

Korean Heritage Language Schools in the United States

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Korean heritage language schools, first established in 1906, have over 100 years of history in the United States. Like other community-based language education, Korean heritage language education often takes place in local Korean communities, serving the more than one million Korean immigrants in the U.S. (Yu, Choe, & Han, 2002).

Current Status of Korean Heritage Language Schools

There are approximately 1,200 Korean heritage language schools in the United States, and the total student enrollment is about 60,000 (Lee & Shin, 2008). The number of schools may be higher, because many small schools are not officially registered in the database of the U.S. Korean Embassy.

Wiley (2001) claims that “although not widely recognized in the United States, a great deal of heritage language education takes place outside the formal school system, in afterschool and weekend programs” (p. 32). Most Korean heritage language schools are organized and operated by Korean Christian churches (Lee & Shin, 2008; Shin, 2005; Sohn, 2000). One of the reasons for this is that about 75% of Korean immigrants in the U.S. are affiliated with Korean immigrant churches (Min, 2000). Min (2000) states that “the Korean community seems to have far more ethnic language schools than any other Asian community mainly because of Korean immigrants’ high level of affiliation with Korean churches” (p. 325). Since Korean immigrants came to the U.S., Korean community churches have helped Korean American children maintain their heritage language and culture by providing educational programs (Min, 2000; Shin, 2005).



Two national organizations provide support for Korean heritage language schools in the U.S.: the [National Association for Korean Schools](#) (NAKS) and the [Korean School Association in America](#) (KSAA). NAKS, established in Washington, DC in 1981 as a non-profit organization, is composed of 14 councils nationwide, and is the umbrella organization for about 1,000 Korean heritage language schools. NAKS holds an annual national conference, publishes the *Journal of Korean American Education* and SAT II Korean textbooks, and develops curricula for Korean heritage schools. It also supervises SAT II Korean trial examinations.

The goals of NAKS are to develop Korean language, culture, and history education for Korean language schools; increase pride through promoting positive perceptions of and understanding about Korea; give suggestions on educational policy and seek help for Korean language education; and nurture positive identity and pride in second-generation Koreans.

KSAA was established in 1982. It is the umbrella organization for 182 Korean community schools, which have 1,839 teachers and 14,435 students in the western United States including Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, and southern California. KSAA develops Korean language teaching curricula and holds teacher training sessions, Korean storytelling contests, and Korean writing and drawing contests. It also publishes an educational periodical, *Han-Eol*, as well as SAT II Korean textbooks. Every year KSAA supervises SAT II Korean mock examinations.

Challenges and Recommendations



Korean heritage language schools often face internal challenges. In general, most schools are small and provide a limited selection of courses (Shin, 2005). Other challenges include a lack of texts written especially for heritage learners of Korean, a shortage of age-appropriate texts for older beginners, a lack of adequate professional training for teachers, high teacher turnover, difficulty in hiring qualified and experienced teachers, and lack of creative and interesting lessons (Shin, 2005).

In addition, many Korean heritage language schools have financial difficulties. The schools depend heavily on student tuition and fundraising, and most of the income is used for teachers' salaries. As a result, there is not enough money to invest in teacher training or updating teaching materials. Most schools offer Korean language and culture instruction for only two or three hours a week; thus, limited instructional hours in Korean heritage language schools can also be a challenge. Inadequate facilities and a lack of parental support are also challenges.

Addressing these challenges requires cooperation among teachers, administrators, and parents. Ways to address them include the following:

- Teachers offer interesting and creative classes instead of tedious learning drills and rote memorization (Lee & Shin, 2008; Shin, 2005; You, 2005) and use innovative teaching materials such as multimedia (e.g., video clips, e-book folk tale stories, and "K-pop," or Korean popular songs).
- Students have access to interesting textbooks that have direct relevance to their lives (Lee & Shin, 2008). Teachers can take advantage of the diverse textbooks written by private companies (e.g., *E.nopi Korean*, *Gitan Hangeul*) as well as textbooks available from the Korean government.
- Programs seek qualified and experienced teachers. To facilitate this, more training and professional development opportunities might be made available to teachers (Lee & Shin, 2008; Shin, 2005; You, 2005).
- To decrease teacher turnover, administrators may need to offer more competitive compensation, calling upon parental support when necessary.

- In order to address heritage language schools' financial challenges, more funds might be raised from host churches or the Korean government. More parents might volunteer, thereby helping children think of going to Korean heritage language schools as a family event, thereby helping them feel safer.
- Parents and grandparents need information about the benefits of heritage language maintenance and the drawbacks of heritage language loss (Shin, 2005), which might motivate them to contribute to their children's heritage language development even when they are out of the classroom.

Conclusion

Despite ongoing challenges, Korean heritage language schools have been considerably well-established in the United States. To upgrade and expedite the movement, Korean educators, teachers, administrators, parents, and national/community organizations need to work together in harmony.

Search for [Korean heritage language programs](#) in the Alliance Heritage Language Program Database.

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