

## A Rigorous Education Begins After School

Written by The Record

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By *LISA REIN*

$$a^2 = (a + b)(a - b) + b^2$$

Pointing at the formula he's written on the blackboard, Young Kwon turns to his class.

"To find the square of any number, there is a formula. Don't just memorize."

This demanding approach, Kwon says later, is how the four high school students in his class at the Elite Academy will beat the competition at the American Invitational Math Tournament in February. Kwon founded the after-school school for Korean students.

The sample problems in this day's class are not easy: logarithms, trigonometry, advanced geometry. But Kwon explains that his 11<sup>th</sup>- and 12<sup>th</sup>-graders will not study anything this complex in their math classes in Fort Lee or Tenafly or Leonia.

Even if they did, the American teaching method is not rigorous enough, he says. And that is precisely why his school – which teaches math, English, and social studies to Koreans –exists.

"The tendency for the American youngster is, they don't study much," Kwon says. Sent to this country as a computer analyst by a Korean electronics firm 10 years ago, he quit in 1986 to open his tutoring school in Flushing, Queens and in one of the corporate buildings on Route 9W in Englewood Cliffs. Sixty students attend the classes at Englewood Cliffs. Fifteen are non-Asians, the rest Korean.

"A smart seventh-grader will learn algebra here, but in regular school he will only be learning pre-algebra," Kwon says. "My impression is that the public school is not enough."

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On Saturday mornings last summer, Jacqueline Choi, an 11-year-old from Leonia, studied fractions at the Elite Academy. Her sixth-grade classmates at Leonia Middle School are starting fractions only now. Jacqueline says that having a leg up is fine by her. “Sometimes I’m careless at math, so the extra studying is good for me.”

Like Jacqueline, the vast majority of Korean children in North Jersey attend supplementary academic institutes—some as early as fourth grade. Some go to Queens; a handful of the schools besides Elite offer daily bus service from high schools in Bergen County.

The after-school schools, where instruction is always in English, are different from the dozens of church-based weekend schools where Korean parents send their children to study their homeland’s culture and language.

The goal, for \$12 an hour and up, is always the same: to score in the top percentile on SATs and achievement tests, to be finalists in extracurricular math leagues. All this helps secure a spot in a top American college.

To this end, Elite’s fall brochure lists the college placements of recent alumnae: four to MIT, three to Columbia, three to Cornell. One student was admitted to Yale, MIT, and Princeton. The names of eight students who scored a perfect 800 on the math portion of the SAT are prominently placed.

Last year, the mother of an Elite student stopped in to report that her son, a senior at Dwight Englewood, a private school in Englewood, had scored 800 on the math achievement test.

“It did make me feel good,” Kwon says. “If you ask why Korean parents want this kind of tutoring for their kids, you must understand that [Asian] people are preparing for the future, and that’s education.”

But what is wrong with preparing for the college boards at Stanley Kaplan or the Princeton

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Review, popular SAT preparation courses?

Kwon answers bluntly: “The average student who goes to those schools is lower than my students.

“We handle problems where the student has to think. If they start that way, the SAT will be no problem.”

The schools have their critics, both American and Korean, who point to a wedge they drive between the two cultures.

“I hate to see the kids so hung up on studying,” says Hyaе Kyung Jo, who heads the Korean bilingual program at Fort Lee High. “These kids are kept extremely busy. In America, they are more well-rounded. The Korean concept is different—do what’s expected, rather than what you want.”