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Tougher air pollution law bans outdoor classes

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Students from Midong Elementary School in Seodaemun-gu, Seoul, head to their classrooms wearing masks on March 26 as air pollution and fog hit South Korea hard. / Korea Times file

By Ko Dong-hwan

Seoul's tougher air pollution law bans schools from conducting outdoor classes whenever hazard levels seriously increase.

The revised law, announced Tuesday, affects the city's elementary, middle and high schools. Whenever PM2.5 (particulate matter with a diameter of 2.5 micrometers or less) records 76 micrograms per cubic meter for two hours or longer, the schools cannot have classes outside. The figure that previously triggered the restriction was 90 micrograms.

The revision also included that whenever PM10 records 180 micrograms per cubic meter for two hours or longer, the schools are advised to reduce normal

hours or cancel classes for the day.

The Seoul Metropolitan Government and the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education signed the revision after discussing the environmental problem and its effect on students.

Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon said at a press conference Monday that he had discussed the school closure initiative with education office Superintendent Cho Hee-yeon. But working parents, whose children have nowhere to go if their schools close, criticized the change.

Air pollution worsened across the city and the rest of the country last week, peaking on Sunday and Monday. In Seoul, the worst-hit in the country, the average PM2.5 concentration was 99 micrograms per cubic meter on Sunday, the worst since South Korean weather watchdogs started monitoring air pollutants in 2015. The city's level reached as high as 143 the following day.

Other parts of the country, including Gyeonggi Province, also recorded "bad" air quality during the days, a reference defined by the Korea Environment Corporation as within 51-100 micrograms per cubic meter.

The Ministry of Environment said Tuesday that stagnant air was the main cause of the pollution, because it prevented pollutants from drifting away. Instead, the situation worsened, with more particulate matter from in and outside the country.