Every morning on her way to school, Hwang Wol-geum, a first grader, rides the same yellow bus as three of her family members: One is a kindergartner, another a third grader, and the other a fifth grader.

Ms. Hwang is 70 — and her schoolmates are her grandchildren.

Illiterate all her life, she remembers hiding behind a tree and weeping as she saw her friends trot off to school six decades ago. While other village children learned to read and write, she stayed home, tending pigs, collecting firewood and looking after younger siblings. She later raised six children of her own, sending all of them to high school or college. Yet it always pained her that she couldn’t do what other mothers did.

“I couldn’t believe this was actually happening to me,” she said. “Carrying a school bag has always been my dream.”

Help came unexpectedly this year from the local school that was running out of school-age children and was desperate to fill its classrooms with students.

Like other rural schools, Daegu Elementary in Hwang’s district has seen its students dwindle. When Ms. Hwang’s youngest son, Chae Kyong-deok, 42, attended it in the 1980s, it had 90 students in each grade. Now, the school has only 22 students in total, including one student each in its fourth and fifth grade classes.

“This year, the worst calamity of all struck the district. “We went around villages looking for just one precious kid to enroll as a first grader,” said the principal Lee Ju-young. “There was none.”

So Mr. Lee and local residents, desperate to save the 96-year-old school, came up with an idea: How about enrolling older villagers who wanted to learn to read and write?

Ms. Hwang and seven other women, aged 56 to 80, stepped forward, with at least four others asking to be enrolled next year.

For younger people who want to stay in the area, the future of their town depended on keeping the school alive.

“Who would start a family here if there were no school?” asked Noh Soon-ah, 40, whose husband — one of Ms. Hwang’s sons — quit his job in an auto parts factory in a big city and resettled his family here five years ago to succeed his parents’ farming business. “Children are what brings laughter and vitality to a town.”

The local education office warmed to the idea, and Ms. Hwang started attending classes last month.

Like many first graders on their first day, Ms. Hwang cried. But these were tears of joy.

“In the first grade classroom, Ms. Hwang and two other grandmothers toiled laboriously, determined to learn to read and write.

Pencil in hand, they chanted the 14 consonants and 10 vowels of the Korean alphabet as their teacher, Jo Yoon-jeong, 24, wrote them one by one on the white board. They took dictation on words like “aunt,” “fisherman” and “raccoon” with their slow and crooked penmanship.

Between writing exercises, Jo turned on an upbeat song, “There Is Nothing Wrong With My Age!” and led a dance routine for the giggling grandmothers to follow.

“School is so much fun,” Ms. Hwang said.