

Mission: Protecting Children and Schools

By Matsunaga Tsutomu

THE *sasumata* was used to capture criminals in the Edo period. It consists of a long wooden staff fitted with a crescent-shaped metal prong on one end to catch the ruffian by the throat and force him against a wall or the ground. Recently, the makers of this traditional equipment have been flooded with orders from elementary and junior high schools, and are operating at full capacity to produce 10,000 per month.

There have been a succession of incidents involving suspicious persons trespassing into school facilities, injuring and even murdering children and teachers. Those at the frontline of education are paling with shock. From the use of equipment from the days of the *samurai* to electronic tags attached to schoolbags, a wide variety of countermeasures are being employed to protect children.

The so-called “open school” used to be the ideal in Japanese education. All school gates were left wide open and there was considerable coming and going. The situation drastically changed after a man forced his way into the Ikeda Elementary School in Osaka in 2001, and stabbed eight students to death. The killer broke into the school through a side entrance and stabbed children as they ran about trying to escape. He testified, “If the gate had been closed, I wouldn’t have gone in.”

A similar incident occurred in Osaka last February. A 17-year-old graduate entered the school with two kitchen knives and killed one teacher and wounded two others. The youth said that he had originally intended to stab his two former homeroom teachers and then commit suicide. But when he encountered a teacher, the youth suddenly decided to launch his attack believing being suspected.

In Nara last November, an elementary school girl on her way home in the afternoon was kidnapped and murdered. The incident was a considerable shock to the public as the 7-year-old was carrying a cell phone with a GPS function in case she ran into trouble, but the criminal countered the safety measure by using the phone to send a photo of the murdered girl’s body to her mother. The kidnapper sent an e-mail threatening harm to the girl’s younger sister as well.

In this “crisis of children and schools,” a taxi company in Osaka has begun a cooperative venture with the police. By using a system that gives information about a taxi’s location – introduced as a means of coping with robberies – drivers who see children in trouble can quickly report the emergency to their company. The company then determines the taxi’s location and notifies the police.

Shinagawa ward in Tokyo has distributed “SOS transmitters” to all its school children. When a pin on the device is pulled, an alarm beeps and the location and name of the child are transmitted to a security center using a PHS function. The center then notifies registered volunteers within a 50m radius to protect the children.

Tests have also been carried out on electronic tags attached to



Illustration: Kairo Shuunru

schoolbags. Electronic reading devices at the school read the tags as children pass the gates, and this information is then transmitted to their families’ cell phones.

The Ikeda Elementary School demolished the building which had been indelibly stained by the odious crime committed there, and completely rebuilt. No effort has been spared in implementing security measures for the new school. It is surrounded by a 3m-high fence with sensors to detect intruders. Where there were formerly three gates, there is now only one, which is automatically locked. A security control room on the 2nd floor is capable of monitoring every classroom. The gymnasium walls are made of glass, in order to eliminate all possible places of concealment. There are 332 emergency buttons in the facilities. Ten locations around the school are covered by surveillance cameras. It was reported that the total construction costs for the new facility were ¥1,970 million, roughly twice the cost of building an ordinary public elementary schools.

The budget for security is a real source of worry for schools. Due to financial difficulties among local governments, it is quite difficult for most public schools to construct superb facilities like those at Ikeda. A contract for permanently stationed security personnel costs a full ¥10 million a year – not an easy sum to come up with. Such funds cannot be allocated in school budgets, so there are cases where the PTA has hired security guards.

“It is structurally difficult to guard a school under the former open school guidelines,” says the person in charge at one security firm. “The agent has to be careful in dealing with children, which is entirely different from security at a factory. It is expensive to train security personnel who can do their job without disrupting the free, open atmosphere of a school.” The efforts continue to prevent additional heinous crimes from occurring. **JS**

Matsunaga Tsutomu is an Assistant Deputy Director of the President’s office of Jiji Press Co., Ltd.