

Homeschooling in Japan

Claire Novak

Imagine what would happen if the biggest media organizations in the country suddenly became enthralled with homeschooling. Picture television crews and famous journalists rushing to interview homeschooling families and promote their lifestyle on the nightly news—think “Why You Should Homeschool,” a special report by Peter Jennings, or “Raising Kids the Right Way” with Barbra Walters. Sound a little far-fetched? Maybe it is—in America. But in Japan, where a once-popular public education system is on the decline, media moguls and businessmen alike are eager to find a viable alternative. Apparently, homeschooling fits the bill.

Catching up with Western standards in science and education has always been one of Japan’s highest priorities. After World War II, Americans “helped” to reform the Japanese education system by modeling it after their own. Compulsory education was formed to include elementary school and junior high. The elementary school curriculum was also divided into three major categories: regular subjects, moral education, and special activities. The nine regular subjects have basically remained the same over the years; students are required to study Japanese, social studies, arithmetic, science, life and environmental studies, music, arts and handicrafts, homemaking, and physical education.

While the public schools were once respected for their high standards and discipline, the Japanese educational system has undergone a steady decline since the 1980s. From 1983 to 1986, a sense of crisis dominated reports on public education. According to Leonard Schoppa, contributing author for a volume entitled *Windows on Japanese Education*, “Stories of students attacking teachers were featured regularly in the press; the Ministry of Education reported an epidemic of bullying in the nation’s elementary and junior high schools; and the nightly news told the stories of tormented young students who blamed bullies and examination pressure before committing suicide.”

Although education reform became a top priority among Japanese leaders due to the tragic events of the ’80s, the situation actually became worse as a decade passed. Hiroshi Yoshimoto, a director in the education reform division of Japan’s Education Ministry, acknowledged that the situation was out of hand when he said wryly, “We all know we have to reform—yesterday.” By 1999, student murders were becoming a far too common threat. Attending public school was like voluntarily throwing yourself in front of a speeding truck—there wasn’t much chance for survival. And according to Yoshie Masuda, founder of a private tutoring program called Apple Tree, issues in the public schools cannot be blamed solely on troubled or violent youth. “The biggest condemnation of the Japanese education system is that even normal kids can’t handle school any more,” he said.

Today, statistics are not improving. Over 300,000 students drop out of school each year, some as early as first grade. The education system, while focusing on the country’s economic success, is ignoring individual well-being. And contrary to old preferences, the

Japanese businesses no longer prefer to accept mindless factory workers. They're seeking graduates who have a vision for life—individuals with integrity, creativity, and an opinion about the future.

Six years ago, four Japanese businessmen visited the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) to investigate the American homeschooling movement. In a practically unheard-of gesture, they founded their country's homeschool movement with the complete cooperation and admiration of the Japanese press. They also asked HSLDA for assistance in working to legalize homeschooling in Japan.

Shortly after this meeting, Tokyo's two largest broadcasting companies, the Tokyo Broadcasting Service (TBS) and Japan Broadcasting Service (NHK TV), flew reporters to the US to interview HSLDA representatives and homeschooling families about the effectiveness of the method. As a result of these interviews, two specials on homeschooling were created and broadcast throughout Japan. But the Japanese businessmen didn't stop there. They also invited Chris Klicka to speak at Japan's first national homeschooling conference and participate in the organization of the national Home School Support Association of Japan (HOSA). HOSA was founded by many major business leaders, including the presidents of Microsoft Japan and the Atmark Corporation. Influential members of the university community also play a part in the supervision and daily management of the organization. HOSA President Shigeru Narita is an education professor at Hyogo University, while HOSA board member Akio Hata is a professor at the Saitama Institute of Technology.

The media's fascination with homeschooling provided many opportunities for Klicka to introduce the method and the Japanese homeschooling movement in a positive light. He spoke for a large press conference with the major networks and newspapers in attendance, and influential papers like the *Nikkei* (the *Wall Street Journal* of Japan) and the *Tokyo Shimbun* (the largest paper in Tokyo), wrote favorably of the Japanese homeschooling movement and its founders. Klicka was also able to meet with a high-ranking official from the Ministry of Education, knowing that the Ministry of Education's decisions and opinions are very important to Japanese school authorities.

"Homeschooling is growing by leaps and bounds in Japan," Klicka told TOS. "It's a tremendous movement of God." Christian homeschoolers have gained extra encouragement since HOSA has been joined by the Church and Home Educators Association of Japan (CHEA), an organization that works to translate homeschooling materials like the Bob Jones curriculum. Together, both associations provide academic and legal support to thousands, arranging homeschooling conferences, field trips, and other events.

"They see this as a way to help recoup the losses Japan has suffered in the field of education," Klicka said. "They want to help these kids—kids who have great creative abilities but don't want to become stuck in a mold." "[The Japanese people] are so hungry and serious about this movement," said CHEA founder Hiro Inaba. "[We have helped parents understand that] children should be raised [in] purely biblical

circumstances to build strong roots in Christ, to be strong salt and light in the world. Little by little, God is working and fulfilling His promise [to Japanese homeschoolers].”

Biographical Information

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