

What Happens When School Has to Pause?



Built from *The Interrupted Timeline* by Isaac Kim, Education Editor

Grades 4–8 · About 45 minutes · ★ everyone · ★★ older readers

Name _____

Date _____

1. Before You Read

★ Have you ever taken a long break from something, like a sport, a lesson, or school? What was it like to come back?

★ Does taking a break from school always mean falling behind? Why or why not?

2. The Short Version

Read this first. Older readers: read the full article too.

In South Korea, the law requires able-bodied men to do **military service** for about eighteen months, starting sometime in their twenties. Korean male students at international schools often ask each other one question: "Before or after?" They mean: should I serve before university, after it, or in the middle?

Most Korean university students take a **leave of absence** partway through their degree, often between second and third year. Korean universities are built for this. The forms exist, and coming back is routine.

American universities are different. Their leaves are designed for illness or money problems, not national service. A student who leaves can lose his housing guarantee, have scholarship trouble, and need to redo his student visa. The students Isaac interviewed said they built their own plan from emails to the school office, advice from older students, and phone calls to the consulate.

Isaac says the real difference is how each system thinks about time. Western schools expect students to move straight through, from age eighteen to twenty-two, and a gap needs explaining. Korean society expects a pause and does not treat it as a life going off track.

The students feel both ways. They dread losing eighteen months. But returning students said service gave them perspective. One said, "Everyone pays for adulthood. I just paid early, in one installment."

Isaac's conclusion: there is no wrong answer to "before or after," only a form nobody has printed yet.

3. Word Bank

Word	What it means
obligation	something you must do because a law, rule, or promise requires it
enlistment	joining the military
leave of absence	official permission to step away from school or work for a while and come back later
registrar	the school office that keeps track of students' classes and records
installment	one part of a payment; paying "in one installment" means paying all at once

★ Use **obligation** in a sentence of your own.

4. Check Your Understanding

★ 1. When Korean male students at international schools say "before or after," what are they talking about?

★ 2. About how long is the military service Korea requires?

☐ six months ☐ eighteen months ☐ five years

★ 3. When do most Korean university students do their service?

★ 4. Name two problems a Korean student at an American university can run into when he leaves to serve.

★★ 5. Isaac says the path these students follow was "worn smooth not by the institution but by the feet of everyone who walked it before." What does he mean? How did the students figure out what to do?

5. Isaac's Side by Side

Isaac compares school systems the way an archivist compares documents: filed side by side, with the details on the record. Fill in each column using the article. In the last column, file your own school's approach.

	Korean universities	American universities	Students living between both	My school
How it thinks about time				
What happens if a student must pause				
Who made the plan for the pause				
What a gap means to it				

★ Which is your school's calendar closest to?

○ an unbroken conveyor belt ○ a timeline that can pause ○ a mix

6. Think Deeper

★ A student back from service described his time away not as "lost time" but as getting things in a different order. He said, "I just paid early." What do you think he meant? Do you agree?

★★ Isaac says Western schools run on "an unbroken conveyor," while Korean society expects a pause. Why might a school treat a gap as a problem? What could change if a school treated a pause as normal?

7. Write Your Report

Write a short report answering this question: **Is a pause in a student's education lost time?**

- **My answer:**
- **Reason 1 (from the article):**
- **Reason 2 (from the article):**
- **One thing the other side would say:**
- **My conclusion:**

For Teachers and Parents: Answer Key

Word bank sentence: Answers vary; check that the student uses obligation to mean something a person must do because a law, rule, or promise requires it.

1. When to do Korea's required military service: before university, after it, after the degree, or in the middle.
2. Eighteen months.
3. Partway through their degree, by taking a leave of absence, most often between the second and third year.
4. Any two: leaves of absence are designed for illness or money problems, not national service; housing guarantees can run out; scholarship terms can become uncertain; the student visa must be ended and set up again.
5. The university did not create a plan for these students. Each student had to build his own, and the way became easier because so many students had done it before. They used emails to the registrar, advice passed down from older students, and phone calls to the consulate.

Side by side (sample answers): Korean universities: a timeline can pause without a life going off track; the student takes a leave of absence, the forms exist, and coming back is routine; the universities built the plan, and returning students are a normal sight; a gap is expected and normal. American universities: an unbroken conveyor from age eighteen to twenty-two, freshman to senior; leaves are designed for illness or money problems, housing guarantees can run out, scholarships can become uncertain, and the visa must be redone; the students made the plan themselves, not the university; a gap needs an explanation on the transcript and is viewed with suspicion. Students living between both: they carry two calendars at once; they must fit eighteen months of service into an education planned across two countries; they built their own path from registrar emails, older students' advice, and consulate calls, translating between calendars; a gap brings both dread (it lands in years they were taught matter most) and perspective (returning students see deadlines differently). My school: answers vary; check that the student describes what really happens at their school when a student must miss a long stretch.

Think deeper: Open answers. For the first, the student meant that everyone has to take on adult responsibilities at some point; he did a big part all at once, early, instead of spread out later. Strong answers say whether they agree and why, and may mention that returning students spoke about gaining perspective. For the second, strong answers explain that a school built around a straight four-year path sees any gap as something that needs an explanation, and describe what might change if a pause were treated as normal, such as forms and plans already being ready, as in Korean universities.

Report: Look for a clear answer, two reasons taken from the article (for example, the dread of losing eighteen months in important years, or the perspective returning students describe), a fair statement of the other side, and a conclusion that matches the answer.