

# Flexible Education

Since 2003 the Japanese government has been promoting the establishment of “special deregulation zones” in local areas, to meet more efficiently the demand for services identified by local authorities and private companies. Education is one area that has benefited from the special zones initiative. **Koji Takahashi**, director of the Office for Administrative Reform at the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), introduces the “special structural reform zones for deregulated educational services” created to date.

**S**pecial structural reform zones for deregulated educational services are one type of special deregulation zone created by the Law on Special Zones for Structural Reform promulgated on April 1, 2003, where regional public bodies undertake the implementation of specific educational projects in accordance with the characteristics of the area and boost the human resources that lead the local industry. The potential for replication nationwide of approved special zones for structural reform is deliberated each year at an evaluation and investigation committee set up in the Headquarters for Promotion of Special Zones for Structural Reform. If there is no particular problem associated with the special zone, the aim is to make the relaxation of regulations that was restricted to the special zone effective nationwide.

The special zones have been approved by the prime minister, and as of January 2009 number 1,060. In the

case of special structural-reform zones for deregulated educational services, 202 have been approved.

The majority of applications for special structural reform zones for deregulated educational services are for English-language education or integrated elementary and junior high school as a result of the creation of flexibility in the curriculum which has expanded across the entire country, discussed below. The next highest number of applications is for special zones for the establishment of schools by corporations for supporting truant elementary, junior and senior high school students, or for the development of experts working with those students. Other unique zones are the “Read Write Speak Listen” language and culture Itami Special Zone in Itami City, Hyogo Prefecture, and the integrated elementary and junior high school special zone “Nara—the city where you can walk with us and learn about world heritage” in Nara City. There is also a special zone where the

municipal board of education offers a special teacher’s certificate to working adults who have particular experience. Chiyoda Ward in Tokyo is one such example, and has been approved as a “special zone for the use of private manpower in a school established by Chiyoda Ward.”

This is an example of an attempt to nurture the people who will lead the next generation by proactively recruiting enthusiastic people from the private sector as teachers or full-time instructors, even though they do not possess a teacher’s license. Taking advantage of the central location, English lessons are conducted by native English speakers from diplomatic establishments, while mathematics is taught in an engaging way by technical experts from IT companies or science-related businesses in Chiyoda Ward.

## Successful Applicants

The Ota Foreign Language Education Special Zone in Ota City, Gunma Prefecture submitted an application at the beginning of 2003 and was the first special zone to be approved. This special zone proposed an initiative for teaching international tourism through lessons conducted almost entirely in English, by native English speakers using English textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

In collaboration with the private sector, Ota City established a school that implements integrated elementary, junior and senior high school education with the goal of creating an educational environment where the children would be able to acquire real-life English and an international sensitivity and mindset that have world currency.

The second case was Arakawa Ward in Tokyo, which aspired to revitalize its image as “Arakawa, the international city” and “Gateway to Tokyo, the Nation’s Capital.” Arakawa Ward applied and was approved as a special zone for the implementation of integrated elementary and junior high

**Special zones have two aspects in common. One is the fostering of world citizens through the early introduction of English language education. The other is the smooth transition through the stages of the compulsory education period as a result of the flexible operation of the curriculum.**

school English language education, conducive to the nurturing of internationally minded people. The Narita New Rapid Railway linking Narita Airport with the Tokyo metropolitan district was planned to open in 2010, with the goal of making metropolitan Tokyo a tourist destination hub by directly linking Arakawa Ward's Nippori Station with Narita Airport in thirty-six minutes. This special zone was for the establishment of a special zone research and development school that would create a flexible curriculum and nurture practical communication skills through the medium of English.

The third application to be approved was Tome City, Miyagi Prefecture. Here, the existing compulsory education system of six years elementary school and three years junior high school (6-3) was replaced by the 3-4-2 system: three years lower elementary grades, four years middle grades, and two years upper grades, in an effort to instill basic knowledge through a flexible curriculum that accords with the development stage of the children or takes account of individual difference, and to nurture children who are equipped to cope with globalization through early exposure to English language education. The aim is to provide a continuous nine-year period of compulsory education that follows a consistent educational approach.

Broadly speaking, these special zones have two aspects in common. One is the fostering of world citizens through the early introduction of English language education. The other is the smooth transition through the stages of the compulsory education period as a result of the flexible operation of the curriculum. It has been pointed out that such a system may produce students who cannot adequately cope with the move from elementary school to junior high school, given that this entails a sudden and significant change in the education content and learning environment, such as the level of difficulty of textbooks, lesson times, and the specialized nature of the curriculum. Debate is taking place about whether the "6-3" system needs to be revised to suit the stages of development of elementary, junior high, and senior high school

students, in the light of medical knowledge regarding the changes in the human body that occur after the age of eleven, which is from grade five of elementary school.

In questionnaires conducted in all special zones by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, with a view to replicating them nationwide, many rated the fact that initiatives of this kind were possible, enabling teaching to take place in accordance with the stage of development by linking elementary and junior high school. Special zones have the advantage of enabling teaching guidelines to be drawn up flexibly, thus making it possible for education to respond to the needs of the region and of the times. On the other hand, special zones targeted at elementary and junior high schools also present challenges. Education is compulsory, and if a student moves then a change will occur in the learning environment and content. As a result, children themselves will find it difficult to cope, and there is a danger that this could have an adverse effect. However, those who cite specific benefits far outnumber those who voice such misgivings, and the initiative has taken off from the special zones to be replicated nationwide.

## Education by Corporations

To date, applications have been made for a variety of types of school, from elementary schools to junior high schools and senior high schools, as well as universities. Twenty-eight out of the forty-three so far accredited have opened. This number comprises six universities, twenty senior high schools, one junior high school, and one elementary school.

Schools established by corporations are currently confined to special zones and have not been replicated nationwide. In the case of senior high schools, for example, many schools established by corporations are correspondence-course senior high schools, with many of the students having a record of nonattendance [at regular schools]. The number of students who are not accepted in the existing school system, or do not fit into

the existing system, is rising, and the schools established by corporations are the result of increased demand. Moreover, in the case of universities established by corporations, specialized graduate schools predominantly in business administration, universities for the training of advanced technical artists, professional graduate schools for teacher training, and others have been approved.

Currently, some schools established by corporations are offering excellent education content and are widely accepted in the area. However, there are many schools that are beset with operating difficulties, and 80 per cent of universities established by corporations and slightly less than 70 per cent of senior high schools are in the red.

To realize the potential of schools established by corporations, we must investigate the compatibility of individual companies' decision-making, based as it is on the need to collect capital from the market and the directive to bring profit to shareholders, with the need in school management to achieve continuity and stability. We need to continually collect information from those schools established by private companies to help ensure their success. Furthermore, it is very important to consider the necessary measures going forward by analyzing the achievement of the special measures at each educational stage, from elementary school upwards. Expansion of the school corporation system nationwide is now under discussion.

Originally, there was a need for educational institutions established by corporations because it was anticipated that the corporate funding that would be forthcoming would make possible initiatives that ordinary school corporations were unable to finance. In particular, applications for senior high schools offering part-time correspondence courses as a new alternative to accommodate students with a record of nonattendance at regular schools as mentioned above are increasing and playing a certain role. [□](#)

---

Koji Takahashi is director of the Office for Administrative Reform, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Japan.