

School daze

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Japan's education system has been under fire for years, but with new, more lax curriculum guidelines, critics worry students will fall behind their counterparts overseas

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Tatsuya Deguchi, a math teacher at a high school in Wakayama, southwest of Osaka, has watched with growing dismay as his students' math ability has plummeted. Especially in the past five to six years, Deguchi's dismay has turned to alarm as the problem

has gotten progressively worse.

"Recently we gave our 10th grade students a math test meant for first- to third-graders, and two-thirds of the 240 students couldn't multiply two-digit numbers. Only half could calculate the area of a triangle using the length of the base and the height," Deguchi said.

The high school teacher thinks the problem lies with the current primary education, which is based on the nation's so-called Education Free of Pressure policy. "Our students should have the opportunity to practice basic calculation, rather than having it easy just to be free from pressure," he said.

However, the situation will probably get worse because of revised government curriculum guidelines to be introduced this April. The new guidelines continue the more lax education policy, which started in 1977 as a reaction to the cramming-centered system that was believed to be stifling students' creativity. so many fundamental skills were



A teacher at Honmyo Elementary School in Yoshidacho, Kagoshima Prefecture, assists a student. The school recently began assigning teachers to teach specific subjects.

cannot keep up with the classes, while enabling teachers to have closer contact with students. In addition, under the new guidelines, despite a major slashing of study hours devoted to existing subjects, some 100 hours will be allocated to "comprehensive learning" aimed at enabling schoolchildren to have hands-on learning about nature being apart from textbooks.

"Though the world ranking (of Japanese schoolchildren) may have become a bit lower, actual scholastic ability has stayed almost the same," Imasato added.

A survey by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) in 1999 indicated that the academic ability of Japanese schoolchildren had edged down. In the IEA's international survey of eighth graders in 1995, Japan marked the third-highest average score (605 points) in math, behind Singapore (643) and

in the entrance examinations, more than 20% can't do elementary school level arithmetic, such as addition and subtraction of fractions," Nishimura said.

The professor pointed out another problem — Japanese schoolchildren have the fewest study hours for math among the Group of Seven major industrialized countries. For instance, Japanese seventh graders take a total of 99 hours of math classes annually, while U.S. students in the same grade take 146 hours, French students 129 and U.K. students 117.

"In terms of the volume of content and the difficulty of questions, math textbooks for Japanese schoolchildren are two to three years behind the ones used in China, South Korea and Singapore. As long as the government keeps the current pressure-free education system,