

Chapter 6

TRENDS AND ISSUES IN DEREGULATION AND DECENTRALIZATION OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION IN JAPAN*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the late 19th century, Japan centralized its institutions, including education, in attempt to catch up with the Western industrialized nations. However, in order to maintain its competitive edge as a world leader in the economic globalization process, a century later the national leadership instituted a series of reforms designed to deregulate and decentralize the educational system. The objective was to provide sufficient flexibility and local control at the school level so that creativity, individual initiative, and the spirit of entrepreneurship would become part of the teaching learning process for each new generation of Japanese students.

Recently, deregulation and decentralization have been underway in all aspects of education. At the same time, several evaluation systems were introduced to assure the quality of education remains high. Although the several new schemes have been put into practice, the impact of those changes is still not clear. This study aims at introducing the present status of these movements, problems, and prospects for the future.

2. PAST AND PRESENT SYSTEM OF JAPANESE EDUCATION

In order to build a strong and unified country that could first catch up with and then cope and compete with the advanced Western nations, toward the end of the 19th century, the Japanese state centralized all its institutions, including the military, police, and education. In 1872, when the first modern education law was enacted, the state made decisions concerning the goals and subject matter of education, textbooks, and the status of teachers and students. Responsibility for the provision of facilities, school equipment, and financial support was delegated to municipalities, but under the supervision of the national government.

Following the end of World War II, a report prepared by the First American Mission on Education guided educational reform in Japan. This report criticized the centralized system of education in Japan and recommended a decentralized school system based on the American system. According to the plan, schools and school districts would be given considerable independence, and members of the community

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would have opportunities to participate in the management of schools. Consistent with new constitutional guarantees for local self-government, the Board of Education Law of 1948 provided local governments with authority over education matters. Centralized control of educational administration by the national government was no longer considered legitimate. Local educational administration was distinguished from other branches of local public administration. Local boards of education were designated as independent administrative councils. The Minister of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture (hereafter referred to as the Minister of Education) and local boards of education were to function as equals rather than in a master–servant relationship. It is important to note that these reforms ran counter to the Japanese tradition of centralized organization and management. In addition, they were implemented according to the dictates of an occupying force rather than in response to the will of the Japanese nation. The changes therefore violated the principles of democracy and liberty (Sugihara, 1998).

The system imposed by the occupation failed for various political reasons, such as conflict between conservative and radical factions in Japan, cold war struggles, and the underdevelopment of democracy as a form of governance at all levels. As the occupation came to an end, the new system was continually modified. Revision of the Board of Education Law in 1956 represented a major change introduced during that period: decentralization became nominal and the national government reestablished control over schools throughout the prefectures and municipalities. Also, a national curriculum, known as the “Course of Study,” was instituted and followed strictly throughout the country. A rigid hierarchy, with the national government located at the top, was reestablished (Wakai, 1996).

3. PRESENT STATE OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

In order to establish a frame of reference, some basic facts about the educational management structure in Japan might be useful. The popularly elected National Diet designates the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister, in turn, appoints the Minister of Education. In each of Japan’s prefectures there is a board of education made up of five members who are appointed by the governor. The board, with the approval of the Minister of Education, appoints the Prefectural Superintendent of Education.

Boards of education also exist at the local level, in the cities, towns, and villages. Mayors appoint members of those boards. In contrast to the practice of prefectural boards of education, the superintendent of a municipal board of education is elected by the board members, with the approval of the prefectural board of education.

Most national educational and cultural activities fall under the authority of the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education supervises and allocates financial support to local boards of education and may require them to report on their educational activities. As occasion demands, the Ministry of Education makes inquiries and gives orders for necessary improvements, or corrections, to local boards of education. The prefectural and municipal boards of education oversee local public educational and cultural institutions. Private schools, however, are supervised by the prefectural governors rather than the municipal authorities. Prefectural governors have the power to approve the establishment or closing of private schools and to collect necessary information.

National, prefectural, and municipal educational agencies are formally independent of each other. However, the Minister of Education offers guidance, advice and assistance to local boards of education; prefectural boards of education carry out similar functions in relation to municipal boards of education. Lower level agencies tend to view such advice as orders that must be followed. Consequently, through informal advice from the top, the administrative structure tends to operate as a centralized system.

4. DEREGULATION AND DECENTRALIZATION OF EDUCATION

In the 1980s, powerful economic networks in Japan began to press for a series of educational reforms. The issue most frequently highlighted by critics was that the education system designed after World War II was effective in helping Japan catch up to more advanced countries, but it was not capable of developing citizens with the intellectual creativity necessary to make the nation a world leader. Educational institutions were viewed as closed, overly standardized, and lacking a spirit of internationalism. In response to growing pressures for reform, a National Council on Educational Reform that reported directly to the Prime Minister was organized in 1984.

Not unlike the *Nation at Risk* report published in the United States in 1983, the Council created a sensation by issuing a report that forcefully called for the liberalization of education. However, education networks, comfortable with the old style, were slow to respond. Nevertheless, changes that fell in line with the recommendations presented in the report were gradually introduced. Although it was eventually dissolved in 1987, the Council managed to launch a series of reforms designed to deregulate and decentralize the Japanese education system (NIER, 1988). Among the plans it set in motion were a reconsideration of the roles of national and local governments, the revitalization of boards of education, and a reexamination of the function of the school districts.

The trend toward increased deregulation and administrative reform continued into the 1990s. According to a report submitted by the National Committee for the Promotion of Decentralization in 1996, local governments were advised to stop acting as subcontractors to the national government. Instead, the relationship between the two levels of government should be based on mutual cooperation, with ministries exerting minimal influence on local government. In addition, the report recommended that the national government reconsider the policy on providing educational subsidies that supported the promotion of decentralization.

In January of 1997, the Ministry of Education introduced an Education Reform Program that responded to the issues raised in the First National Committee for the Promotion of Decentralization. This document raised the possibility of providing increased flexibility to school districts, increasing the level of community participation in school activities, and abolishing the appointment-approval system for selecting school superintendents. The Ministry of Education also issued an official relaxation of the school district system. The school district system used to be rigid, with few exceptions to established regulations and procedures permitted. Thanks to the Ministry's official statement, some boards of education initiated broader selection of schools beyond the school districts at the level of compulsory education. A series of

reforms, including the Promotion of Decentralization Plan and the Basic Law Concerning the Reform of Ministries and Agencies promoted further decentralization of school administration.

Why did recent educational reforms in Japan promote the relaxation of central control over schools? Ichikawa (1995) lists neo-conservatism, changes in the power system (from a conflict driven to a consumer oriented system), a drop in the school age population (increasing competition among schools to attract students), and increasingly diversified needs in industrial circles (a diversified school system for responding to diversified needs) as the primary causes.

5. IMPACT OF THE REPORT BY THE CENTRAL COUNCIL FOR EDUCATION

In the 1990s, a series of reports moved the education system into an era of new liberalization. Many of the issues raised in those reports were referred to in a "Promotion and Decentralization Plan." One of these reports, produced in 1998 by the Central Council for Education, was titled "Policies on the Educational Administration of Local Governments." The report redefined the roles of the government and the boards of education, enhanced school autonomy, and encouraged increased community participation in educational activities. This report clarified the role of the national government, and recommended that the Ministry of Education limit its practice of giving detailed advice to lower levels. In addition, it called for reduced participation by the national and prefectural governments in municipal and school activities.

The following are the major proposals intended to improve the current system based on the Educational Program and most of them are realizing. Underlying all of these recommended changes is the desire for administrative reform and increased deregulation.

- *Abolish the appointment-approval system of superintendents:* Currently, local government offices consult with upper level officials about candidates for school superintendent before making any appointments. If the informal feedback they receive from above is negative, no appointment is made. This course of action is taken to avoid any political conflict. New proposals emphasize the need to eliminate this "informal centralized approach" and call for a new system in which local assemblies select superintendents.
- *Reconsider requirements for school principals and vice-principals:* The leadership and the management skills of school principals and vice-principals are indispensable, but the current requirements for those positions are very strict. As a result, it is often difficult to find qualified administrators to staff the schools. These requirements need to be modified. Previously, a principal was required to hold a teaching certificate and have at least 5 years experience working in schools. According to the report prepared by the Central Council for Education, the requirements for certification should be relaxed so that boards of education can appoint administrators as they deem appropriate.
- *Clarify the function of staff meetings:* In some schools, due to the historically strong influence of teachers' unions, most decisions are made during staff meetings. Under the new liberalization plans, a school principal can make decisions

independent of the teaching faculty. The objective of staff meetings should be to enhance communication, mutual understanding, and the exchange of ideas among teachers—not to make decisions. If staff meetings are organized with these goals in mind, the school principal will be able to perform his professional responsibilities more smoothly because the decision by the school principal will be formally authorized.

- *Encourage community participation in school boards:* In order for public schools to gain the trust of parents and other members of the surrounding community, schools must become more accessible. Before making important decisions, the principal needs to confer with members of the community. To achieve this goal, school boards composed of members of the community should be created. A school board system is a new practice and the board has the power of influence. A principal may use that power to oppose the teachers' unions.
- *Establish local standards for class size:* In Japan, the government previously set the standard class size at 40 students per elementary and lower secondary school classroom. However, because the number of students is declining, and because some areas of the country are more thinly populated than others, greater flexibility in establishing class size according to local circumstances should occur.
- *Create a special system for part-time teachers:* The requirements for obtaining a teaching certificate are rather severe. For example, to obtain a first class Elementary School Teacher Certificate, students are required, in addition to the completion of a bachelor's degree course, to acquire the following: 41 credits for specialized subjects (such as teaching methods), 8 credits for teaching subjects, 10 credits for specialized or teaching subjects, and 7 days experience working as care givers in special education schools and/or social welfare facilities. However, the new curriculum requires many temporary (special part-time) teachers to implement the Integrated Study Program. According to the liberalization policy, schools should be given the authority to create teaching opportunities for individuals with special knowledge and skills who may not hold teaching certificates.
- *Distinguish instructions and orders from guidance and advice:* As I note above, schools tend to treat all government communications as direct orders. Local educators usually believe that it is safer to follow orders than to ask questions. Failing to do so might result in unfavorable treatment in the future. Under the plans for the new liberalization, instructions and orders must be distinguished from guidance.

As the above examples illustrate, the report from the Central Council for Education promoted concepts such as decentralization of educational administration, the enhancement of individual initiative, school independence, and community participation in school management. The CCE also recommended the introduction of a system of school choice.

6. THE NEW FLEXIBLE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

In Japan, it is compulsory for all schools, including private ones, to follow the national Course of Study. In the past, this document clearly defined curricular content

and instructional hours, leaving little room for schools to design the curriculum to fit the needs of their communities. The new Course of Study, in contrast with its older version, allows schools to design more than 10% of all instructional hours. This change provides much needed academic flexibility at the local level. The new Course of Study was introduced at the kindergarten, elementary, and lower secondary levels in 1998, and in upper secondary schools in 1999. By 2003, this curricular reform was fully implemented at all levels of the system.

One important component of this new approach is a new course titled Integrated Study (*sogotekina gakushu*). Schools have great flexibility in determining the length of Integrated Study lessons, the number of hours that should be devoted to creative teaching/learning activities, the arrangement of instructional content at each grade level, and the locally-determined subjects that are introduced at the upper secondary level. Thus, this new course provides schools with opportunities to introduce new instructional methods and content. The Ministry of Education has not offered any curricular outlines for the new Integrated Study courses. Instead, educators are expected to develop everything by themselves at the local level. However, convincing teachers to incorporate creative thinking, which had not previously been stressed, into their lesson is proving to be no easy task. In response to a barrage of requests from local schools and boards of education for guidebooks with sample lessons, the Ministry of Education developed and distributed those materials in 2000. The guidebooks quickly became best sellers. As the Ministry of Education feared, many schools have used the guidebooks as courses of study, essentially defeating the primary goals of the reform.

7. DEREGULATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Following World War II, an increase in the number of students applying to institutions of higher education allowed most colleges and universities in Japan to recruit new students without making any special effort. Students typically selected colleges and universities based on their national reputations rather than on the curriculum they offered. The greatest challenge for high school students became passing the entrance examinations at high status universities. In order to pass the tests, high schools students must often spend long hours preparing for university entrance examinations at cram schools that offer evening and weekend classes, in addition to the time they spend in their regular schools.

Once admitted to institutions of higher education, students tend not to spend a great deal of time studying. Until the 1990s, the economic situation in Japan was quite good and graduates had little difficulty finding jobs. Unlike most industrialized nations, Japanese companies relied on their own in-house programs to train new hires and were not particularly concerned with what students learned at their colleges and universities. Graduation was almost automatic at many institutions of higher education, especially in the humanities and the social sciences. However, dramatic changes began to take place in the 1990s, prompting calls for reform of the higher education system. Three of the reasons most often used to justify those demands follow:

- *Globalization in the information age*: In the 1990s, there was a fear that students were losing interest in science and engineering. As a result, greater emphasis was placed on producing graduates who could compete in those fields at

the international level. Universities are now expected to promote academic excellence and the development of professional workers in order to maintain a competitive edge and to lead the world in this age of globalization.

- *Diversification of academic interests:* The ratio of secondary school graduates who go on to pursue higher education has been on the increase. In the near future it will be possible for anyone to study at a university if she is not overly selective. The declining birthrate will force all universities to attract students by featuring unique courses. They will also have to promote student flexibility to cope with changes in society.

As early as the 1980s various organizations recommended the points listed above. In response to a report completed by the National Council on Educational Reform, a University Council was established in 1987. The Minister of Education directed the Council to examine “concrete measures for the improvement, individualization and activation of education and studies at institutions such as universities” (Ministry of Education, 1996). Since then, the Council has prepared numerous reports that prompted the introduction of several higher education reform initiatives.

8. HIGHER EDUCATION CURRICULUM REFORM

The Standard for the Establishment of Universities sets out the general standards for the subject matters of university education. Before the revisions of 1991, students were required to earn: 36 general education credits for courses in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences; 8 credits in a foreign language; 4 credits in health and physical education; and 76 credits in courses in a specialized field. To meet those standards, universities had to secure teaching staff based upon the number of students who signed up for each course. Most universities divided courses and instructors into distinct general and specialized education streams. Instructors also tended to be placed in separate faculties or departments. For example, instructors on general education belong to a Faculty or a Department of General Education. Thus, the general education and specialized education curriculums were disconnected. Furthermore, general education programs were often criticized because students, who had already been taught some of the material in high school, often lost interest in these subjects. General education tended to be regarded as preparation for specialized education, and professors in the two areas were not provided equal levels of research funding. These factors often caused conflict between professors in the department of general education and those in specialized studies departments.

The revisions to the Standard for the Establishment of Universities that were implemented in 1991 required major modifications in university curricula. Although the total number of credits necessary to graduate remained the same, the distinction between general education and specialized education was abolished. Universities were given the autonomy to design their own curricula. They are now free to create academic programs to fit the abilities, aptitudes, and needs of their students. Similar freedom was granted to junior colleges and institutes of technology. Capitalizing on their new freedom, some universities abolished their departments of general education and created new departments. These more recently established departments tend to offer interdisciplinary approaches to education, and to pay close attention to economic and social change. Many of these new departments include in their names words like

the following: human, information, environmental, international, development, or Integrated. Another trend is for universities to emphasize practical education, such as information technology and foreign language, that will help their students secure employment after graduation. Universities that emphasize general education have become rare.

Another major change that occurred after 1991 is that the credits earned at universities and other schools have become convertible. In the past, specialized schools, junior colleges, and universities all had different types of curriculum. However, as the rules regarding the curriculum were relaxed, differences in curricula became less pronounced. Even junior colleges and technical colleges began to offer specialized courses of study. Some now offer 4-year instructional programs. Variations in the terms used to describe different educational programs are becoming insignificant.

The revisions to the standards also made it possible, in some instances, to transfer credits between universities and from specialized courses. For example, credit may be awarded to students who pass the English Proficiency Test. Such changes lower the walls separating academic institutions from other types of learning establishments. Additional measures designed to promote mutual recognition of credits have been implemented. Since 1997, students who earn credits at national universities no longer have to pay to have those credits transferred in from other institutions. The 1999 University Council Report recommended that it should be permissible to earn up to 60 credits—about half the total number of credits necessary for graduation—at institutions other than the university from which a student plans to graduate.

Deregulation breeds competition. A report prepared by the University Council in October of 1998 is subtitled “To Be Distinctive: Universities in a Competitive Environment.” The report recommended the establishment of an independent body that would evaluate reforms to the system of higher education. It also called for a redefinition of national universities as independent administrative entities. The issue of turning national universities into independent agencies has been discussed by the National Council on Educational Reform (Ichikawa, 1988). The national universities have started to prepare for this new idea; however, there is still much confusion because of the absence of clear model.

9. CURRENT PRACTICES ON DEREGULATION AND DECENTRALIZATION

9.1. *School Choice Program*

Students enroll in public elementary and junior secondary schools according to their place of residence. However, the percentage of students who are permitted to attend schools located in zones other than their own has been increasing across the country. A report prepared by the Central Education Council in 1998 called for a relaxation of national and local regulations so as to provide principals with greater freedom to manage schools according to their ideals about education, and to make the school zone system more flexible. Following the issuance of that report, the Ministry of Education ordered boards of education throughout the country to loosen their policies regarding school boundaries. The Ministry’s intent was to provide schools

with more freedom and to give students more latitude in choosing where they will be educated.

Several school districts followed that advice and revised their policies regarding school admissions. In 1998, Kiho Town in Mie Prefecture started offering a free choice system for seven elementary schools. Hozumi Town in Gifu Prefecture introduced a free choice system involving four elementary and two lower secondary schools in 2000. That same year, the Shinagawa Board of Education in Tokyo introduced its own free choice system. In all of these districts, new frameworks have been created, giving parents the freedom to choose which public schools their children will attend. In the Shinagawa system, the public elementary schools are divided into 4 blocks, each with between 8 and 12 schools. Parents may choose to send their children to any school in the block that has been allocated to their children. In 2001, the Shinagawa Board of Education expanded its free choice system to include lower secondary schools as well. In Shinagawa, 16% of all elementary school enrollees chose to attend schools other than their neighborhood institutions. That represented a slight increase over the previous year, when only 13% of all students attended schools out of their residential zones.

The factors that parents tend to consider most seriously when making choices about schools include transportation issues, a school's relationship with the local community, the choices of friends, and experiences of siblings. Interestingly, they do not usually consider the unique educational programs offered by individual schools (Sadahiro, 1999; Shinagawa Board of Education, 2001).

Government leaders have supplied several reasons for introducing the free choice system:

1. The free choice system enhances parental awareness of school programs. It contributes to the development of cooperative relationships between school, community, and home. It is believed that because the system respects the opinions of children and their parents, they will become more involved in school activities.
2. The free choice system supports the diversification and improvement of the education provided in public schools, which have been criticized as being overly standardized. Previously, 4.4% of all elementary school students and 26.7% of all lower secondary school students chose to attend national or private schools rather than public schools located in their neighborhoods. Because they will have to compete for students, the public schools will find ways to attract new students.
3. Schools that parents do not select will be forced to close. The resulting consolidation of schools will lead to more efficient administrative practices. Kiho Town, the first municipality to introduce a choice system, closed one school in 1999 and another in 2001, eliminating its smallest, least-efficient schools.

Opinions about the school zone system have swung between the egalitarian ideal of minimizing differences among schools by maintaining small school zones, and the principle of competition and the provision of a wider range of options to parents. The current tendency is to sacrifice equality in exchange for better schools. Traditionally, upper secondary school students have had the freedom to apply for admission to public schools grouped into medium or large size school zones. Recently, however,

schools have been opting to enlarge or abolish school zones. For example, in 2000 the Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education eliminated the school zone system. Students may now apply to any public high school located in the city. In 2001, the Council on Integrated Regulatory Reform submitted a report to the Prime Minister that recommended promoting the school choice system for more elementary and lower secondary schools in Japan.

In 2001, the Council on Comprehensive Regulatory Reform submitted a report to the Prime Minister that recommended promoting a school choice system for more elementary and junior high schools in Japan. This has prompted the expansion of school choice systems, especially in urban areas with well-developed public transportation systems. According to a survey of 98 Boards of Education in Tokyo and surrounding cities in Chiba, Kanagawa, and Saitama Prefectures that I conducted in 2004/2005, a quarter of the boards have adopted some sort of school system at the junior high school level. As a result, in central Tokyo, 12.3% of all students are currently enrolled in public junior high schools outside of their regular school zones. These students, combined with students enrolled in private and national schools (in other words, students who are not attending public junior high schools in their designated school zones) constitute 38.5% of all junior high schools in central Tokyo.

9.2. *New Course of Study and Integrated Study*

As I mention above, a new Course of Study was recently introduced at the elementary and junior secondary levels. Distinguishing features of this new curricular framework include a decrease in the total number of instructional hours (due to the implementation of a 5-day school week) and the administration of the Integrated Study curriculum. Integrated Study is designed to promote integrated learning through activities rather than lectures. However, some critics assert that the Integrated Study program is being used to absorb instructional hours trimmed from the schedule as a result of the shorter school week. That is to say, there are not enough hours to accommodate all of the subjects in the national curriculum, even with a new timetable. Specific subjects could not be eliminated because that would create political problems. So a new course that could serve as an umbrella for multiple subjects was created: Integrated Study. Schools have the freedom to adjust the hours allocated to Integrated Study to fit their own objectives.

While the Ministry of Education has promoted the introduction of unconventional subjects in a flexible manner since 1977, “unconventional, flexibility-oriented education” has been under constant criticism from individuals who fear that such reform will lead to the deterioration of student achievement. The Ministry previously suggested that the Course of Study represented the highest level of education and should therefore be respected. However, the government later stated that the Course of Study only set the minimum standards for learning, and schools were free to supplement it with other instructional activities. The Ministry’s attitude, combined with the circumstances surrounding the creation of Integrated Study, led some schools to teach conventional subjects during the hours allocated to Integrated Study. For example, they might use an instructional period designed to allow for creative and

integrated learning under the Integrated Study program to offer an extra hour of mathematics. Furthermore, 45% of all private elementary and secondary schools continue to hold classes on Saturdays (Ministry of Education, 2002).

On the other hand, some local governments have proposed a number of interesting programs in response to the new Course of Study: offering optional supplementary courses before and after school or on Saturdays; developing supplemental materials to cover advanced matters that extend beyond the scope of textbooks; keeping class sizes lower than those specified in the national standards; organizing classes based on the achievement levels of students; and, conducting surveys of student achievement (Yomiuri Shinbun, 2002).

Educational reform has produced a decrease in the contents of the Course of Study and the implementation of Integrated Study. Schools now have greater opportunities to display their own creativity. It can be said that the free choice system is a logical consequence of these reforms. Now that schools are no longer uniform, it would be unfair not to give freedom of choice to the students.

9.3. *Experimental Schools*

The Ministry of Education felt that it was necessary to implement new curricula on a trial basis before revising the Course of Study. Beginning in 1976, the Ministry recruited schools to implement experimental curricula based on themes determined by central education officials. Such schools, designed as R & D (Research and Development) schools, were not required to follow the Course of Study. The system was later modified. In the year 2000, 102 schools were designated as R & D schools, the budget for these schools increased, and participating schools were given the freedom to choose their own themes, rather than those set by the Ministry. This framework represented a significant departure from previous Ministry of Education practice.

Furthermore, the Ministry created additional models for experimenting with curricula. The most notable examples were the Super Science and the Super English Language high schools. Schools chosen to become Super Science high schools receive up to 25 million yen per year to supplement their regular budgets. In 2002, 77 schools applied for 26 Super Science high school spots, and 16 of 56 applicants were selected to become Super English Language high schools. This seems to suggest that more and more schools, free from pressure to conform to the practices of other schools, are now trying to highlight their unique qualities.

9.4. *Introduction of Evaluation System*

There is an argument that the introduction of deregulation and decentralization will cause an imbalance between schools and a decline the quality of instruction. An evaluation system is expected to solve that problem somehow. The Policy Evaluation Law of 2001 required all government policies, programs, and projects to be evaluated, starting in fiscal 2002. The purpose of these evaluations is to introduce a system of accountability to governmental organizations. Each Ministry or government office will evaluate its own practices and incorporate the results of those evaluations into

policymaking activities. It is also believed that publicizing the results of those evaluations will stimulate public interest in the policymaking process (Study Group on Policy Evaluation Methods, 2000).

In the area of education, the primary focus of the evaluations will be student achievement. Traditionally, norm-referenced assessments were used to evaluate student achievement. Although such tests identified student rank within a class, they did not compare schools. Recently, there has been a shift toward criterion-referenced evaluations. A similar system of evaluation had been employed before: Beginning in 1956, the Ministry of Education conducted criterion-referenced evaluation to measure student achievement. However, the system was discontinued 10 years later because the teachers' union, fearing that instructors would be judged based on their students' test scores, fiercely protested such testing. As a result, when debates about the effects of revisions to the Course of Study on student achievement, there was no data to consider. For that reason, in 2000, the National Curriculum Committee asserted that the Ministry should conduct continuous criterion-based achievement evaluations in whole Japan. Some local governments also began to conduct achievement evaluations on their own.

9.5. *Evaluation of Teachers*

When selecting schools, parents pay attention to the educational objectives set by schools as well as the qualities of teachers. However, when a national teacher evaluation system was proposed in 1958, resistance from the teachers' union was fierce. Although the system was eventually implemented, results of the evaluations were rarely shared with teachers and had no influence on their salaries (Bjork, 2000). However, the Tokyo Board of Education began to appraise the professional performance of teachers in 2000, followed by some other municipalities. In Tokyo, schools and sub-groups within schools set educational objectives. Teachers are then appraised in terms of their ability, motivation, and performance concerning each objective. In other words, the evaluations have become a systematized management tool. The Tokyo Board of Education intends to reflect on the evaluations when making decisions about teaching assignments and wages in the future.

9.6. *External Evaluation and National Institute for Academic Degrees*

Based on recommendations from the Universities Committee, the National Institute for Academic degrees was reformed in 1998. The Institute is now responsible for evaluating the quality of education provided and research conducted by Japanese universities, and disseminating the results. In 2001, 112 universities and other institutes of higher education were evaluated and the results were made public the following year. All of the universities were rated "satisfactory" or "adequate" in terms of their "contributions to society," and 96% were rated "satisfactory" or "adequate" in the area of "achievement."¹ Some of the universities complained that the evaluation standards were not clear. Nevertheless, disclosing the results of the evaluations, the objections expressed by universities, and the responses to those objections were unprecedented events.

According to the revised Standards for the Establishment of Universities of 1991, Article 2, an institution of higher education “must endeavor to examine and evaluate itself.” However, this provision was modified in 1999. According to the revised version of the document, an institution “must examine and evaluate itself” and publish the results of such assessment. Furthermore, it provided that an institution should have outside experts evaluate the results of the self-examination. Though the methods, contents, and mode of utilizing the results of the outside evaluation have not been firmly established yet, it has been decided that budget allocations will be tied to those results. This illustrates the Ministry of Education’s clear tendency to provide unequal funding to universities, depending on their demonstrated ability to improve in quality (Amano, 2002).

9.7. *Independent Administrative Agencies*

Many government agencies, including research institutes and museums, became independent administrative institutions under the Independent Agency Act of 1999. Reestablishing those agencies as independent administrative units, it was believed, would increase incentives for improvement in terms of finance, structure, personnel management, and evaluation. The Research Committee on Reforming National Universities as Independent Administrative Agencies (2002) under the Higher Education Bureau of the Ministry of Education had been discussing the reform of national universities as well. In March 2002, it published a report titled “Image on New National University Foundation” that offered a framework for reorganizing national universities as independent administrative agencies, beginning in 2004. This report was approved by the Association of National Universities after heated arguments in April. That report lists several specific objectives for such change: (1) create universities that operate independently, and are internationally competitive in both research and instruction; (2) emphasize that universities are accountable to society and the nation; (3) introduce the principle of competition between institutions of higher education; (4) clarify management responsibilities so that universities can be run in a more flexible and strategic manner.

According to the framework, each university should develop medium-term plans to meet these objectives. They should also develop strategies for crystallizing those plans on an annual basis. The Committee on the Evaluation of National Universities (tentative title) will evaluate the universities’ ability to meet those objectives, and will publish the results. Decisions about government subsidies for higher education will reflect the information included in the evaluations.

Although discussion on this topic is still in progress, the Ministry of Education did adopt a related program, which it calls the “Top 30 Concept,” in 2001. The idea behind this program is that university funding should be tied to performance, with extra funding being awarded to the 30 best universities in their respective areas. After a number of universities raced to develop materials to improve their chances of being named a “Top 30” institution, the Ministry modified its plans and adopted a new scheme, titled the “COE Program for the 21st Century.” With the new program, 100–500 million yen will be awarded to each of 10–30 universities (with an average of 20) in 10 research subject areas.

10. PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE AND KEY PROBLEMS TO BE RESOLVED

10.1. Initiative

Reports by the Central Council for Education and the University Council indicate that after decades of intense centralization of both educational management and the curriculum, Japan is finally moving towards a decentralized and deregulated education system. These changes are now being codified into legislation. The Integrated Decentralization Law of 1999 has already abolished the appointment-approval system for superintendents and relaxed requirements concerning the number of representatives serving on boards of education. The idea that schools should be directed by local government initiatives and that members of communities should be active participants in the management of schools (both recommended in the report by the Central Council for Education), represent significant changes in Japanese tradition (Kumagai, 1999).

An important issue articulated in those reports concerns responsibility for educational reform: Which administrative units should take the initiative to drive the various reforms now taking place in Japan? In elementary and secondary education, the national government is now taking that initiative. Schools and boards of education are doing their best to understand reports and expectations communicated by the government and councils. It is odd that deregulation and decentralization, which call for initiative at the grass roots level, have been implemented in a uniform manner from the top; central authorities have conveyed orders to local educators. While decentralization has provided schools with greater discretion, they are also subject to sanctions if they fail to follow the guidelines set forth by the national government. Consequently, there are many cases where deregulation simply breeds new regulations intended to direct the process of deregulation (Kubota, 1994). Through mechanisms such as an enforced evaluation system, the center can actually continue to steer the education system from a distance (Whitty, Power & Halpin, 1998).

10.2. Board of Education

Boards of education are designed to represent communities and to act independently. This structure aims to maintain the neutral nature of educational administration. Efforts to enrich the functions assigned to boards of education are currently underway. The goal of these efforts is to allow the municipalities and prefectures to implement policies that reflect their unique social and economic characteristics. The quality of superintendents is another important issue. Even though superintendents no longer must hold licenses, as was the case under the previous law, they must be provided with training and education that will allow them to improve their administrative skills.

10.3. Community Participation

In order for the boards of education, which are in charge of administrative activities in their communities, to positively respond to the needs of those communities,

the boards must make efforts to understand the will of the community, reflect on the views expressed, and encourage members of the community to participate in educational administration. How to more effectively facilitate community participation in education remains an unresolved issue. While parents of students can participate in school administration through the school board system, whether or not a particular even has a school board is up to the discretion of the principal. Thus, finding the appropriate mechanism for transferring some measure of authority to parents has not yet been identified in a satisfactory manner.

10.4. Capacity Building

Many of the education reforms currently being promoted in Japan are intended to provide considerable independence to schools and school administrators by increasing the authority allocated to school principals and vice-principals. However, it is unclear whether or not principals are prepared to carry out such non-traditional tasks. In order to improve the administrative capacity of school leaders, training must be offered to principals, vice-principals, and members of boards of education. Also, because Japanese principals usually serve for only a short time, it is often difficult for them to demonstrate strong leadership in the schools. If the changes that are presently being considered are to succeed, it may be necessary to lengthen the time that principals spend at each school, and to choose younger teachers to serve as administrators.

10.5. Quality Assurance

Educational opportunity, as well as the substance of the education provided, has become diversified in Japan in recent years. At the same time, evaluation systems are being implemented to secure high standards for students' achievement at all school level and to improve financial efficiency. The national government is promoting decentralization and deregulation, and a variety of comprehensive educational reforms have been introduced. However, initiatives related to school evaluations and the widening of the school selection process are not likely to be supported in the future. This is because the idea that the small-school zone system will provide the same quality of education in schools across the nation is an illusion. Also, the Ministry of Education has repeatedly stated that the Course of Study represents minimum academic standards and that each school and region is responsible for student achievement. Therefore, parents and communities are ultimately responsible for the success or failure of attempts to improve the quality of public education.

Difficulties will emerge as governments try to resolve the challenge of harmonizing traditional organization, structure, and content of education with new and emerging forms of diversified education that grant local actors more control. As the deregulation process continues, gaps in achievement between schools are likely to widen. The national government is not providing subsidies to support national standards regarding class size. Therefore, the municipalities bear the financial burden of lowering class sizes in their schools. Also, if school choice becomes widely accepted throughout the nation, maintaining equal opportunities for all students will be a challenge.

11. POSSIBLE PARADOX

It is necessary to expand the discretion of schools on personnel matters, budgets, and the design of educational programs. Such a redistribution of authority will encourage teachers and administrators to be independent and creative in offering education that reflects the unique characteristics of each school. Additionally, it is necessary to strengthen school administration and to clarify school responsibilities and also to strengthen the responsibilities each person in a school has. In sum, numerous educational reforms have been introduced in Japan and recent years. Among those are efforts to promote creativity, diversity, and flexibility through decentralization and deregulation. It is believed that such changes will give Japan a competitive edge in an era of globalization. Nevertheless, the tradition of a standardized education system with centralized control is proving difficult to change.

In Japan, changing the mindset of those who deal with reform is difficult. There is a strong tendency to wait for instructions from upper officials. Even though the government is now offering authority to individuals, they may or may not choose to exercise that autonomy. Many educators criticize their superiors for being authoritative, but use the prevalence of instructions from higher levels of the organization as an excuse for not assuming responsibility themselves. There are also people who would like to capitalize on the authority they have been given, but lack the training necessary to act independently. Interestingly enough, the Japanese education system may face the paradox of becoming more uniform than ever as the level of central control decreases.

NOTE

1. Universities were rated according to the following scale: dissatisfactory, fair, adequate, or satisfactory.

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