JAPAN

Total area: 377 801 sq km
Population: 125 351 000

Illiterate population aged 15 years and over: ...
percentage of illiterates: ...
Public current expenditure on education
as percentage of GNP: ...
Public current expenditure by level of education (1994*)
pre-primary: 2.3%
primary: 37.0%
secondary: 41.8%
tertiary: 12.1%
Gross enrolment ratios by level of education (1994)
pre-primary: 49%
primary: 103%
secondary: 100%
tertiary: 41%

Source: UNESCO statistical yearbook, 1999; [...] data not available.
(* ) Including capital expenditure.

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SHIGEO YOSHIKAWA

1. Background Information on the National Curriculum Standards in Japan

1a. System of basic education

Children in Japan from ages 6 to 11 are required to attend elementary school, and children from 12 to 14 are required to attend lower secondary school. The six years of general elementary school education and the three years of general lower secondary education are compulsory.

1b. Who formulates the national curricula standards?

Monbusho (The Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture of Japan) has set a nationwide standard of education from kindergarten to upper secondary school. It is based on the concept of equal educational opportunities for all.

A Monbusho ordinance has set the types of subjects and the number of hours for teaching them. Fundamental standards, such as the objectives and content of all subjects, are stipulated in the National Curriculum Standards for kindergarten, elementary, lower secondary and upper secondary schools.

The National Curriculum Standards were first prescribed in 1947. They have been revised subsequently every ten years to keep up with the times. Revision of the Standards is made upon recommendation of the Curriculum Council, the advisory organ of the Minister of Education, Science, Sports and Culture.

1c. Educational curriculum in schools

Each school is supposed to make its own educational plan in line with the relevant laws and the National Curriculum Standards, taking into account the actual circumstances of each school and each community. Schools are required to use textbooks and most of these
textbooks are edited by private entities, in accordance with the National Curriculum Standards are authorized by Monbusho. The central government provides the textbooks free of charge to students in national, public and private compulsory education schools.

1d. Underlying philosophy of the national curriculum standards

The present National Curriculum Standards were released by Monbusho in 1989 and have been implemented in every school since 1992. The basic philosophy of the present standards are to enable children to achieve a balanced development and to equip them for coping with social change.

To implement this approach, it is necessary to clarify the types of qualities and abilities that are being targeted by education and to enhance teaching and learning. This implies that education will need to focus on the development of qualities and skills that will enable students to identify problems for themselves, to think independently, to make independent judgments, and to articulate and solve problems more effectively.

Providing this type of education necessitates an approach based on a concept of scholastic ability that encourages children to learn, and emphasizes willingness to learn independently and to acquire the ability to think, judge, and express oneself. The aim of education under this concept of scholastic ability is to change the fundamental direction of school education, which tends toward the delivery of large quantities of knowledge and skills in a one-way process from teacher to student. The new approach emphasizes instead the development of abilities that enable children to think and judge independently and act for themselves. It is also designed to provide appropriate support for independent learning activities of students in order to enhance their strengths and potential.

2. Changing structures and organization of learning content

2a. Process of the curriculum reform

The new National Curriculum Standards were released by Monbusho in 1998, and will be implemented starting fiscal year 2002. The processes of the curriculum reform proceeded as follows:

The Central Education Council announced the nation’s fundamental measures for educational reforms. Among the duties of the council, as directed by the Minister of Monbusho, it is to deliberate on the issues and to advise the minister concerning fundamental important policies related to education. In 1995, Monbusho started the 15th Central Education Council and was requested to study “How education should be in the 21st century.” In July 1996, the council issued the first bulletin, resulting from the deliberation. The following points related to the curriculum reform were included in the advice:

a. Select carefully the educational content of school lessons to enable students to learn more freely and in a more leisurely way.

b. Aim at adopting a complete five-day-week system in school beginning in the 21st century.

c. Reform and fulfill school education in response to internationalizing, shift to an information-oriented society and the development of science and technology.

In August 1996, Monbusho started the Curriculum Council. About sixty members from various areas joined it to discuss the issues. In July 1998, the Council issued a report that stressed, as a basic objective, the development of educational activities in schools with much latitude and in a more leisurely way with children and the cultivation of a “zest-for-living”
among them, under a comprehensive five-day-school-week system. Guidelines for improvement were also proposed, such as the more rigid selection of teaching content in each subject, reduction of teaching hours in the classroom, wider selection of elective subjects in secondary schools, and the establishment of the new subject called “period for integrated study” that combines several topics from different subject areas.

2b. **Basic philosophies of the curriculum reform**

Based on the report of the Curriculum Council, Monbusho revised the National Curriculum Standards in December 1998. The revision was made based on the following basic philosophies:

a. Encourage the emotional development of the youth, to make them well equipped to contribute to society and to have an increased self-awareness as a member of the international community.

b. Enhance children’s ability to learn and to think independently.

c. Develop a comfortable educational environment, which successfully equips children with essential basic contents as well as develops children’s individual personalities.

d. Encourage each school to discover its own special characteristics and redefine itself as a unique site of distinctive education.

2c. **Structure of the national curriculum standards**

The National Curriculum Standards for elementary school has four chapters, namely,

- Chapter 1 General guidelines
- Chapter 2 Teaching Subjects
  - Japanese language
  - Social Studies
  - Mathematics
  - Science
  - Life Environment Studies
  - Music
  - Drawing and Handicraft
  - Homemaking
  - Physical Education
- Chapter 3 Moral Education
- Chapter 4 Special Activities.

The standard number of teaching hours of subjects is in appendix 2. The structure of teaching subjects in elementary school has been almost the same since the first grade. “Life environment studies” is a new subject introduced first in the present Standards by combining social studies and science, which are taught in the first and the second grades.

2d. **Introduction of a new integrated subject area**

In the new National Curriculum Standards, a subject, “Periods for integrated study,” was introduced, where children can find interesting topics to learn. These topics may be a combination of several topics children have learned in different subjects or may be applications using basic contents in some subject areas. Topics such as the use of computers or foreign language conversation could be introduced in “periods for integrated study.”

2e. **Challenging task for curriculum specialists**
One of the challenging problems faced by curriculum specialists is to clarify the basic content in each subject. Teaching hours as well as content in each subject area are reduced because of the implementation of the five-day-school-week system and the introduction of a new area like “Periods for integrated study.” Re-examination and re-arrangement of contents in each subject are needed to clarify which teaching contents are necessary for children for their daily activities and for their continuous learning of academic subjects. Adding some new items into a subject may not be very difficult, but reducing some items is.

3. Designing and implementing local curricula

The new National Curriculum Standards were released in December 1998, and they will be implemented in schools beginning April 2002. This means we have about three years to prepare for the new educational curriculum.

3a. Teachers’ role

One of the most important things is that schoolteachers should understand the basic philosophies of new standards. They should be able to design the appropriate curriculum in their schools, taking into account the actual circumstances of each school and each community. The teachers’ willingness and confidence in their profession are crucial factors in improving the quality of education.

3b. Workshops for schoolteachers

Monbusho has been organizing several workshops on the new school curriculum for representative schoolteachers and supervisors invited from all the prefectures in the country. In the workshops, specialists explain the philosophies of the curriculum reform as well as objectives and teaching content in each subject in the new National Curriculum Standards. Teachers and supervisors get the opportunity in the workshop to discuss what to teach, how to teach, and how to evaluate children’s learning process and their achievement in each subject area.

An education board in each prefecture is responsible for organizing some workshops on school curriculum for teachers in their local area. Almost all the teachers in the area are given the opportunity to attend these workshops.

Monbusho also has been editing a monthly booklet, which informs schoolteachers and supervisors about the philosophies of curriculum reform and about some concrete examples of teaching and learning in actual classroom situations.

3c. Information for parents and other people in the community

We believe that support to school education, which parents of school children as well as people in the community give, is important in improving education. Monbusho is now organizing several meetings and symposia on education, which are open to parents and other people in the community.

3d. Revision of textbooks

All textbooks are revised in accordance with the new National Curriculum Standards before implementation. There are several private textbook companies, which compete with each other. Several months before the implementation of the new Standards, education boards in local district areas are supposed to select, for each subject, the textbooks, which will be used in schools in their areas.
4. Evaluation of Curriculum Reform

4a. Nationwide surveys on students’ achievements

Monbusho has been conducting nationwide surveys on students’ achievements in some subject areas. The purpose of this survey is to evaluate the impact of the implementation of the National Curriculum Standards. The results of this survey are used as a basis to improve the methods of teaching and learning in a nationwide perspective and will be the basis for designing more effective Curriculum Standards in the near future.

The last survey was conducted from 1993 to 1995. In this survey, one of the methods used was a paper-and-pencil test conducted nationwide. Another survey method was evaluating children’s activities in classrooms in several pilot schools all over the country.

The tests for mathematics and Japanese language in the elementary school level were conducted in February 1994. About 1 percent of all the fifth- and sixth-grade children in the elementary schools took the test. Test problems were designed in accordance with the present National Curriculum Standards, based on the four viewpoints for evaluation, such as: way of thinking, knowledge and understanding, skills and representation, and willingness to learn and attitude towards learning.

4b. Some findings from the surveys

The report of the results of this survey in each subject area was published in 1997. Some of the results in mathematics, for instance, are:

Generally speaking, children have good skills in computation, measurement, and drawing of geometrical figures. On the other hand, some children have difficulties in solving a bit complicated, non-routine problems making use of mathematical ideas. Some children have difficulties in understanding the meaning of division of fractions. A lot of children feel that exact paper-and-pencil computations are not very difficult, but on the other hand, there are not many children who appreciate the value of calculation in actual situations. This implies that more emphasis should be put on developing children’s sense of numbers, as well as on introducing children’s hands-on activities in mathematics classrooms.

These results and analysis were taken into account in revising the objectives and teaching content in the present Curriculum Standards for Mathematics.

Notes
1One school hour is defined as 45 minutes.
2The figures in the parentheses represent the class period for the new curriculum to be implemented beginning FY2002.

Appendix 1. Organization of the School System in Japan

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<td>Secondary Education</td>
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### Appendix 2. Standard Number of Annual Class Hours in Elementary School

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