

Student teachers take up classroom slack

Teacher wannabes bring enthusiasm to school, get valuable job experience

College students who want to be school teachers are being dispatched to elementary and junior high schools around the country as assistants to teachers in actual classrooms. With the average age of their teaching staff climbing, principals want to recruit young people to revitalize their schools, while college students would like to gain practical experience in preparation for their careers.

Officials at local boards of education expect a lot from the program, saying, "Student teachers will help boost pupils' desire to learn."

In Kodaira, a city in the metropolitan Tokyo area, some students from Tsuda College and Tokyo Gakugei University have been registered with the local board of education since May 2000. The students have been dispatched, in response to requests from primary and junior high schools, to assist teachers in English, mathematics and comprehensive learning classes.

All but four of the city's 27 public schools have embraced the system. Kodaira Daichi Junior High School adopted it in April last year, using trainee teachers in English, mathemat-



A student teacher help out in a class in Kodaira, Tokyo.

ics and Japanese classes. While licensed teachers actually instruct the class, the student teachers go around the classroom answering individual questions.

One Tokyo Gakugei University senior who helps out in a junior high school said, "I've come to notice the eyes of students as if they are saying 'Look at me.'" She is greatly encouraged when a student finally understands part of the lesson because of her help.

One 13-year-old student said: "It's

embarrassing to ask a question when I fall behind in the class with only one teacher in the room. But when a college student comes around, I can always ask a question. Classes are fun now."

Volunteer students are of great help to teachers as well. A math teacher who appreciates the students' help said: "Seventh graders tend to fumble math from the beginning when they learn equations. Teachers alone cannot deal with the situation. Eager volunteer students are really helpful." The move to recruit teaching assis-

tants can also be found in other communities. Local college students will begin providing support in classes from next school year in Tokyo's Itabashi Ward, as well as Warabi in Saitama Prefecture and the city of Tsu in Mie Prefecture.

Local education boards send volunteer students to classrooms because there are few young teachers at a time when significant numbers of teachers are getting older.

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, there were only 5,017 new elementary school teachers nationwide in 2001, and 2,790 for junior high. This is down sharply from the figures of 10,987 and 7,839, respectively, in 1992.

Despite the falling numbers, the competition to become a teacher remains fierce, though it has eased somewhat this year.

The average age of Tokyo's public school teachers as of May last year was 41.9 years old at primary schools and 43.4 at junior high schools. Teachers are turning gray, with the average instructor now 1.9 years older than five years ago.

An official at the Tokyo Metropolitan Office of Education noted: "Most primary school teachers belong to the baby-boom generation. With few teachers retiring, it's difficult for us to recruit new graduates."