood education one year before the start of primary education. In Korea, 97% of children in this age group were enrolled in 2022, at a similar level to 96% on average across the OECD.
- Though most children and youths participate in education in the years before and after compulsory education, not all do so. To increase enrolment in the early years or among youths, 12 OECD member and accession countries have increased the duration of compulsory education over the past decade. Korea does not belong to this group. Compulsory education in Korea is from the age of 6 to 14 for a total of 9 years, which is shorter than the OECD average of 11 years (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Duration of compulsory education (2022)



**Note:** The year in parentheses indicates when policy changes were made to the duration of compulsory education. In addition, extended ECEC/extended upper secondary refers to the extension in the duration of the relevant level since 2013.

1. There are other compulsory activities to complete by the end of compulsory education (see Table B2.1).

2. Starting age, ending age, and duration of compulsory education may vary at sub-national level.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the duration of compulsory education.

**Source:** OECD (2024), Table B2.1. For more information see *Education at a Glance 2024 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).



- In most OECD countries, a large majority of 15-19 year olds are still enrolled in education, even though compulsory education usually ends before the age of 19. It is the case in Korea. Even after compulsory education, 85% of 15-19 year-olds were enrolled, similar to the OECD average of 84%. However, in most countries, including Korea, there are large differences in enrolment rates between subnational regions. Incheon showed the lowest enrolment rate of 69% while Daejeon and Chungcheongnam-do the highest at nearly 100%.
- Grade repetition is common in many countries to give students more time to master the content of a grade, although its effectiveness is debated. In Korea, almost no student from primary to general upper secondary education repeated a grade in 2022, while the OECD averages were 1.5% at primary, 2.2% at lower secondary and 3.2% at general upper secondary level.
- Across the OECD, 23% of students enrolled in upper secondary education from private institutions in 2022. However, the share of private institutions is slowly expanding. Between 2013 and 2022, the share of students enrolled in private institutions had grown by five percentage points. Meanwhile in Korea, the share of students enrolled in private upper secondary institutions decreased from 44% to 41% during the same period.
- Women are over-represented in tertiary education and the gap is widening in most countries. In Korea, 51% of new entrants to tertiary education were women in 2022, compared with an OECD average of 56%. As women are also more likely than men to complete tertiary education, the gap is even greater among graduates (see *Education at a Glance 2022*). However, in all OECD countries, there are large gender differences between fields of study chosen. In Korea, 17% of female entrants chose science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields while 45% of their male peers did so (15% and 41% respectively on average across the OECD).
- Students in STEM fields are more likely to be internationally mobile as the language barriers are lower and the skills are more transferrable across borders than other fields of education. Indeed, 30% of all international or foreign students in the OECD countries were enrolled in STEM fields in 2022, 11 percentage points higher than non-mobile students. Korea is an exception, where only 16% of foreign students were enrolled in STEM fields, compared to 34% of non-mobile students.
- Countries actively seek to attract internationally mobile students to their tertiary institutions as they bring the substantial economic benefits such as tuition fees and, if students stay after graduating, a highly skilled workforce. Between 2013 and 2022, the share of internationally mobile students at tertiary level in OECD countries increased from 5% to 6%. In Korea, the share of foreign students in tertiary education doubled during the same period from 2% to 4%.

## Financial resources invested in education

- On average across the OECD, the share of gross domestic product (GDP) dedicated to educational institutions from primary to tertiary levels (including R&D) had been broadly stable, with 4.9% in 2015 and 2021. However, trends vary considerably between countries. Korea is among the countries where expenditure as a share of GDP remained roughly constant: 5.3% in 2015 and 5.2% in 2021. Korea is also one of few countries that devoted a greater share of their GDP to government spending on educational institutions in 2021 than it did in 2015, even though the number of students fell by at least 5% during this period.
- In 2021, the average annual expenditure per student from primary to tertiary education (including R&D) was USD 15 858 in Korea, higher compared to the OECD average of USD 14 209. In most countries, expenditure increases by level of education. However, Korea stands out as one of the





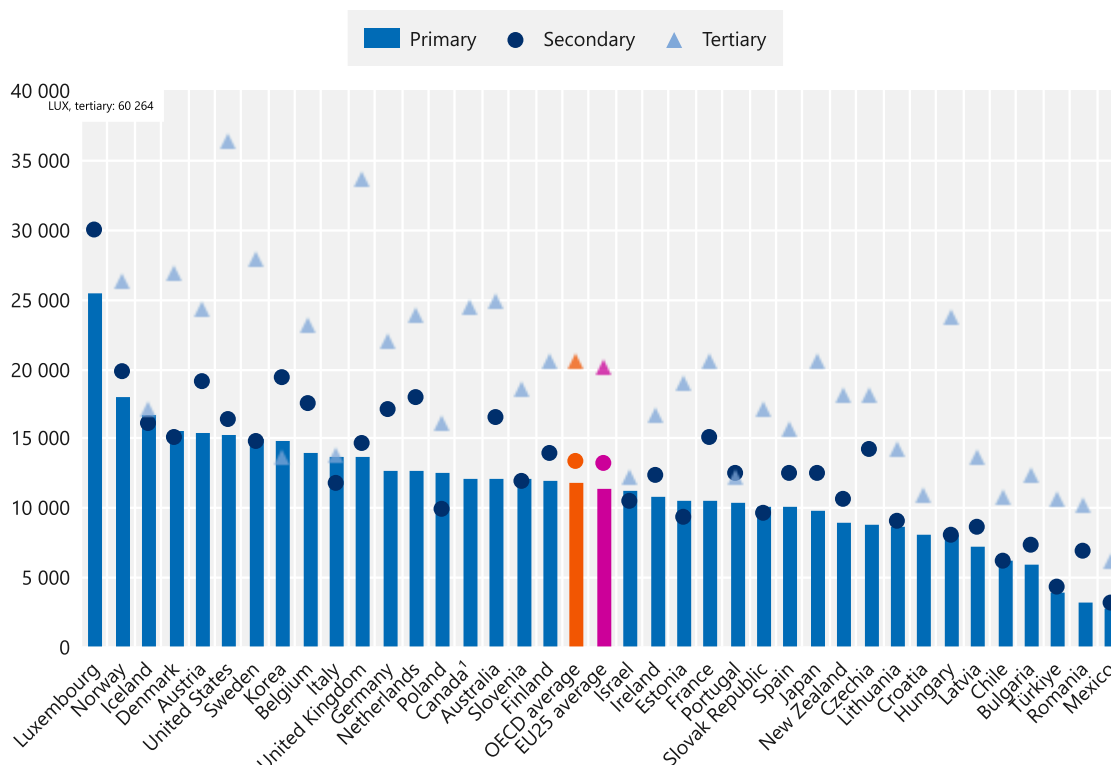
two countries where expenditure per student was higher at primary level than tertiary level. Spending per student was USD 14 873 in primary education, USD 19 299 in secondary education and USD 13 573 in tertiary education in Korea (Figure 3).<sup>1</sup>

- How private institutions are funded varies considerably across countries, with some fully or largely government funded, while others receive little or no public funding. In Korea, government sources spent USD 23 832 per full-time equivalent student in public upper secondary institutions and USD 16 356 per full-time equivalent student in private ones. These are nearly double the OECD averages (USD 12 713 for public institutions and USD 9 088 for private institutions).
- Across the OECD, public authorities are responsible for the vast majority of spending on education, particularly in compulsory education. In Korea, 95% of total expenditure on primary educational institutions came from public sources in 2021, similar to the OECD average of 93%. In contrast, public expenditure makes up a relatively smaller share in pre-primary and tertiary education in many countries. For pre-primary education, it is not the case for Korea: 88% of total expenditure was from public sources, similar to the OECD average (86%). However, at tertiary level, the share dropped to 45% and lower than the OECD average (68%). This can be explained by tuition fees.
- Tuition fees are an important component of private expenditure on tertiary education, but they vary considerably across countries. In Korea, national students in bachelor's programmes paid USD 5 171 per year in 2023, at the upper end of the range among OECD countries with data available.
- The distribution of government expenditure on education by level of government differs between countries. In Korea, most of the funds are transferred from the central to regional and local governments for primary and lower secondary education. So in 2021, the central government was responsible for 1% of final expenditure on primary and lower secondary education, the regional governments for 22%, and local governments for 77%. This is not the case at tertiary level. The central government was responsible for 96% of final expenditure from total government expenditure on tertiary education.

<sup>1</sup> All expenditure figures in this note are expressed in USD calculated based on purchasing power parity (PPP) exchange rates.

**Figure 3. Total expenditure per full-time equivalent student in primary, secondary and tertiary education (2021)**

In equivalent USD converted using PPPs, expenditure on educational institutions



1. Primary education includes pre-primary and lower secondary programmes.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the total expenditure per full-time equivalent student in primary education.

**Source:** OECD (2024), Table C1.1. For more information see *Education at a Glance 2024 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).

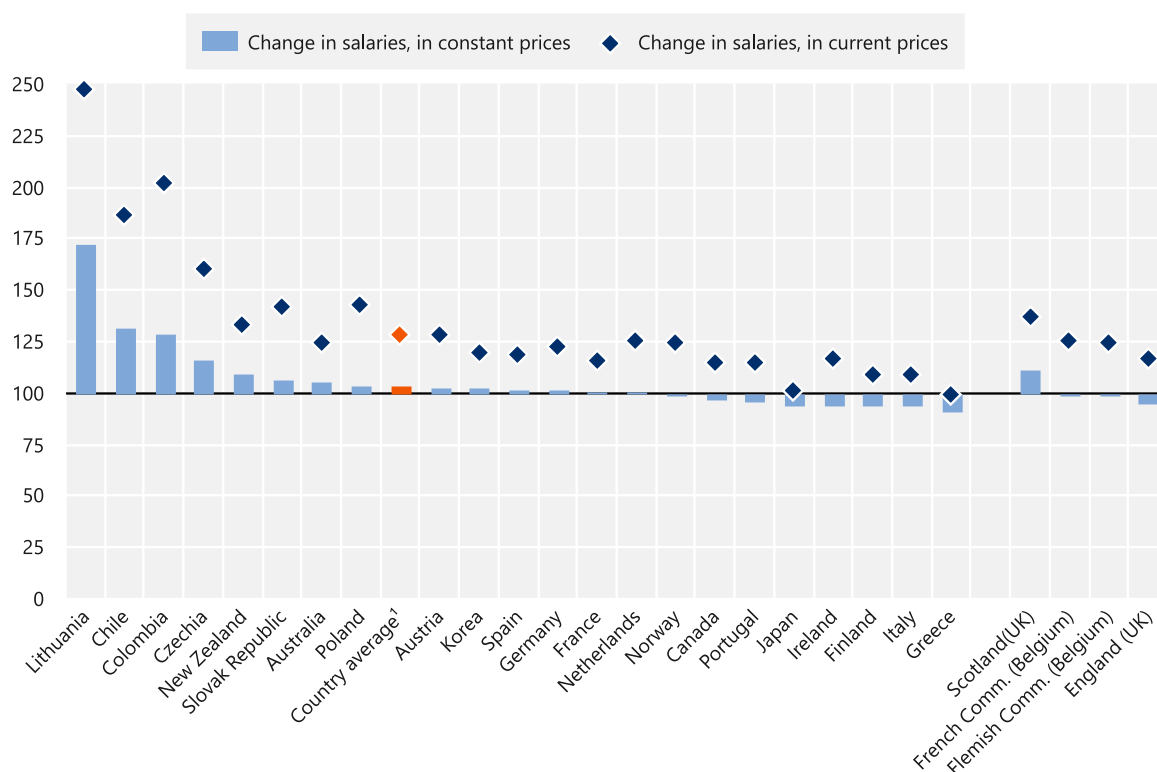
## Teachers, the learning environment and the organisation of schools

- Across the OECD, 18 out of 21 countries with data available report that they face shortages of fully qualified secondary school teachers at the start of academic year 2023 (or the academic year 2022/23). Korea was one of the few exceptions (together with Greece and Türkiye) that did not report a shortage of secondary teachers.
- Between 2013 and 2022, the average age of teachers had increased across the OECD. In 2022, 36% of lower secondary teachers were 50 years or older, compared to 35% in 2013. In comparison, Korea has had fewer teachers aged 50 or older during this period: from 23% in 2013 to 25% 2022.
- Korea has a very young teacher population in pre-primary education which may signal an early attrition of pre-primary teachers. In Korea, the share of pre-primary teachers below the age of 30 was 47% in 2022, the second highest across the OECD (18% on average). Only 7% of pre-primary teachers were aged 50 or more, much lower than the OECD average of 30%.

- Between 2015 and 2023, nominal statutory salaries increased by 19% in Korea for lower secondary teachers with 15 years of experience. Most of this increase compensated for the rising cost of living. In real terms (i.e. adjusted for inflation), teachers' salaries increased by 3% over the eight-year period compared to an average increase of 4% across countries with available data (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Change in lower secondary teachers' statutory salaries between 2015 and 2023**

Index of change in annual salaries of teachers with most prevalent qualifications after 15 years of experience (2015 = 100)



**Note:** The change in constant prices refers to the change in salaries assuming the same level of purchasing power between 2015 and 2023 (that is, in 2015 prices), whereas change in current prices refers to the nominal change in salary amount between 2015 and 2023.

1. Excludes Australia, Chile and Colombia as data for some years are missing between 2015 and 2023.

Countries and other participants are ranked in descending order of the change in salaries in constant prices.

**Source:** OECD (2024), Table D3.6 and Table X2.5. For more information see *Education at a Glance 2024 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).

- Despite a lower statutory salary at the beginning of the career relative to their peers in non-teaching jobs, teaching may still be appealing for young teachers as a lifelong profession in terms of salary level later in the career. Korea is one of six OECD countries where, after 15 years of experience in teaching, lower secondary teachers' statutory salaries reach or exceed the average earnings of similarly educated workers in 2023. In Korea, statutory salary of lower secondary teachers with 15 years of experience was 27% higher than the average earnings of workers with a bachelor's or equivalent degree.
- The number of hours that teachers are contractually obliged to teach varies greatly across countries. In Korea, teachers at lower secondary level have to teach 517 hours annually in 2023. This is below the OECD average of 706 hours per year. However, the work of teachers consists





not only teaching, but also preparing lessons, grading assignments and communicating with parents.

- Countries make different choices about whether to operate many small schools or fewer large schools. In 2022, the median primary school in Korea had 52 students per grade. It is high compared to the OECD average of 27 and is the second highest after the United States. The largest 5% of primary schools in Korea had 197 or more students per grade, while the OECD average was 91 or more. At the other end of the scale, the smallest 5% of primary schools had 3 or fewer students per grade compared to an OECD average of 5 or fewer students per grade. Although small schools are important for ensuring primary education is accessible, especially in sparsely populated rural areas, they can be costly to run and may have to resort to multi-grade teaching.
- Most education systems involve students and parents in the governance of public schools. In most countries, it is compulsory for parents' representatives to be included in the governing board of public schools. Student participation is less widespread, but still common. In Korea, the participation of parents in governing body of public schools is required, and the participation of students is possible.



## More information

For more information on *Education at a Glance 2024* and to access the full set of indicators, see: <https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en>.

For more information on the methodology used during the data collection for each indicator, the references to the sources and the specific notes for each country, see *Education at a Glance 2024: Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).

For general information on the methodology, please refer to the *OECD Handbook for Internationally Comparative Education Statistics 2018* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264304444-en>).

Updated data can be found on line at <http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/5q> and by following the StatLinks  in the publication.

Explore, compare and visualise more data and analysis using the Education GPS: <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/>.

Questions can be directed to the Education at a Glance team at the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills: [EDU.EAG@oecd.org](mailto:EDU.EAG@oecd.org).

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