

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, although Japan's educational level ranks high internationally, a closer look at the state of education today reveals that confidence in education is eroding and that the country's educational system is confronting several major issues.

Firstly, it is pointed that educational functions of families and local communities have declined markedly against a backdrop of urbanization and falling birthrates. Bullying, School Non-attendance, school violence are among the major problems in school education and serious criminal acts by young people, heretofore deemed unthinkable, are frequent both inside and outside school. Many problems such as child abuse are also occurring within families, which is originally the starting point for education.

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. This deterioration in the socialization and moral consciousness of children is believed to be accelerating the tendency for adolescents to break away and seclude themselves from their communities.

Thirdly, education suited to the personalities and abilities of individual children has often been neglected in favor of the standardization of education and excessive drilling of knowledge brought about by an egalitarianism gone too far. It has also been noted that the current education system, including the school system and entrance examinations, 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 from elementary and secondary education to higher education 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 Education Reform in the context of society as a whole including schools, households and communities.

2. Progress on Education Reform

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

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

In November 2004, the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology announced an Education Reform plan entitled "Japan! Rise Again!" The plan proposes the objective of education that encourages dedication and effort. Among the reforms that have been subsequently pursued are the following:

- a. "Amendment of the Fundamental Law of Education" to promote reform that harks back to the very basics of education
- b. Specific measures for "Improvement of Academic Ability," including thoroughgoing lesson improvements and programs to improve reading comprehension skills, as part of promotion of the "Action Plan for Improving Academic Ability"
- c. "Professional Development of Teachers" through the establishment of professional graduate schools for teaching training, and the renewing teaching licenses system.
- d. School and board of education reform from the perspective of placing importance on the initiative of schools and local boards of education.

In response to requests from the MEXT's Minister, the Central Council for Education, responsible for carrying out deliberations on important matters related to the promotion of education, lifelong learning, sports and other matters, in FY2004 submitted three reports: "Review of University Entrance Qualification Examination," "The Ideal Form of Future Pre-School

Education Taking into Account Changes in the Environment Surrounding Children,” and, from the viewpoint that the national government should take responsibility for higher education into the future, “The Future of Higher Education in Japan.”

With regard to compulsory education overall, a November 26, 2004 agreement between the government and the ruling party confirming a consensus on “reaching a conclusion at the Central Council for Education by autumn 2005” created the Compulsory Education Special Working Group established under the general committee in February 2005 to examine major issues in compulsory education in an integrated and flexible fashion. The study underway is scheduled to arrive at a conclusion in autumn of this year, on the basis of which reforms are to be made to compulsory education. Future approaches to teacher training and licensing systems, reviews of comprehensive Courses of Study, and measures to promote lifelong learning that open the way to a new age are also being discussed.

The MEXT is pursuing Education Reform in line with these efforts. When advancing these reforms, it is essential to encourage public discussion and appropriately reflect the views of the public in the reforms.

To that end, a variety of means—including “Education Reform Forums” and “Education Reform Town Meetings” held around the country—are being used to deepen public understanding on Education Reform, particularly with regard to amendment of the Fundamental Law of Education and reforms to the compulsory education system.

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Report by the National Commission on Education Reform (Dec. 22, 2000)

Education Reform Plan for the 21st Century (Jan. 25, 2001)

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| ○ Development of children's "Academic Ability" and Cultivation of Richness in Mind | ⇒ Promoting small-group education or achievement-based teaching (2001)
Creating and distributing "Kokoro no note" (a notebook for moral education) |
| ○ Improvement of learning environment to one which is enjoyable and free of worries | ⇒ Encouraging adults to take part in school education (2002) and clarifying the requisites for treatment of compulsory prevention of school attendance (2002) |
| ○ Ensuring the schools' credibility with parents and communities | ⇒ Establishing a school self-evaluation system (2002) |
| ○ Promotion of volunteer/social service activities and experiential activities | ⇒ Developing a nationwide system to conduct and promote experiential activities (2002) |
| ○ Training of teachers as real "professionals" of education | ⇒ Taking rigorous measures on teachers lacking in teaching abilities (2002), improving social experience training program (2001) and introduction of training program for teachers with 10-years of experience (2003) |
| ○ Promotion of the establishment of universities of International standard | ⇒ Establishing professional graduate schools (2003) and incorporating national universities (2004) |

Human Resources Strategy Vision (Aug. 30, 2002)

- Objectives
1. Vigorous Japanese people who think and act on their own initiative
 2. Fostering of top-level talents who will lead the Century of Knowledge
 3. Japanese who will maintain and create a spiritually rich culture and society
 4. Japanese who are educated through living in the international community

From a strategic viewpoint, this vision of Education Reform is being pursued through a system of four above objectives and six measures.

Compulsory Education Reform Plan (Aug. 10, 2004)

1. Towards a flexible compulsory education system
Clarifying the objectives to be attained in the compulsory education system and introducing more flexibility into the system
2. Bold reforms in the teacher training system
Bold reforms in teacher training and teacher certificate systems for drastic improvement of the quality of teachers
3. School and board of education reform
Strengthening the authority of local governments and schools to allow local areas to introduce creative innovation.
4. Clarification of responsibility of central government in ensuring compulsory education
MEXT's responsibilities of compulsory education (equal educational opportunities, assurance of educational standards, free education)

"Japan! Rise Again!" (Nov. 4, 2004)

1. Amendment of the Fundamental Law of Education
—Creating an image of the Japanese in a new era—
2. Improvement of academic ability
—Cultivating rivalry among students and the implementation of nationwide academic ability surveys—
3. Improvement of the quality of teachers
—Introducing the renewing teaching licenses system and the establishment of professional graduate schools for teaching training—
4. Placement of importance on the initiative of schools and local boards of education
—Strengthening the authority of local governments (including large municipal areas) in terms of personnel management and budgeting, and establishing a school evaluation system—
5. Reform of the system of national treasury's share of compulsory education expenses
The MEXT is supposed to set the criteria of compulsory education, ensure the maintenance of educational standards, provide equal educational opportunities, leave compulsory education management to the discretion of local governments, and guarantee the necessary financial resources.

Summary compiled by the Commission on Future Education (Sep. 1, 2004)