

# Researching the Educational System of Shizuoka, Japan

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This is *part one of a three part series* that provides a general summary of trends in Japanese education, including the National Commission on Educational Reform's proposal that emphasized core changes in education to meet the needs of today's students. Focus on special education is also included, which encompasses samples of educational opportunities available within the Shizuoka Prefecture. Part one summarizes educational changes in Japan and special education in Shizuoka, Japan.

## Educational Change in Japan

Today's children require an educational program that develops individual abilities and meets their educational and social-emotional needs. This is especially true for students identified with a disability, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), sub-average intellectual ability, and other Physical Impairments (PI), since they may often have a significant impact on their academic, social, and emotional development. Within Japan, there has been a recent recognition of the individual needs of all students. Although not specifically addressing special education, The National Commission on Educational Reform was formed under the guidance of the Prime Minister, to provide direction in educational changes. With this, the opportunity for a student with a disability to participate in the regular education setting has increased. The National Commission on Educational Reform published the "17 Proposals for Changing Education" (2000) that emphasized four areas to be addressed in the current educational system. The commission proposed (1) stressing the importance of parental involvement, volunteer activities, moral education, and equal and fair treatment of students; (2) developing the talents of individuals by the introduction of small-group activities, individualized instruction, implementing a learning achievement test to measure academic growth, and allowing students to earn university credits while in high school; (3) introducing an evaluation system for schools, creating "community schools" and hiring career counseling specialists; and (4) developing a system that recognizes a teacher's individual efforts and increasing both pre-service and continuing education training opportunities for teachers. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has played the central role in developing the curriculum standards for schools, including special education centers. MEXT has developed national curriculum guidelines every 10 years since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Japan's educational system was readjusted to follow an American educational model. As well, MEXT maintains national standardization by certifying textbooks, overseeing regional and national entrance exams, and regulating teacher training. With these 10-year revisions, however, some critics may argue that Japanese education has made minimal changes since the reform. In considering the National Commission on Educational Reform's proposals, MEXT developed the "Educational Reform Plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> century" which later led to other legislative reforms. The current plan, initiated in 2001, is called the "Rainbow Plan" and included seven priority strategies to revitalize education. These strategies are focused on maintaining a high level of standards and uniformity, while promoting innovative programming and teaching.

## Special Education Trends

The current trend in special education is to increase services and include special needs students as much as possible within a regular education setting. Estimates indicated that there are approximately 4.5 million handicapped persons in Japan, which is just under 4 percent of the population. Nationally, education for “handicapped” students in Japan became compulsory in 1974, although the first special education school for blind children opened in 1878 and became compulsory in 1956. Naturally, with the recent recognition of the individual needs of all students, a focus on students with a disability to participate in the regular education setting has increased. In Japan, the concept of “normalization”, or the idea that handicapped persons should have the same opportunities as others and participate as much as possible in a “natural” environment, has recent influence on Japan’s educational system and delivery models for special education students. MEXT has encouraged “integrated education”, a method of providing considerations to special needs students within the regular education setting. In 2004, the first television program called “Watch, Hustle, Listen, Hustle”, was broadcasted on NHK (Japan Broadcasting Television) for children identified with either a Learning Disability (LD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), or Autism. This program is more specifically directed as an outlet for students who are not classified with a disability but receive some specialized instruction in regular education programs (Special Support Schools). Further assistance through placing Special Support Education Coordinators at schools, which would act as a liaison on behalf of students with special needs, was suggested by MEXT. Parents of special needs students seem to be more active in seeking regular education placement for their children. Although there is both an active interest by parents and government initiatives to provide “integrated education”, one of the major barriers is the school facility and method of instruction in secondary schools. Many of Japan’s schools are not handicapped accessible, which can eliminate opportunity for students to enter the school freely. In regard to instructional delivery and implementation of special education services within the “regular” school, elementary schools appear to be the best equipped in accepting students initially; however, the entire weight is usually placed on the student’s “regular education” teacher. In this regard, the teacher may often have little experience and training in special education to meet the individual and/or social-emotional needs of the student fully. Supportive services and training specifically in special education may not be available within all school districts to the degree that they are easily accessible. In comparison, Japan’s special education schools appear to have a high level of support services for students identified with physical impairments or multiple disabilities. In the past, these environments appear to have been an effective method in that they provided educational opportunity for disabled students. Today, this type of environment continues to provide suitable programming for those with severe or multiple disabilities; however, this type of placement may be viewed as highly restrictive and may not be suitable placements for students with a milder degree of disability. Through reform, special education programming and delivery is becoming a priority goal and changes will become evident as school facilities become more accessible, awareness increases, and innovative programs are created.

### **Looking Forward**

Looking back, the educational system in Japan can be praised for meeting one of its earlier goals of developing a standard curriculum and programming within the realm of regular education. With these as core goals, however, emphasis on creating innovative programs, advocating diversity, and meeting a student’s individual needs were not at the forefront. With this reform, changes within Japan’s schools are occurring as educators are more focused on individual needs and developing more “well-rounded” students. Within each prefecture of Japan, it appears that the local school districts are becoming more independent from governmental regulations while following the basic guidelines set forth. Paired with the fact that Japan’s school may be generally seen to have a high level of autonomy, they are able to create an environment that meets the needs of their community of students. Currently, the ministry guidelines emphasize a curriculum that focuses less on knowledge-based learning and more student-centered and critical thinking. Perhaps one of the more notable changes was the five-day school week system, beginning in the 2002-2003 school year. Other less obvious changes include the construction of school facilities that have multiple uses, such as community centers, but more importantly improve access for those students with physical disabilities. In regard to special education, increased attention is being directed to expanding the educational opportunity of students. Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and

Technology (MEXT) initiatives and the proposals offered by the National Commission on Educational Reform appear to have affected Japan's educational system at the school level. More importantly, it seems that these system changes will have an impact in the long-term through a program evaluation model in Japan's educational system. This evaluation, it is believed, will focus on assessment of the individual needs of all students, including those who may require special education.

### **About Shizuoka Education**

Shizuoka schools offer a wide range of educational programs in the realm of regular education. In addition to the Shizuoka Prefectural Board of Education, both city and private entities are involved with educational programming within the Shizuoka Prefecture. A survey of these schools is completed on a yearly basis and the latest information was available as of May 1, 2003. Within the Shizuoka Prefecture, a total of 551 elementary schools with a total population of 218,855 students and 299 junior high schools with 115,270 students were reported. At the high school level, there were a total of 146 full-time high schools with an enrollment of 115,068 students. Shizuoka's schools also include 24 part-time high school programs and one correspondence school, with a total number of 3,168 and 2,783, respectfully. In regard to special education, there were a total of 22 special education schools with a total enrollment of 3,444 students reported.

The Shizuoka Prefectural Board of Education completes a yearly report to summarize its goals, policies, and initiatives that encompass various aspects of student, family, and societal education. As goals have been achieved in relation to educational reform, such as the five-day school week and the six-year unified lower and secondary school system, the prefecture has set other goals. As a whole, the Shizuoka Prefecture's aim is to develop individuals with a "well-balanced" repertoire, and to be active contributors and participants within society. Shizuoka's plan is to develop a society of life-long learning through goals set in "Education Plan 2010-Cultivating Individuals." In addition to supporting academic achievement, the prefecture is advocating individualized curriculum and expanding opportunity between special education and general education students. Directly related is the prefecture's goal of developing relationships between the home, school, and community.

### **Shizuoka and Special Education**

The Shizuoka Prefectural Board of Education Schools serves as the primary sample of antidotal observations of educational programs within the Shizuoka Prefecture, as the Shizuoka City schools that service special education students are primarily under the jurisdiction of the Prefectural Board. Within the Shizuoka Prefecture, there were just over 3,440 students enrolled in either national, prefectural, municipal or private schools designated for disabled students. Of this, there were approximately 780 students who attended a School for the Handicapped, School for the Blind, or School for the Deaf within Shizuoka City. Generally speaking, there are two kinds of schools that exist for handicapped students in Japan: special education schools and special education classes within regular schools at the elementary and junior high school levels. In particular, some smaller private schools seem to cater to those with additional needs at the high school level. Students in need of special education at center schools are typically identified during the pre-school years, as the nature of their disability is physical in nature (e.g., Down Syndrome, Physical Impairment) or the degree of developmental delay is profound. Although there seems to be no standardized measures or highly formal system used to evaluate students for special education services, care is taken in placement of students in special education settings. School personnel guide parents in making educational decisions for their child and for children with physical disabilities, a physicians' advice seems to be weighed highly. Students with other disabilities, such as a learning disability, attentional deficit, or mild developmental delay may be more difficult to evaluate until they enter school. Yet, schools currently appear to lack support personnel with special education experience that may delay the identification, and therefore services of students with special needs. At the high school level, due to the entry requirements of an exam, the opportunity for special education students appears somewhat limited at the secondary level and may result in some students transferring to a special education school or private high school.

## **Researching the Educational System of Shizuoka**

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This is *part two of a three part series* that provides a general summary of trends in Japanese education, including the National Commission on Educational Reform's proposal that emphasized core changes in education to meet the needs of today's students. Part two focuses on special education delivery in schools located in Shizuoka, Japan.

### **Shizuoka's Special Education Schools**

Shizuoka's special education center schools, appear to service a variety of students and make accommodations based on their individual needs. Basically, these schools fall within a few categories and are described briefly. As noted previously, Japan's special education tends to address students with more visible types of disabilities although the range of individual disability ranges greatly at the center schools. As a result, this listing is not intended to be a complete listing of available settings and absolute description of the services provided at each particular center. One particular type of school, which is designed to meet the educational needs of all ages of students, includes Fujieda Yogogakko, Hamamatsu Yogogakko, Hamana Yogogakko, Numazu Yogogakko, and Shizuoka Kita Yogogakko. These schools primarily service students who are identified with a mental handicap, although it appears that some students with a severe learning disability or autism may attend such schools. In general, class sizes may range up to approximately 10 students, and a high level of support services are available to students and parents. In addition, a few schools also service elementary or junior high school students, such as Toen Gakuen, or the Iwata branch of Hamamatsu Yogogakko where some students also reside in the adjoining building. Other schools include the Hamamatsu School for the Deaf and Shizuoka Mogakko, where students with a range of either hearing or visual impairments attend, respectfully. Shizuoka Chuo Yogogakko services students who primarily have physical limitations or disabilities. Kawana Bunko, includes programs for students with a learning disability, physical disability, or those under protective care due to home circumstances. Although students mainly have physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy, Shizuoka Nabu Yogogakko also services students with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and other disabilities such as autism, hearing loss, speech impairment, and learning disabilities. Educational services are also provided at the Children's Hospital located in Shizuoka City, for students with long-term illnesses or other medical issues that prevent them from attending school. As with any students, there are learning strengths and weaknesses that affect learning and center schools offer a variety of services that are as varied as the students who attend them.

### **A Day at Shizuoka Kita Yogogakko**

Shizuoka Kita Yogogakko is located in Shizuoka City and services students from the elementary to high school level. As is the case with many special education centers, the general atmosphere is one of warmth, openness, and focuses on individual student needs. Students attending this school are generally identified as mentally handicapped; however, levels appear to be of various ranges-trainable to educable mentally handicapped. Although quantitative data is not available, some observations of senior high school students are suggestive that students with varying degrees of a learning disability (LD) are present rather than a mental handicap. Although it may seldom occur, these students may transfer to the special education school after completion of middle school. These students seem to take on leadership roles within the classroom and school. Typically, students are grouped within each grade level, although sections (i.e., elementary, middle or high school) usually participate in gym activities or special lessons. In some cases, as with other special education schools, on-campus housing

is available for students. The classroom enrollment varies but usually does not top 10 students and the student to staff ratio is approximately 3:1. Although focusing on the individual needs, there is a significant effort to promote group goals and life-skills to increase the student's ability to function within their community to the degree they are capable. In general, assistant teachers aid students as needed and promote independence in learning and socialization. Throughout the day, it was noted that daily observations and the progress of students were recorded through anecdotal notes in student's individual notebooks. This information was sent home daily as a form of communication between the school and parents. Several techniques are utilized to shape behavior and motivate students toward goals. As in regular education schools, students are primarily responsible for assisting in cleaning the classroom/school, communicating daily announcements, as well as lunch preparation. Additionally, high school students are given hands-on instruction in order to prepare day trips within Shizuoka and school trips outside the prefecture. There appears to be a high regard to allow students as many real-life experiences as possible. Recently, high school students prepared a school trip to Hiroshima through researching history, transportation, areas of interest, and culture. Each high school classroom researched these areas in preparation for the trip, and was responsible for presenting a specified topic at the pre-departure presentation. In regard to Shizuoka life, students are given hands-on opportunity to plan day-trips in various cities in Shizuoka. Hands-on materials such as train schedules, restaurant menus, and brochures are used so students can work with "genuine" information that can be applied in other daily life situations. Students are also encouraged to participate in community events, such as the 5-kilometer race of the Sumpu Marathon, throughout the year.

### **Innovative Projects**

The Shizuoka Prefecture promotes various unique projects to promote mutual understanding between others. Some of these projects are geared toward social education and developing empathy for others. For example, high school students are volunteering in their communities at pre-schools and senior facilities/rehabilitation centers. These initiatives seem to be important in meeting reform goals, but more importantly provide an opportunity for students to develop connection to their community. This connectedness to others has also been initiated through the integration of special education and general education. The 2002-2003 school year marked the joining of regular education and special education programming at Ito Jyogasaki High School in Ito City, Shizuoka. This measure was initially due to the decreasing number of students in area schools, and to alleviate the financial strains of operating schools, which were underenrolled. However, the meshing of these two programs resulted in the beginning of an exchange between regular and special education students on an ongoing, practical basis. Within Shizuoka City, this type of exchange is also occurring using soccer as the common ground between Shizuoka Kita Yogogakko and Shizuoka Minami High School. With these specialized projects, special education students and regular education students have the opportunity to gain knowledge from each other. In an indirect way, these opportunities may also create the desire for students to develop interest in the study of special education, and/or continue to volunteer for others.

### **Promoting International Curiosity**

To foster international awareness, the Shizuoka Prefecture developed the Global Awareness Seminar and an international exchange program called, "The Bridge Over Asian Countries." For the past ten years, the Shizuoka Board of Education and the Shizuoka Prefectural Foundation for the Promotion of Lifelong learning have sponsored the Global Awareness Seminar Camp (GAS Camp). The core aim of the GAS Camp is to improve English communication ability; however, other goals are to build confidence and promote international understanding. During the past three years, approximately 80 junior high and 80 high school students participated along with 32 Assistant Language Teachers from various countries around the globe. Over the three-day period, students have varied opportunity to experience an English-enriched environment with the assistance of Japanese teachers of English. Clearly, this opportunity provides the chance for all involved to develop mutual understanding in a unique environment with mutual objectives. The Bridge over Asian Countries, an international exchange program, has afforded Shizuoka students the opportunity to view the world and its people through experiential learning.

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### **Raising the Standard**

One goal of reform is to provide teachers with on-going training in educational issues and recognize individual teachers for outstanding efforts in education. This often results in educators with increased knowledge and enthusiasm for their work. Seminars that focus on special education and educational trends, as well as content area have increased both at the regional and school level. For example, at some schools, lectures on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autism have been conducted. This is significant in the fact that these disorders have not been well researched in Japan thus far and minimal data is available on the true percentage of students who may have these types of disabilities. Positively, the dissemination of this information has begun to raise awareness that some student may benefit from educational accommodations. Ultimately, this may lead educators to research and develop innovative teaching methods for all students. Shizuoka Mogogakko, is a school for the blind and visually impaired, located in Shizuoka City. As with many center schools, the atmosphere is warm and student's individual needs are tailored to. More than that, however, educators at this school have a desire to seek improvements in their service delivery. Recently, a Shizuoka Mogogakko teacher visited the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (USA) to investigate the type and range of services offered to students. In addition to studying equipment and classroom techniques, the procedural components and legal documentation of a student's yearly goals and progress through an Individual Education Plan (IEP) was investigated. Perhaps more importantly, the ideologies were studied, particularly in relation to inclusive education and the school's focus on providing educational opportunities as much as possible at local regular education schools. Perhaps it is not on a large scale, but Shizuoka Mogogakko promotes these activities as well on an individual basis. Recently, a television program depicted the day-to-day life of one of their students. The program highlighted the perceptions of the student/parent/school and some of the activities in which the student participates at the local elementary school. Not only is this type of activity important in relation to the student, but the program is also critical in raising the awareness of the Shizuoka community to advocate for students with special needs to be educated as much as possible in the regular education classroom.

### **An Innovative School**

Shizuoka's educational system has developed innovative programming. As individual schools are developing to meet the needs of their students and community, the prefecture has plowed the way in creating a new type of school in Japan. Shizuoka Chuo High School, which opened in 1993, is located in Shizuoka City and was developed as an alternative way for students to earn a high school diploma. This school was one of the first three prototypes in Japan. Shizuoka Chuo High School is considered one of the prefecture's part-time schools; however the school is significantly different from other schools that are classified within the category. In reality, this school does not operate part-time but is open and offers classes from morning to evening. This school is open to applicants transferring directly from junior high school, or those students who are

returning to earn a high school diploma due to various reasons that prevented completion from the traditional avenue. Shizuoka Chuo High School is more than a high school, as it is also open to residents of Shizuoka in an effort to promote continuing education within the prefecture. Therefore, the age range of students mixed within classes varies significantly. As a whole, the class sizes tend to be smaller. Greater flexibility appears evident in classroom instruction, and in the ability to make accommodations for individual students. Shizuoka Chuo is wheel chair accessible, which allows students with physical disabilities to attend and move freely on campus. In order to address possible social-emotional needs of students, the school's teachers staff a counseling room and a school counselor visits the school on a weekly basis. Of further interest is the correspondence course component, which allows students to earn credit through self-study. The main unit is housed at Shizuoka Chuo Koko and students routinely meet on pre-selected days, usually Wednesday or Sunday, to partake in class lectures; however, teachers and students also meet at other branch locations in the northern and southern part of the prefecture. Students attending Shizuoka Chuo Koko select a course of study and develop their own time schedules. The school day is divided into twelve 45-minute time blocks, with a total of 6 courses (1.5 hours) offered within these blocks. This school was designed to meet the needs of students within the prefecture, and the school continues to develop and improve independently based on the needs of the students. This school year, a new semester system has started which allows students to complete some courses in either a half-year or full-year format. Class offerings and formats have also changed, as the needs of the students have. Students attending this school appear to benefit from the ability to develop their own course of study. Perhaps one student of Shizuoka Chuo Koko put it best by saying, "I love my school. I hope that other Japanese schools or students know of our school and change their fixed ideas and systems."

### **The Comprehensive Education Center**

The Asunaro Center is located in Kakegawa City, Shizuoka and serves as the central resource in meeting the goals of continuing education. Perhaps in terms of reform measures, it is designed to promote the ongoing and continued focus on program assessment, educational improvement, and support services. The center focuses on 4 key areas that include development, creativity, research, and support. In addition to providing a variety of reference sources and educational counseling, the center is available for public use in order to encourage continued education and meet the prefecture's goal of promoting life-long learning. The center conducts various computer seminars and maintains educational research information and software. In addition to managing in-service seminars, the center often serves as the site for in-service trainings throughout the year. The center offers seminars during the summer months, including those specific to special education, and is capable of providing on-campus accommodations. Educational support services are the primary focus of this center, which also provides individualized counseling as well as counseling via the telephone.

### **How does this compare to American Special Education?**

The influence of "normalization", "integration", and "mainstreaming", has influenced special education in other countries, such as America, to a greater degree than in Japan thus far. Therefore, a wide range of services is offered within the American school districts (Broward County School District) and individual schools at all levels. In addition, special education coordinators are positioned at each school, and a team of supportive personnel is assigned to each site. Supportive personnel include but are not limited to school psychologists, behavior specialists, family counselors, and job coaches. These professionals fulfill specific services to the student, family, and school. American schools focus on providing education for students in the "least restrictive environment", or within the regular education classroom as much as possible.

In fact, the "dignity of risk" or the "opportunity to fail" is believed to be the basic premise in learning and developing life skills. Therefore, the regular education classroom is assumed to be the optimal setting to learn about "real life" situations. In many educational programs, special needs students have been protected from learning opportunities within the general education setting. Integrated education makes the assumption that all students benefit from opportunities to interact with each other. Through the legislative changes, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) initiatives, and proposals by The National Committee on Educational Reform, subtle changes can be seen in Japanese schools today.

Perhaps, the most powerful force is a parent of disabled student who is beginning to advocate for increased educational opportunities within the regular education setting. These two forces, coupled with increased teacher training, research of other countries' educational systems will continue the trend to evaluate the effectiveness of educational opportunities.

### **Shizuoka and Education**

Upon reviewing the initiatives and educational opportunities within the Shizuoka Prefecture, the wave of changes in programming for both regular and special education has focused on the goals of reform for Japanese education as a whole. The Shizuoka Prefecture has stressed the importance of a majority of the proposals to a degree where they are evident at the school level. Among these, Shizuoka educational initiatives have stressed the importance of parent involvement and volunteer activities through specialized projects and education centers. High school students have the opportunity to earn university credits, and counseling specialists are available at regional offices are more accessible, via appointment or a set schedule, at some schools. In creating community schools, Shizuoka has widened the opportunity for alternative ways to earn a standard diploma for students of all ages and created a community school to encourage adults to become life-long learners. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has also encouraged "integrated education" (Special Support Schools) and placement of Special Support Education Coordinators at schools. The Shizuoka Prefecture appears to be a leader in educational change and hold a true desire to improve opportunities for its citizens. It is believed that the Shizuoka Prefecture will also take this MEXT initiative and apply it within Shizuoka schools. Through these gradual changes, the face of education will change for Shizuoka students and providing more individualized programming options.

### **Researcher's Message**

The opportunity to research into the Shizuoka Prefecture school system was an enriching experience, both professionally and personally. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Sugura Institute of Sugura Bank, Shizuoka in making this opportunity possible. Through this research, the ability to collect information from students, parents, educators, and community members has allowed me an inside view into education, and the life of Shizuoka students. Gratitude is also extended to the Prefectural Board of Education in providing specialized placement at Shizuoka Chuo Koko and Shizuoka Kita Yogogakko. I have been touched by the warm-heartedness of many educators and students. It is my hope that Shizuoka continues to be a progressive force in education today, and will be a driving force in programming changes for students with special education needs. Throughout Japan, much reform appears to be needed in regard to services for students with special needs within the regular education program. With this reform, gradual and systematic changes are suggested. Researching Japan's special education schools and innovative programs, and other country's special education systems is important in analyzing the most practical and realistic application to Shizuoka schools. After a two-year term in Japan with the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET Programme), I returned to Florida, USA and continue my work as a school psychologist. Future plans are continued study in the field of education and to advocate for students with special needs. A summary of this work and other materials will be shared with the School District of Broward County, Florida as well as the Morikami Japanese Museum (Delray Beach, Florida), in an effort to showcase Shizuoka, Japan and Japan's educational system today. Currently, there are various projects underway that will continue to maintain a strong connection with Shizuoka and be available to Florida educators as a resource.

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