

ISSUES | LEARNING CURVE

Center helps non-Japanese kids tackle the obstacles of getting into a Japanese high school



Multicultural Center Tokyo concentrates on helping non-Japanese junior high school-age students and their parents prepare for the high school entrance exam, one of the Japanese school system's most complicated processes. | MULTICULTURAL CENTER TOKYO

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Educator Noriko Hazeki says the challenges non-Japanese children face in the Japanese school system begin even before they enroll.

She says some parents have been told that it will “be hard for your child because their Japanese isn’t good,” and that, actually, “they don’t have to go to school, so why push them?”

“Compulsory education in Japan is really only compulsory if your citizenship is Japanese,” she explains. “Otherwise, it’s up to the parents whether they want to put their children in school or not, and some schools even discourage them from doing so.”

The picture that often comes to mind when imagining non-Japanese children going to school in Japan is often one of a multicultural student body attending elite, expensive international schools in the heart of Tokyo. As the number of non-Japanese in this country has increased, however, more and more of them are enrolling their children in the much more affordable public education system.

Unfortunately, Japanese public schools are generally not equipped to address the needs of those students who don't speak Japanese well, nor is the system user-friendly to parents who are unfamiliar with how it works.

That's where Hazeki and her organization come in. Since 2015, she has served as the director of [Multicultural Center Tokyo](https://tabunka.or.jp/en/) (<https://tabunka.or.jp/en/>), which provides counseling and classes for non-Japanese children whose needs are not being met by the country's education system.

Gap at the high school level

In principle, children who are of elementary- and junior high school-age are eligible to attend school and theoretically receive remedial Japanese-language education. This may not always work in practice, though, as not all public schools have the resources to provide such support. Therefore, some schools perceive dealing with non-Japanese students and their special needs as a burden.

Those non-Japanese students who are accepted at local schools may be left to struggle on their own in classrooms where no accommodations are made, unable to understand what the teacher is saying and unable to read textbooks and worksheets. This leads some students to give up and drop out, while others do their best but end up learning little.

The challenges are particularly great for those students who have already completed nine years of education in their home country, as there is no place in the Japanese public school system designated or obligated to receive them. In order to attend high school in Japan, it is necessary to sit for and pass an entrance exam. Those tests are daunting even for native speakers, but they're virtually impossible for those who are not fluent in Japanese.

On top of that are the difficulties non-Japanese parents face in navigating which schools to apply to, how to register for the entrance exams, testing protocol and completing all the required paperwork.

It's this age group that Multicultural Center Tokyo focuses its efforts on, running two full-time free schools in Tokyo, one in Suginami Ward and the other in Arakawa Ward. They're aimed at older students who are not enrolled in a Japanese school because they came to Japan after graduating from junior high school in their home countries, because they were attending a Japanese junior high school and dropped out, or because they graduated junior high school but want to shore up their educational foundations before proceeding to high school.

The curriculum focuses primarily on helping students strengthen their Japanese and academic skills in small group classes, and then supports them in the high school application process. Since 2005, the center has graduated over 700 students who have gone on to attend Japanese high schools. They are originally from



(https://cdn-japantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/np_file_148905.jpeg)

Noriko Hazeki says that if the government wants more people, particularly workers, to come to Japan, it will need to fund programs that help those workers' families adjust to life in the country. | MULTICULTURAL CENTER TOKYO

countries that include China, Congo, Ethiopia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Peru, the Philippines, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, the United States and Vietnam.

The center also runs free Japanese-language study groups on Saturdays for students and their parents, serving around 1,000 participants a year. Twice a year it holds informational programs on how to apply to Japanese high schools, and assists 280 families with educational counseling sessions each year.

Parents and students find out about the center primarily by word of mouth, although some learn about it from their local government or come across it on the internet. Hazeki would like to get the word out, as she believes that there are many students whose families are isolated and don't know where to turn.

“With no source of advice, students may end up spending months or even a year without going to school at all, or just going to cram school for a few hours a week,” she says. “This, of course, sets them back in academics, but also in their social development.”

Underscoring the rarity of the kind of support that the center provides, students commute to its two Tokyo locations from as far away as Chiba and Saitama prefectures. However, since the center is not deemed to be an official “school,” the students cannot purchase discounted student fare passes for their commute.



(https://cdn-japantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/np_file_148903.jpeg)

The Arakawa Ward school run by Multicultural Center Tokyo, which aims to prepare kids for high school. | MULTICULTURAL CENTER TOKYO

Challenges for the students

In her previous work as an elementary school teacher, Hazeki had some non-Japanese students in her classroom and saw up close the issues they had with learning Japanese, as well as their families' struggles with visa issues. She joined Multicultural Center as an instructor in 2006.

Even if students speak Japanese to some extent, everyday language is different from the academic language needed for schoolwork.

“Children who can think abstractly in their native language can't necessarily do that in Japanese,” Hazeki says. “It can take years for them to develop their Japanese enough to be able to do that.”

For students who arrive in Japan when they are junior high school-age, having to learn an entirely new language, as well as study in it, is a monumentally difficult task. While students coming from China have a head start due to being familiar with the kanji, those who come from countries that don't use kanji are at a particular disadvantage.

“Sitting and listening for hours to Japanese when you don't understand it can be so hard,” Hazeki says. “Children who used to love school in their home countries (can subsequently) experience a sense of loss, lose confidence and find it hard to make friends.”

The challenges go beyond just the linguistic. The pressure to conform in Japanese schools can be difficult for non-Japanese students.

“The expectation that everyone will behave exactly alike can be very surprising (for the students) and lead to stress. It can also be difficult to understand the so-called burakku kōsoku,” Hazeki says, referring to “black rules,” the notoriously Draconian regulations that some Japanese schools still have on the books. “It's definitely a cultural difference.”

A growing need

Hazeki sees the issue of education for non-Japanese children as likely to become increasingly important in the future.

“The government wants a lot of non-Japanese to come to work here, and will let Specified Skilled Workers stay longer and bring their families with them,” she says. “But if they want to succeed with that, they need to be able to guarantee that people can lead stable lives here, which includes guaranteeing education for their children.” The problem, she says, is that unfortunately the educational needs of non-Japanese children tend to be an afterthought. And right now, it's left to nonprofits like hers to fill the gap.

Hazeki points to government figures showing that over the past decade the number of children in Japanese public schools requiring remedial Japanese instruction has risen by 1½ times, and that 20% of those are not able to receive such instruction. There are also an estimated 20,000 non-Japanese children in Japan who are not enrolled in school or whose enrollment status cannot be confirmed.

Given the scale of this issue, more government attention seems warranted, as it's beyond the ability of any one nonprofit, no matter how ambitious, to address. Hazeki says the central government is beginning to realize that the education of non-Japanese children is an issue, however, acknowledging that a significant number are not enrolled in school. She also sees some school districts “making efforts to accommodate non-Japanese students, little by little.”

More immediately, she hopes the government can recognize the key role that nonprofits like hers play, and provide more support.

“Lately, we keep having to move our schools from location to location like vagabonds, for lack of stable facilities,” Hazeki says. “It would be nice if the government could at least give us a place to teach our classes.”

For more information on Multicultural Center Tokyo, visit [✉ tabunka.or.jp](https://tabunka.or.jp) (<https://tabunka.or.jp>).



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