KICCE POLICY
BRIEF

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Designing Korea's Integrated Quality Assessment System for ECEC: Lessons from International Experience

I. Background

- Korea is merging its kindergarten and childcare systems into a single ECEC system. Before the two become one, a prior question must be answered: in a unified system, what counts as good quality, and how should it be measured? How Korea answers this will decide whether integration genuinely improves what children experience, or only rearranges which ministry is in charge.
- Today the two systems are assessed in different ways, and both are already changing, in the same direction.
  - Kindergarten evaluation, managed by the metropolitan and provincial offices of education, has previously relied on document-based self-assessment. Reform efforts now emphasize consulting-based monitoring and process-oriented reviews to strengthen the link between evaluation and pedagogical improvement (Early Childhood Education Act, 2004).
  - Childcare center evaluation has been centrally coordinated and is currently transitioning from a rating-based national evaluation system toward a consulting-centered support model, with structured improvement guidance for participating institutions (Ministry of Education & Korea Childcare Promotion Institute, 2025).
- Both tracks thus stand at a turning point, converging on a shared path: away from grading, toward support. The hard part is making the two connect — ensuring that what an evaluation finds actually changes what happens in the classroom, rather than sitting in a report. International experience shows that this connection, more than the strictness of inspection, is what separates evaluation systems that work from those that do not. Integration is Korea's chance to build that connection in from the start.
- To find out how, this brief compares how ECEC quality is assessed across 15 countries, groups them into three governance types, draws out the design principles that make evaluation lead to real improvement, and applies them to the system Korea is now building.

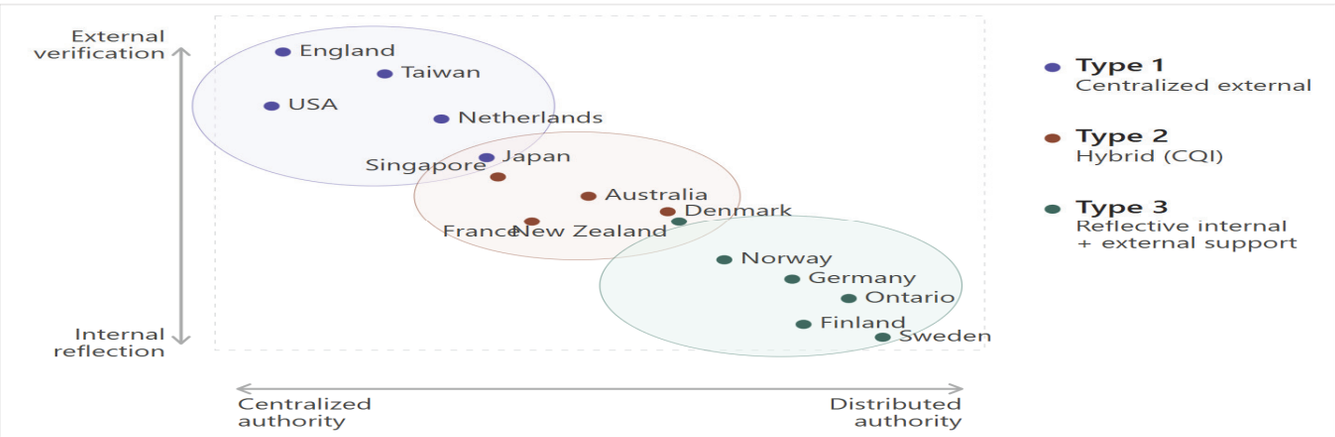
Note: This brief synthesizes national and international sources, including OECD Starting Strong reports (OECD, 2015; 2021; 2022) and country agency documents cited throughout. Country categorizations represent dominant institutional features at the time of analysis; many systems are actively evolving across categories.

This paper is based on selected findings from the KICCE research report Directions and Future Tasks for Integrating the Quality Assessment System of Early Childhood Education and Care (2025), by C. Park, S. Jung, and D. Jung. The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Korea Institute of Child Care and Education (KICCE).

II. Three Types of ECEC Quality Assessment Systems

- Drawing on OECD reference reports and country case documentation, this analysis classifies international systems into three governance types based on two dimensions: the locus of evaluation authority (centralized vs. distributed) and dominant evaluation logic (external verification vs. internal reflection). Each type embodies a distinct institutional logic regarding what quality is and what evidence supports quality claims.
- The typology captures dominant features rather than fixed states. Many systems are in transition: England has replaced single-word grades with report-card reporting (Ofsted, 2024; 2025), the Netherlands integrates process-quality observation into supervisory practice (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2022), and New Zealand's review office has redefined its role from inspection toward improvement facilitation (ERO, 2020; 2025). The classification is therefore best read as a descriptive lens for design comparison, not a static ranking.

[Figure 1] Typological positioning of ECEC quality assessment systems across 15 countries



Note: The vertical axis represents the dominant evaluation logic (external verification through inspection and rating vs. internal reflection through documentation and dialogue); the horizontal axis represents the locus of evaluation authority (centralized national bodies vs. distributed local-institutional governance). Country positions reflect dominant orientation; many systems span boundaries and are in transition. Korea's two tracks currently sit near the Type 1 quadrant (centralized, verification-oriented); the reform direction analyzed here points toward Type 2 (hybrid). Source: Authors' analysis based on OECD (2021; 2025b) and the country sources cited in this section.

Type 1: Centralized External Evaluation.

- In Type 1, national supervisory bodies inspect institutions against standardized criteria, backed by legal authority. Its strength is setting a clear minimum-quality floor that every institution must meet, with the power to enforce it. Its structural risk is that when evaluation works mainly through rating and public disclosure — with little connection to improvement support afterward — institutions tend to orient toward passing the inspection rather than genuinely improving quality.
  - England (Ofsted) illustrates both the reach and the limits of this approach. The 2019 Education Inspection Framework widened the focus toward process quality — curriculum intent and implementation (Ofsted, 2019) — yet the four-grade single-word system (Outstanding/Good/Requires Improvement/Inadequate) became associated with stigmatizing labeling and risk-averse behavior (Castro-Kemp & Kemp, 2025; Fitzsimons & Smith, 2025). Following the 2024 Big Listen, England replaced the overall single-word grade with report cards scoring multiple areas on a five-point scale from November 2025, and moved early-years inspection to a four-year cycle (Ofsted, 2024a; 2025). Observers caution that spreading grades across more areas, without stronger links to support, may raise workload rather than ease high-stakes pressure. The implication for Korea is direct: changing how results are disclosed, without linking evaluation to genuine support, does not resolve the underlying problem.

- The Netherlands maintains regulatory oversight under the Childcare Act (Wet Kinderopvang, 2005) while incorporating process-quality observation into supervisory practice. Inspections invite institutions to articulate and reflect on their pedagogical practice, although the broader context remains one of legal compliance (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2022).
- The United States operates a data-driven approach through state-level QRIS (Quality Rating and Improvement System) frameworks and CLASS observation scoring (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008). Empirical studies find that programs incorporating process-quality observation show stronger associations with children's outcomes and school readiness than those relying primarily on structural indicators (Schmitt et al., 2023; Elicker et al., 2022). Strong financial incentives may, however, orient institutions toward score management, and standardized observation instruments may not fully capture culturally diverse interaction patterns (Markowitz, Bassok, & Player, 2020).
- Japan combines national standards with institution-level adaptation, in a system administered across several ministries. Kindergartens follow MEXT's Course of Study (MEXT, 2017), while childcare centers undergo third-party evaluation under Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare guidelines (MHLW, 2004; 2014), and certified centers follow joint guidelines (Cabinet Office, MEXT, & MHLW, 2017). The third-party evaluation model — self-assessment reviewed by an accredited external body — is paired with public disclosure and is intended to balance assurance with institutional autonomy.
- Taiwan demonstrates that strong legal mandates and periodic external evaluations can maintain quality floors in a predominantly private-sector market (Early Childhood Education and Care Act, 2012; Regulations on Kindergarten Evaluation, 2012), though regulatory strength alone is unlikely to elevate process and relational quality without post-evaluation support pathways (Leung, 2014).

Type 2: Hybrid (External Evaluation + Self-Assessment)

- Type 2 combines the two logics: external evaluation for accountability and institutional self-assessment for improvement, joined in a repeating cycle of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI). The critical design point is that a self-assessment portfolio works as a genuine improvement tool only when it is built to spark improvement dialogue — not when it becomes one more compliance document.
  - Australia (NQS/QIP) has developed one of the most fully realized hybrid architectures internationally. Every ECEC service maintains a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) documenting self-assessment against the National Quality Standard, improvement goals, and progress; external assessors evaluate both the quality of practice and the institution's improvement process (ACECQA, 2018; 2023a; 2023b). Recent analysis notes ongoing efforts to keep this system focused on improvement rather than documentation (Staton et al., 2025).
  - Singapore (SPARK 2.0) pairs institutional self-appraisal with external validation by the Early Childhood Development Agency, organized around five quality standards — leadership, staff, partnerships, quality of the preschool experience, and holistic development — with an emphasis on reflective practice and provider ownership of improvement (ECDA, 2020; 2025a; 2025b).
  - Denmark has institutionalized cycles of internal evaluation, regional dialogue, improvement agreements, and monitoring, anchored in a strengthened pedagogical curriculum, with local governments providing on-site support on a standing basis (Ministry of Children & Education, 2021; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2025a). Denmark sits within the hybrid type because its regional improvement agreements function as binding accountability instruments, distinguishing it from Type 3 systems where external dialogue is primarily supportive.
  - France has moved toward integrating school self-evaluation with supportive external review at the école maternelle level, treating evaluation and pedagogical development as connected processes (MENJS, 2021; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2025b).

Type 3: Reflective Internal Evaluation with External Support

- In Type 3, evaluation is treated mainly as a process of learning and reflection rather than judgment. Its central insight is that when quality is understood as relational, evaluation shifts toward dialogue and shared sense-making. The teachers' own team-based reflection is the core mechanism, while external evaluation plays a supporting role — meta-feedback that strengthens the quality of internal evaluation. Several Type 3 systems also retain external review; the typology reflects where the emphasis falls, not the absence of external evaluation.
  - Finland (FINEEC) provides a supportive platform for observation-based documentation and reflective practice, with quality guidelines and indicators that connect evaluation, professional development, and policy feedback so that findings inform training and adjustment. Quality is framed as relational and co-constructive learning (FINEEC, 2018; 2020; 2024).
  - Sweden anchors quality in pedagogical documentation (pedagogisk dokumentation) — observation records, photographs, video, children's work samples, teacher annotations — as the primary evidence base, with teacher-led team reflection as the core quality-management mechanism and results feeding internal feedback rather than external ranking (Skolverket, 2018; 2019; 2020).
  - Norway and Germany combine internal evaluation with external professional consulting and regional dialogue in a dual-cycle model. Local authorities act as facilitators, and national bodies provide frameworks while delegating implementation, creating co-responsibility that maintains coherence alongside contextual variation (Udir, 2017; 2025; BMFSFJ, 2022; 2024).
  - Canada (Ontario) uses the How Does Learning Happen? framework, organized around Belonging, Well-being, Engagement, and Expression. Its documentation approach links observation to interpretation and action, building evidence chains rather than assigning a single rating (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014).
  - New Zealand pairs Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education (New Zealand), 2017) with the Education Review Office's Evaluation for Improvement framework. Over the past decade, ERO has redefined its stance from judgment toward improvement facilitation, with reviews designed to build internal evaluation capacity, documented through culturally responsive artifacts and with equity-focused attention to Māori, Pacific, and lower-income communities (ERO, 2019; 2020; 2025).

III. Five Common Design Principles

- Despite divergent governance structures, the most effective systems converge on five interconnected principles. These are not a parallel checklist but a unified design logic — each principle reinforces the others and loses force in isolation (authors' analysis based on OECD, 2021; 2025; Park et al., 2025).

Principle 1. Process Quality-Centered, Observation-Based Indicators.

- Moving beyond structural compliance to capture interactions, play, and teacher professionalism through observation and narrative documentation.
- Research consistently shows that process-quality dimensions — particularly the quality of teacher–child interaction — are more strongly associated with children's developmental outcomes than structural indicators alone (Slot, 2018; OECD, 2021). Because process quality is harder to standardize, it calls for observation-based evidence rather than document-based verification.

Principle 2. Institutionalized CQI Cycles (Evaluation → Support → Feedback → Re-evaluation).

- Embedding continuous quality improvement into legislation, budgets, and organizational capacity so that evaluation results inform improvement support.

— CQI cycles function when structurally coupled with support mechanisms. When evaluation findings connect to coaching, consulting, professional development, and re-evaluation, the system generates sustained improvement. Australia's mandatory QIP, Singapore's SPARK validation, and Denmark's improvement agreements illustrate this institutional coupling (ACECQA, 2023a; ECDA, 2025b; Ministry of Children & Education (Denmark), 2021).

Principle 3. Narrative-Based Disclosure with Concurrent Support Linkage.

— Complementing rating-based information with explanatory narratives that present strengths, improvement priorities, and support pathways together.

— Accountability is sustained — and arguably strengthened — when disclosure presents improvement trajectories alongside categorical signals, giving the public information they can actually interpret and act on. England's shift from single-word grades to narrative report cards reflects this direction (Ofsted, 2025).

Principle 4. Three-Layer Governance Alignment (Central–Local–Institutional).

— Aligning responsibility lines and data flows across governance levels, with each layer's task made explicit. Central government (Ministry-level integration body) defines the quality philosophy, core standards, data ethics, and evaluator competency standards. Local governments and education offices manage coaching, consulting, tracking, and learning-community facilitation. Institutions lead internal evaluation, team reflection, and improvement routines.

— Governance alignment is, in practice, a data-flow problem. When evaluation data is fragmented across levels, institutions face duplicate reporting and inconsistent evaluative signals.

Principle 5. Embedded Values of Inclusion and Equity.

— Ensuring that equity functions as a structural lens across all evaluation criteria rather than a supplementary agenda.

— Support packages — language and cultural mediators, leadership cohorts, environmental adjustments — are linked to evaluation outcomes based on institutional risk and need profiles. Equity is embedded in indicator design, evaluator training, disclosure formats, and post-evaluation support allocation, not addressed only through separate programs (OECD, 2023; 2025a).

[Table 1] Cross-National Comparison by Governance Type

Analysis Axis	Type 1. Centralized External	Type 2. Hybrid	Type 3. Reflective Internal
Quality definition	Compliance with legal standards; externally verified	CQI-integrated balance of accountability and process quality	Relational; co-constructed through dialogue and documentation
Evidence logic	Document review and external observation, leading to a rating	Core indicators with portfolios; observation- and case-based evidence	Learning stories, pedagogical documentation, culturally responsive artifacts
Evaluator role	Inspector / auditor	Coach-inspector hybrid	Coach / facilitator / learning partner
Coupling mechanism	Disclosure → improvement (link often weak)	QIP → coaching and budget → re-evaluation	Internal reflection → team dialogue → improvement agreement and tracking
Structural risk	Defensive formalism; score management; labeling effects	Portfolio bureaucratization; gaps in support infrastructure	Formalism of autonomy; accountability gaps; capacity inequality

Source: Park, Jung, & Jung (2025), based on OECD (2015; 2021; 2022) and the country agency sources cited in Section II. CQI = Continuous Quality Improvement; QIP = Quality Improvement Plan.

IV. Policy Suggestions for Korea's Integrated Quality Assessment System

• For Korea, the central design challenge is to build a system in which accountability and autonomy reinforce rather than undercut each other, extending the consulting-based reforms already underway in both the kindergarten and childcare tracks. International evidence points to one workable direction: keep supervision and quality evaluation as distinct functions, yet connect them through shared data infrastructure. The six recommendations below translate that direction into design choices for Korea's unified system.

Recommendation 1. Adopt a Hybrid CQI Model as the Foundational Architecture

— Reference Australia's NQS/QIP model as the primary design template, and adapt it for Korea's institutional context (ACECQA, 2018; 2023a).

— Establish common core indicators across five domains: health and safety; play and interaction quality; teaching competency and leadership; operational accountability; and family and community engagement. Require each institution to keep a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) limited to four working components — observational evidence, improvement hypotheses, next actions, and support needs. This adapts Australia's fuller QIP template, kept deliberately lean to avoid the paperwork-heavy pattern noted in its rollout (Staton et al., 2025).[1]

— Link each QIP directly to coaching allocation and budget support, so that what an evaluation finds translates into concrete help. For Korea, this is the pivotal design choice: it is what turns a merged evaluation system from a reporting exercise into an engine for actual improvement.

Recommendation 2. Redefine the Evaluator Role from Inspector to Coach

— Building on Singapore's SPARK and New Zealand's ERO models, evaluator competency should be redefined from procedural knowledge to professional facilitation capacity (ECDA, 2025b; ERO, 2020). Because both systems developed this facilitative capacity gradually, Korea can phase in coach-evaluators over time rather than requiring them all at once — a task shared between central government and local offices.

— Certification criteria: observation reliability, qualitative feedback skills, cultural responsiveness, inclusion adjustment competency, and leadership coaching. Mandatory re-certification with case-based continuing education should support evaluator skill maintenance and alignment with evolving quality concepts.

— When evaluators are trained and deployed as coaches, the evaluation visit itself becomes an occasion for professional growth, not only a check on accountability. Because Korea's two tracks are already shifting toward consulting, a shared coach-evaluator corps is a natural next step — and one that can be phased in region by region.

Recommendation 3. Functionally Separate Supervision and Quality Evaluation.

— When supervisory (risk/compliance) and quality improvement functions are loaded onto the same evaluation event, institutions tend to orient toward compliance. The two functions operate in different evaluative languages: supervision speaks to risk and regulation, and quality evaluation speaks to observation, feedback, and improvement design.

— Supervision addresses minimum legal standards, with clear enforcement where they are not met. Quality evaluation works through observation, narrative feedback, and CQI cycles, paired with coaching and learning support. A single data hub connects the two, so the same institutional evidence serves both purposes. For Korea, this separation is what keeps integration from collapsing everything into one compliance check — the outcome most likely to erode the reform's original intent.

1. This four-component design adapts Australia's NQS/QIP template (ACECQA, 2023), simplified for the Korean context. The original also includes fields such as service philosophy, identified priorities, and timelines; the simplification keeps documentation lean to avoid the "QIP-as-paperwork" pattern seen in Australia's early rollout.

Recommendation 4. Strengthen Narrative-Based Disclosure with Support Integration

— Evaluation results are best published as a narrative that presents an institution's strengths, improvement priorities, and available support pathways together. Disclosing only a category or grade can produce negative labeling and a cycle in which institutions scramble to recover their rating without changing actual practice between evaluations.

— Narrative disclosure keeps results publicly accountable while giving institutions something they can act on. For Korean parents and the public, a clear narrative account of a setting's strengths and next steps is far more meaningful than a single letter grade.

Recommendation 5. Align Three-Layer Governance with Unified Data Architecture

— The success criterion for integration should be defined not only by organizational unification but also by the degree of automatic coupling between data flows and support systems.

— Central government: shared quality philosophy, core standards, evaluator certification, and data ethics. Local education offices and metropolitan units: coaching, dialogic feedback, learning community facilitation, and tracking. Institutions: internal evaluation, team reflection, and improvement routines.

— A shared classification system lets the same institutional evidence flow to both supervisory and quality-evaluation functions without duplicate paperwork. For Korea, defining this common data architecture early — before the two systems merge operationally — will determine whether integration reduces the reporting burden on the ground or simply doubles it.

Recommendation 6. Embed Equity as Structural Design

— Equity support should be designed as an automatic entitlement linked to evaluation outcomes, not as a discretionary supplementary program. Denmark links risk-profile diagnostics to standing budget lines, so that institutions identified as serving vulnerable populations receive coaching teams, mediators, and environmental-adjustment funding as a routine post-evaluation response (Ministry of Children & Education, (Denmark), 2021). New Zealand's ERO conducts equity-focused reviews for Māori, Pacific, and lower-income communities as a standard component of the evaluation cycle (ERO, 2025).

— The design implication is that equity funding should be pre-budgeted and released automatically on the basis of evaluation findings, rather than left to separate competitive applications. Equity then runs through the whole system — what counts as quality evidence in diverse settings, how evaluators are trained, and how support is allocated afterward (OECD, 2023; 2025a). For Korea, embedding equity this way is how integration can narrow, rather than widen, the gap between well-resourced and under-resourced settings.

[Table 2] Suggested Phased Roadmap

Phase	Timeline	Key Actions	Reference Models
Phase 1: Foundation	2026–2027	Unified quality philosophy codified in legislation; common core indicators developed; joint inspection pilot; data hub architecture designed	Japan (core + optional indicators); Netherlands (process-quality observation in supervision)
Phase 2: Integration	2027–2029	Integrated evaluation framework deployed in pilot regions; coach-evaluator certification launched; QIP introduced; narrative disclosure expanded; CQI cycle embedded in regulations and budgets	Australia (NQS/QIP); Singapore (SPARK 2.0); Netherlands (process-quality observation in supervision)
Phase 3: Maturation	2029–2031	National rollout; reflective evaluation culture supported through teacher-led professional learning communities (PLCs); equity-targeted support extended; national learning portal operational	Finland (FINEEC); New Zealand (ERO/Te Whāriki); Canada (How Does Learning Happen?)

Source: Park, Jung, & Jung (2025). Reference models draw on the country sources cited in Sections II–IV.

V. Conclusion

- International evidence converges on a single observation: the most effective quality assessment systems treat evaluation as infrastructure for learning and trust, as much as a tool for accountability. What sets them apart is not the strictness or frequency of external oversight, but whether evaluation is structurally linked to improvement support and professional growth.
- Where evaluation is treated as a periodic compliance event isolated from ongoing support, it often breeds defensive practices and evaluation fatigue, regardless of whether the system is centralized or decentralized. In contrast, where evaluation outcomes are integrated into processes such as coaching, consulting, and subsequent re-evaluation, they foster sustained improvement and genuine professional engagement.
- For Korea, integration is a rare and time-bound opportunity. Because both tracks are already moving toward consulting-based support, the task is not to start over but to lock in that convergence — a system in which supervision addresses risk while quality evaluation speaks the language of observation, feedback, and improvement, the two joined through a single data hub so that practitioners record their work once and that record serves accountability, improvement, and professional learning at the same time. The moment of integration is when this choice gets made. The evaluation system Korea designs now will define what quality means for young children in the unified system for years to come — and that, more than the merger of institutions, is the true measure of whether the reform succeeds.

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