School Hours to Increase

High Hopes Pinned on Return to Basics

By Isao ADACHI

Class hours in public primary and secondary schools will see a drastic increase mainly for mathematics and science under a revised government guideline for school teaching. The revision comes against the backdrop of mounting criticism of "education with latitude" introduced under the old guideline for the purpose of developing children's independence and individuality. Critics contend that "education with latitude," touted as a relaxed style of teaching free from pressure, has resulted in a decline in students' academic abilities.

Japanese society has maintained a high level of quality education since the Meiji era (1868-1912). Some people take exception to the view that the scholastic level in Japanese schools has declined. But judging from my experience of sending my child to a public secondary school, I can say that class hours for key subjects are definitely too few. High-quality education is Japan's asset. Thus we should discuss what schools should look like as a whole, reviewing not only class hours but also various school events which press both teachers and students.

Often cited as an indicator of the declining scholastic level of Japanese schools is the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). Conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), PISA shows the level of knowledge and skills among 15-year-olds. judging from my experience of sending my child to a public secondary school.

Class hours for mathematics in secondary schools stood at 140 units (each unit being 50 minutes) a year under the old government guideline for school teaching introduced in 1972. But mathematics class hours continued to decrease on the back of criticism of "cram education," standing at 105 units since 2002, down 28% from 1972. Class hours for science likewise decreased.

Introduced in their place was "comprehensive learning" aimed at offering "creative and ingenious" teaching in order to develop students' abilities to learn on their own initiative. But some educational experts point out that "comprehensive learning" classes are often co-opted for making preparations for school events like athletics meets. Some schools appear to be making effective use of "comprehensive learning." But in the school my child attended, classes for key subjects were held intermittently in the second semester (September through December), when preparations continue for athletics meets and other school events. As a result, schools were hardly able to provide the thorough instruction required for understanding. Under the circumstances, students tended to forget what they had learned unless parents had them either review class lessons at home or attend cram schools. It seems that differences in students' home environments and family income have led to inequality in their scholastic abilities.

Under the new guideline for school teaching, primary/ secondary school hours will be 15% more for mathematics and 23% more for science than now. The new guideline positions "repeated learning" as one of its pillars, meaning that the revision of the guideline is based on the importance of "learning."

Some educational experts take exception to the new guideline on the grounds that it means a throwback to the old system of cramming knowledge into children's heads. They often cite Finland as an example of success in enhancing scholastic levels despite short class hours.

OECD data show that students of secondary-school age in Finland had 796 class hours in 2003, fewer than the 817 hours in Japan. The picture is different, however, in terms of annual class hours for each major subject. Finnish schools spend 103 hours a year for the national language, 95 hours for mathematics and 103 hours for science, all exceeding the respective 98, 90 and 82 hours in Japan. Class hours for foreign languages are also longer than in Japan. On the other hand, class hours for social studies are extremely short and those for technical engineering-related classes and for physical education are also shorter. In fact, the school curriculum in Finland puts great emphasis on key subjects.

Class hours for selective compulsory subjects such as foreign languages (French, German, Russian, etc.), mathematics, physics, law, domestic science, computers, information technology, fine art, music and physical education account for 20% of all class hours. This suggests that students choose subjects depending on the career they intend to pursue. These factors must be taken into account when comparing class hours in Japan and Finland.

Along with the increase in class hours, calculation of the area of a trapezoid is to be reintroduced and, in calculations using the circumference ratio *pi,* 3.14 will be used instead of 3 as at present in the primary school curriculum. As reflected in Plato's statement that "God eternally geometrizes," geometry was positioned as the basis of learning in ancient Greece. I support the proposed return to basics, which should not be limited to geometry. JS

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