



Japanese Education

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It is important for teachers and students to develop a broad understanding of Japanese education. Americans who are knowledgeable of teaching and learning in Japan gain insights about a different culture and are better able to clearly think about their own educational system. This Digest is an introductory overview of 1) Japanese educational achievements, 2) Japanese K–12 education, 3) Japanese higher education, 4) contemporary educational issues, and 5) significant U.S.-Japan comparative education topics.

Japanese Educational Achievements. Japan's greatest educational achievement is the high-quality basic education most young people receive by the time they complete high school. Although scores have slightly declined in recent years, Japanese students consistently rank among world leaders in international mathematics tests. Recent statistics indicate that well over 95 percent of Japanese are literate, which is particularly impressive since the Japanese language is one of the world's most difficult languages to read and write. Currently over 95 percent of Japanese high school students graduate compared to 89 percent of American students. Some Japanese education specialists estimate that the average Japanese high school graduate has attained about the same level of education as the average American after two years of college. Comparable percentages of Japanese and American high school graduates now go on to some type of post-secondary institution.

Japanese K–12 Education. Even though the Japanese adopted the American 6-3-3 model during the U.S. Occupation after World War II, elementary and secondary education is more centralized than in the United States. Control over curriculum rests largely with the national Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (*Monbukagakusho*) and education is compulsory through the ninth grade. Municipalities and private sources fund kindergartens, but national, prefectural, and local governments pay almost equal shares of educational costs for students in grades one through nine. Almost 90 percent of students attend public schools through the ninth grade, but over 29 percent of students go to private high schools. The percentage of national funding for high schools is quite low, with prefectures and municipalities assuming most of the costs for public high schools. High salaries, relatively high prestige, and low birth rates make teaching jobs quite difficult to obtain in Japan while in the United States there are teacher shortages in certain fields. Although more Japanese schools are acquiring specialists such as special education teachers and counselors, American schools have many more special subjects and support personnel than is the case in Japan. Japanese schools have only two or three administrators, one of whom has some teaching responsibilities.

Japanese students spend at least six weeks longer in school each year than their American counterparts although Japan's school year was recently shortened when all required half-day Saturday public school attendance ended in 2002.

While the Japanese K–12 curriculum is actually quite similar in many respects to the curriculum of U.S. schools, there are important differences. Because Japanese teachers at all levels are better

prepared in mathematics than their American counterparts, instruction in that subject is more sophisticated in Japan. Japanese language instruction receives more attention in Japanese schools than English instruction in the United States because of the difficulty of learning written Japanese. Virtually every Japanese student takes English language courses from the seventh grade through the final year of high school.

Since many *Japan Digest* readers are social studies teachers, a few words about those subjects are included here. First- and second-grade students study social studies in an integrated science/social studies course. In grades 3-12, there are separate civics, geography, Japanese and world history, sociology, and politics-economics courses. University-bound students may elect to take more or less social studies electives depending upon their career interests.

All Japanese texts are written and produced in the private sector; however, the texts must be approved by the Ministry of Education. Textbook content, length, and classroom utilization in Japan is quite different than in the United States. The content of Japanese textbooks is based upon the national curriculum, while most American texts tend to cover a wider array of topics. Japanese textbooks typically contain about half the pages of their American counterparts. Consequently, unlike many American teachers, almost all Japanese teachers finish their textbooks in an academic year. The Japanese believe schools should teach not only academic skills but good character traits as well. While a small amount of hours every year is devoted to moral education in the national curriculum, there is substantial anecdotal evidence that teachers do not take the instructional time too seriously and often use it for other purposes. Still, Japanese teachers endeavor to inculcate good character traits in students through the hidden curriculum. For example, all Japanese students and teachers clean school buildings every week. Japanese students are constantly exhorted by teachers to practice widely admired societal traits such as putting forth intense effort on any task and responding to greetings from teachers in a lively manner.

Many American public high schools are comprehensive. While there are a few comprehensive high schools in Japan, they are not popular. Between 75 and 80 percent of all Japanese students enroll in university preparation tracks. Most university-bound students attend separate academic high schools while students who definitely do not plan on higher education attend separate commercial or industrial high schools. In the United States, students enter secondary schools based on either school district assignment or personal choice. In Japan almost all students are admitted to high school based upon entrance examination performance. Since entering a high-ranked high school increases a student's chance of university admission or of obtaining a good job after high school graduation, over half of Japanese junior high students attend private cram schools, or *juku*, to supplement their examination preparations. Until recently examination performance was the major criterion for university entrance as well. However many private colleges and universities have replaced entrance examinations with other methods for determining admission, including interviews. Although mid- and high-level universities still rely primarily on

entrance examination scores, increasing numbers of college-bound students do not spend enormous amounts of hours studying for university examinations as was the case until just a few years ago.

Japanese Higher Education. Japan, with almost three million men and women enrolled in over 700 universities and four-year colleges, has the second largest higher educational system in the developed world. In Japan, public universities usually enjoy more prestige than their private counterparts and only about 27 percent of all university-bound students manage to gain admission to public universities. Even so, Japanese universities are considered to be the weakest component in the nation's educational system. Many Japanese students have traditionally considered their university time to be more social than academic and, usually, professors demand relatively little of their charges. Until recently, graduate education in Japan was underdeveloped compared to Europe and the United States. However in response to increased demands for graduate education because of globalization, Japanese graduate enrollments have increased by approximately one third since the mid-1990s.

Contemporary Educational Issues. In the past decade a variety of factors have contributed both to changes in Japanese schools and to increasing controversy about education. Japanese annual birth rates have been decreasing for almost two decades, and Japan's current population of almost 128 million is expected to decline. Almost half of all Japanese women with children in school now work outside the home at some point during their children's schooling. Although low compared to the U.S., Japan's divorce rates have been rising recently. While Japanese teachers now enjoy considerably smaller classes than at any time in the past, they face increasing discipline problems resulting in part from children who do not get adequate parental attention. Also Japan's economy has experienced a fifteen-year malaise, and many people believe that an inflexible educational system is in part responsible for the country's economic problems.

In 2002 the Ministry of Education began to implement educational reforms that officials labeled the most significant since the end of World War II. In an attempt to stimulate students to be independent and self-directed learners, one third of the content of the national curriculum was eliminated. Japanese students in grades 3–9 are now required to take Integrated Studies classes in which they and their teachers jointly plan projects, field trips, and other “hands-on” activities. Students in Integrated Studies learn about their local environment, history, and economy. They also engage in regular interactions with foreigners, and in learning conversational English. There are no Integrated Studies textbooks, and teachers are not allowed to give tests on what students have learned. Although many elementary school teachers and students seem to enjoy Integrated Studies, the reform is quite controversial among both the public and junior high school educators. They perceive Integrated Studies as “dumbing down” the national curriculum, and they are concerned that the reform will result in less-educated students and lower high school entrance examination performance. In response to this controversy, the Ministry of Education has recently announced plans to reevaluate Integrated Studies.

Japanese higher education is also currently going through significant changes. During the early part of the 21st century, the Japanese government initiated policies intended to expand educational opportunities in professions such as business and law. In 2004 the Japanese government declared the national universities to be “independent administrative entities,” with the goal of creating more autonomous universities offering less duplication of programs while having more financial discretion. It is expected that some national universities will attain international reputations as research centers. It is quite likely that the recent reforms will also

result in downsizing of some public universities and expansion of other public institutions of higher learning. Because of projected smaller enrollments in a few years due to continuing birth rate declines, many of Japan's private universities are potential “endangered species.”

The way certain Japanese textbooks depict World War II has twice been the subject of international controversy in the new century. In 2001 the Ministry of Education approved a new junior high school textbook, written and edited by a group of nationalist academics, that omitted topics such as the Japanese army's mistreatment of women in battle zones and areas under Japanese rule and the Nanjing Massacre (Masalski 2001). In Spring 2005 the Ministry approved a new edition of the same textbook. In both instances, despite the fact that less than 1% of all Japanese students use the book in schools, there were widespread Chinese and Korean protests. In 2005 the situation negatively affected overall Chinese-Japanese relations, as boycotts of Japanese goods occurred and some Japanese-owned property was destroyed in China.

Significant Comparative Education Topics. Despite the problems addressed in this *Digest*, American policymakers and educators will find Japan's educational system, and in particular its K–12 schools, worthy of serious study. Scholars of Japanese education are particularly interested in the following questions: Why are Japanese elementary teachers so much more successful than their American counterparts in teaching math? How have Japanese educators managed to sustain successful peer collaboration for decades? How is moral education handled in Japan, and can American textbooks be improved through a closer examination of slimmer and more focused Japanese texts? In an era of increasing globalization, it is imperative that American educators study other nations' schools. Japan offers rich food for thought for all those who wish to improve the teaching profession.

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