

〔論文〕

The Expansion of Elementary Education and Plans for the Compulsory Education System in Colonial Korea

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Abstract

This article investigates the expansion of elementary education and the establishment of a compulsory education system in colonial Korea under Japanese rule. Challenging previous scholarship that often depicted individual expansion schemes as fragmented, ad hoc responses to local demand, this article argues instead that these seemingly disparate initiatives formed integral and deliberate steps within a continuous, evolving trajectory toward compulsory education. The analysis focuses on key policy milestones pursued by the Government-General of Korea, including the “Three-Village, One-School Plan,” the “One-Village, One-School Plan,” the establishment of simplified schools, and the Second and Third Education Expansion Plans. Drawing on official documents, statistical yearbooks, and internal reports, the study demonstrates that a steady increase in school infrastructure reflected both administrative intent and rising popular demand, even though many colonial policies fell short in quality and equity. References to compulsory education first surfaced in the 1910s; by the late 1930s the concept had gathered considerable momentum. In 1943, the Government-General formally resolved to introduce compulsory education in 1946 with gender-specific enrollment targets. Japan’s defeat in 1945, however, brought colonial rule to an abrupt end, leaving the fully designed system unrealized—a “phantom policy” of modern empire. By recontextualizing these policies within a broader, long-term state-building project, this article significantly redefines our understanding of colonial educational governance.

Keywords: compulsory education, elementary school expansion, colonial Korea, phantom policy

1. Introduction

This article clarifies the conceptual evolution and practical steps that led to the introduction of a compulsory education system in colonial Korea. Between 1910 and 1945, while Korea was under Japanese colonial rule, compulsory education was never formally institutionalized, in contrast to its early adoption in the Japanese home islands. Nevertheless, the Government-General of Korea conducted several inquiries and deliberations on the establishment of such a system. In 1943, it officially announced the introduction of compulsory education scheduled for 1946. Thus, by the early 1940s, a series of educational reforms aimed at implementing compulsory education had begun to take shape. Yet these developments remain underexplored in existing scholarship. Despite this scholarly neglect, the present article addresses the lacuna by reexamining the movement toward the

institutionalization of compulsory education and, in doing so, offers a renewed perspective on the nature of elementary education in colonial Korea. Official publications such as *A Hundred-Year History of the Education System* (1972), compiled by the Japanese Ministry of Education, underscore the importance of compulsory education and the national school funding system established during the Meiji period, noting their central role in increasing enrollment and achieving “universal enrollment” in Japan. The subsequent volume, *A Hundred and Twenty-Year History of the Education System* (1992), also issued by the Ministry, outlines the evolution of school attendance regulations and the legal framework of educational policies since 1872. However, both texts fail to provide detailed analysis of attendance rates or the implementation of compulsory education in Japan’s former colonies or occupied territories. In contrast to these Ministry compilations, scholars of Korean educational history—such as Sano Michio (2003), Kim Buja (2005), and Furukawa Noriko (1995)—have examined these issues in greater depth, contributing significantly to our understanding of enrollment patterns in colonial Korea. While these studies have provided invaluable insights into the diverse facets of colonial education—ranging from the quantitative growth of schools to gender disparities and local responses—they have largely depicted the various expansion schemes as discrete, often ad hoc, responses driven primarily by local Korean demand or the immediate needs of colonial control. What remains underexplored is the consistent, long-term policy trajectory of the Government-General of Korea toward systematizing—and ultimately mandating—elementary education. This article addresses this critical gap. Contrary to the prevailing view of fragmented policy, this article argues that the Government-General meticulously planned and sequentially implemented a series of education expansion schemes—from the “Three-Village, One-School Plan” to the later Education Expansion Plans—as deliberate, cumulative steps toward the eventual introduction of a compulsory education system. This reinterpretation is made possible through an in-depth analysis of previously underutilized archival materials, including internal reports and detailed policy drafts from the Government-General, which reveal a continuity of administrative intent often obscured in aggregated statistical accounts or broader socio-cultural analyses.

Recent research by Neuhaus (2023) has highlighted the complex motivations behind the surge in educational demand among Koreans under Japanese colonial rule, characterizing it as “education fever” beyond simplistic frameworks of assimilation or national resistance. While Neuhaus’ analysis contributes significantly to understanding grassroots demand for education, his work does not explicitly address the administrative policy trajectory toward compulsory education. The current study complements Neuhaus’ findings by analyzing how official policies interacted with, and responded to, this rising educational demand from an institutional perspective.

As stated above, a compulsory education system was ultimately neither established nor implemented in colonial Korea. Yet, this historical outcome should not be interpreted as evidence of an absence of intent or initiative. On the contrary, a close reading of official documents reveals a discernible policy shift toward the institutionalization of compulsory education. By analyzing this shift,

this paper aims to redefine the nature of elementary education in colonial Korea through a new interpretive lens. This is the central concern of the study.

2. Sources and Methods

This article employs a documentary analysis approach, drawing primarily on official educational records produced during the period of Japanese colonial rule in Korea. The core sources include administrative documents concerning educational policies, school operations, and teacher deployment, supplemented by a variety of materials such as statistical reports, field surveys, legal texts, ordinances, and governmental notifications. These sources provide a comprehensive foundation for examining both the quantitative expansion and qualitative transformation of elementary education during the colonial period. Key reference materials utilized in this article include *The Korea Education Overview* (compiled by the Bureau of Education, Government-General of Korea), *The Korea Education Directory* (published by the Government-General), *The List of Schools in Korea* (compiled by the same Bureau), and the *25th Anniversary History of the Government-General of Korea*. In addition, contemporary articles written by Government-General officials and published in periodicals of the time are referenced to shed light on the intentions and ideological motivations underpinning policy formation. These diverse sources together enable a multilayered analysis of the evolution of educational policy, particularly in relation to the development of compulsory education.

This multilayered source base makes it possible to move beyond aggregate statistics and recover the administrative rationalities that shaped policy design—an approach rarely undertaken in existing scholarship.

3. Analysis

This section positions the four expansion measures enacted between 1919 and 1943 as incremental steps toward a comprehensive system of compulsory education. It examines how policy attention shifted at each stage from (i) the provision of physical infrastructure, to (ii) the quantitative expansion of enrollment, and finally to (iii) the imposition of legally enforceable attendance requirements.

3.1 Overview of Policies for the Expansion and Enhancement of Elementary Education in Colonial Korea

This section outlines the historical trajectory of elementary education policy in colonial Korea, with a focus on the Government-General's successive initiatives aimed at expanding and improving access to education for Korean children. The analysis traces the major educational plans that shaped elementary schooling, particularly those that targeted quantitative expansion and laid the groundwork for the later introduction of compulsory education. Highlighting each stage of expansion reveals how policymakers recalibrated their strategies in response to shifting political exigencies and rising local demand, thereby complicating prevailing narratives of linear imperial imposition.

3.1.1 Elementary School System and the "Three-Village, One-School Plan"

During the colonial period, elementary education in Korea was institutionally stratified along ethnic lines, with distinct systems for Japanese and Korean students. Between 1910 and 1937, schools for Japanese children were designated as *Shōgakkō* (elementary schools), while those for Korean children were referred to as *Futsūgakkō* (elementary schools for Koreans). These two types of schools differed not only in nomenclature but also in structure: *Futsūgakkō* offered a four-year curriculum, whereas *Shōgakkō* followed a six-year program. The divergence extended to educational goals, curricula, teaching materials, staffing, and pedagogical methods. This article focuses primarily on *Futsūgakkō*, which were established for the education of Korean children.

Beginning in the 1938 school year, both school systems were formally consolidated under the unified label *Shōgakkō*, and were subsequently renamed *Kokumin gakkō* (National Schools) in 1941. While this administrative reclassification obscured ethnic distinctions in official records, disparities in actual school composition, curriculum length, and teacher assignments persisted in practice.

From the earliest years of annexation, the Government-General of Korea prioritized the establishment and expansion of *Futsūgakkō*. Under the 1911 *Chōsen Education Ordinance*, these schools were defined as institutions intended to provide “basic national education to children, teach the Japanese language while promoting physical development, conduct moral instruction, cultivate the qualities required for imperial citizenship, and impart knowledge and skills for daily life” (Article 8). Katsuo Usami, who served as Director-General of the Internal Affairs Department from October 1, 1910, to August 19, 1919, underscored the political significance of elementary education in an address delivered to school principals in April 1912:

“Currently, the center of education is the public elementary school. The mission of the principals is to enrich the content of education, promote moral education in the local areas, and accomplish the political objectives of the Government-General’s Office. Public elementary schools are the most important institutions for the Government-General’s Office, and your duties are both heavy and significant.” (*Government-General of Korea, 1915, p. 26*)

As indicated by Usami, *Futsūgakkō* were regarded as the “center of education” for the Korean population and were therefore central to colonial policy: the school as a node where moral suasion, Japanese-language discipline, and village surveillance converged. In line with this view, expansion efforts were launched early in the colonial period. A milestone initiative in this regard was the December 27, 1918 policy memorandum that outlined the plan for expanding elementary schools for Koreans:

“In recent years, approximately 20 new public elementary schools for Koreans have been established annually across Korea, resulting in a ratio of one school per six villages. As institutions for national education, this figure is inadequate. Therefore, starting in fiscal year 1919, 50 schools will be established annually in each province, with the aim of achieving one school for every three villages within eight years.” (*Government-General of Korea, December 27, 1918*)

This expansion plan, later referred to as the “Three-Village, One-School Plan,” was originally set for 1919–1927 but was accelerated and met its numerical targets by fiscal year 1922. By 1928, a full decade after the policy’s inception, the number of Futsūgakkō had increased to 1,423 schools (Bureau of Education, Government-General of Korea, 1929, p. 121). This rapid increase in school numbers was facilitated by a combination of the Government-General’s shift to “cultural rule” following the March 1st Independence Movement of 1919 and the growing educational aspirations among the Korean populace. Prior to this, many Korean families preferred private Confucian-style study halls (*Shodō*) over colonial elementary schools. Yet, this attitude began to shift, with more families seeking access to Futsūgakkō. Despite this trend, the number of available schools remained insufficient to meet demand, resulting in fierce competition for admission in subsequent years. Furukawa (1995) analyzed the initial resistance to school enrollment in the 1910s and the factors contributing to its reversal, while Oh Seong-cheol (2000) explored the surge in applications following the March 1st Movement.

Despite the increase in the number of Futsūgakkō during the 1910s and 1920s, educational authorities continued to view the expansion of elementary education as an “urgent task.” In 1928, Lee Jin-ho, then Director-General of the Bureau of Education (December 1924–January 1929), wrote:

“I would like to prioritize the expansion of elementary education. In Korea, the system of compulsory education has not yet been implemented. It is unacceptable to leave many children without access to education simply because there is no compulsory education. In order to achieve true harmony between Japan and Korea, the Korean people must develop the qualities and awareness of being citizens of the Japanese Empire. The spread of elementary education is the most urgent task.” (*Lee Jin-ho, 1928, pp. 1–34*)

As Lee emphasized, the expansion of elementary education remained a pressing concern under Governor-General Hanzo Yamanashi (1927–1929), and efforts to increase the number of Futsūgakkō continued in earnest during this period.

In retrospect, the “Three-Village, One-School” plan served as the colonial administration’s first controlled experiment in rural school scaling, laying both the infrastructural and ideological foundations for more ambitious blueprints to come. This initial phase, while primarily focused on quantitative expansion, implicitly initiated a trajectory towards broader educational access, a prerequisite for any future compulsory education system. In short, the “Three-Village, One-School Plan” functioned as a pilot that tested the preconditions for later compulsory education.

3.1.2 The "One-Village, One-School Plan" and the Establishment of Simplified Schools

As the next stage, the Governor-General launched the “One-Village, One-School” (*Ichimen Ikkō Keikaku*) initiative, which sought to universalize the school network established in the preceding phase. Initiated in 1929, this eight-year initiative aimed to establish at least one elementary school in every village across Korea. The plan represented a quantitative leap from the previous “Three-Village, One-

School Plan" and sought to provide universal geographic access to schooling within the colonial framework. At the outset of the plan, the number of public Futsūgakkō stood at approximately 1,500 in May 1929. Over the following eight years, the number of schools steadily increased: 1,639 by May 1930, 1,774 in 1931, 1,891 in 1932, 2,015 in 1933, 2,128 in 1934, 2,269 in 1935, 2,411 in 1936, and 2,503 by 1937. More than 1,000 new schools were established during the course of the plan, and the original target of one school per village was reportedly achieved by 1936 (Government-General of Korea, 1937, pp. 63–66). Official records from the Ministry of Colonial Affairs provide further insight into the rationale and projected outcomes of the “One-Village, One-School Plan.” A 1933 report from the Local Affairs Division noted that, beginning in fiscal year 1929, the Government-General would establish approximately 136 schools annually until 1932, followed by slightly fewer schools in the subsequent years. Upon completion, the plan was projected to raise the elementary school enrollment rate by roughly 2.3 percentage points, from a baseline of 19.34%. A 1943 policy document, *Explanation of the Draft Temporary Educational System (Secret, Q&A)*, confirmed that the plan was completed in 1936 and credited it with raising the enrollment rate to over 27% (Government-General of Korea, 1943). Despite the increase in the number of Futsūgakkō, significant disparities in access and quality persisted. A 1935 policy document titled *Reference Materials on the Revisions to the Korean and Taiwanese Educational Decrees* noted that while the gross enrollment rate for Korean children had reached 27.4%, only 20.4% were receiving complete elementary education in public institutions. The remainder were often enrolled in “incomplete” institutions, such as traditional Confucian-style study halls (*Shodō*), which lacked standardized curricula and modern pedagogical methods. At that time, approximately 561,000 children were enrolled in Futsūgakkō or similar schools, while an additional 192,000 attended private or informal educational institutions.

In response to these persistent disparities, the Government-General of Korea introduced a new type of educational institution: the *simplified school* (*Kani Gakkō*), beginning in 1934. These schools aimed to extend basic literacy and civic instruction to children in remote and underserved rural areas. The creation of simplified schools was guided by earlier policy frameworks, including the “Simple National School Establishment Plan” (April 1928) and the “National School Establishment Plan” (June 1928), which had laid the foundation for rural education initiatives. These efforts were closely aligned with the broader Rural Development Movement launched in 1932. In a 1934 circular titled *Matters Concerning the Establishment of simplified schools*, the Government-General articulated the strategic goals of the simplified schools program:

“Given the current state of the spread of elementary education in Korea and the level of education among rural residents, establishing simplified schools to supplement the spread of ordinary education is of utmost importance. Transforming the traditional *Shodō* and making them affiliated with public elementary schools for Koreans is advisable.” (*Government-General Circular to Provincial Governors, 1934*)

This directive was accompanied by detailed *Guidelines for the Establishment of Simplified*

Schools, which outlined founding principles, operational models, instructional hours, curricular content, and tuition structures. Further elaboration was provided in a 1938 document submitted to the Privy Council, *Explanation Material on the Revision of the Korean Education Decree*, which clarified the aims and future administration of simplified schools. These institutions were designed to deliver basic moral and civic education, focusing on subjects such as Japanese language, Korean language, arithmetic, vocational training, music, and physical exercise. The emphasis was placed on practical instruction tailored to the needs of local communities.

From 1937 onward, policy efforts aimed to integrate and institutionalize simplified schools further. In principle, they were to be affiliated with Futsūgakkō, while independent private institutions were temporarily discouraged. By the end of May 1936, 579 simplified schools had been established throughout Korea, enrolling a total of 35,696 students. This represented a significant, albeit partial, attempt to bridge the gap in educational access between urban and rural populations.

The “One-Village, One-School” policy turned an experimental outreach model into standard practice, embedding the goal of universal elementary access in day-to-day administration. Although not yet explicitly a compulsory education policy, this push for universal geographic availability laid crucial groundwork by establishing the physical infrastructure and setting the administrative precedent for mass schooling, essential for future mandatory enrollment initiatives.

3.1.3 The Second Expansion Plan for Elementary Education in Korea

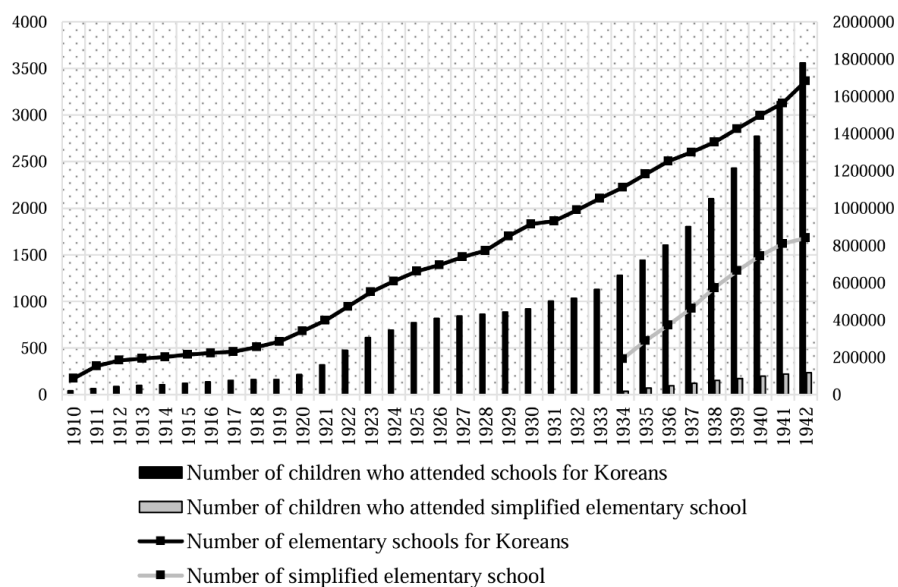
While the “One-Village, One-School” initiative successfully fulfilled its quantitative objectives in preparing for the implementation of compulsory education by aiming to raise actual enrollment levels, new challenges soon emerged. Notably, school attendance rates among school-age children remained low, and difficulties persisted in establishing schools in remote and underserved regions. In response to these issues, the Government-General of Korea launched the “Second Expansion Plan for Elementary Education in Korea,” beginning in fiscal year 1937. This initiative marked a significant turning point, aiming not only to increase the number of schools but also to raise actual enrollment rates—thereby aligning educational infrastructure with student access. A key document outlining the background and objectives of this new policy was the 1935 report entitled *On the Establishment of the Second Expansion Plan for Elementary Education in Korea*. At the time of its formulation, Kiyonori Imaida, then Director of the Government-General’s Department of Administration (serving from June 1931 to August 1936), made the following observation:

“Whereas previous expansion plans focused solely on the increase in the number of schools, this new plan sets specific goals for both the expansion of schools and the improvement of enrollment rates. The scale of this plan is also larger than any undertaken in the past 25 years.” (*Imaida, 1935*)

In contrast to earlier efforts such as the “Three-Village, One-School” and “One-Village, One-School” plans—which prioritized the sheer number of institutions—this new strategy incorporated explicit targets for increasing school attendance. According to the same 1935 document, the plan

aimed to ensure that all current applicants could be accommodated, with the ultimate goal of enrolling over 60% of school-age children, amounting to approximately 1.68 million students. Significantly, the plan was described as a preparatory step toward the eventual introduction of a compulsory education system. The plan's implementation spanned a ten-year period starting in 1937. It envisioned the annual enrollment of approximately 70,000 students, resulting in a cumulative total of 763,000 students attending public elementary schools. To meet these targets, the plan proposed the addition of new classes to around 1,000 existing Futsūgakkō, with each school offering a four-year program comprising two classes. In regions where a single school was deemed insufficient to meet demand, the establishment of new schools was authorized. Moreover, the plan included the annual creation of 220 new simplified schools (Kani Gakkō), amounting to 2,200 institutions over the ten-year span. These schools were expected to accommodate approximately 15,000 students each year, with a cumulative enrollment target of 154,000 students. The integration of simplified schools into the broader framework of elementary education further underscored the plan's dual focus on institutional proliferation and enrollment accessibility. The financial blueprint for the plan projected total expenditures of 49,490,000 yen. This figure comprised 16,775,000 yen in recurring expenses and 32,715,000 yen in special, non-recurring costs. Recurring expenses were to be funded through a combination of national government subsidies and local taxation. The special expenditures were to be shared with local communities, who were expected to bear a portion of the financial burden. It was estimated that approximately 3.3 million yen in special expenses would be incurred annually across Korea. To avoid overburdening local budgets during economically challenging periods, the Government-General proposed a pre-accumulation strategy, whereby surplus funds would be collected and stored during periods of prosperity.

[Figure 1] Number of Elementary Schools for Koreans and Student Enrollment in Colonial Korea



* Created by the author based on various editions of the *Statistical Annual Report of the Government-General of Korea*.

In sum, the Second Expansion Plan represented a significant shift in the Government-General's educational policy, as it linked institutional expansion with quantitative enrollment targets and explicitly framed these measures as preparatory steps toward compulsory education. This alignment of infrastructure, financial planning, and policy intent positioned the plan as a transitional phase between prior expansion efforts and the envisioned introduction of universal schooling. Crucially, by setting explicit enrollment targets and integrating simplified schools, it began to operationalize the mechanisms necessary for mass compulsory attendance, moving beyond mere access provision to active student mobilization. Furthermore, as will be demonstrated in the next section, the Third Expansion Plan broke new ground by introducing gender-specific enrollment targets, thereby specifying, for the first time, who was to be enrolled—and by when—under a compulsory education regime. Taken together, these measures mark a pivot from expanding access to enforcing attendance, setting the stage for concrete preparations for a legally binding system of compulsory education.

3.2 Preparation for Implementing the Compulsory Education System and the Third Expansion Plan

This section examines how the abstract ideal of compulsory education converged into its final stage—a concrete institutional blueprint accompanied by a scheduled implementation year, 1946. The documents examined below are particularly revealing because they capture the moment when compulsory education shifted from a rhetorical horizon to a concrete administrative blueprint. This period marks a decisive turning point where the conceptual aspiration for universal education began to translate into specific, actionable plans, signaling a fundamental reorientation from a focus on infrastructure provision to the actual enforcement of enrollment. As previously discussed, the Second Expansion Plan for Elementary Education in Korea was conceived as a preparatory initiative for the eventual implementation of a compulsory education system. Several historical documents from this period reveal that the notion of mandatory education for Korean children was under active and sustained consideration. One of the earliest and most telling sources is a 1933 report titled *Current Status of General Education in Overseas Territories*, compiled by the Ministry of Colonial Affairs during the ongoing execution of the “One-Village, One-School Plan,” and prior to the formal announcement of the second expansion initiative. The report includes a section entitled “Feasibility of Implementing Compulsory education in Korea and Taiwan,” which reads as follows:

“Recently, the desire for learning in overseas territories has remarkably increased, particularly in Korea and Taiwan, where school attendance rates have been rising annually. Looking at the school attendance rates of the Japanese population, Korea's attendance rate stood at 99.79% in 1930, and Taiwan's was 99.00% by the end of March 1932. Therefore, there is little difference compared to mainland Japan, even without the implementation of compulsory education. However, the school attendance rates for local children are much lower: 19.34% in Korea (1930) and 34.17% in Taiwan (as of March 1932). Although there is a growing trend toward the demand for compulsory

education, it is impossible to introduce it immediately, considering the level of education, the status of school expansion, and the financial situation.” (*Local Affairs Division, Ministry of Colonial Affairs, 1933*)

This statement underscores the disparity in school attendance between Japanese and colonized populations. Although interest in compulsory education was growing, the report clearly stated that its immediate implementation was not feasible, citing educational, infrastructural, and fiscal limitations. Moreover, the document highlights the gap between Korea and Taiwan: Korean school attendance lagged behind Taiwan’s by approximately 15 percentage points. A 1935 follow-up document reproduced this same statement, though it updated the statistics to show a modest improvement—Korea’s attendance rate had risen to 23.30%, and Taiwan’s to 37.02%. Although the gap persisted, the data suggest that Korea was catching up at a slightly faster rate. A discernible shift in policy discourse can be identified after the initiation of the Second Expansion Plan. A confidential February 1938 report titled *Explanatory Material on the Revision of the Korean Education Ordinance at the Privy Council* noted that Korean school attendance had reached approximately 30%. While the report maintained that implementing compulsory education at that stage would be “premature,” it emphasized that such a system would be adopted once certain conditions were fulfilled. In November 1939, Nobuo Yagi, then Director of the Education Affairs Division of the Government-General, authored *Educational System Reform and the Issue of Compulsory education*, in which he articulated explicit support for the future introduction of compulsory education. He positioned this goal within the broader objectives of the Second Expansion Plan. This perspective is examined in greater detail by Lin Qizhen (2015), who traces the ideological and administrative evolution of compulsory education policy in colonial contexts.

A turning point came in 1943, when the Internal Affairs Bureau of the Japanese Ministry of Home Affairs compiled a policy reference document titled *Question-and-Answer Compilation Regarding the Revision of Imperial Decree No. 258 of Shōwa 16, and Other Imperial Decrees*. In response to the question, “What are the main differences between the national elementary schools in Korea, Taiwan, and those in Japan?” the document offered the following:

“While compulsory elementary education was implemented in Taiwan starting from the 1943 fiscal year, it has been decided that compulsory education in Korea will be implemented beginning in the 1946 fiscal year, and preparations are currently underway.”

The document further clarified the implementation schedule and enrollment targets:

“In Korea, compulsory education will be implemented starting in the 1946 fiscal year. However, for the time being, the duration of compulsory education will be set at six years. In the first year of implementation, the target school attendance rate will be 90% for boys and 50% for girls.”

The February 1943 issue of *Bunkyō no Chōsen (Education in Korea)*, published by the Chōsen Education Association, included several articles related to the implementation of the compulsory education system. These included “Plan for the Implementation of the compulsory education system” (by the Bureau of Education, Government-General of Korea) and “The Implementation of Compulsory

education and the Responsibilities of Educators” (by Hideshi Ichimura, Inspector at the Government-General’s Office). In the April 1943 issue, another article titled “Regarding Preparations for the Implementation of the compulsory education system,” authored by the Director of the Bureau of Education, was published. These articles underscore that the newly determined policy to implement compulsory education in Korea had become a prominent and widely anticipated topic at the time. The extensive discussion of these topics in contemporary publications reflects the growing focus on the impending implementation of compulsory education and underscores the significant roles played by education officials and educators in preparing for this transition. The 1943 report by the Bureau of Education, Government-General of Korea, titled *Survey on School Education in Korea (Reference Materials)*, outlined projections based on the Third Elementary Education Expansion Plan. According to the report, the school enrollment rate in 1942 stood at 54%, with 1,758,463 of the 3,228,263 school-age children attending school. By 1946, when the compulsory education system was scheduled for implementation, the projected enrollment rate was expected to reach 70%, with 2,391,549 out of 3,408,513 children enrolled. The report also provided gender-specific projections: boys’ enrollment was expected to increase from 75% in 1942 to 90% in 1943, and girls’ enrollment from 33% to 50% over the same period. Notably, these gender-specific targets were explicitly highlighted in the Bureau of Education’s report. Watanabe Manabu of the Bureau’s Educational Affairs Division commented on the significance of this development in his study, noting that earlier expansion plans had not differentiated enrollment goals by gender, as there had been no perceived need to do so. (Watanabe, June 1944, pp. 39–40).

Thus, the introduction of compulsory education in colonial Korea, accompanied by detailed enrollment targets, was scheduled to begin in 1946. However, with Japan’s defeat in World War II and the subsequent end of colonial rule in 1945, the proposed system was never implemented. As a result, it remained a “phantom” policy—planned in detail but ultimately unrealized.

The four stages—“Three-Village, One-School,” “One-Village, One-School,” the Second Expansion Plan, and the Third Expansion Plan—can therefore be understood as a continuous deepening along three axes—material infrastructure, enrollment, and compulsion—that culminated in the policy threshold represented by the projected 1946 compulsory education system. By analyzing the four expansion policies as interconnected steps, this chapter has traced the trajectory by which the idea of compulsory education in colonial Korea evolved from a latent administrative intention into a concrete institutional design.

4. Conclusion

By meticulously re-examining the Government-General of Korea’s policy documents and internal reports, our analysis fundamentally reinterprets what earlier scholarship often viewed as fragmented, ad hoc expansion schemes. Instead, this article has demonstrated how these initiatives—from the “Three-Village, One-School Plan” to the Second and Third Education Expansion Plans—

constituted a deliberate, incrementally designed, and uninterrupted trajectory toward the eventual realization of compulsory education. This continuity of administrative intent, often overlooked in studies focusing solely on quantitative outcomes or local demands, represents a key contribution of this research.

Despite remaining unrealized, this ‘phantom’ compulsory-education scheme of modern empire stitches together the ostensibly disparate elementary-education policies pursued in Korea from the 1910s onward, illuminating their strategic character and the state’s agenda of governance through education. Put differently, ‘compulsory education’ provides the single organizing axis that links these measures and makes their strategic alignment visible.

Moving forward, future research should delve deeper into how indigenous "education fever," as explored by Neuhaus (2023), intersected with the administrative policy outlined here, examining the dynamic interplay between colonial initiatives and local agency. Furthermore, it is imperative to investigate the multifaceted responses, negotiations, and resistances of Korean educators, students, and communities to the expanding colonial education system. By integrating these perspectives with the administrative history presented in this article, scholars can achieve a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of education in colonial Korea, bridging the gap between top-down policy and bottom-up societal dynamics.

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