

EDUCATION



Enhancing educational ability

Kumon is an educational program that originated in Japan but is now also rated highly overseas. At present, 1.4 million people study at Kumon centers in Japan, while almost 2.6 million study at centers in 44 countries and regions around the world. The key characteristic of the Kumon method is that it does not pit students against their peers; instead it focuses on the individual, drawing out the unique potential of each student. The method is extremely straightforward. Students apply themselves to worksheets, and qualified Instructors help them to develop the ability to correct their own mistakes. The students study at just the right level and develop the ability to deftly work their way through the exercises. At the beginning, the children study at a comfortable level and repeat exercises until they can easily achieve a perfect score, thereby creating a sense of achievement through becoming able to answer all of the problems correctly.

Kumon centers are not cram schools, so the students' efforts may not result in a swift rise in their school grades. However, students develop concentration skills and good study habits by working steadily through the worksheets. The underlying objective is that they begin to enjoy solving problems by themselves, and while improving their grades they develop other academic skills they can apply in other areas of their life.

The Kumon method is known to be particularly effective in enhancing mathematical ability. Cumulative knowledge is important with mathematics; just one mistake and progress stops. Without the basic ability to carry out calculations, the application of mathematical knowledge is impossible. Therefore, when necessary, high school students go back and review elementary school content to allow them to develop the necessary fundamental skills needed to achieve a perfect score. Conversely, students developing the ability to calculate, often find that mathematics becomes one of their stronger subjects. One characteristic is that the level of difficulty increases in small steps, so even elementary school students are able to solve mathematical problems set for high school students. This helps develop self-confidence and generate enthusiasm for other subjects.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of Kumon. Its origins trace back to the mathematical drills the founder of the Kumon method, Toru Kumon, created for his second grade son. It is an approach that can be used in any country as long as the students have paper and pencils. While Kumon centers can be found in relatively affluent sectors of society, they can also be seen in lower socio-economic and poverty-stricken areas.

FACING: Pupils at a Kumon center in Tokyo (*top*). • Children studying at Kumon centers in the US (*left*), and Brazil (*right*).