

# **The Japanese Education System**

**by**

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The Japanese education system is admired by many foreign educators, who note that Japanese students do better than their American counterparts in international math and science tests. Disciplined Japanese students obey teachers, rarely commit school violence and have little contact with drugs or alcohol. Some American education analysts insist that the adoption of the Japanese system by the United States would provide American children with a good educational foundation, and reduce school problems such as drug abuse, violence and truancy.

Because of the strong link between education and national development, Japan's post-World War II economic miracle is often attributed to its school system. It is therefore only natural that foreign educators should be interested in Japanese school education. Japan, an economic powerhouse second only to the United States, rose from the ashes of catastrophe at the end of the war by means of government-led economic policies. Realizing that national prosperity depended on school outcomes, the Japanese government extended its influence in education by centralizing the school system and standardizing the school curriculum. Under this

national policy, children were disciplined and educated to become obedient, hardworking workers, who would contribute specifically to catching up with or surpassing western technologies.

## **Structure of the School System**

The Japanese school system has a 6-3-3-4 system: six years of elementary school, three years each for middle school (lower-secondary school) and high school (upper-secondary school) and four years for university. There are also kindergarten and nursery schools for pre-school children.

Japanese law requires all children between the ages of six and 15 to receive education, either in an elementary school and a middle school or in a special school for the blind, the deaf or the otherwise handicapped. All children receive a general education appropriate to their level of physical and mental development. High schools, which provide both general and specialized education, are not compulsory; but admission to higher educational institutions is limited to students who have completed high school education. Colleges of technology admit middle school graduates and require five years of study (five and a half years for the merchant marine course); graduates are awarded the title of associate.

## History

The modern education system in Japan began with the Education Order of 1872. The Education Ministry, established in 1871, issued in 1886 the Elementary School Order, the Middle School Order, the Imperial University Order and the Normal School Order, which established a comprehensive school system. The ministry determined the national curriculum and compiled and authorized textbooks for elementary and middle schools. Local school officials had to comply with all of the ministry's education policies.

After World War II, the United States occupied Japan and made liberal proposals for reform of the Japanese school system. In 1947, the Fundamental Law of Education and the School Education Law were enacted and a 6-3-3-4 system was set up on the principle of equal educational opportunity. High schools were introduced in 1948, offering full-time and part-time courses; a correspondence course was added in 1961. In 1949 universities began under a new system, and a provisional system of junior colleges was introduced in 1950. The permanent system for junior colleges was established in 1964 through an amendment to the School Education Law.

## Common Education

*"All people shall have the right to receive an equal education correspondent to their ability, as provided for by law. All people shall be obligated to have all boys and girls under their protection receive ordinary education as provided for by law. Such compulsory education shall be free."* (Constitution of Japan, Article 26)

Parents are obliged to have their children receive common education in elementary and middle schools: home schooling, which exists in the United States, is prohibited in Japan. Public elementary and middle school tuition is funded by the government, so that all children receive an adequate education, regardless of family income. However public high schools do charge for tuition; and students in private elementary, middle and high schools pay much higher tuition fees.

Central government supplies textbooks free of charge to all children enrolled in public and private elementary schools and middle schools. This system was introduced in fiscal 1963, to put into practice the spirit of the Constitution. In fiscal 1994, ¥43.4 billion (U.S.\$347.2 million, based on an exchange rate of ¥125 to the dollar) was spent on a total of 136.15 million textbooks for about

12.98 million schoolchildren. Students pay for their own notebooks, pens and other necessary school supplies.

## **The State Curriculum**

The Education Ministry sets the national curricula for all public schools, from kindergarten to high school, to ensure standardized education. Under this system, each school creates its own curriculum conforming to the provisions of the School Education Law, the Enforcement Regulations of this law, and the Course of Study, while taking into account its own circumstances and the situation of the community.

The ministry's "Enforcement Regulations for the School Education Law" determine the minimum number of weeks of school per year and the subjects to be offered. The Course of Study (*Gakushu Shidoyoryo*) presents guidelines for the objectives and standard content of each school subject; it specifies the names of elective subjects, and regulates the content of the curriculum in detail. The Course of Study has recently been revised and improved to promote education based on respect for the individual.

## **Authorized Textbooks**

The School Education Law requires that all elementary, middle and high schools, as well as special education schools, use textbooks that are either authorized by the Education Ministry or published under the ministry's copyright. This system is designed to ensure equality of opportunity in education, proper content of textbooks for use in the classroom, and improvement of educational standards nationwide.

Unlike the pre-war state-compiled textbook system, the current system allows private publishers to write and edit textbooks, but these must be submitted to the ministry for approval before they can be used in schools. Non-approved textbooks are not used at schools, but can be sold at bookstores. Textbook authors and publishers claim that the state-authorized textbooks system is a violation of Clause II, Article 21, of the Constitution of Japan: "No censorship shall be maintained, nor shall the secrecy of any means of communication be violated." However the Supreme Court upholds the legality of the textbook authorization system.

As part of the authorization process, the Education Ministry takes into account the expert recommendations from the Textbook Authorization and Research Council, which works in accordance with the ministry's guidelines. Each local prefecture (the

administrative subdivision between national and municipal levels) or municipality board examines and adopts its own selection of authorized textbooks according to local needs. The books are distributed at the beginning of each school year. In fiscal 1994, 177.96 million copies of 1,479 titles were published and distributed.

### **Local Boards of Education**

Cooperation between the Education Ministry and local boards of education allows the ministry to collect ample information on schools and local communities for the planning and drafting of national education policies. Local boards have to comply with these policies and with the ministry's official notices.

In line with the Education Ministry's advice on policies for administration, local boards of education execute training programs for their members, and hold conferences on issues such as revitalization of the boards and introduction of new education policies. The exchange of opinions among boards in different regions is encouraged. The ministry recommends that local boards hire capable personnel as board members and administrators, and that these employees should receive attractive salaries. Boards are also charged with improving management systems and deciding on policies that take into account the will of the local communities.

## **School Districts**

Local boards of education fix school districts for public elementary and middle schools, and require that children attend the schools to which they are assigned, unless they attend a private school. Parents are rarely allowed to choose a school outside the district or to change the school to which their child is assigned. Local school officials state that all public schools provide the same level of education based on the national curriculum and authorized textbooks, so that children do not need to change schools in order to get a better education.

In January 1997, however, the Education Ministry advised municipal boards to be flexible in their administration of the school district system. Henceforth, children would be allowed to go to schools outside the districts if local boards approved the applications, and they would be permitted to change schools for reasons such as bullying, violence, or health problems.

## **The School Year**

The Japanese school year runs from April to March. There are three terms: spring, fall, and winter. The spring term starts in early April and usually ends on July 20; after 40 days of summer vacation, the fall term starts on September 1 and finishes in mid-December; winter term begins in early January and ends in mid-March. Students living in the northern part of Japan have a shorter summer holiday and a longer winter break because of the heavy snow in that area. Summer vacations are not completely free: teachers and children have to attend several days of school during the break.

Children used to go to school six days a week, 240 days a year, with Saturday classes ending at 12:30 p.m. The shift toward the five-day week for employees allowed the Education Ministry to introduce the five-day school week in order to cut children's workload. From September 1992, the second Saturday of every month became a school holiday; in the 1995 school year, this was extended to the fourth Saturday of every month. The government has recently instructed certain schools to adopt the complete five-day school week as an experiment. Elementary and middle schools

will adopt the five-day week in 2002, with high schools following suit in 2003. Even so, students will still attend school on about 200 days a year - more than the 180 days a year in American schools.

## **The Classroom**

Most learning in Japanese schools takes place in the homeroom classroom. Students have few elective courses, and therefore only need to move out of their homeroom for laboratory sciences, music, studio art, physical education and other activities requiring special facilities.

Class size in Japan averages 36-40 students to one teacher in urban areas. This is in sharp contrast to the American average of 25-30 students per teacher; however the quiet demeanor of Japanese students and the discipline imposed on them ensure that the larger class size causes few problems.

The standard unit hour per subject in Japan is 45 minutes in elementary schools, and 50 minutes in middle and high schools. Teachers give full unit hour lectures, whilst the students copy into their notebooks all the notes on the blackboard. There is little discussion in class. High test scores are gained by students' memorization of the factual knowledge copied into their notebooks.

## Teachers

The outcome of school education depends largely on the quality of teaching. In order to improve and maintain the quality of teaching in schools nationwide, the Education Ministry has established the standardized teacher-training curriculum, with which education departments in universities have to comply. This national curriculum is constantly revised by the Teacher Training Council, an advisory panel to the ministry. In accordance with the provisions of the Education Personnel Certification Law, trainee teachers are awarded their teaching certificates upon successful completion of the required subjects on their university course. Depending on the subject areas in which they plan to specialize, prospective middle and high school teachers are awarded certificates of math, Japanese, English, social studies, science, etc. There are also special certificates and temporary certificates.

The special lecturer system allows those without formal teaching certificates, but with plenty of social experience and sufficient knowledge and skills, to be appointed as special teachers for the promotion of various educational activities. In the 1997 school year, there were 141 such part-time teachers in elementary schools, and 470 in middle schools.

In addition to the initial teacher training, the Education Ministry and school boards also run many study programs for newly appointed teachers. All newly qualified teachers in elementary, middle and high schools, and in special schools for the disabled, are required to undergo a year of induction training under the guidance of a master teacher at a prefectural or municipal education center, while at the same time engaging in teaching and other educational activities in their schools. Teachers receive about two days a week of in-school training, which covers all aspects of the teacher's work: instruction, class management, preparation of report cards and other records, sponsorship of extracurricular club activities, management of physical education equipment, understanding child psychology and student guidance. There is also one day a week of out-of-school training, which includes lectures, seminars, and skill practice at education centers and other facilities. New teachers also visit other educational institutions, and participate in social-service activities, company activities and outdoor activities. During summer vacation, they attend residential workshops for about five days. The Education Ministry also runs training programs for experienced teachers, and administrative personnel.

In order to attract able students to the teaching profession, and thus improve the standard of education, it is necessary to offer

a high salary. The 1974 Law Governing Special Measures on Salaries of National and Local Public School Educational Personnel guarantees better pay for public school teachers than for other public employees. In order to maintain teachers' higher salaries nationwide, the central government pays one half of the money from the national treasury in compliance with the law determining the budget for the overall standard distribution of teachers. This system allows poor local governments to employ the necessary number of teachers without being affected by their local financial situation. Furthermore, as long as the budget permits, a class can be taught by two teachers.

## **Moral Education**

*"Since education is the process of character formation, moral education can be regarded as a fundamental part of school education."* (Education Ministry White Paper, 1994)

Moral education aims to prevent problem behavior such as bullying, truancy and school violence, and to encourage in children a respect for human life. It does so by fostering the development of healthy human relations, which have gradually been damaged by social changes such as the trend toward nuclear families or fewer children per household. The 1989 revised Courses of Study

enhanced the content of moral education by improving educational guidance and restructuring and prioritizing teaching content.

In fiscal 1993 the Education Ministry conducted an extensive survey on the implementation of moral education under the new Courses of Study, cooperating with local boards of education and public and private elementary and middle schools across the country. The survey found that almost all elementary and middle schools incorporated the subject of "moral education" into the curriculum and used supplementary books on morality.

## **Special Education**

Special education is intended to meet the needs of physically or mentally disabled children by providing an educational environment appropriate to the type and degree of their disability, their stage of development, and their special characteristics. It helps them develop to their full potential and participate actively and independently in social activities.

Special schools are of five types: schools for the blind, the deaf, the mentally retarded, the physically handicapped, and the health impaired. The schools comprise kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, and high school departments. In high school departments, students take vocation-related subjects, an

enhancement of the curriculum under the new Courses of Study. As of May 1994, there were 168,239 elementary, middle and high school students in receipt of special education, approximately one percent of all students in this age bracket. According to an Education Ministry report, in fiscal 1996 there were 978 schools for the disabled, with about 86,000 children in attendance.

Children with mild disabilities can attend special classes in regular elementary or middle schools. Special classes are classified into seven types: classes for the mentally retarded, the physically handicapped, the health impaired, the visually handicapped, the hearing impaired, the speech handicapped, and the emotionally disturbed. Until 1993, disabled children were not allowed to attend subjects in a standard classroom, as it was thought that this might impede the learning of the other children. In January 1993 the enforcement regulations of the School Education Law were amended, and in April of that year a program was introduced permitting them to take classes in a normal classroom appropriate to the degree of their disability. Disabled children can now alternate between the standard classroom where they take standard subjects, and the special classroom where they receive special instruction. They can also receive special support services in resource rooms.