

日本から学ぶ事

LEARNING FROM

JAPAN

THE FINDINGS OF A NORTH CAROLINA DELEGATION WHICH VISITED JAPAN IN SEARCH OF BETTER MODELS OF SCHOOLING.





# LEARNING FROM JAPAN

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## SPECIAL

Finding a way to enable twenty-two elected officials, policymakers, business leaders and educators to study and visit Japanese schools was no small undertaking. It would not have been possible without the support of the Center for Global Partnership (CGP), a New York and Tokyo based foundation which exists to foster closer understanding and ties between Japan and the United States.

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The groups that conceived the idea and collaborated on coordinating the project included: the Public School Forum of NC, Governor Hunt's Education Office, The NC Center for International Understanding, NCSU's

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Without these people, the project would not have been possible. On behalf of the Learning from Japan delegation, we are grateful.



*Pictured above are the 22 members of the Learning from Japan delegation who spent nearly one-year studying Japanese schools and culminated their study with two weeks visiting schools in Japan.*

## DELEGATES

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# 要約

## EXECUTIVE

## SUMMARY

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Nearly a year's worth of study, reading and discussion about differences between Japanese and North

Carolina schools culminated when twenty-two policymakers, educators and business leaders from North Carolina traveled to Japan to spend two weeks visiting and observing Japanese schools, educators and governmental officials. Recognizing that there are profound differences between the cultures of Japan and North Carolina, the delegation came back with observations that should contribute to

the discussion about schooling in North Carolina. The balance of this document will focus on some of the starker contrasts between our systems and will look at the implications of those differences. Major findings include:

- The focus of Japanese elementary schools is on the development of character and on instilling a belief in hard work.

Students work in teams which are composed of mixed academic ability groups. This is in sharp contrast to our academic grouping of young people and to our primary focus on improving student performance on standardized tests.

- Throughout the Japanese system there is a philosophy of learning by doing. Students, working in groups, focus on challenging problems and assignments which force them to apply what they are learning. Much of our learning continues to rely on the lecture method and standardized examinations.
- International test scores find the average Japanese student reaching high levels of achievement. Many attribute that to the high expectations teachers have for all students and to the attention paid to mastery of educational concepts.

- At the high school level, Japanese young people are grouped in either academic or occupational high schools which have a clear focus and mission. That is in stark contrast to our comprehensive high school approach which groups all high schoolers in the same building.

- The Japanese school year is much longer than that of the United States. Also, teaching in Japan is a twelve-month job. Thus, students have more time to learn; teachers have more time to plan.

- Education is revered in Japan. Teachers are well-paid and respected members of the community.

- Japan has national education goals and plans which are established once every ten years. Once set, there are very few changes in the plan. That is in contrast to our start and stop approach to school reform.

While there is much to learn about Japanese schools, two findings may be of most importance to North Carolina. First, the Japanese approach to long-range planning and managing change gives schools time needed to prepare educators and the public for change. Second, there is real clarity around the goals of schools. The primary goal is the development of young people who will be contributing members of the Japanese society. Japan sees schools as the way in which young people can develop the strength of character and a belief in the value of hard work that will make them contributing members of a democratic society.

This clarity of purpose combined with thoughtful long-range plans appear to have contributed greatly to creating a system of schools which is the envy of many. It is possible that Japanese approaches in these areas offer much for North Carolinians to consider.



# INTRODUCTION

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Are there lessons about schools and schooling that North Carolina could learn from Japan? That was the question 22 North Carolinians set out to answer in the Learning from Japan (LFJ) Project co-sponsored by the Public School Forum, the North Carolina Center for International Understanding and Governor Hunt's Education Office.

The process began with months of study, reading and discussion. It culminated nearly one year later when the LFJ team spent two weeks in Japan visiting schools, meeting with educational and governmental officials and talking with teachers, students and parents.

While the official project has ended, the process continues. Since returning to the United States, the LFJ delegation has met, recorded what they saw and, in this document, attempted to capture differences between the two systems – differences which may have profound implications for North Carolina's educators, policymakers, business and community leaders and citizens.

For those who were part of the project, much remains to be done. Individual members of the delegation are sharing their insights with others. Several have made and are making formal reports to policy-making bodies. Others are attempting to incorporate

elements of what was seen in Japanese schools into the thinking of North Carolinians as they work to shape and reshape our system of schooling.

What follows is offered in the spirit of a beginning. The LFJ delegation came home with as many new questions about differences between our systems of schools as they had answers. Unanswered questions abound as do lingering doubts about whether the cultural differences between Japan and North Carolina make it difficult, if not impossible, to adapt much of what was seen in Japan. Those doubts aside, the members of the LFJ delegation offer the following observations in the hope that readers will find the differences between our systems thought provoking and challenging. In many instances, what was observed challenges basic assumptions upon which our system of schooling rests. In other instances, the following pages record vastly different governmental and societal priorities. In all cases, we hope our findings will contribute to North Carolina as it seeks ways to create a system of schooling which is second to none.

## CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN JAPAN & NORTH CAROLINA

Book after book has been written about the differences which exist between the cultures of Japan and the United States. Suffice it to say, the Learning From Japan (LFJ) delegation, even after nearly a year of reading and preparing for the trip to Japan, was not prepared for how deep those differences are.

One of the most basic differences is apparent when one lands at Tokyo's Narita Airport. Unlike most major American airports, there is not a sea of diverse people planing and deplaning. The occasional foreigner stands out. There is a racial sameness about the people that becomes more pronounced the further one travels away from urban centers.

Unlike our country which prides itself on its "Give me your tired, your poor" reputation, Japan does not encourage immigration. Aside from a small native population comparable to our native Americans, the only sizable minority in Japan is Korean and it makes up less than one percent of the population.

There is also an economic sameness that differs markedly from what is seen in our own country and even more in developing nations. When surveyed, over 90% of the Japanese people describe themselves as "middle class." While economic differences obviously exist, Japan's cities are not enclaves of wealth surrounded by decaying slums. While Japanese living in rural areas are typically less wealthy than many in urban areas, the rural poverty that grips American areas like the Mississippi Delta is not common to Japan.

The relative absence of extreme economic and cultural diversity means that there is very much a "Japanese character" which is evident even to the first-time visitor. Spoken and unspoken rules and traditions abound. Whether it is in how one introduces him/herself or knowing when shoes should come off, there is a Japanese way of doing things which has evolved over thousands of years.

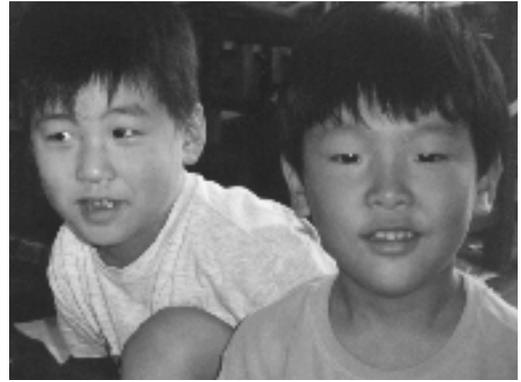
Explanations of why this is are plentiful, but several explanations are typically cited. The Japanese, living in a small, island nation which lacks abundant natural resources, have a feeling of vulnerability which fosters reliance on one another and a sense of urgency in areas like economic competitiveness and national defense.

Lacking abundant natural resources, Japan, for centuries, has had to strive to excel in other areas. To do that, the Japanese have a history of scouring the world for the best it has to offer and then molding those ideas to Japan's unique culture. For instance, following U.S. Admiral Perry's arrival in Japan with his fleet of "black ships," Japan set out to modernize its own national defense system. Borrowing military techniques from Germany, manufacturing methods from the United States and other ideas from around the world, the roots for the military power that emerged in the twentieth century were planted in response to vulnerability in the nineteenth century.

More recently, economic competitors frequently bemoan Japan's ability to spot new technologies or products elsewhere only to perfect them in their own country. No small part of what has been termed the "Japanese economic miracle" can be attributed to Japan's willingness to take promising ideas of others and to incorporate them into the Japanese culture.

Japan's willingness to import new ideas, by the way, is not confined to manufacturing and economics. A first-time visitor to Japan is struck by the number of familiar companies and products which co-exist within the Japanese culture – from McDonald's and IBM, to Baskin-Robbins and French pastry shops, Japan's cities are awash with products and companies from across the world.

International products and eating establishments aside, there remains a Japanese culture which is much more of one piece than that found in the United States. Where the U.S. prizes its immigrant heritage, Japan prides itself on retaining traditional values and cultural norms stretching back thousands of years. While the U.S. strains under the weight of its diversity, Japan imports those parts of other cultures which it finds appealing, but, as to its people and its character, they remain very much Japanese.



# 第一課

LESSON

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## A DIFFERENT ATTITUDE TOWARD EDUCATION

Returning from Japan, it is difficult to convey to people in America how profoundly the two countries' attitudes toward education differ. Over and over the LFJ delegation heard that education is almost a religion in Japan. Indeed, by our standards, that appeared to be close to the truth.

In Japan, one's success in school largely determines one's station in life, what business one will work for, the rate at which one will advance on the job.

In Japan, teachers, by law, are paid more than almost all other civil servants.

Where in North Carolina teachers leave education for private sector jobs that are perceived as "better," in Japan, people from the private sector attempt to become teachers. Where in the United States, it has become fashionable for politicians to cut "fat out of education budgets," in Japan, a politician would be taking an enormous risk in proposing cuts in educational funding.

There are many possible explanations for the importance education holds in Japan's culture. One harkens back to the degree to which being a small island nation with few natural resources has an impact on national decisions. People are Japan's greatest national asset. Not having huge expanses of arable land

or large, untapped deposits of ore, Japan's future is dependent on its people. For government, investment in education is quite literally an investment in the future of Japan.

Another possible reason for the position education holds in the Japanese culture is the degree to which education and learning have been valued for thousands of years in most Asian cultures.

A third possible explanation is that Japan is much more of a meritocracy than is the United States. There are consequences related to one's performance in schools. As noted earlier, how well one does in school largely frames one's future in Japan's society. To a much greater degree than is true in the United States, employers place value on school performance. Students from modest backgrounds can go quite far in Japan if they apply themselves in school. It would appear that in Japan "what you know" is at least as important, if not far more so, than "who you know."

For whatever reason or combination of reasons, education is central to Japanese life and educators are highly respected members of the Japanese culture.

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The Shizuoka Prefecture staff, above, played key roles in arranging school visits and educational briefings for the LFJ delegation. Over one dozen prefecture staff from the Office of International Affairs and Educational Divisions were involved in making the study project a success.

## A QUICK PRIMER ON JAPANESE EDUCATION

Leaving cultural differences aside, when one looks at schools in Japan and in North Carolina there are many similarities in addition to differences. Briefly:

- Japanese public schools are organized much like those in North Carolina. There is public pre-school for four and five year olds. Elementary school goes from first to sixth grade. The Japanese lower secondary school corresponds to our junior high schools, spanning grades seven to nine; the Japanese upper secondary school corresponds to our high school, spanning grades 10-12.
- Schooling is compulsory only through the lower secondary school. However, while Japanese young people can end their schooling before entering high school, over 95% of Japanese young people graduate from upper secondary, or high school.
- There is a national set of educational goals and a national curriculum framework. These would correspond most closely to North Carolina's state goals, state curriculum expectations and state assessment programs.
- The national Japanese government, like the state of North Carolina, pays the bulk of educational costs – especially those related to school personnel.
- Standardized tests administered at the end of the lower secondary school determine what type of high school a student will attend. Based on test scores, Japanese students can be assigned to academic high schools which focus on college preparation or to a range of occupational schools focusing on a particular area of work like manufacturing, agriculture or marine-related areas.
- The Japanese school year is considerably longer than is the school year in North Carolina. In some Japanese prefectures, the Japanese

school year is as long as 240 days per year in contrast to North Carolina's 180 day instructional year. In Shizuoka, the prefecture visited by the LFJ delegation, students attend school roughly 220 days per year. However, the prefecture is shortening the school year in response to concerns about too much pressure being placed on children.

- The bulk of Japanese schools are public; however, there is choice available through religious schools, private schools or schools connected to colleges and universities.
- Japanese schools have PTAs and membership is required or, at least, expected, of all parents.
- There are some fees for parents of school-aged children. As in North Carolina, parents pay for school lunches, but there are fees for other expenses as well. Those fees increase as students reach upper secondary grades.
- The prefectural government, equivalent to state government in the United States, plays a large role in administering the schools. The prefectural school board and superintendent assign staff and determine the budget for the prefecture. Decision making is more centralized than in America where local school boards and smaller governmental jurisdictions have greater control. It appeared, however, that individual schools have a fair degree of autonomy in determining how they will meet national goals.

While there are similarities as well as differences in the structure and governance of schools in the two countries, it is inside the schools themselves that the starkest differences begin to emerge.

LESSON

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THREE

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## JAPANESE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: A FOCUS ON CHARACTER



*Schools teach respect for the environment by having teams of students plant flowers and vegetables on the school grounds.*

On the last day the LFJ delegation was in Japan, an official of the national Japanese Ministry of Education said, "I am glad you spent so much time visiting our elementary schools; it is there that our young people learn how to be Japanese."

And, from what the LFJ delegation observed, it may well be that the elementary schools are the forge upon which the Japanese character is shaped. Random observations in elementary schools include:

- In school after school, the goals or mission statements included no reference to higher student achievement. Instead, typical school goals would include things like: instilling respect for others, developing compassion for the environment, implanting a belief in the value of effort and hard work, and fostering creativity and individuality.
- While class sizes in Japan, by American standards, are large (40 is not uncommon) it is a mistake to think of one teacher attempting to work with 40 students. Instead, one should think of one teacher working with five groups of eight students each. Instruction is geared to groups or teams of young people.
- Japanese elementary students are not grouped by ability; rather, they work in the same teams through elementary school; the teams are purposely not

grouped by ability. Typically, students stay in the same group throughout their elementary years and they will have the same teachers for a period of two years.

- Elementary school children take responsibility for their rooms and their schools. After lunch each day, students and teachers literally

clean their rooms, the halls and even the school grounds.

- There are no cafeterias in elementary schools. Food is delivered to the classrooms where students, working in teams, put out dishes and utensils, serve food and, when lunch is over, clean up, wash the dishes and store them for the following day.

- Leadership of the student teams rotates. Thus, all students have a regular opportunity to lead their groups.

- Learning is application-oriented.

Student teams are given problems to solve which require them to apply concepts they are learning.

- Just as learning is application-oriented, students learn concepts by doing.

Schools teach respect for the environment by having teams of students plant flowers and vegetables on the school grounds. Most elementary schools keep animals and birds which are cared for by their students.

- Schools are very student-centered, especially in the pre-school environments which would remind an American of Montessori school settings. There is a great deal of activity and noise. However, the LFJ delegation saw little sign of aggressive behavior

between the students. While animated, students were polite and respectful.

- There are no national or prefectural tests administered to all elementary school students. While the schools work to instill a solid foundation of basic skills, schools are not rated or "held accountable" as they are in the U.S. The focus is on developing character, not improving on last year's test scores.

After the members of the LFJ delegation had an opportunity to debrief their experiences in elementary schools, it became clear that at least some had expected schools in Japan to be regimented, mirthless places. In the schools which we observed nothing could have been further from the truth. The pre-schools and elementary schools were joyful places; students were animated and learning.

The focus and patterns within the schools are geared to teaching young people to work and learn in groups, to take responsibility for their surroundings and to contribute to the group. As one teacher said during a post-observation interview, "if we succeed in developing their character and instilling a belief in hard work, good grades will follow."

LESSON

第四課

FOUR

## LONG-RANGE PLANNING & MANAGING CHANGE



What the LFJ delegation observed when visiting Japanese pre-schools and elementary schools did not come about by happenstance. As the LFJ delegates would learn, the success of Japan's schools is not the result of good fortune. Instead, it may owe much of its success to a long-range planning process that stands in sharp contrast to that employed in North Carolina.

If the LFJ delegation had visited Japan's pre-schools only a few years ago, they would have found a very different structure of schooling – one that would be familiar to someone accustomed to traditional American kindergarten classes. The adoption of a new national education goal precipitated planning that led to the Montessori-like schools we observed.

The new national goal called for Japan's schools to focus on fostering creativity and individuality in young people. That sparked education officials to look at schools across the world. Their visits and investigation led Japanese educational officials to set the course toward a Montessori-like model that would become the norm in all of Japan's pre-schools.

Recognizing that a change that wrenching cannot happen overnight, much less win quick approval from parents, the time-line for implementation called for schools to spend two years training teachers and principals and taking the time needed to plan for the change. The two years also gave schools and the government an opportunity to educate the public about the change and prepare them for a very different pre-school environment. It further enabled teachers who were not able or willing to make the change to transfer from pre-schools to more traditional elementary school settings.

Today, with Japan in the ninth year of their most recent ten-year education plan, it appears that both educators and the public have come to embrace the change.

Embracing technology and harnessing it to instruction will almost certainly be a new goal in the next ten-year national education plan. Educators, however, are not waiting for the new ten-year cycle to begin planning. Education officials from the Shizuoka Prefecture, the same officials who arranged the LFJ school visitation program, are now visiting schools across the world, including some in North Carolina. They are talking to governmental officials and educators; they are attempting to see what lessons others have learned about technology in the schools.

Back in Shizuoka, the prefecture is nearing completion of a major teacher training installation that will be used to give technology training to every teacher in the prefecture.

In fact, the government envisions each teacher receiving an intense one-week of training after which they will be given a computer for their own use. After they have had an opportunity to grow familiar with technology, they will receive another week of training; this time, with a focus on using technology for instruction. Then, and only then, will the government begin outfitting schools and classrooms with technology.

In short, the Japanese educational system, while willing to make enormous changes, makes them within the context of plans which:

- Involve many people across the country in their formulation.
- Are based on careful study and research into programs across the world.
- Take into account the necessity of providing the time and dollar investment needed for teacher training and planning.
- Enable local governmental and school officials to prepare the public for change.
- Are set in ten-year blocks of time in the belief that it takes roughly a decade for a new idea to become institutionalized and gain public acceptance.
- Are not easily changed, once adopted.
- Are largely drawn up by professional educators, not by elected officials.

LESSON

第五課

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FIVE



The fishing vessel pictured above, owned by the Yaizu Maritime High School, goes to sea for over four weeks at a time, with students preparing for maritime-related careers.

## PREPARING YOUNG PEOPLE FOR THE WORKFORCE

Several members of the LFJ delegation had a special interest in seeing how Japan prepares young people for the challenges of tomorrow's workforce. Those delegates spent much of their school visitation time seeing Japanese high schools which have what we would call a vocational focus. Among other things, they found:

- Japanese high schools are either academic or occupational. Academic high schools focus on preparing young people for the entrance examinations they need to become accepted into college and to prepare them for college coursework. Occupational high schools are focused on a particular area of employment. Agricultural high schools focus on preparing students for agribusiness; maritime schools focus on a range of skills from aqua-agriculture to marketing to navigation; commercial high schools focus on clerical, accounting and technology skills; and manufacturing high schools focus on skills ranging from welding and robotics to computer-aided design work.
- The government invests roughly four dollars for each student in an occupational high school for every one dollar invested in academic high school students.
- Technology used in the occupational schools would rival that found in North Carolina's community colleges.
- As in elementary schools, the focus is on applied learning. Students frequently work in teams; teams are given challenging assignments testing their ability to apply concepts they are learning.
- Teachers and schools assume responsibility for job placement. Since most large employers hire groups of new employees in cycles that coincide with high school graduation, most students are placed (hired) with employers prior to graduation.

- Schools keep placement records and do follow-up studies to assess the success of their graduates.
- Special focus schools are located in proximity to job opportunities. Maritime schools, as one would expect, are located in or near busy fishing or maritime recreation areas; manufacturing high schools are located in the heart of major manufacturing centers.
- Major employers work closely with the schools. Large companies like Yamaha, for instance, assign employees to teach highly specialized classes in manufacturing high schools for up to two years at a time.
- Some students travel considerable distances to reach specialized occupational schools. Students attending Shizuoka's manufacturing high school, for instance, came by bike, bus and train. The government is not responsible for providing transportation to and from school; however, it must be noted that the mass transit system in Japan is far more developed and accessible than ours.

One school in particular seemed to best illustrate Japan's commitment to occupational training: the Yaizu Maritime School located in a fishing community roughly one-hour away from the capitol of the Shizuoka Prefecture. Students in the maritime academy culminated their studies by taking a voyage of nearly forty days on a school-owned, state-of-the-art fishing vessel equipped with its own food processing equipment. Roughly 30 students go to sea with 20 adults, including three teachers. During

the day, students attend formal classes in academic subjects, but the rest of the day is devoted to learning applied skills – machine maintenance, navigation, sonar use, food processing and the like. When they return, they take course work in marketing and distribution and literally market and sell the fish they caught while at sea.

Others in the school are learning to commercially raise fish and eels. In fact, the school receives a steady stream of revenue from carp, eel and other fish raised by the students. Presuming that there will be a diminishing supply of seafood in the years ahead, the school is attempting to raise a generation of young people which will be prepared to enter what may well prove to be a growth industry in the years ahead.

Still other students are learning how to navigate and captain a school-owned recreational ship similar to those chartered for pleasure fishing in towns along Japan's coast.

When the students graduate, in virtually all cases, they will have taken the tests necessary to give them certification in one or more of over 30 different skill areas related to the maritime trades.

LESSON

第六課

SIX

## ON BEING A STUDENT IN JAPAN



*The minimum driving age in Japan is eighteen; thus, high schools in Japan are surrounded with bicycle parking areas as seen above.*

While most of the interaction the LFJ delegation had with Japanese students left an impression of motivated young people in supportive and stimulating environments, the importance placed on education and student performance creates another dimension which directly bears on young people.

The closer a child comes to the final examinations at the end of Japan's lower secondary schools, the more serious are the consequences of performing badly. The best testament to the degree of pressure placed on young people is the staggering enrollment rates in "Jukus" or private schools often called "cram schools." By the time Japanese young people are in lower secondary grades, over 60% of them are taking coursework at night or on weekends in a Juku. By the time they are nearing the all-important examinations at the end-of-high school which will determine where they go to college, over 70% are enrolled in Jukus.

For the typical child, that means attending school all day, being part of a required extra-curricular activity after school, eating a quick meal and attending courses at a Juku until 8:30 or 9:30 pm.

The LFJ delegation had an opportunity to visit a Juku one evening and observed middle-school aged children in a mathematics cram course. The instructor was demanding; the coursework was fast paced. We learned later that the

course closely tracked the public school curriculum and that the young people were covering material that they would cover again in a short period of time in their public school classrooms. By enrolling in the Juku math course, the young people would be ahead of their peers and able to cover essentially the same material twice, hopefully mastering it better than they would have without the extra effort.

The role that Jukus have assumed in Japan is a strong testament to differences between our culture's attitudes toward schools. There are others:

- Japanese high school students are expected not to hold after-school jobs. In fact, a permission slip from school principals is needed before most employers would hire a student before high school graduation.
- The age at which one can receive a driver's license is 18, not, as it is in the U.S., 16. Subsequently, instead of high school parking lots filled with student-driven cars, Japanese schools are surrounded by bicycles.

School is serious business to Japanese families and young people. The climate in academic high schools is far closer to the stereotypic regimented school room that some of the LFJ delegation had expected to see when visiting Japan.

In contrast to the student-centered environments in pre-schools and elementary schools, upper secondary schools, especially the academic high schools, appear to follow more traditional approaches. In contrast to seeing younger Japanese students who were animated and working in groups, the LFJ delegation typically saw academic high school students seated in rows as instructors lectured in much the same fashion that is true in many American classrooms.

It is clear that the weight of responsibility a student feels increases as they approach high school graduation, especially in academic high schools. Whether that responsibility is imposed directly or indirectly by parents, peers, the schools or by the young people themselves, enrollment in Jukus and barriers against diversions like part-time jobs and cars underline the serious nature of schooling in Japan.

LESSON

第七課

SEVEN

## ON BEING AN EDUCATOR IN JAPAN



Becoming an educator in Japan means being selected in a very competitive field. Not only is teaching highly regarded in Japan, teaching is a well-paid and secure field. By law, teachers in Japan are paid 10% more than managers in other areas of governmental or civil service work. Annual bonuses, housing allowances and other “extras” add even more value to an educator’s income.

With that, educators in Japan assume a level of responsibility commensurate with their income. Consider the following:

- Teaching in Japan is a year-round job. Not only is the instructional year forty-plus days longer than in North Carolina, teachers are responsible for planning and training during the time students are not in school.
- While students have school vacations and breaks, they are not “on vacation” as they would be in our public schools. Teachers devise learning plans for students such as required reading, and students frequently are expected to turn in material when they return to school.
- Teachers assume a great deal of responsibility for young people. In the words of education officials who met with the LFJ delegation, “Schools (teachers) assume much of the

responsibility that families and churches would in your country.”

- Nothing underscores the difference in responsibility better than what would happen if a Japanese student were caught shoplifting – the first call, according to what the LFJ delegation was told, would go not to the home, but to the student’s teacher. A student’s success in school and in the community is seen as a reflection on the school and on the teacher.
- The acceptance of responsibility and belief in hard work typified what we heard from educators themselves. The delegation heard very little “buck passing” (i.e. a child is “learning deficient,” or the “parents don’t care”). Instead, the sentiment when describing a slow-learner was more likely to be “I (the teacher) have to work harder; with the parents, I need to instill a belief in the value of effort.”
- Confronted with learning problems, teachers intervene with children’s parents and attempt to enlist greater parental support.
- The typical teaching day is demanding. In most of the schools we observed, there was a large room in which every teacher had a desk, filing equipment and a work area. Days began in those rooms with brief faculty meetings. At the end of the day, teachers debriefed and prepared for the next day’s lessons. These meetings allow teachers to focus on strategies aimed at enabling students to master basic concepts. Teachers share concepts and critique teaching approaches used during the day.
- Teachers have desks and other work areas provided for their use.
- Teachers also have a range of extra-curricular responsibilities; students are required to participate in one or more extra-curricular activities at the end of each school day.
- At the secondary level, in contrast to high school teachers in North Carolina, Japanese teachers have considerable time during the school day for meetings and planning.

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- Teachers in Japan are rotated to different schools and teaching assignments on a regular basis. A belief in the value of giving people different responsibilities and assignments is equally true in the national and prefectural education agencies. An agency employee might be working on certification one year and facility planning the next.

The typical Japanese school is also structured differently for teachers than is the typical North Carolina school. Each school has “master teachers,” experienced teachers who assume roles we would associate with specialized staff like guidance counselors, assistant principals or media specialists. One master teacher might work with new teachers; another might focus on discipline, while yet another might spend additional time on curricular issues.

It is interesting to note that there is not a college program of preparation for school administrators. Successful teachers are rewarded with additional roles and responsibilities as master teachers; successful master teachers move into assistant principalships, and principals are drawn from the ranks of assistant principals. Subsequently, principals are typically successful, seasoned educators who have gained the respect of their peers.

Several principals expressed a concern that they had large numbers of relatively inexperienced teachers who required a great deal of support. That said, it appeared that a great deal of attention is paid to less experienced teachers. At a minimum, through daily meetings of faculty, younger teachers have an opportunity for coaching from more seasoned colleagues and there appeared to be a high level of sharing among teachers.

## RANDOM OBSERVATIONS ABOUT SCHOOLING IN JAPAN



*Japanese children take responsibility for their schools. After lunch each day, students and teachers clean their rooms, the halls and even the school grounds.*

It is virtually impossible to record the lessons learned by 22 people each of whom came away with their own memories and insights. In an effort to stimulate more discussion and thinking about what the group saw while in Japan, the following random observations may be of interest.

### SCHOOL FACILITIES

- Compared to schools in North Carolina, the Japanese schools visited were very utilitarian. While school grounds were well-kept and clean, many of the buildings were old and modestly equipped. The same observation could be made about playing fields and school grounds.
- Compared to schools in the U.S., technology is quite sparse, except in occupational high schools, where technology is state of the art with robotics, CAD stations, navigational equipment and the like. However, in other schools, rare was the computer at a teacher work station and rarer yet was technology in classrooms, especially in elementary schools.
- Media centers were considerably smaller and less well equipped than those in the United States.
- What the schools lacked in amenities, they made up for in a sense of tradition. Many buildings had paintings or photographs of former school principals, or busts of highly regarded educators or coaches. In briefings, school administrators typically began by citing the number of people who had graduated from the school and, in some cases, famous graduates.

### EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

- The longer Japanese school year and school day enable programs to be three-dimensional. As noted earlier, students are required to participate in extra-curricular, after-school activities.
- High schools annually test their students for physical fitness and regular exercise and swimming are part of the school day.
- All high schools have olympic-size pools; since the Olympics were held in Japan, swimming has become a national source of pride.

### THE ROLE OF PARENTS & COMMUNITY

- Most Japanese elementary schools are neighborhood schools in the traditional sense of the word. Students walk to school. Many adults living in a neighborhood would have attended local schools as a child. There are deep bonds between school and home.
- In a discussion with PTA leaders of an elementary school the difference between the U.S. and Japan became clear. Members of the LFJ delegation were attempting to gauge the degree of parental involvement and asked how many participated in PTA activities. The PTA leaders seemed puzzled. Finally one said, "Well, of course, all parents belong; it is expected."
- There is a Japanese expression meaning "Education Mama" which is used not in derision but in describing a mother who is very attentive to her children and to their success in schools. Instilling a belief in young people in the value of hard work appears to be the result of concerted effort in school and at home.

- Especially at the elementary level, parents were much in evidence. Some even volunteer to care for the school's plants and animals during school breaks.
- While there was little evidence of school/business partnership activities common in North Carolina (i.e. businesses adopting schools, business mentors, etc.), businesses work closely with occupational high schools in matters such as job placement and providing specialized employees to teach classes.

OTHER

他の課題

LESSONS



*There are no cafeterias in Japanese elementary schools. At lunch time food is delivered to the classrooms where students serve the food and clean up, and wash and store dishes for the following day.*

## WE ARE ALL SEARCHING FOR BETTER WAYS

While the LFJ project went to Japan to search for better ways to educate our young people, it must be noted that Japan is wrestling with its own questions.

At a time when we, in North Carolina and the United States, are moving closer and closer to a consensus around state, and possibly national, education goals or standards, the Japanese question whether their system should be more flexible.

Some in the United States feel we have gone too far in the direction of fostering individuality, but a Japanese national priority is fostering individuality in an attempt to encourage creativity in young people.

While some cite Japan's reliance on traditional teaching as evidence that technology cannot replace basic teaching, Japan is about to invest heavily in school technology.

While others site Japan's method of drawing school principals from the ranks of teachers as evidence that successful teachers make the best school leaders, Japanese universities are working with American universities as they prepare to introduce formalized training for prospective school principals.

If nothing else was learned by the LFJ delegation, it was that we are all searching for better ways to educate our young and that both systems have their strengths and weaknesses.

For policymakers, educators and concerned citizens in North Carolina, the hoped-for impact of this trip to Japan is in the potential these findings have to stimulate us to consider different approaches to schooling.

The pages which follow are an attempt to draw on the experience of the LFJ delegation and to frame questions that merit consideration.

教訓

THE LAST

LESSON



## THE IMPORTANCE OF CLARITY & CONSISTENCY

After what is now a decade-plus, roller-coaster of school reform in the United States, the clarity of purpose in Japanese schools is breathtaking in its simplicity.

- Because of the national education goals and curriculum expectations in Japan, schools know what they are doing and they are focused on doing it.
- Because education goals and plans are set for ten years, the stop-and-start school improvement initiatives Americans have grown accustomed to are not the norm in Japan.
- Because of the nature of long-term planning in Japan, new initiatives are not the result of a newly elected office holder's campaign platform; rather, they are the result of research and study. As in business, the Japanese both bring the most promising ideas and practices to bear in their nation and are able to avoid the early implementation mistakes of others.
- Because the nature of planning in Japan gives educators a decade to focus on new initiatives, school officials have the luxury of time to prepare the public for change, for planning and for retraining teachers.

Using only the last decade as a contrast, educational planning in North Carolina could not be more different. In 1986, career ladders and the Basic Education Plan (BEP) were touted as the salvation of North Carolina's schools. In 1989, with commitment and enthusiasm for career ladders and the BEP ebbing, the School Improvement and Accountability Act introduced report cards, accountability and local flexibility. In the early nineties, schools began to experiment with total quality management principles; a Site Based Management Task Force was established and schools were mandated to relinquish more control to local

schools. In 1996, the State Board of Education has launched the ABC plan which will replace today's accountability system. In the meantime, career ladder programs were abandoned. The BEP was never completed. The School Improvement & Accountability Act is sinking under the weight of amendments and changes.

In virtually all cases, new initiatives were introduced hastily; little, if any, money or time were budgeted to support changes; local communities were asked to shift their thinking from one approach to another in a matter of months.

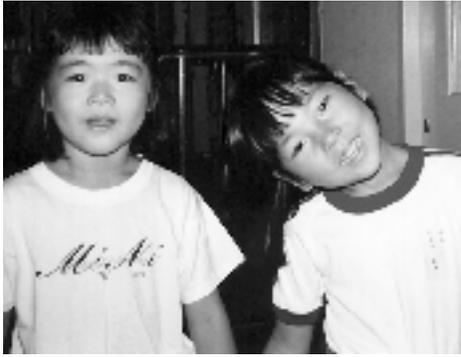
During a discussion about differences in planning initiated after the LFJ delegation had returned, one participant, only half-jokingly, said: "Well, we have ten-year plans; we just make new ones every two or four years."

Few in North Carolina would disagree that our start-and-stop approach to school reform has taken a toll. Studies find educators cynical about new initiatives. With justification, they doubt that policymakers will stay with any plan long enough for it to take root.

For policymakers, the contrast between North Carolina and Japan raises troubling questions:

- 1** Given the degree to which decision making about North Carolina's schools and schooling is politicized, is it possible to even imagine a plan remaining intact for a decade?
- 2** Would future governors or members of General Assemblies be willing to trust educators to devise long-range plans?
- 3** Is it possible to balance today's drive for instant results with research that finds planning, training and building support to be essential if positive changes are to take root?

## LABELING, TRACKING & CHARACTER



影郷音

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As was recounted earlier in this document, Japanese pre-schools and elementary schools are structured and focused very differently than are those of North Carolina. Two things make them most different. First, in Japan, the focus of elementary schools is developing character and instilling a belief in effort. In most of the United States, improvement of student performance as measured by test scores has become the number one goal.

Second, in Japan, young people are not grouped by ability. Instead, they work in mixed-ability teams through their entire elementary school experience. In contrast, by first grade, youngsters in North Carolina know who is “winning and losing.” Gifted and talented labels separate children and, in most cases, the children live up to our expectations. Those who are gifted and talented will, for the most part, do well; others will do less well.

Attempting to explain our method of Academically Gifted (AG) grouping to one of the prefectural staff who arranged our trip drove home the gulf between our systems of sorting and tracking children. Our host asked twice, “Do you mean you use an IQ test in first grade to determine who is gifted?” After being assured that we did, he then asked: “Then, if because of that test, my son or daughter were not labeled AG, they could never have the advantage of special programs even if they were making a great effort?” We assured him that “yes, that is true.”

The Japanese believe that their system of placing students in mixed ability groups accomplishes several things. It insures that young people will learn to work with students unlike them. It places a responsibility on academically gifted to help less gifted team members. Most importantly, the focus on effort and hard work insures that all students will work to help move their groups forward.

The focus on instilling a belief in hard work and character, when contrasted to our system of sorting, grouping and testing raises basic questions:

**1** As many have asked before, does our system of early labeling become a self-fulfilling prophecy? If a non-gifted child knows that he or she will never be able to join the ranks of AG children, is there a disincentive to effort from the earliest days of school? Does early labeling have an impact on teacher expectations?

**2** American research says that children learn best by doing and by learning in and working with groups. Is our early focus on testing and accountability helping or impeding the ability of teachers to build self-confidence, give students time to apply what they are learning and instill a more solid grasp of basics?

**3** The focus of Japanese schools is on mastery of basic educational concepts and on the ability to apply concepts to problem solving. Critiques of America’s schools contend that the focus of our schools is on covering large amounts of material without taking the time to apply what is learned. Should we rethink our approach to curriculum coverage? Do our schools devote too much time to coverage of material and too little to mastery of concepts?

**4** Nationwide, America is in the midst of a crisis of character. School safety is the number one concern of parents and taxpayers. Could the Japanese system of focusing on individual responsibility, group cooperation and effort point the way to more promising solutions to our country’s growing problems?

**5** Do we have the proverbial “cart before the horse?” Could it be true that the Japanese focus on developing strong character and a belief in the value of hard work first, will translate to high academic performance later?

These questions are troubling and they are no less so when one asks the same questions of our approach toward vocational education.

## PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE WORKFORCE



*Students in a manufacturing high school work in teams on independent study projects. Students above work with machines common to industries in their area.*

While Japan does not sort or group students by academic ability in the elementary years, Japan, like most European nations, does group young people by ability in high school. Within the ranks of students unlikely to go on to college, there are also gradations of grouping based on ability.

Subsequently, the focus of high schools is very clear. Academic high schools know what they are about; they are preparing young people to succeed in college. Occupational schools, on the other hand, are not just teaching occupational skills; they also are grounding young people in academics they will need. The focus, however, in both types of schools is clear. One type is accountable for how well graduates do on college admission tests and for what types of colleges and universities their graduates attend. The other type holds itself accountable for job

placement rates and the success of graduates in the workplace.

The questions raised by Japan's approach to schooling at the high school level are difficult. For instance:

**1** Can we expect high schools to be all things to all people? Would students benefit if schools had a clear focus – academic or occupational?

**2** Could North Carolina, given its history of local school jurisdictions, think regionally about occupational schools? Would it be possible, for instance, to have five maritime high schools between Brunswick and Dare Counties that served young people from throughout eastern North Carolina?

Could occupational schools focused on manufacturing be located in cities like Winston-Salem, Raleigh and Charlotte, but draw students from counties across the Piedmont?



## RETHINKING THE SCHOOL YEAR

Because of their much longer school year, graduates of Japan's high schools have the equivalent of three to four more years of education than do their counterparts in North Carolina.

Because of the longer school year and the longer school day, Japanese young people also have time for a well-rounded school program which balances extra-curricular activities, academics and physical fitness. Japanese students can also learn by doing and by working on group projects because of the additional time.

Because teaching in Japan is a full-time job, teachers have the benefit of time for planning, study and training that their North Carolina counterparts do not have.

**1** In America and in North Carolina, study after study has challenged the assumption that America's long-standing 180 day instructional calendar is adequate to meet today's educational

challenges. Additional studies have called for making teaching a full-time job to provide the time needed for planning, study and training. Can policymakers, parents and concerned citizens continue to ignore the issue of time for teaching, training and planning?

**2** Largely because of North Carolina's growing facility problems, more and more communities are looking at year-round schools as a solution to building problems. Year-round schooling in North Carolina, however, does not mean adding additional days of instruction; rather, it means housing additional students in one building through a rotation system based on the same 180 day school year. Is year-round schooling as it is being discussed in North Carolina likely to further limit the ability of North Carolina to extend the school year to a length competitive with countries like Japan or Germany?

## TEACHERS & NORTH CAROLINA

It may be that education will never occupy the same place within the culture of America that it does in Japan. However, until steps are taken to enhance the image of educators it is

almost certain that little will change. Salaries, of course, are the most tangible difference between how teachers in the two cultures are viewed. There are, however, other equally important issues. As noted earlier, the ten-year national education plans are largely framed by educators. Elected officials do not impose wrenching, and sometimes unsound, changes on schools in the midst of a ten-year cycle.

Goals are clear; expectations are known. For North Carolina the role and nature of being an educator in Japan raises serious questions:

**1** What would a truly professional salary for teachers be? Could policymakers extend the length of teacher contracts to twelve months and both attend to the salary issue while gaining valuable time for planning, study and training?

**2** Should the state look at other benefits such as housing allowances, sabbatical leave, reimbursement for college coursework, individual accounts for professional reading and material?

**3** Is it possible for the state to devise and support a better system of induction for new teachers to prevent the alarmingly high turnover rates of new teachers?

IMPLICATIONS

影郷者

FOR NC



## CONCLUSION

# 結論

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The LFJ delegation was confronted with so many contrasts and different ways of approaching education that it has been difficult to limit both the list of observations and the implications they raise.

As noted earlier, however, this document records what the delegation hopes will only be a beginning as policymakers, educators and business leaders continue to look at Japan and at other countries for answers to our own educational problems.

The LFJ Project has sparked an interest that may blossom in future exchanges of teachers between North Carolina and Japan; it may lead to a joint initiative in the administrative training area; it is possible we will delve more deeply into issues related to the proper role of policymakers and government.

Those of us who were part of the Learning from Japan project fervently hope that the questions raised in this

document do not fall on deaf ears.

While we are very aware that differences between our cultures make it unlikely and possibly unwise that we should attempt to import Japan's approach to schooling intact, we do believe that there is much to learn from our new friends in Japan.

In closing, we wish to reiterate the fact that this initial examination would not have been possible without the support of the Center for Global Partnership, the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, the Japan Center of NC State University, the International Studies Center in the School of Education at East Carolina University, the Center for International Understanding, Governor Hunt's Office, and, most of all, the prefectural staff and educators in Shizuoka who opened their doors to us.



感謝を込めて

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## COLLABORATORS

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## TRANSLATOR

Thanks also to Yoshiko K. Johnson for the Kanji translation that appears in this report. Mrs. Johnson teaches international classes at the Japanese Language School in Raleigh. The classes are especially designed for business people who wish to increase their knowledge of the Japanese culture and language. She also teaches Japanese at Wiley Elementary International Magnet School in Raleigh.

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Note: The North Carolina Japan Center at North Carolina State University maintains a library and stock of reference material, including videotapes on Japan, which are available to those interested in further studies about Japan or its system of schooling.

日本から学ぶ事

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