

## MENTOR MENTEE PROGRAM FOR PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH IN KOREAN YOUTH

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### INTRODUCTION:

Hye-Min, a 16-year-old girl, wakes up at 6:30 a.m. to go to school by 8 a.m., where she takes 9 classes until she is dismissed at 4 p.m.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after eating dinner, she hops onto a bus to go to *hagwon* (cram school) where she takes additional lessons from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. Without a break, she returns to school for *yaja* (enforced evening self-study), until she returns home past 11 p.m. At home, she continues to study until 2 a.m., just to wake up in 4 hours to head to school. Hye-Min is not the only student in South Korea who studies to this extent. From grades 1 to 12, students in South Korea spend an average of 6.4 additional years attending *hagwon* outside of normal school.<sup>2</sup> Among them, only 10% cite the pleasure of studying as a motive for taking additional classes. Yet, many will sacrifice their mental health, and more, for an acceptance letter from a prestigious university in Seoul. We wish to mitigate the factors that have led South Korea to become one of the worst countries for adolescent mental health.

### BACKGROUND RESEARCH:

Globally, South Korean high school students rank in the top five for their performance in reading, mathematics, and science.<sup>3</sup> However, these academic achievements come at the cost of the students' well-being. South Korea has consistently ranked as one of the top two countries for suicide rates over 10 years.<sup>4</sup> According to a study conducted by the National Youth Policy Institute in 2017, among students from grades 4 to 12, 29.1% reported having suicidal ideation within the past year.<sup>5</sup> Among them, 40.1% said their reason stems from academic pressure from both their parents and peers. According to PISA, life satisfaction among 15-year-old students in South Korea is 6.4/10, significantly under the OECD average of 7.3/10.<sup>6</sup> Per the perception that life satisfaction increases with the hours spent studying, students continue to dedicate more hours to their education to increase their chance of achieving their future goals.

In fact, the problem of cultural obsession over education was not publicly addressed until recently. In November 2018, the TV show *SKY Castle* highlighted how South Koreans destroy each others' lives as long as their loved ones could get into one of the three most prestigious universities: Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University. The TV show yielded a nationwide viewership rating of 25% and captured the attention of many people due to its accurate depiction of the pressure the South Korean education system exerts on students.<sup>7</sup> After the show ended, people started to address how 'surface-level' the TV show is in comparison to real-life. Students from *Daechi-dong*, an affluent neighborhood in Seoul densely packed with *hagwon*, started to publicly confess what evil or unhealthy habits one would do to get into these universities.<sup>8</sup>

### PROJECT PROPOSAL:

Our project's main objective is to establish a mentor-mentee program between college students and nearby school districts to reduce the suicide and depression rates among South Koreans between grades 1 to 12. We will model our program after a successful mentoring program at Colby College called Colby Cares About Kids (CCAK)—a 20-year-old program with 15% of the current Colby student population actively participating in it.<sup>9</sup> Mentors first participate in a basic training session to better understand how to communicate with youth. After the training, students undergo an interview process to match with a mentee with similar personalities and interests. Mentors and mentees will be required to meet at least once a week to engage in a variety of activities—some pairs enjoy playing at recess while others choose to play board games.

<sup>1</sup> Chakrabarti, Reeta. "South Korea's Schools: Long Days, High Results." BBC News. BBC, December 2, 2013. <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-25187993>.

<sup>2</sup> PISA 2018 RESULTS. OECD Publishing, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "기타자살통계." Korea Suicide Prevention Center. Accessed November 17, 2020. <https://spckorea-stat.or.kr/etc02.do>.

<sup>6</sup> PISA 2018 RESULTS.

<sup>7</sup> "TOP 20 LIST FOR TV PROGRAMS." Nielsen Korea. The Nielsen Company, n.d. Accessed November 17, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> KBS 다큐 [KBS Documentary], "미국의 하버드생들이 대치동학원가에서 놀란 이유는? + 한국 고3들과 수학 대결! [공부하는 인간]," January 28, 2020, video, 11:25, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ntHnStApzd8>.

<sup>9</sup> "Overview." Colby Cares About Kids. Colby College. Accessed November 17, 2020. <https://www.colby.edu/caresaboutkids/>.

In general, we will choose the mentees based on the recommendations from both parents and teachers. The relationships students have with their parents and teachers in South Korea contrasts with Western culture, so it may be difficult for them to directly communicate with each other about mental health. However, having a college mentor who recently went through these struggles will establish a different type of relationship that promotes open conversations.

#### PREPARATION:

In addition to our fluency in Korean, our idea to adapt an ongoing program to a foreign nation is aided by our experience as student leaders. Serving as leaders of Student Health on Campus, CCAK, Asian Student Association, Sexual Violence Prevention Programming, and First-Year Orientation Committee has prepared us with the organizational and communication skills necessary to lead acts of civic engagement in South Korea. Also, because of our personal experience in being raised by first-generation Asian immigrant parents, we both sympathize and understand the unique dynamic that exists between parents and children in regards to college admissions and higher education. Additionally, we have obtained letters of support from Yonsei Red Cross (YRC) at Yonsei University<sup>10</sup> and Youngsuk Yoon<sup>11</sup> regarding our plan. With their help, we aim to initially establish 100 mentor-mentee pairs.

#### TIMELINE & PLAN OF ACTION:

##### Part I – CCAK Consulting (April 2 – June 16)

During this time, we will consult the leaders of CCAK to create a document describing how to advertise the program to college students, interview potential mentors, design initial and continual training sessions, and match mentors and mentees. While the document serves as a manual to execute the program in South Korea, it will also help us develop ways to adapt the program to meet the needs of South Korean youth. Throughout this time, we will be in contact with the members of YRC via KakaoTalk, as well as recruit student-led clubs at other universities that may be interested in collaborating with us.

##### Part II – Program Introduction & Development (June 17 – June 30)

Once in South Korea, we will visit Yonsei University to discuss how YRC can help initiate the program. We will be in contact with Youngsuk who will compile a list of elementary, middle, and high schools that will be interested in participating in the program. We will also visit the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education to consult legal issues involved in connecting these respective institutions.

##### Part III – (July 1 – July 31)

We will advertise the program through student-led clubs at universities and teachers at schools to recruit potential mentors and mentees. The process will involve an online application that aims to understand one's characteristics through a series of questions.<sup>12</sup> We plan to develop one-on-one relationships between mentors and mentees with similar interests and backgrounds.

##### Part IV – Initial Training of Mentors (August 1 – August 16)

We will visit the interested schools to train the mentors about the expectations for the program, as well as additional topics, such as diversity, equity, and inclusion. We will consult Lexie Mucci, the Director of the Pugh Center, and Kate McLaughlin, the Associate Director of Student Access and Disability Services, about the topics that may be valuable to the training.<sup>13</sup>

##### Part V – Program Execution (August 17 – August 31)

As the new school year begins for students in South Korea, we will execute the program at various schools either in person or online.

#### SUSTAINABILITY & REFLECTION

We plan to allow YRC, as well as other student-led organizations, to carry on the program in the future. To evaluate the success of the program throughout the years, we will distribute online surveys to all participants at the beginning and end of every school year. We will measure the effectiveness of the program by observing the level of commitment from all participants and the progress of mentees' mental health over time. Finally, we believe that the implementation of our organization at Yonsei University, with the help of Youngsuk, will ultimately initiate changes within the South Korean educational system.

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<sup>10</sup> Yonsei Red Cross is a student-led volunteer club at Yonsei University.

<sup>11</sup> Youngsuk has been teaching elementary school children for ten years at various school districts in South Korea.

<sup>12</sup> Students may also send video applications.

<sup>13</sup> This required training session may be held over Zoom.