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2028 College Entrance System Reform Initiative to transform the current CSAT

The Ministry of Education unveiled a draft of the new 2028 college entrance exam system reform initiative, which will be first initiated to current eighth-grade school students in Korea. On October 10, the Ministry of Education (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education Lee Ju-Ho) reported the 2028 College Entrance Exam System Reform Initiative (hereinafter referred to as the “2028 College Entrance Exam Reform Initiative”) to the National Education Commission (Chairman Lee Bae-Young) and requested their reviews.

The 2028 College Entrance Exam Reform Initiative prioritizes the core values of fairness and reliability in the college admission system aiming to refine 1) the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) and 2) the high school grading system to align with the high school credit system.

The Ministry of Education identified issues with the current CSAT system, as students choose certain subjects for higher scores, rather than choosing subjects that are relevant to their career paths. That is, depending on the subject taken for the CSAT, this strategic subject selection leads to disparities in final scores, making students select CSAT subjects strategically regardless of their aptitude or career goals.

- ※ Earth sciences I (33.7%) vs Physics II (0.6%), Ethics and Life (32.9%) vs Economics (1.1%) (Based on 2023 CSAT)
- ※ According to high school teachers, the current CSAT system prompts students to strategically choose subjects based on their goal of obtaining high CSAT scores, rather than considering their aptitude and career aspirations (College Entrance Reform Expert Forum, February 2023).

In addition, due to the wider range of subjects for eighth-grade students under the full implementation of the high school credit system, additional challenges are anticipated if the high school credit system is streamlined with the current CSAT subject structure.

The current high school grading system, in particular, the common subjects for ninth-grade students on a relative 9-tier scale and elective subjects for tenth- and eleventh-grade students are on a comprehensive 5-tier achievement evaluation (i.e., absolute evaluation) in line with a plan announced in February 2021. As a result, the current grading system is likely to pose obstacles in 2025.

Indeed, this grading system could lead to grade inflation for tenth- and eleventh-grade students, intensifying competition for college admissions. Since it is difficult to raise academic standing received in the ninth-grade under the absolute evaluation structure in the second- and third-year high school years, this may result in increased dropout rates and higher spending on private education.

Criticisms surrounds the existing 9-tier system, where only the top 4% of students receive a grade level of 1, deviating from the global trend of adopting a 5-tier system focusing on essay-type evaluations. In addition, this system disadvantages small schools in remote areas due to the rapid declining student populations.

To address these issues, the Ministry of Education has proposed the following reforms:

① Integrated and Converged Subjects for CSAT

Starting from 2028, the subjects of Korean, Mathematics, Social Studies/Science Inquiry, and Vocational Education will be administered in an integrated manner without specific subject choices. The purpose is to

assess all students uniformly, eliminating advantages or disadvantages based on subject choices. The plan aims to resolve the fundamental issue of inequity and unfairness due to subject selections.

Indeed, the object is to break down the barriers between subjects and promote students' converged learning. The evaluation will shift away from rote memorization of subject knowledge, towards enhancing logical reasoning skills and competencies focusing on core contents of social studies and science.

The Ministry of Education has proposed an additional review plan, which includes a new subject called "Advanced Mathematics." This will assess students in advanced subjects such as Calculus II and Geometry through absolute evaluations. The proposal aligns with the goal of nurturing talents in cutting-edge fields.

It is important to note that, apart from the transition to an integrated and converged subject system for CSAT, the evaluation methods, score reporting methods, and integration with Educational Broadcasting System (EBS) will remain the same. The Ministry of Education plans to finalize the details after gathering opinions from the National Education Commission and other relevant authorities.

2 Eradication of Special Interest Cartels

For a fairer, more equitable, and transparent CSAT, measures will be initiated across all areas of CSAT creation and management to prevent involvement of special interest cartels.

The qualifications criteria for CSAT committee members will be revised to exclude individuals engaged in profit-oriented private education. The final selection of the CSAT committee will be made through random drawing, ensuring that individuals with vested interests, such as academic and regional affiliation, are excluded in the entire process. In addition, cooperation with the National Tax Service will verify tax-related information, reinforcing the system against false declarations. Any profit-oriented private education related to the CSAT will be strictly

prohibited for the next five years after the release of exam questions.

③ Advancement of High School Internal Grading to a 5-tier System

Starting from 2025, the high school grading system will transition to a 5-tier system, preventing confusion and inequity resulting from different grading methods during the high school years. The 9-tier system, which has been addressed as one of the leading causes to the intensified competition, will be transformed into an advanced 5-tier system.

Starting from 2025, a 5-tier absolute evaluation (A-E) will be implemented for all high school grades and subjects based on students' academic achievement levels. At the same time, relative evaluation grade tiers (1-5 tiers) will be employed as a safeguard against grade inflation and to ensure the stable implementation of the absolute evaluation.

④ Strengthening Teachers' Evaluation Competency

The Ministry of Education will take proactive steps to empower teachers to be equipped with professional evaluation skills. A significant shift is underway in the high school grading system, moving away from the reliance on knowledge-based multiple-choice exams. Instead, the emphasis is on fostering essential skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. This transformation involves the use of essay and descriptive questions to assess students, encouraging a deeper understanding of subjects. The academic achievement tiers for each subject will be standardized to enhance the accuracy and consistency of evaluations, ensuring a more reliable evaluation process at the school level.

In conjunction with the efforts to ensure fairness in the CSAT and eliminate unfair advantages, the proposed reform introduces a unified system for high school assessments. This new system adopts a consistent 5-tier evaluation method. By establishing this uniform approach, the college admission process will be more stable and predictable for students and parents. Moreover, within schools, this evaluation system will promote collaboration among students and provide teachers with the opportunity to explore innovative teaching methods, thereby enriching the

overall learning experience. Colleges will also benefit from this reform; they will be able to select students through a fairer process based on reliable CSAT scores, ensuring a transparent admission process.

The Ministry of Education is committed to finalizing the 2028 University Admissions System Reform Initiative through discussions and feedback, led by the National Education Commission. Recognizing the significant changes in evaluations, ample time will be given to educational institutions and high schools for preparation. Furthermore, a nation-wide public hearing will be scheduled, providing citizens with an opportunity to participate and express their opinions on the proposal.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education Lee Ju-Ho underscored the importance of striking a balance between the realities of the current admission system and educational ideals. He stated, “Finding a balance is crucial. We are dedicated to listening to the voices of students, parents, high schools, and colleges. Through continuous efforts, we aim to create a better system founded on the principles of fairness and reliability.”

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