

From “Education with Latitude” to Enhanced Curricula

— Shifting Education Policy to Bring Academic Skills Back to World’s Top Levels —

Photo: Kyodo News



Japanese elementary school students taking a test

JAPAN’S school education policy is reaching a major turning point. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has asked the Central Council for Education to consider introducing new curriculum guidelines. The reassessment is aimed at bringing Japan’s academic standards back to the world’s top levels. The council, an advisory body to the minister, is likely to consider having classes on Saturdays and increasing the study hours for main subjects such as the national language and mathematics. MEXT is aiming to outline new guidelines this fall.

In 1996, the council set forth a policy of introducing a five-day school week and cutting 30% of textbook contents as part of “education with latitude.” The policy was meant to put greater emphasis on building children’s ability to “learn and think for themselves” and de-emphasize the role of

rote memorization aimed at passing university entrance examinations amid intense competition. The controversial “latitude policy” was introduced at public elementary and junior high schools in 2002, and at high schools in 2003. The guidelines, however, caused tension from the beginning. Some critics, for example, were concerned that the guidelines allowed students to substitute “3” instead of “3.14” for a circle ratio, and claimed this would lead to a decline in academic levels.

The results of international student assessments conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that covered 40 countries and regions led MEXT to change its course. The Program for International Student Assessment Test in 2003 showed first-year high school students of Japan tumbling to 14th place for reading comprehension from 8th in 2000 and to 6th place for mathematics

from top. This forced the ministry to recognize a decline in Japan’s academic skills. “We can’t surely say that Japanese academic standards are at the world’s top levels although their learning skills rank high by international standards,” a ministry official commented. A survey by the National Astronomical Observatory of Japan has revealed that approximately 30% of elementary school pupils don’t know in what direction the sun sets. A chorus of strong criticisms of “education with latitude” sprung up within the government.

Education minister Nakayama Nariaki has called for, among other things, bolstering the curricula for main subjects such as Japanese, science, mathematics and foreign languages. He has also suggested resuming classes on Saturdays and trimming summer vacations and other holidays. Longer study hours are expected to form the main pillar of the reassessed education guidelines. There are no confirmed data, however, to indicate that a cut in study hours leads to lower academic standards. No wide gaps are seen between elementary/junior high school hours in Japan and South Korea and Singapore, two high-ranked Asian countries. Finland, which was ranked top in reading and science, attained shorter study hours and higher academic skills together, a feat which indicates that there are various ways to improve academic abilities. Longer study hours alone do not necessarily ensure the recovery of the world’s top levels. This indicates difficulties in addressing the education problem.

The nation’s basic education policy is going to switch to strengthening curricula only a few years after the introduction of “education with latitude.” The abrupt change in the policy is generating concern among teachers and schoolchildren. The recommendation the Central Council for Education will come up with is now attracting strong public interest.