

Institute for International Policy Studies

Draft Proposal on Educational Reform

I. Basic Educational Policy in Japan

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I. Basic Educational Policy in Japan

1. The ultimate objective of education in Japan is to cultivate healthy Japanese who can thrive within the international community. Given that human beings exist within society and history, it is essential that we foster Japanese individuals who possess a deep understanding of Japanese history, culture, and tradition; have the ability to apply themselves diligently amid ongoing globalization; and are endowed with character, self-sufficiency, and tolerance.

2. Japanese education is currently in a pitiable state, however. Since the 1985–1987 Nakasone government's special commission of inquiry on education, successive reforms have been devised for the educational system that resulted from the restructuring carried out by the occupying forces immediately after World War Two. Although the Basic Law on education has been amended and some of these reforms have been put into practice, a legion of problems still remains.

3. In particular, the decline in scholastic ability and physical strength at the elementary education level is continuing, and this trend is expected to persist for some time. Extreme egotism is also rampant, and loss of the communal spirit has long been bemoaned. The ability of the individual to socialize also continues to decline, in what is known as the "fragmented society." In higher education, too, there has been a reduction in the international competitiveness of universities and research organizations. In addition, the inclination to look inward has spread, as exemplified by the sharp decline in the numbers of Japanese venturing overseas; Japan's competitiveness has waned markedly.

4. The current flaws in the system—typified by the continuing decline in the scholastic ability of elementary and junior high school students—are unmistakable. Given that this could continue with the existing content of education and the existing educational system, now is the time when Japan must make a decisive change of course and consider concrete and effective policies.

In terms of the content of education, the younger generation must be nurtured so as to afford them ability, a broad viewpoint, and an appreciation of the importance of character and independence. From the perspective of lifelong education, the current educational system must be reformed from the ground up, with an appropriate division of roles between schools, regions, and households.

II. Specific Reforms for the Various Stages of People's Lives

1. Infancy (0–6): The objective should be to nurture healthy infants with the ability to socialize. In view of the decline of the family's capacity to educate—given the trend

towards nuclear families and the increasing proportion of families with a single child—early childhood education should be compulsory from the age of three. Elementary school facilities should be used for early childhood education, which should be carried out with the cooperation of the local community—in particular, the elderly of the area should be requested to participate actively. This would provide the opportunity for children to have contact with people other than their parents, and would begin the training that enables children to acquire social skills. Day care kindergartens should be for children of two and under, and an attempt should be made to eliminate waiting lists for admission.

2. Compulsory education period (7–15): The objective should be to inculcate children with the fundamentals of scholastic ability, physical strength, and discipline, in collaboration with the local community. The acquisition of correct Japanese language skills through the recitation of the classics, such as “One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets,” and of numerical ability by means of repeated practice, will round out the student’s basic scholastic abilities. People who are already active in society, such as the school’s alumnae, should participate fully in the teaching of subjects such as science and social studies.

The capability for international communication should be fostered from an early age, with the introduction of foreign language instruction into elementary education. Biographies should be used as teaching materials to encourage a sense of individuality in students by making them think about what they want to do in the future. At the same time, students should come to grasp the concept of community (and feel a sense of local community and a sense of nationhood) by understanding how society is structured and understanding their responsibilities as citizens. They should also be equipped with discipline, social skills, and the means to live a well-ordered life. Creativity and ingenuity should also be encouraged in school management—for example, the active hiring of school principals from outside the teaching staff, and the use of local citizens. The buildings in school facilities should also be attractive and in tune with the surrounding landscapes, should symbolize the local areas, and should be open to local residents.

3. Adolescence and young adulthood (15–25): The objective should be to establish character and inculcate an idea of the state and a sense of nationhood. People should come to understand the concepts of equality and justice and should show tolerance of others, as well as consolidating their own characters by establishing their ideals and making unstinting efforts in life. People should be encouraged to learn their rights and duties as citizens, participate in the local community, and develop an awareness that as Japanese they can function in the international community (without lapsing into narrow-minded nationalism). This can be achieved by establishing a clear sense of what the individual can do for society, rather than what society can do for the individual. One possible program would make it compulsory for people to spend six months to a year prior to adulthood engaging in one of the following: an activity that fosters respect for nature (such as farming, forestry, or fishing); confronting the reality of Japan’s aging society by nursing the elderly; joining the police, fire brigade, or self-defense forces for the purpose of engaging in disaster relief or taking part in activities to prevent crime; or living abroad and working for an organization such as the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers. The government would prepare options from which to choose. Higher education should also feature the practical enhancement of foreign language skills (particularly in English), with an emphasis on the ability to engage in discussion and the ability to write logical text.

4. Maturity (25–64): For the first half of this period (25–40), the objectives should be identifying one’s strengths and how to make use of them and gaining work experience. Individuals should be helped to build up their abilities to apply themselves diligently in a globalized world and to attain individuality by developing skills in the course of their work. At the same time, both men and women should participate in child-rearing and thus strengthen the skills they need to become pillars of the local community. For the second half of this period (40–64), the objectives should be the further development of one’s character, the making of a greater contribution to society, and the reconciliation of private and public activities. Before they reach 40, people should consider what they can do for society after the age of 40, based on their experiences in the first half of this period of maturity, and they should become those mainstay workers within Japanese society who act as a bridge between local and national networks. At the same time, people should be helped to achieve a balance between family, work, and participation in society, so that following separation from work and a structured role, they can transition to a plane from which they can function as independent Japanese individuals.

5. Old age (65 and over): The objective should be for people to use their accumulated knowledge and experience to give back to society, and to become pillars of society who pass on history, traditions, and culture to the following generations. People should carry on and pass down the history, traditions, and culture of their nation and their region, while looking back over their lives and continuing to cultivate their characters. In particular, they should participate actively in education and pre-school childcare (not just of their own offspring) up until the compulsory education phase, and should play a central role in directing study in their region.

III. The Urgent Need for Development of a Framework

1. In order to implement the above-mentioned reforms as rapidly and effectively as possible, it is necessary to review the current state of the educational system from the ground up. In particular, the following structure must quickly be put in place in schools—which lie at the heart of education.

2. Elementary and junior high school education

(1) Restructuring the organization

(a) Consolidating authority and responsibility under a regional chief executive

For elementary and junior high school education, the system involving the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science, and Technology and boards of education should be abolished, and authority and responsibility consolidated under the chief of a regional public body. Existing boards of education should be re-organized into educational reform commissions—organizations that assist the chief executive. In addition, the secretariats of existing boards of education should be placed under the direction of the chief executive—as educational affairs departments at the prefectural level and education departments at the municipal level.

However, the established role played by the board of education system in ensuring political neutrality, continuity, and stability in education must be maintained, or there will be chaos—even after the re-organization. For this reason, the following structure should be established:

The educational reform commissions should include distinguished academics, and at least one-third of the membership should consist of local citizens (who are not parents or guardians), and parents or guardians—in both cases, ideally current or former members of school councils—whose appointments would need to be approved by the

school councils. The chief executive would need to obtain the approval of the educational reform commission on important matters such as the adoption of textbooks and the appointment of school staff.

When authority and responsibility are consolidated under the chief executive, he or she must first devise a ten-year educational policy proposal, and then establish this policy with the approval of the school councils. The chief executive must administer education in line with this educational policy. He or she may not change the educational policy without the consent of the educational reform commission and the school councils.

(b) The state, the prefectures, and the municipalities—their respective roles and the relationships between them

The municipalities should mainly focus on educating elementary and junior high school students in their districts, through the exercise of their ingenuity and creativity. The state should designate fundamental nationwide educational policy; formulate basic plans; provide the reform principles and specific instances of reform required for the resolution of nationwide issues; and provide direction, advice, and assistance to the prefectures as necessary. The prefectures should adapt the reform principles and specific instances of reform provided by the state in accordance with the actual conditions in the prefecture in question, and provide direction, advice, and assistance to the municipalities as necessary. However, while displaying regard for consistency with these principles, the state must show as much respect as possible for the characteristics and inventiveness of individual schools, areas, and municipalities.

In addition, in each prefecture a director of educational reform evaluation who understands the practical conditions surrounding educational reform in each school should be appointed. The director of educational reform evaluation will report these practical conditions to the prefectural governor. At this time, the director shall incorporate in the report any points that must be improved upon in state, prefectural, and municipal policies. Based on this report on practical conditions, the prefectural governor should offer his or her opinions to the national government and provide direction to the municipalities.

The municipalities should adapt the reform principles and specific instances of reform provided by the prefecture in accordance with the actual conditions in the municipality in question and carry out educational reform in schools on this basis.

(c) Communication and information transfers between the state, the prefectures, municipalities, and schools

It is anticipated that, in practice, the difficulty will be the rapid and accurate communication of information and intentions within the gigantic educational administration organization that extends from the national government to encompass the prefectures, the municipalities, and every school. In order to attempt to manage this smoothly and to reform and promote education, the prime minister should (with the assistance of the minister of education, culture, sport, science and technology) host a national conference of educational affairs directors, bringing together the heads of all the educational affairs departments—the officials who are responsible for the administration of education in each prefecture. In similar fashion, prefectural governors and mayors of the municipalities should engage in the rapid and accurate exchange of information and intention with those in charge of education (respectively, the heads of the municipal departments of education and the school principals), and attempt to advance education and cooperate with local people.

(2) Appointing and training teachers

The system for renewal of a teacher's license should be further developed and more teachers who can offer practical foreign-language instruction should be hired. Graduate schools for teachers have been established; however, consideration should also be given to the idea of appointing talented people who have accumulated considerable practical experience in society or who have a strong sense of vocation to teaching positions. To achieve this option, a mechanism for providing training appropriate to the particular educational content and classroom setting should be established.

3. Higher education—reform of the university system

(1) System of entrance examinations

Various university systems must be reformed. In particular, the following reforms to the entrance examination system would be desirable: relaxing the age requirements for people taking entrance examinations by instituting a system that allows students to skip grades; relaxing the constraints on the timing of examinations so that there are several sittings a year; relaxing the rigidity of the questions set (so that that the “textbook answer” is not the sole correct answer); and allowing each university to determine the relative importance of each subject (while reducing the wide variety of exam subjects available).

(2) Strengthening international competitiveness

In order to increase the quality of teachers and their competitiveness in terms of research, lifetime employment should be abolished and replaced with a system of renewable employment terms (of approximately five to ten years) based on teachers' research records. An attempt should be made to strengthen international competitiveness by differentiating the liberal-arts universities, which stress the teaching of education, from the few universities that aim to train researchers and provide both education courses and specialized courses, so as to make the best use of their respective characteristics.

(3) Motivating students

In order to strengthen the motivation towards research and education of the students themselves, a performance-based system that allows both skipping and repeating years and a system of student grants that is directly linked to performance should be instituted. Based on these suggested improvements, the relative burden of cost on the state, the municipality, and the individual should be reviewed and the external effects considered.

IV. Conclusion

Educational reform represents the start of a long-term state program. The Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11 exposed the crisis facing Japan and highlighted the fact that the nation itself has grown weak in its post-war prosperity. Re-organization of education is the key to Japan's revival and restoration. Amid the unprecedented difficulties brought about by the earthquake, candid responses to this draft proposal are most welcome.

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