

Japan's Double-barreled Educational System

By Tetsuro Ito

Every night around 9 p.m. there are long lines of 13- and 14-year-old children at bus stops in front of a certain suburban Tokyo train station. They have just finished classes at a nearby *juku* (extracurricular preparatory school) and are excitedly discussing the material and comparing scores on that evening's tests.

This is not an isolated case. Ensuring that their children get the educational credentials they need is perceived by many Japanese as a parent's most important responsibility.

This April, the Ministry of Education released the results of a survey taken of 42,000 households with elementary or junior high school children. According to this survey, one out of every four elementary and junior high school children attends *juku* two to three times a week. Nationwide, this means approximately 4.5 million children attending *juku*.

It used to be that *juku* were primarily for high school students cramming for their university entrance exams. Today, however, there has been a definite increase in the number of junior high school students in *juku*. In their third year, when they are preparing for the grueling senior high school entrance exams, 47% of Japan's junior high students now attend *juku*. In the major urban areas (cities with populations of 100,000 or more), 53% of all junior high school students attend *juku*, and in towns and villages of less than 8,000 the percentage is 24%.

Compared with the results of a similar survey done nine years ago, the number of children attending *juku* has gone up by an astounding 1.4 million—and this is starting at an increasingly early age. The number of first through third graders going to *juku* has doubled since the last survey. In the big cities, 10% of all first

graders (ages 6 and 7) and 35% of all sixth graders go to *juku*. After spending a full day at school, Japanese children are devoting many extracurricular hours to additional study.

Exacting as they are for children, *juku* can also be trying for parents, with the average monthly fee running ¥7,800 for elementary school children and ¥10,200 for junior high school students. The overall average of ¥9,200 is nearly twice the ¥5,200 average of nine years ago.

Children's choice

Why do parents send their children to the after-school *juku*? In the Ministry of Education survey, 52.3% of the respondents said that it was the children's idea. This is not surprising. The *juku* have deprived children of their playmates, and a child who does not attend a *juku* could very well end up without any friends.



Some 4.5 million Japanese school children attend the after-school *juku*, most of them voluntarily.

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The next highest response (38.0%) was that children would not study on their own and were being sent to *juku* to force them to study. Other responses were that schoolwork is so difficult these days that parents cannot help children with their homework (29.1%), that the *juku* make schoolwork more interesting for the children (28.9%), and that the regular school curriculum is inadequate for someone wanting to get into the college of his or her choice (27.2%).

Parents expect a lot from the *juku*. Dissatisfied with the quality of regular school education, they believe the *juku* are needed to help their children get into better and better schools—better, of course, defined as providing the education needed for entry to still-better schools culminating in a prestigious university and then a blue-chip company. However, this is not an easy escalator to get or stay on, and it requires attending *juku* from as early as elementary school or, at the very latest, junior high school.

Nine years ago, *juku* were still rare and relatively unimportant within the overall educational structure. Today they rank right alongside the regular schools and have become quite conspicuous. The Ministry of Education estimates that there are a total of 36,000 *juku* throughout the country, but this does not include the really small-scale *juku* or the large number of one-room *juku* taught by housewives in their homes. If these are included, the number is probably much closer to 100,000.

Demography has directly affected the growth of *juku*. The children who entered junior high school this year represent the last of the second postwar baby boom of the mid-1960s. Thanks to this baby boom, *juku* have evolved into a mammoth industry with an ¥800-billion-a-year market (about \$4.4 billion at the rate of \$1/¥180). One Japanese economic magazine's ranking of 1985's top 60,000 Japanese corporations by income included nearly five dozen *juku*, many of them among the leaders in the service sector. Kumon, the largest *juku*, has tens of thousands of classrooms throughout the country and enrolls some 1,350,000 students. Its total sales for fiscal 1984 were a whopping ¥28.9 billion.

Over the last nine years, as shown by the Ministry of Education's survey, the *juku* have incorporated, grown into nationwide chains, and now train their own instructors. The *juku* are clearly big business. According to the survey, the percentage of *juku* that are corporations has more than doubled (to 26% from only 12%) and the percentage that are fran-

chise chains has more than quadrupled (to 27% from 6%).

Instructors trained in-house

Whereas the *juku* once relied heavily on regular school teachers (17%) and college students (33%) working on a part-time basis to provide teaching staff, the number of regular teachers has today dropped to 5% and college students to 29%. In their place, the *juku* now train about two-thirds of their instructors themselves. Of these *juku*-trained instructors, more than 70% have had no previous teaching experience and only half have teaching certificates. These instructors have come directly into the *juku* after graduating from college.

As one Tokyo *juku* owner put it, "We can't depend on regular school teachers any more to see our children through the entrance examinations. Parents have much more faith in us when we use instructors whom we've trained ourselves."

There is even one *juku* that has gone public and was listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange last December. Headquartered in Tokyo, Gakkyusha operates 32 schools and enrolls approximately 15,000 students. In the business year ended February 1985, Gakkyusha showed ¥3.44 billion in sales and ¥350 million in profits. Its president, Shinichi Kawabata, is only 34 years old. Since graduating from the economics department of Keio University ten years ago, Kawabata has devoted himself exclusively to Gakkyusha's management. "The entrance examination system is a hurdle Japanese children have to overcome," he says. "They need the *juku*, and society is coming to recognize that the *juku* are not a 'necessary evil' but a positive force in education."

Kawabata has reason to be proud. Not only is his company doing very well, but it is widely acknowledged that the *juku* are rapidly becoming a major industry. *Juku* are moving to establish links with Japan's leading corporations, expanding overseas, and even drawing upon the new telecommunications media to expand their offerings.

Today Seminar, named to imply an association with the University of Tokyo, recently entered into a business tie-up with a real estate company. Today Seminar Principal Kanroku Ueshima explains that they were attracted by the classroom sites their joint-venture partner could offer. Other *juku* are signing similar agreements with credit companies and private railroad lines.

The *juku* are on an eternal quest for

classroom sites and capital. Gakkyusha, for example, has tied up with a private rail line, and it was able to grow as rapidly as it did by opening classrooms in buildings near railway stations. For its part, the railway company considers the link an opportunity to enter a new market area. This kind of convergence of interests has helped to spur the growth of the *juku* industry.

The central Tokyo market is virtually saturated, and the *juku* are being forced to locate 30–40 kilometers from the lucrative metropolitan center. In nearby Saitama Prefecture, more than 10 *juku*, large and small, have been competing for students around Omiya Station for the past several years.

Like many other Japanese companies, the *juku* are also expanding overseas as competition escalates in the domestic market. Kumon, which has been opening overseas classrooms for the past decade, now has branches in Taiwan, Brazil, West Germany, the United States and Australia. In Manila, five *juku* are cooperating in a joint-venture *juku* for Japanese children in the Philippines.

Seeking students

Juku work hard to woo their students. Many send out direct mailings offering free placement testing. *Juku* salesmen visit the homes of students who score high on these tests to invite them to their classrooms, in extreme instances offering them full scholarships. It might not seem to make much business sense to waive these students' entrance and tuition fees, but the *juku* are willing to take the apparent loss because such students are highly useful as living advertisements. The more students a *juku* can get into the famous schools, the better its reputation and market rating will be. So fierce is the competition that it is accepted practice to attempt to recruit superior students from other *juku*, much as a U.S. university might attempt to steal another school's All-American athletes.

Still, one *juku* did go too far when it offered a money-back guarantee and a sliding schedule of fees to improve a student's performance so much in so many months. The table was based on the widely recognized *hensa-chi* deviation value used in Japan to measure a student's comprehensive academic ability. The average *hensa-chi* is 50, and the *juku* promised to get a student with a 35 deviation value up to a 50 rating in junior high school math for ¥400,000, to 55 for ¥450,000, to 60 for ¥500,000, and to 65 for ¥550,000. This bald presentation ap-

parently did not appeal to most parents and the advertisement soon disappeared, but it is testimony to the extremes to which many *juku* have been willing to go.

The *juku* have also been quick to take advantage of the new telecommunications media. For example, one common method of "teaching" in the *juku* is the use of practice entrance examinations. Students can take the test at the *juku* or do it at home and send it in to be graded and commented on. Fukutake Shoten, one of the institutions which helped to popularize this system, has now begun to offer a voice-response-test-grading system. In the conventional correspondence system, it could take more than ten days for a student's test to be graded and returned. With Fukutake's new system, however, the response is almost instantaneous. Students transmit their multiple-choice answers over a touch-tone telephone and the corrections and commentary are transmitted verbally over the phone.

A growing number of *juku* are using

facsimiles, enabling students to fax their tests to the *juku* to be corrected and faxed right back. Another new media, this one still in the experimental stage, is cable television. After a 20-minute lecture on cable television, students at home are faxed a quiz on the lecture to complete and fax back. They get the results at the *juku* the next day.

As well as supporting new technologies, the *juku* have also spawned new lines in established businesses. Because children commute to *juku* after they have finished their regular schooling for the day and seldom get home until late at night, there is always the chance that something could happen to them at the *juku* or during the long commute. Two years ago, Yasuda Fire & Marine Insurance Company introduced a new policy offering *juku* operators maximum liability coverage of ¥20 million per person and ¥100 million per accident for their students. As of April 1986, Yasuda had concluded 1,222 *juku* contracts for a total of nearly ¥100 million, and at least two

other insurance companies have come out with similar policies.

The *juku* are making prodigious efforts to improve their business positions in preparation for the dramatic shrinkage in their market in the next three years. At present there are approximately three million school children in the Tokyo area in grades four through nine. By 1989, this number is expected to dwindle to around 2.6 million. In the *juku* industry they talk about the coming "child shock."

The large *juku* with 5,000 or more students continue to expand their classrooms, but the small *juku* with 500-1,000 students are already feeling the pinch. Nor do the smaller *juku* have the financial resources to invest competitively in new telecommunications media and the other equipment needed to attract and keep students. In the major metropolitan areas, some smaller *juku* have banded together under joint *juku* management to compete. Others have opted to diversify into new business fields, to move upscale or to specialize in certain subjects or target schools.

The results of nationwide tests of elementary and junior high school children over the past two years have shown that Japanese children rank among the most academically advanced in the world. The Ministry of Education reluctantly admits that the *juku* are primarily responsible for this trend.

All work, no play?

However, for everything gained, something is lost. In response to the Ministry of Education survey cited earlier, Japanese children claim the *juku* have helped them understand their schoolwork better but have left them less time to play and even to sleep. Another negative effect is the burden *juku* are imposing on family budgets. Today, the *juku* claim more than 10% of all educational spending. At the same time, the *juku* have responded to their clients' educational needs by emphasizing rote learning, with the result that Japanese children score lower than hoped on deductive reasoning powers and imagination as measured by various international tests and even by the Ministry of Education's own tests.

Nine years ago, the Ministry of Education styled the results of its survey as a warning to the schools that their education was inadequate. With the most recent survey, this warning has been upgraded to an emergency alert. The light has changed from a yellow to red, and no one knows where Japan's double-barreled education system will go from here. ●



Juku students stream out of class at the end of a long, hard day.