# A young North Korean woman reveals the harsh indoctrination and struggle in her country’s education system



A young woman who escaped North Korea has provided a rare and detailed account of the harsh realities faced by children in the country’s education system, revealing a regime that blends intense ideological indoctrination with brutal physical labour and financial burdens on families.

Bella Seo, who fled the dictatorship as a teenager and now resides in Seoul, South Korea, described how North Korean students’ education is overwhelmingly focused on their current leader, Kim Jong Un. According to Ms Seo, children study “Greatness Education” about the ruling Kim family three times daily, with subjects dedicated to the “childhood and revolutionary history” of Kim Jong Un, his father Kim Jong Il, and grandfather Kim Il Sung. She explained, “Even if a student excels in Korean, English, maths, history, science, PE, or art, their overall evaluation depends on their performance in these ideological subjects.”

The curriculum portrays Kim Jong Un as a gifted child who “rode a yacht, did target practice, and liked to read,” and includes lessons in “revolutionary” music and singing propaganda songs. Starting the school day typically involves cleaning the leader’s portrait and singing songs honouring loyalty to North Korea.

Alongside ideological indoctrination, students endure physical punishment described by Ms Seo as daily beatings “to the point that it seemed normal.” After classroom hours, children are forced to perform several hours of “extremely strenuous” manual labour, such as levelling rocky schoolyards with sand, often carrying heavy loads weighing up to 25 kilograms for four hours every evening. Ms Seo recalled that “by the time she got home she passed out from exhaustion.”

Financially, the education system imposes additional strain. Students are expected to pay for “youth projects,” including improvements such as new playground flooring. School supplies, teachers’ birthdays, family events, and weddings also require monetary contributions—class leaders often bearing the highest costs. Ms Seo said that many families, living on meagre state salaries sometimes insufficient to purchase basic necessities, were forced to forego food in order to meet these demands. “It was a severe burden for families surviving on daily earnings; some parents had to skip meals to afford these school expenses,” she told The Mirror. In her northern hometown of Hyesan, monthly wages were “barely enough to buy a bottle of alcohol.” Students unable to pay faced exclusion by peers and punishments from teachers.

The harsh environment extended to gender dynamics, with girls assigned classroom cleaning duties and reportedly receiving harsher punishments. Ms Seo recounted an incident where a friend was “grabbed by the hair, slapped, and thrown against the teacher’s desk” for making noise while cleaning. Although the teacher later apologised, the matter was not treated seriously within the school. Students were then required to admit their failings during Saturday self-criticism sessions.

The ideological education also included hostile views of foreign countries. Children were taught that America is “an eternal enemy we cannot coexist with” and that South Korea was “poor and starving.” Authorities increased the emphasis on Kim Jong Un’s personal history recently, with a 2020 directive from Kim’s sister, Kim Yo Jong, significantly expanding the time spent on the ruling family’s history—from approximately 30 minutes to potentially half the school day.

Concerns have been raised by a source in North Hamgyong Province, near the Chinese border, who spoke to South Korea’s Daily NK newspaper. The source observed that the increasing focus on the current leader’s background is leaving less time for basic skills such as learning the alphabet. “The kids are almost at the point of becoming elementary school students,” the source said. “Parents ask teachers to focus on studying the alphabet, but the increase in time spent on the leaders leaves less time for alphabet study, so parents will be unhappy.”

Photographic evidence from previous visits to North Korean schools shows murals glorifying missiles, warplanes, and graphic violence against US troops, while students participate in highly choreographed performances with military imagery. Ray Cunningham, an American who has visited several North Korean schools, described how “the younger school children are the ones that are given more of this indoctrination” and that “there are lots of little stories that are so apocryphal they’re crazy but you see them in every school.”

Ms Seo and her family managed to escape North Korea via a hazardous crossing into China, and subsequently travelled clandestinely through Laos and Thailand before arriving in South Korea. Their testimony provides an inside look at the educational experiences shaping North Korea’s youth, marked by indoctrination, hardship, and state control.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://pscore.org/life-north-korea/forced-to-hate/> - This URL supports the claim about intense ideological indoctrination in North Korea's education system through daily idolization sessions focused on the ruling Kim family.
2. <https://kids.britannica.com/students/article/North-Korea/489860> - This article provides background information on North Korea's education system, highlighting that education is free and compulsory, which corroborates the context of the education system described in the article.
3. <https://factsanddetails.com/korea/North_Korea/Education_Health_Transportation_Infrastructure_2/entry-7418.html> - This URL details the structure of North Korea's education system, including the division into different schooling levels, supporting the overall framework of education in the country.
4. <https://ryanmurdock.com/2009/11/inside_the_north_korean_school/> - This source provides insight into primary school education in North Korea, highlighting subjects like Communist morality and revolutionary history, which aligns with the ideological education described in the article.
5. <https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/contents_view.htm?lang=e&board_seq=435485> - This article explains the evolution of North Korea's compulsory education system, supporting the broader context of how education is structured and implemented in the country.
6. <https://www.foxnews.com/world/north-korea-schools-propaganda-military-indoctrination> - Although not directly linked here, similar reports highlight the indoctrination and military themes in North Korean schools, which aligns with the portrayal of propaganda and ideological education in the provided article.
7. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14655007/Inside-North-Koreas-brutal-schools.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data