

Japan's rigid schooling comes under fire

By Angela Bianchi
Special to The Star

TOKYO — The Japanese fear their economic boom may stagnate if the country's education system is not reformed.

"Our rigid education system is one reason we've only been able to turn out four Nobel Prize recipients," says Yasunori Nishijima, president of Kyoto University. "But the same system has enabled us to produce a well-educated country that brought us ahead, technologically, in just 40 years. I agree that we now need to make changes if we are to keep our level of competition well into the next century."

On the plus side, illiteracy is virtually nil in Japan, the crime rate is one of the lowest in the world, unemployment stands at a mere 2.7 per cent and this once industrially poor Asian giant now controls 10 per cent of the world's gross national product.

Despite its many pluses, educators, students, parents and even politicians realize Japan's hierarchical education system can be improved.

First on the education ministry's list is restructuring and standardizing the

examination system for all high schools and public universities.

At present, some public high schools select top students from junior grades by putting them through rigorous examinations. These students' high school years are a period of constant study and tutoring by teachers to prepare them for competitive university entrance examinations.

It is extremely difficult to gain entry to universities in Japan. Sixty-eight per cent of first-time applicants to colleges and universities get accepted; 25 per cent make it on their second attempt.

"What we have now is students learning not for the sake of knowledge, but just to pass exams," Nishijima says.

Enjoy school

"We want students to enjoy school and not be restricted in what they can study. We want to promote individualism and diversify educational opportunities."

A recent survey by the ministry of education shows 70 per cent of elementary school children and 50 per cent of junior high school students understand their school curriculum, but only 30

per cent of senior high school students fully understand what they are being taught.

Parents and teachers complain that school life is too strict and chokes creativity and individual ability.

"Some parents accuse us teachers of keeping their kids hostage because they study so hard," says an elementary school teacher at Tokyo's Gukugei primary school. "But they also apply a lot of pressure on their kids to excel because our society evaluates you according to academic background."

In fact, 44 per cent of junior high school students and 80 per cent of high school students attend private cram schools, called *juku*, after regular hours to help them prepare for entrance exams to prestigious schools.

Students often sacrifice their social lives during their last year of high school to study for difficult exams, appropriately called *shiken jigoku* (exam hell).

The system has become so competitive that some schools insist on screening children before accepting them into kindergarten.

The goal for most students is still to enter a good university, get a good job

and stay there for life. If a student is accepted at a prestigious university, the chances of finding employment are 99 per cent.

"Employers are demanding higher education from workers," Nishijima says, "so students are forced to go to university, preferably one of the top 10."

"Students know that academic standings will determine their future career and are willing to study longer and harder and put up with strict rules."

Commit suicide

But some high school students, who find the competition and pressure of learning too stressful, have committed suicide.

During the 5½-day school week, girls are not allowed to wear make-up, jewelry, sheer panty hose or perm and color their hair. Boys must keep their hair short and tidy. Students must wear a uniform.

Schools don't hold dances or other social events to discourage dating and keep students' attention fixed on their Number 1 priority — studying.

□ Angela Bianchi is a Toronto-based freelance writer.