

**[Keynote Speech]**

**“Contribution of Local Communities to Realize Better Education  
-A View from Japanese Educational Policies”**



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# **Contribution of Local Communities to Realize Better Education -A View from Japanese Educational Policies**

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## **1. Japan's declining birthrate and aging society**

The population of Japan is rapidly decreasing and aging. As page 2 of the handout shows, the population has been decreasing since peaking in 2005. Japan's society is also aging (page 3). The number of elementary school-age children has decreased by half over the last 50 years (page 4).

The international community has given a high evaluation of the public education in Japan, but major concerns have been voiced, particularly in recent years. As page 5 shows, i) students are less motivated or willing to study, ii) there is a tendency for students to do relatively well on problems that have clear-cut answers while doing less well on problems that test reading comprehension and logical or creative thinking abilities, and iii) as the social divide in Japan is actually widening, there is a growing tendency for parents' economic and education levels to have ramifications across generations. As for the third concern, page 6 shows a clear tendency. The 2007 national standard test and life survey showed that test scores and family situations were strongly co-related.

Education has become increasingly important for Japan, with its limited natural resources and land and now a declining population.

Japanese education has gained a certain reputation in the international community, but parents and the general public seem to be more dissatisfied and distrustful of public schools. Responding to this situation and to the changing society, innovative educational reform has been taking place from two different directions. One is the approach from the outside or the top-down approach to vitalize school education by introducing a kind of market principle, which calls for competition, evaluation and accountability. The other is the approach from the inside or the bottom-up approach to bring about change by promoting decentralization, school autonomy and participation by local communities to respect the opinions of the recipients of education. In other words, this bottom-up approach is intended to change education from the inside by making schools more autonomous while promoting school-community cooperation.

The "contribution of local communities" of the title of this presentation, refers to the latter approach. Past surveys and observations have shown that by effectively utilizing the approach from the outside, such as the widely introduced school evaluation required by law and the national standard test (now changed from a complete survey to a sample survey), and the support of local communities and their active participation in school management can make schools that tend to be "closed" more transparent and foster a sense of ownership among parents and local communities. This contributes to the vitalization of schools and cultivates a better school-community relationship, which results in improving school education (page 8). In fact, a survey of all the elementary and junior high schools in Adachi Ward, Tokyo, indicates that the participation of communities in classrooms and in school events brings about positive changes in the school-community relationship and that a key factor in bringing about these changes is the participation of communities in school management (master's thesis by Ayako Umegae, Keio University, 2003).

## **2. National Commission on Educational Reform and community schools**

As I mentioned, although the international community has recognized that Japanese public education is at a relatively high level, dissatisfaction with and distrust of public schools are growing. Various social and economic

developments are behind this. With rapid globalization, Japan has made a radical shift toward a competitive society in which the economy is given the highest priority. As society has become more information-oriented, the concept that the country's society and economy are led by individuals has become dominant, rather than the traditional concept of group initiatives, in which Japan is said to have excelled. With these changes, there is a stronger tendency to demand self-responsibility. The social divide has widened as well.

Today, a wide range of information is easily available to anyone anywhere. Children are exposed to an environment full of different stimuli. In some cases, they get into bad company without their parents knowing it. Due to the lower birthrate, the high expectation of parents and society puts pressure on children. In our society, while anyone who is energetic and quick to seize opportunities can succeed, there are an increasing number of apathetic children who give up from the beginning. As family ties and community bonds weaken, existing institutions including schools are losing their authority. The traditional authority that has, for better or worse, placed limits on children's behavior is also weakening. Due to these changes, children's living environment and their ways of thinking are undergoing drastic changes, and the educational administration system seems to be unable to keep up with these social changes.

With the National Commission on Educational Reform in 2000, the Japanese educational policies began to change in line with the changing society. The final report submitted by the commission made 17 proposals for school reform, which aimed at transforming the existing bureaucratic pyramid system of educational administration from two different directions: by vitalizing it from the outside and by promoting changes from the inside.

The second subcommittee of the National Commission on Educational Reform made specific proposals in each of the following five key areas for improving school education: i) to create a system in which teachers' enthusiasm and efforts are rewarded and evaluated, ii) to create schools that are trusted by their communities, iii) to introduce the concept of "organization management" into schools and boards of education, iv) to make lessons easy to understand and effective from the children's standpoint, and v) to establish new types of schools (such as "community schools"). Many of these proposals made by the subcommittee were institutionalized over the years. In many ways, they anticipated the subsequent direction of Japanese school reform.

The introduction of community schools, an approach from the inside, is symbolic of the policy changes that have taken place since 2000, granting more independence to schools and communities (and calling for more accountability) by promoting the decentralization of education, allowing more autonomy to schools, and promoting school-community cooperation.

Community schools are a mechanism by which parents and local residents participate in school management with a certain authority and responsibility. Local school boards designate community schools and form community school councils at these schools. Compared to the existing public school system, this is an extremely decentralized system as the national and prefectural governments do not take the lead. The law stipulates that the community school council shall include representatives of parents and local residents, that the council has the authority to approve the annual school management plan, and that it has the right to express its opinions to the authority over personnel issues and recommend teachers to be assigned to the school. The law also says that the authority must respect the council's recommendations. All these imply that the members of the council, as well as the school principal are responsible for school management. As of the end of 2010, more than 600 community schools had been established in Japan.

### **3. Case study in Mitaka: community schools that offer unified primary and lower secondary education**

Mitaka, a city in Tokyo, has formulated its educational policies based on its own guiding principles. One of the key policies is to establish one community school which unifies elementary schools and a junior high school in each junior high school district. In fact, by April 2008 the city had designated all the municipal elementary and junior high schools

as community schools, by establishing a community school called *gakuen* (meaning school or campus) in each of its junior high school districts. In this way, Mitaka has introduced unified primary and lower secondary education in all of its junior high school districts.

According to the survey on Nishi-Mitaka Gakuen, the first community school that offered unified primary and lower secondary education in Mitaka, the school achieved positive results from the first year. The community school council conducted evaluations and hearings on the establishment of *gakuen* that offered unified primary and lower secondary education and found that many students, particularly those in the sixth grade (at the two elementary schools) and the seventh grade (at the junior high school), gave positive answers to the questions related to good collaboration among the three schools, good collaboration of the teachers between the elementary schools and the junior high school, and the availability of more elective subjects. The sixth and seventh graders are the students who have more opportunities to interact under the unified-school system. The interaction between elementary and junior high school students was found to be particularly effective. Many students gave positive answers to the questionnaire. The report said that the three schools acted in concert on promoting greeting to teachers and among students, cleaning campaigns and in other activities, and that the elementary school students learned from what the junior high school students were doing and started volunteer activities at nearby kindergartens. The report also said that the junior high students participating in community events outside school took good care of younger children. The principal of the *gakuen* and the staff in charge of school collaboration also said that there were significant positive effects on teachers, as the elementary school teachers and the junior high school teachers came to stand on an equal footing and achieved consistency in giving far-sighted guidance to the students. This tendency coincides with the results of the nationwide survey on schools that offer unified primary and lower secondary education (master's thesis by Risako Toyama, Keio University, 2007).

The community school, which offers unified primary and lower secondary education, has also had a positive effect on the efforts of the parents and the local community to support schools. About 30 parents and local community residents became members of the community school council and actively participated in school management, carrying out school evaluations and other activities. The membership of the school support group increased from about 250 in 2006 (school year) to about 320 in 2007 (school year). The total number of person-days for these support activities increased drastically from about 890 to about 2,300. As for teaching support, the total number of person-days increased from 630 in 2006 to 1500 in 2007. Nishi-Mitaka Gakuen is a joint organization of three schools, but the community collaboration has become extremely active. This is thought to be a positive effect of establishing a community school offering unified primary and lower secondary education.

Nishi-Mitaka Gakuen carries out a thorough school evaluation. The evaluation of the second year showed improvement in almost all items compared with the first year. For example, in the first year, 44% of the parents answering the school evaluation said that they were not satisfied with the unified curriculum and with the classes. In the second year, the dissatisfaction rate decreased to 33 percent. As for the interaction between the elementary schools and the junior high school, more students answered positively in the second year than in the first year. More parents and local residents also participated in school-support activities in the second year, as I mentioned earlier.

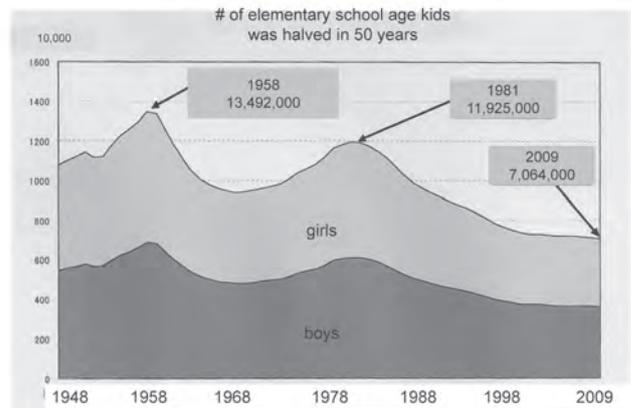
Aside from community schools, in order to respond to social trends, there are an increasing number of educational policies and systems that promote decentralization to encourage community participation and local autonomy. It is important to consider that these policies and institutions, including community schools, are only “instruments” to bring about “good schools.” What is important is will power and actions by parents and local residents as well as teachers for the betterment of local schools.

Japan Education Forum VIII  
 Collaboration toward Self-Reliant Educational Development

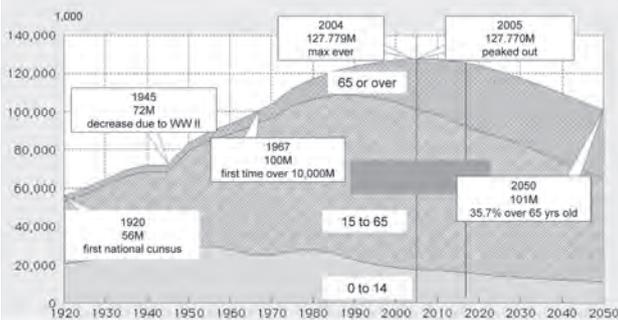
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 --- A View from Japanese Educational Policies ---

Feb. 3, 2011  
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Decreasing elementary school age children in Japan



Population is rapidly decreasing in Japan



Concerns about education in Japan

- ◆ Decreasing motivation and time devoted to study
 

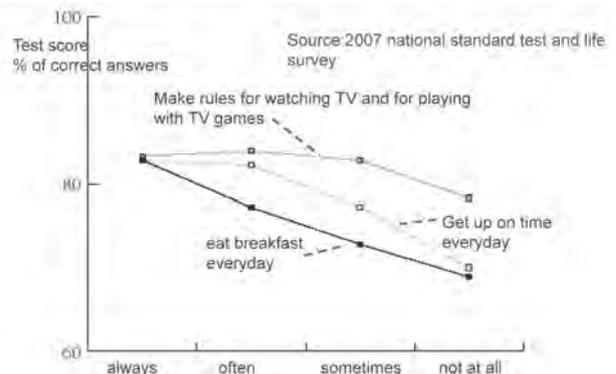
City of Fujisawa, Kanagawa prefecture (9 <sup>th</sup> graders)		
	1965	2005
want to study more	65.1%	→ 24.8%
can keep up with class	39.7%	→ 19.7%
almost no study at home	1.6%	→ 14.1%
- ◆ Capacity of logical and/or original thinking is lacking
 

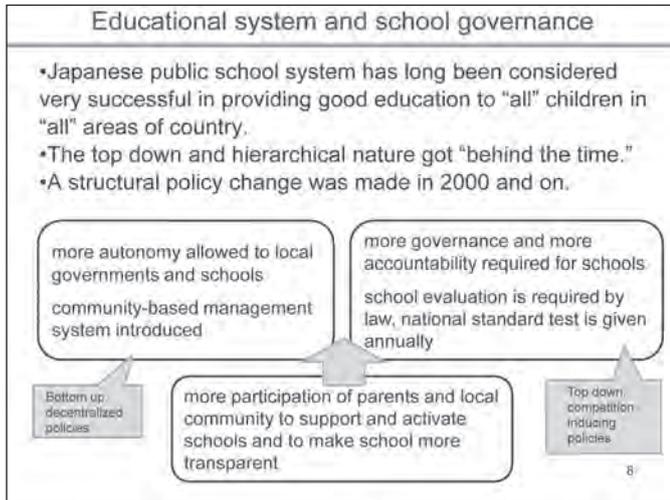
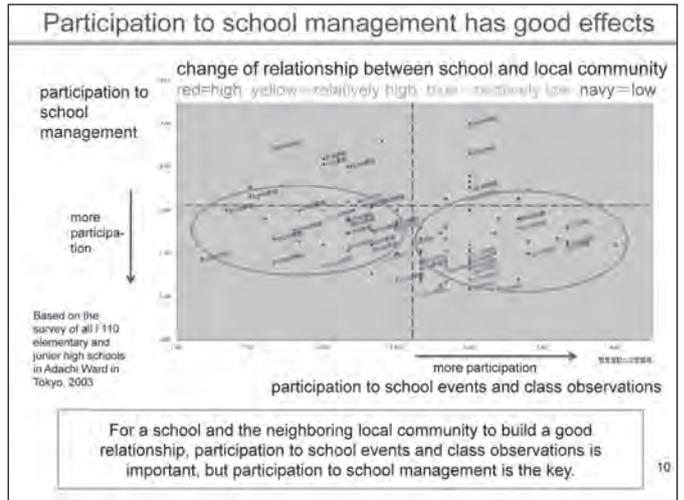
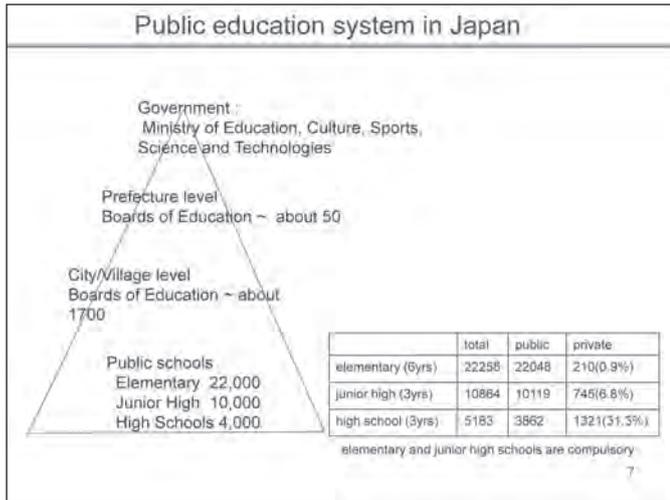
	average % of correct answers (all 8 <sup>th</sup> graders in a certain prefecture)		
	multiple-choice	descriptive	comprehension
sociology	55.8%	39.2%	45.2%
math	62.5%	55.4%	17.4%
science	60.4%	37.8%	37.8%
English	73.9%	67.1%	37.9%
- ◆ Propagation of disadvantaged families over generations  
 Polarization of society, increase of disadvantaged children  
 Parents' economic and education levels limit children's opportunities

Japan is rapidly aging



Test scores and family conditions are strongly co-related





### Case of schools in City of Mitaka

Example: Nishi-Mitaka School (established as community school in 2006) ... All public schools in City of Mitaka are now made community schools since 2006.

A movie on participation of local community residents to regular class room lectures is shown.

Effects of the policy innovation is discussed.

