

# KICCE POLICY BRIEF

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## The integration policy of ECC<sup>1</sup> and ECE<sup>2</sup> in Korea

### I. Introduction

**The president of Korea declared that the integration policy of early childhood care and education (ECEC) was part of the new government's national agenda that was planned for the president's official term (2022–2027).**

- The government established the taskforce on the consolidation of early childhood education and care under the Ministry of Education and announced plans to promote education and childcare integration.
- There have long been attempts to integrate ECEC, but without success. However, the current government, which faces population problems owing to low birth rates, has taken a step forward by placing full responsibility for the integration on the Ministry of Education.

**Although ECEC overlap in the targeted ages of children (three to five) and have similar functions, they differ in many respects such as their service organizations, competent ministries, and teacher qualifications due to their historical and social foundations. This has a negative impact on social integration.**

- If children experience differences in cost burden and quality of education depending on which institution they enroll in, the basic philosophy of ECEC in Korea, which aims for “equality from the starting line,” may be jeopardized.
- Differences in cost support, hours, and operating methods between split institutions (kindergartens/daycare centers) are confusing to parents, and teachers and directors also have disagreements with each other regarding different treatments, working environments, operational management, and support.
- There was a conflict between the metropolitan/provincial offices of education and the local governments over the issue of support resources because of differences in jurisdictional ministries for the same age group.

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1. Early Childhood Care  
2. Early Childhood Education

## II. Current State: A Split ECEC System

**From a governance and structural perspective, Korea's early childhood education and childcare are dualized.<sup>3</sup>**

- Early childhood education is for children aged three to five years, and the kindergartens where they receive education are educational institutions under the authority of the Ministry of Education. The legal basis for kindergartens is the Basic Act of Education and the Early Childhood Education Act, which define kindergartens as schools that educate young children (Article 2 of the Early Childhood Education Act).
- In contrast, childcare is for children aged from zero to five years, and service providers are daycare centers, which are childcare facilities under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health and Welfare established and operated based on the Child Care Act (Article 2 of the Child Care Act). According to the law, childcare is “a social welfare service that protects and nurtures infants and young children and also provides education.”
- In essence, the basic concept of education is different from childcare for young children; therefore, their legal and institutional approaches are bound to be different, and they can be clearly differentiated in the purpose of their respective service providers.

**We can count several differences between early childhood education and care.**

- In terms of administration and financing, early childhood education, which is part of the school education system, is managed and supervised by the metropolitan/provincial offices of education, and childcare is managed and supported by local governments, such as metropolitan/provincial public-administration offices. Accordingly, early childhood education financing comprises education financing centered on local education finance grants from the Ministry of Education and special accounting for education expenses, whereas childcare financing comprises general accounts centered on national treasury subsidies, local grants, and local government financing.
  - Another important point of comparison is the teachers in charge of education and childcare in each areas. Kindergarten teachers must graduate from the early childhood education department of 2/3/4-year college and pass the national employment examination if they want to work at public kindergartens. They have a certain period of experience (relatively long period of time) to be promoted after many hour training and acquire director qualifications. Childcare teachers are required to have a high school diploma or higher, and a certain period of experience (relatively short term) is required for promotion to higher-level teacher and director qualifications.
- Additionally, with the introduction of the national level ECEC curriculum called “Nuri” in 2013, the core principles of education and care activities for three to five-year olds have been integrated, and some administrative procedures such as information disclosure and tuition cards have also been unified; thus, efforts to integrate ECEC have had some success. However, it would be accurate to say that most elements are still dualized and integration is still not easy.

## III. The Goal of ECEC Integration

**The President included in his national agenda a plan to integrate ECEC to provide quality education opportunities for all children and reduce the burden of parental care. To this end, it was announced that related government ministries would jointly establish and operate the Taskforce on the Consolidation of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC TF), launch the Committee on the Consolidation of Early Childhood Education, and promote integration in stages.**

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3. In terms of internal, content, and software such as activities, teaching materials, and curriculum, it is difficult to say that Korea's ECEC is dualized. This is because, at least for children aged 3 to 5, the basic program is structured based on the same national-level ECEC curriculum (“Nuri Curriculum”).

**The fundamental need for ECEC integration is to ensure that no matter where education or care is received, whether kindergartens or childcare facilities, private or public, there will be no discrimination or difference in content, tuition , or environment, and that homogeneous and high-quality education and care will be provided.**

- The government has stated, “In the face of the low birth rate crisis, it is necessary to provide high-quality education and care services from the beginning of life so that each child can grow into a valuable talent. The integration of ECEC will be promoted out of the concern that disparities in institutional services by care or education could lead to disparities among children in the current dual system.”
- Ultimately, the goal of ECEC integration is to build a new type of integrated institution and system so that all infants and toddlers aged zero to five-years old can receive quality education and care services without discrimination, regardless of the institution they attend (Ministry of Education, 2023).

#### **IV. The Policy Plan of ECEC Integration**

**The government announced that at the end of 2023, all policy tasks related to early childhood education and care will be adjusted to be under the authority of the Ministry of Education, and the integration of ECEC will center on the Ministry. In 2023, ECEC TF was launched under the Ministry of Education and the Plan for the Integration of ECEC was announced on January 30, 2023. The implementation plan according to each stage by year is as follows.**

**The first stage, set from 2023 to 2024, consists of pursuing tasks to reduce the gap and laying the foundation for integration.**

- Since the direction of the overall management system is unified under the Ministry of Education, the government will need to provide preemptive support to provincial offices of education so that they can reduce the gap between kindergartens and daycare centers with consideration of local conditions.
- These tasks include identifying and reconciling the differences between the two organizations, including cost support, care time, and facility improvements.
- In addition, the leading provincial offices of education are designated to analyze operational cases, plan to integrate the management system, and establish a new integrated institution model.

**The second stage, starting in 2025, is the full-scale implementation stage of the integration of early childhood education and care, in which it is planned that existing kindergartens and daycare centers will be converted into “new integrated institutions.”**

- The number of classes by age will be adjusted, new names and legal status will be provided, and transitional regulations will be applied so that in the resulting environment of teachers with increased capabilities and an integrated curriculum, young children will enjoy integrated quality education and care services for which the government will be responsible (Ministry of Education, 2023. 1. 30. Press release).

**As of September 2023, the government, related experts, and field officials are working on systems, facility environments, operations, cost support, and management systems to successfully achieve ECEC integration.**

- It is necessary to prepare practical measures and strategies that enhance the integration of each field, such as teacher qualifications, training and treatment, and curriculum, away from the current divided state.
- In particular, the various opinions and demands of stakeholders in the education and childcare sectors (institutional operators, teaching staff, support personnel in the service delivery system, etc.), who have had similar functions but different expectations in social roles, are difficult to address on either side. The most difficult and necessary process would be to coordinate and adjust them wisely so that the strengths of the two areas can be properly integrated without harm, and to move forward with a new type of integration.

## V. Outlook

**The expected effect of the integration of ECEC is equal, uniform, and high-level structural quality as well as equal process quality<sup>4</sup> of education and care for young children of all preschool ages, no matter what region they are in or institution they attend.**

**In addition, considering the expected effects from the perspective of each stakeholder, the results would be as follows (Ministry of Education: MOE, 2023).**

- First, parents will be able to safely entrust their children to integrated education and care institutions with strengthened national responsibility starting from the age of zero, reducing the additional burden of ECEC cost.
- Second, regarding teachers, qualifications and training will be improved to enhance the quality of education and care, and working conditions, such as treatment, will be improved, which is expected to allow teachers to focus on the children more fully.
- Third, regarding ECEC institution managers, excellent teachers, high-quality ECEC conditions, and more efficient support from the MOE can be expected to reduce the burden of running the institutions.

**For reference, we list 10 policies for implementing the vision of ECEC integration presented by MOE in 2023.**

1. We (i.e., the Ministry of Education and 17 metropolitan/provincial offices of education) will be responsible for education and care from the ages of zero to five years.
2. We will ensure a curriculum that takes into account the characteristics of young children and the continuity of their development.
  - ▶ Integrate the zero to five-year old curriculum and strengthen the connection with the elementary school curriculum
3. We will support the healthy development of young children by creating a safe and comfortable environment.
  - ▶ Strengthen the safety infrastructure, improve play facilities, etc.
4. We will provide quality snacks and meals without discrimination for all infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.
5. We will substantially guarantee the educational rights of young children eligible for special education.
6. We will improve the quality of education and childcare by strengthening the expertise and capabilities of teachers.
  - ▶ Reorganize the training curriculum, support capacity building of in-service teachers, etc.
7. We will improve the treatment and working conditions of teachers so that they can focus on educating and caring for young children.
8. We will systematize supply and demand management and enhance the convenience of admission to ECEC institutions.
  - ▶ Establish a data-based regional supply and demand management plan, reducing the wait for admission, establishing an integrated information system, and providing a one-stop service
9. We will relieve you from worrying about the cost burden of using the ECEC agency.
  - ▶ Promote the gradual reduction of the burden on parents
10. We will guarantee diversity and autonomy in the operation of institutions within the integrated model, as well as the right of parents to choose their preferred institution.
  - ▶ Secure diversity in institutional operations and expand care support tailored to regional characteristics.

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4. In early childhood education and care, the OECD considers qualitative differences due to the physical structure, human resources, environment, number of children, etc., of the institution as constituting structural quality, whereas educational activities to support the interaction between teachers and children and social-emotional-cognitive development are considered process quality.