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CASE STUDY · MARLUC SYNOPSIS

South Korea AI digital textbooks

IMPLEMENTED 2023–2025 · EDUCATION · SOUTH KOREA · BAND F · REVERSED

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A national programme put AI digital textbooks in schools in March 2025. Lawmakers reclassified them as optional educational materials in August 2025, and an audit later found low use.

ABOUT THIS SYNOPSIS

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Facts and figures are as reported by the sources listed below, which may be incomplete, self-reported or out of date. Check the original source before relying on any figure.

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NOTICE WORDING LAST UPDATED 16 NOVEMBER 2026

AT A GLANCE

What went wrong: Business or programme failure.

AI and automation used: AI-based digital textbooks; how the AI worked is not described in the sources opened.

Implemented: 2023–2025. Grade: band F, Failure, Reversed.

Headline result, as reported: National Assembly downgraded AI digital textbooks to educational materials in August 2025; state audit found average use of 8.1% in schools that chose them, December 2025

1 · The case

The facts, as reported by the 5 sources listed at the end. Where a source is silent, the field says "Not reported".

Organisation

Ministry of Education, South Korea. South Korea's Ministry of Education, which led a national programme to put AI digital textbooks (AIDT) into elementary, middle and high schools. About a dozen publishers were approved to develop the textbooks, per Rest of World. Canvas block: 3. Customers and proposition. Also 8. Governance and risk, 6. Data and technology.

Business challenge

The challenge. Per Rest of World, the programme was meant to personalise learning, reduce inequality and lighten teachers' workload, and authorities said it would help prevent dropouts.

Who implemented it

In-house (In-house): Ministry of Education, South Korea: Led the programme and set the policy and approval process..
Textbook publishers (including Dong-A Publishing, Kyomunsa and YBM) (Software vendor): Developed the AI digital textbooks under the Ministry's plan..
About a dozen publishers were approved, per Rest of World; the AI model or technology providers behind the textbooks are not reported in the sources opened.

Technology (SEAM pillar E)

SEAM types: not established; the sources do not say how the system works. Deployment: Not reported. Vendors and products: Dong-A Publishing, Kyomunsa, YBM.

Where it was built in: Digital textbooks for school subjects used by students on devices in class, developed by publishers approved by the Ministry. The AI functions are not described in the sources opened.

What changed

Before: the programme treated AI digital textbooks as official textbooks. After: in August 2025 the National Assembly limited textbooks to books and e-books and classified AI learning software as educational material, so schools decide whether to use it. The Ministry halted the review of further titles that had been planned for 2026. A state audit in December 2025 reported average use of 8.1% in schools that chose the books. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

Cost of failure

Government spending above 1.2 trillion won ($850 million), including equipment and teacher training, and about 800 billion won invested by publishers, per Rest of World. About 10 publishers filed a 200 billion won damages claim in June 2026, per Seoul Economic Daily; the outcome is not reported.

What it saved

Not reported [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

Governance and control

The Board of Audit and Inspection issued six cautions to the Ministry and asked the minister to pilot any new type of textbook first. The Ministry's decision to roll out in full was taken after seven internal meetings and no outside consultation, per the audit as reported by Kyunghyang Shinmun. The 2025 law requires school principals to follow criteria agreed with the Personal Information Protection Commission when choosing AI materials, per The Fact.

S2 · Accountable owner · Evidenced
The Board of Audit and Inspection issued six cautions to the Ministry and asked the minister to pilot new types of textbook in future. [4]

A1 · Safe use · Missing (independent source shows it was absent)
The audit found no consultation with students, parents or teachers and no pilot before full introduction was decided. [4]

A2 · Human in the loop · Not reported
Not reported.

A3 · Monitoring and assurance · Evidenced
The National Assembly asked for the audit in February 2025, and the Board of Audit and Inspection measured use in schools that chose the books. [4]

A4 · Vendor AI · Missing (independent source shows it was absent)
The audit found the Ministry issued the approval notice without a technical specification document, so publishers developed without a unified standard. [4]

A5 · Agent controls · Not reported
Not reported.

A6 · Standards and regulation · Outside scrutiny (a regulator, court, auditor or similar body acted)
The 2025 law makes principals follow criteria agreed with the Personal Information Protection Commission and a school operation committee review when choosing AI materials. [3]

What worked, what did not, what is unproven

WORKED

– An elementary teacher told Rest of World the textbooks were convenient and helped save time and support struggling students.

– A spokesperson for the Korean Federation of Teachers' Associations said its survey found high effect in schools that had adopted the textbooks, per The Fact. Neither statement is an independent evaluation.

DID NOT

– The audit, as reported by Kyunghyang Shinmun, found the share of students who never logged in averaged 60% in schools that chose the books, rising to 72.8% in high school grade 1 English, and average use was 8.1%.

– Students, teachers and parents complained of factual inaccuracies, data privacy risks, more screen time and heavier workloads, per Rest of World.

– Reported adoption fell from 37% in the first semester to 19% in the second, per Rest of World.

– A lawmaker told the then minister that AI textbooks took 12, 3 and 3 months across development, review and preparation, against 18, 9 and 6 months for print, per Rest of World.

UNPROVEN

– Whether the textbooks improved learning: no outcome evaluation appears in the sources opened.

– Whether the privacy concerns were borne out: the developers say no student personal data was stored, per Rest of World; no independent finding appears in the sources opened.

– The outcome of the publishers' damages claim: Not reported.

Timeline

2023 The Ministry of Education announces its AI Digital Textbook Promotion Plan [5]

Nov 2024 A teachers' union and civic groups sue the then education minister over the mandatory

Dec 2024 The opposition-controlled National Assembly passes an amendment defining AI digital textbooks as educational materials; the minister says he will ask parliament to reconsider [1]

Jan 2025 The government shifts from mandatory adoption to a one-year voluntary trial [2]

Mar 2025 AI digital textbooks launch for maths, English and computer science at the start of the school year [2]

Aug 2025 The National Assembly passes the amendment on 4 August; the Ministry says the books are now educational materials, effective immediately, and halts the review of further titles planned for 2026 [3]

Sept 2025 Second semester begins; reported adoption is 19%, down from 37% in the first semester [2]

Dec 2025 The Board of Audit and Inspection reports on 17 December that the Ministry pursued the programme without public consultation or a pilot, and that average use was 8.1% [4]

Jun 2026 About 10 publishers file a 200 billion won damages claim against the state [5]

2 · Grade and SEAM assessment

MarLuc's opinion, made on the evidence above. How cases are graded: marluc.co.uk/case-studies/how-we-rate

Level of change and impact

Claimed: Not applicable. Grade: F, Failure. Proof: Reversed. Level of change: Not graded.

No level assessed: band F, a national deployment reversed by legislation within months, with low use and large public and private spending.

Graded F. A flagship national deployment was reversed within months by legislation, an audit found little use, and the public and publisher cost is reported in the hundreds of billions of won. No claim of transformation is made in the sources opened, so no claimed band is set.

The SEAM view and lessons learnt

The audit's central finding is about sequence: the programme went to full rollout without a pilot, consultation or technical standard, and use stayed low even where schools opted in. For any large organisation, a pilot with real users and a technical specification are cheaper than reversing a rollout. Rest of World lists a change of government among the causes of the reversal, so support from users and across parties is part of delivery.

1. Pilot with real users and measure use before a full rollout.
2. Consult the people who must use the tool, and publish the technical standard first.
3. Plan funding and legal status early, so a change of sponsor does not strand suppliers.

Evidence

Score 2 of 4. Independent but second-hand: a state audit and legislative votes, read through Korean and international press; the audit report itself was not opened. Limits: no learning outcome data; adoption figures differ between sources.

Evaluation method. Legislation and a state audit as reported by press: National Assembly

3 · Original sources

Read these in full. To challenge a fact or a grade, use the contact form at marluc.co.uk or the link on https://marluc.co.uk/case-studies/south-korea-ai-digital-textbooks

[1] Korea Times: Nat'l Assembly votes to downgrade AI-generated 'textbooks' to 'educational materials'
https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/amp/southkorea/society/20241226/national-assembly-votes-to-reclassify-ai-generated-textbooks-as-educational-materials

[2] Rest of World: South Korea’s AI textbooks fail after rushed rollout
https://restofworld.org/2025/south-korea-ai-textbook/

[3] The Fact (□□□): AI□□□ □ □□ □□ '□□□□'□...□□□ □□□ (Korean)
https://news.tf.co.kr/read/life/2230700.htm

[4] Kyunghyang Shinmun (□□□□): □□□ “AI □□□ □□□ □□, □□□□ □□□ □□ □□□ □□...□□ □□□ 8.1%□ □ □” (Korean)
https://www.khan.co.kr/article/202512171702001

[5] Seoul Economic Daily: AIDT Publishers File 200 Billion Won Suit Over Demotion to Teaching Material
https://en.sedaily.com/society/2026/06/26/textbook-publishers-sue-government-over-ai-textbook

Ministry of Education, South Korea website: https://english.moe.go.kr

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VERSION HISTORY

v1.1 15 November 2026 Method update: standards and regulation (A6) relabelled "outside scrutiny" because the evidence is a regulator, court, auditor or similar body acting, not the organisation's own compliance. technology type set to "not established" where the sources do not say how the system worked.
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