

# Progress on Education Reform

## 1. Background of Education Reform

Education in Japan since the end of World War II has embodied the principle of equality of opportunity, raising the education level of the people and serving as the engine of social development, nurturing human resources in response to the changing demands of time. However, if we look at the state of education today, it is evident that confidence in education is eroding.

Firstly, many point out that the educational ability of families and local communities has declined markedly against a backdrop of urbanization and falling birthrates. Bullying, truancy, school violence and serious criminal acts by young people are frequent. Many problems are also occurring in the home such as child abuse.

Secondly, many say that social awareness and respect for rules and morals among our young are deteriorating. This reflects not just the tendency of society to overemphasize individual freedom and rights, but the drastically changing environment that children find themselves in and the decline in opportunities for them to polish themselves in relationships with people and the community.

Thirdly, as others point out, the standardization of education and excessive drilling of knowledge brought about by an egalitarianism gone too far may mean that the current education system is unable to maximize students' individuality and talent.

Fourthly, dramatic progress in science and technology, economic globalization and the march of the IT revolution are accelerating change in society and the economy. Therefore, many consider that the education system overall and the knowledge of those associated with it are not necessarily equipped to deal with the changing conditions of time and the society.

It would thus appear that education, as it stands, is not responding adequately to economic and social change or to the changes in the environment that children are growing up in. Fully dealing with the various issues of education requires systemic reform and improved strategies, principally of schools, as well as educational reform in the context of society as a whole including schools, households and communities.

## 2. Progress on Educational Reform

Education in a rapidly changing society was the subject of debate for the National Commission on Educational Reform, established under the Prime Minister in March 2000. In December of the same year, it submitted the "Report by the National Commission on Educational Reform—17 Proposals for Changing Education."

Based on the National Commission on Educational Reform report, in January 2001 the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) released its Education Reform Plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The Plan established an overall vision for education reform as well as conveying the specific policy plans and tasks to be tackled.

In August 2002, the Minister for Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology announced the "Human Resources Strategy Vision" to the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy as the basic vision for human skills development. It contains four objectives, and the Ministry is pushing ahead with policies to achieve those.

Alongside these specific reform measures, in March 2003 the Central Council for Education submitted a report on a radical overhaul of education to modernize and update the system under the title, "Fundamental Law of Education and the Basic Promotional Plan for Education in a New Era."

The Central Council for Education, responding to MEXT's request for advice, submitted a report regarding policies for promoting reform of primary and secondary education in May 2003 entitled "Immediate Policies to Enhance and Improve the Curriculum and Instruction in Primary and Secondary Education." It is currently discussing the introduction of increased flexibility in compulsory education and other school education systems, future concepts for upper secondary schools and policies to promote lifelong learning.

With the intense interest that education is attracting, MEXT is currently moving forward comprehensively with the following measures for all levels from primary and secondary education to higher education, guided by the four principles of "respect for individuality and ability," "fostering of sociability and international outlook," "emphasis on diversity and choice" and "promotion of openness and evaluation."

### Primary and Lower Secondary Education

Develop "Academic Ability"—Implementation of new Courses of Study from 2002

- Boost children's academic ability with teaching that is more tailored to individual personality and ability

- Teaching adjusted to ability, small classes, more developmental and complementary learning
- Have children experience the fun of learning, increasing their desire to learn and improving the “quality of academic achievement”
  - Establishment of a “period of integrated study,” more experiential learning; links between schools, families and local communities encouraged under a five day school week
- Realization of “understandable lessons” using IT and cultivation of the ability to use information
  - All public schools to have high-speed 24-hour internet connection by 2005

#### Cultivation of “Richness in Mind”

- Fostering enrichment
  - Development of ethics, civic-mindedness and sensitivity
    - Expanded moral education (distribution of “Kokoro no Note” (a notebook to be used by students in moral education) to all elementary and lower secondary school students from 2002)
    - Promotion of volunteering/social service activities, hands-on activities and reading
    - Enhanced education on traditional culture
    - Development of school counseling (appointment of school counselors nationwide)
- Developing healthy bodies
  - Towards better health and physical ability
    - Rollout of a comprehensive policy in line with the Plan to Boost Children’s Physical Ability (from 2003)
    - Promotion of nutritional education (instruction about food)

#### Development of Schools of Unique Character Harnessing Community Creativity and Initiative

- Schools with more individual character as a result of student and parent/guardian choice
  - Increased freedom in selection of elementary and lower secondary schools, elimination of upper secondary school zones

#### Development of Open, Trustworthy Schools

- Truly accountable schools
  - Encouragement of school evaluation and information sharing—toward implementation in all elementary, lower secondary and upper secondary schools
    - Official requirements stipulated for elementary, lower secondary and upper secondary schools (from 2002)

### Higher Education

#### Nurture Top-level Brains and Diverse Talents

- Human resources that will lead the world
  - Creation of a professional graduate school system across national, public and private universities
    - World-class graduate law schools inaugurated
      - Implemented from 2004, 68 universities in the first year
    - Support for the establishment of world-class graduate business schools
      - Eight universities in first year—2003—expanding to 22 universities in 2004

#### To Be Distinctive Universities in a Competitive Environment

- Graduate schools at the global cutting edge
  - Formation of global center of excellence for research and teaching centers through third-party evaluation and competitive principles
    - 21<sup>st</sup> Century COE Program (from 2002)
- Reform of national universities
  - Incorporation of national universities (from 2004)
    - Each university becomes a national university corporation
    - A vision defined for each university
    - Broader discretion for universities

- Establishment of a responsible management structure
- Management input from external specialists
- Full implementation of evaluation and information disclosure

#### Establishment of Quality Control Systems for University Teaching and Research

- Introduction of the third-party evaluation system (in 2004)
  - Ongoing evolution of teaching and research through compulsory third-party evaluation at national, public, and private universities and public disclosure of results