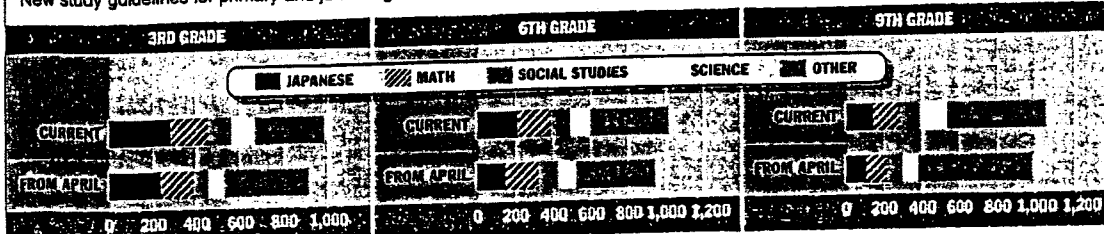


New study guidelines for primary and junior high school students; in annual study hours



Source: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology

Japan will inevitably lack the human resources to maintain global competitiveness," Nishimura said. He stressed the importance of basic ability gained from repeated practice, such as arithmetic and writing, not only for mathematics but for other subjects too.

By the same token, many parents send their children to private schools with unique educational curricula to improve their academic ability, rather than to public schools that have to follow guidelines provided by the government. According to an estimate by Yotsuya Otsuka, a leading Tokyo-based cram school for primary school students who want to enter a competitive private junior high school or a national junior high school that is attached to a national university, the ratio of students who took entrance examinations for private or national junior high school was 13.3% in 2002; up from 12.8% in 2001 and 11.8% in 1999.

Naotsugu Matsushita, business promotion section chief of Yotsuya Otsuka, said the number of sixth-grade students in the Tokyo metropolitan area, including Kanagawa, Chiba and Saitama prefectures, declined sharply in 2002 to 290,000 from 306,000 the previous year. Yet the number of students who applied to private/national junior high schools decreased by a much lower margin, to 38,500 from 39,300.

"The trend became remarkable in 1999, when the government announced the new curriculum guidelines to be introduced in 2002. Despite the current economic stagnation, parents are seen as having strengthened their wish to send their children to private schools with higher academic standards," said Matsushita.

To meet parents' demands and secure enough students to maintain their operations amid a declining num-

ber of children, private schools take great pains to provide unique academic curricula to improve students' abilities, including offering advanced courses.

A survey released by the Education Ministry in early March showed that most private schools did not intend to shift to a five-day week for the time being, so as not to lower the quality of their curriculum. The survey found that 43.4% of private junior high schools and 58.9% of senior high schools intend to opt out of the system. Especially in Tokyo, nearly 70% of private schools said they would maintain their six-day week, although the ministry has urged private schools to shift to the shorter week to close the study-hours gap: the total class hours of private schools will be as much as 1.5 times that of public schools.

Parental pressure

Amid growing parental pressure for a better educational environment, many municipalities are also working to introduce supplementary lessons. Fukaya, Saitama Prefecture, Koga, Ibaraki Prefecture, and Tokyo's Taito Ward will give supplementary lessons on Saturdays that fall on national holidays to students who want to take them.

Asakusa Junior High School in Taito Ward will open a Saturday School Program on April 20 to offer supplemental math, Japanese and English classes and each subject will have both basic and advanced programs to meet students' needs. Not to conflict with Education Ministry's guidelines for the five-day system, the Saturday school will be taught by college students. Including similar programs to be offered by six other public junior high schools in the area, Taito Ward earmarked ¥8 million (\$61,100) for

fiscal 2002 starting in April.

"Considering that the majority of our students go to cram schools to prepare for high school entrance examinations, I thought we should do something to encourage their will to study for better scholastic ability. Public schools, too, should contrive unique and better educational services for students," said Atsushi Okoshi, principal of Asakusa Junior High School.

Some local governments whose public schools will follow the five-day system also plan to introduce intensive and attentive teaching via small-class lessons. Tottori Gov. Yoshihiro Katayama proposed trimming the salaries of prefectural government personnel by 5% and using the money to reduce first and second grade classes to 30 students or fewer. The Yamagata prefectural government earmarked ¥725 million in the next fiscal year's budget to slash the number of first-, second- and third-graders in each class to 21-33, while planning to expand the small-class system to grades four to six in fiscal 2004.

The government of Kagoshima Prefecture has been carrying out measures to enhance basic scholastic ability. Honmyo Elementary school, run by the Yoshida municipal government, introduced a new system from the the current fiscal year, under which teachers are assigned to teach specific subjects.

Uzawa of the University of Tokyo asserts that the best way to improve children's scholastic ability is local government freedom to offer unique educational curricula with distinctive features that differ from the central government's directives. "Competition among local governments will enable public schools to offer better educational options for each student," he said.