

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## Our K-12 Policies Resemble Those of Imperial Japan

By Lawrence Baines

Year after year, students from Japan are at the top of the charts in international comparisons of student achievement, particularly in mathematics and science. In addition to their high achievement, Japanese students seem to be compliant and cooperative in school. According to a **2013 report of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development**, Japan has "the best disciplinary climate among students in all other OECD countries."

What is not as widely known is that, after the end of World War II, the United States helped Japan create a new K-12 education system. **The Report of the United States Education Mission to Japan**, published by the U.S. State Department in 1946, explicates the flaws of Imperial Japan's system of education and outlines a detailed plan for the future "based on the recognition of the worth and dignity of the individual."

In the foreword to the book, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, the commander of allied forces in the Pacific and then directing the reconstruction of Japan, states that the report is "a document of ideals high in the democratic tradition." In particular, its American authors excoriate the old Japanese regime for its mistaken beliefs about education. The system the Japanese built, they write, was conceptually flawed:

- It presumed *"a fixed quantum of knowledge to be absorbed, and tended to disregard differences of ability and interest among students."*
- It established that *"the measure of efficiency was the degree to which standardization and uniformity was secured."*
- And it *"lessened the opportunities for teachers to exercise their professional freedom."*

What is most surprising about the 1946 Mission Report is that the educational practices of Imperial Japan, which the report's American authors characterized as "malicious," are strikingly similar to recent reforms enacted in the United States.

**Breadth of Curriculum.** According to the report, the old Japanese educational system was overly reliant on a fixed curriculum and failed to prepare students for the real world. About the



prevalence of high-stakes testing, the report states: "A system of education that is dominated by preparation for examinations becomes formal and stereotyped; it makes for conformity on the part of teachers and students. It stifles freedom of inquiry and critical judgment."

Of course, the American educational system today is predicated upon high-stakes exams that may have little relevance to the real world. In his **2001 State of the Union address**, President George W. Bush acknowledged that the aim of this new brand of American education should revolve around test performance.



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"They talk about 'teaching to the test,'" Mr. Bush said. "But let's put that logic to the test. If you test a child on basic math and reading skills, and you're 'teaching to the test,' you're teaching math and reading. And that's the whole idea."

Frequent testing, it turns out, is of negligible value, though it consumes inordinate amounts of instructional time, as ever more hours, days, and weeks are devoted to "practice tests" and test-taking strategies.

Today in American classrooms, any lesson, discussion, or event that does not directly correlate to a test is viewed as problematic. Indeed, the solution for continued low test-score performance has become the threat of a state takeover, in which the fixed curriculum becomes petrified—in the form of scripted lessons and a doubling-down on test preparation.

**Standardization and Uniformity.** Across the United States, superintendents, school administrators, and department chairs enthusiastically announce that they have aligned the curriculum so that they know precisely the material that every teacher in every class will cover every day. These school officials are enthusiastic because uniformity is what gets rewarded under the current American system. It does not matter that a particular class might be teeming with kids who have IQs above 130, or is crowded with children who emigrated from Haiti last week. The curriculum must be followed, regardless of the students who might actually be sitting in the seats. When the curriculum is standardized, the needs of students become superfluous.

The 1946 Mission Report notes that a good curriculum is not standardized, but "must start with the interests of the pupils." No curriculum, it says, is "valid under all circumstances, irrespective of the environment and abilities of pupils."

Uniformity is a poor strategy for developing human potential. Learning how to solve a quadratic equation, run the steeplechase, sew a blouse, camp in the wilderness, and understand literature have inherent degrees of difficulty, and typically, students are at different places on the road to mastery at different points in time. To maximize efficiency and to maintain student interest, the ideal starting point for learning is where the student happens to be, not where the curriculum guide commands.

According to the report, "Teaching methods emphasizing memorization [and] conformity ... should be modified to encourage independent thinking, the development of personality, and the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship."

**Opportunities for Teachers.** The most strongly worded exhortations in the Mission Report involve the role of Japanese teachers, who, during World War II, were poorly paid and were ordered by the government to extol national supremacy, to valorize military service, and to encourage blind self-sacrifice. "The effects of the old regime are manifest in the teaching practices," chides the report. "Teachers have been told exactly what to teach and how to teach it."

Similarly, American teachers today have precious little autonomy, perhaps less than at any other time in history. Yet, to improve the quality of teachers in future Japanese schools, the report implores that "to do their best work, [teachers] must have freedom to think, speak, and act. They must have security in their positions, reasonable salaries, and adequate retirement provisions."

The Japanese government eventually passed legislation specifying that salaries for teachers be set at the highest possible level. As a result, the salaries for beginning engineers and beginning teachers in Japan are about the same. Japanese teachers must teach for a year under a mentor teacher, and continually engage in professional development, which is paid for by the government.

In most states in this country, teacher pay is low, requirements for certification are widely varied, and expectations for paid and facilitated professional development are almost nil.

Unquestionably, Japan's post-World War II educational experiment, based on democratic values, has flourished. Today, Japan has one of the strongest education systems in the world. On the other hand, the United States, which used to have one of the strongest education systems in the world, has reverted to the practices of pre-World War II Imperial Japan. Not only has America borrowed Imperial Japan's discredited educational practices, but these "malicious practices" have also become the cornerstone for education reform in the 21st century.

American education could improve, at absolutely no cost, if we took our own advice from 1946 and rid ourselves of the autocratic, misanthropic, and illogical policies of the past. A return to democratic ideals would mean:

- Appreciating the differences among students;
- Teaching the child, not the curriculum; and
- Giving teachers the freedom to teach.

Japan changed its outdated system of education in 1946. Perhaps the United States can change its outdated system in 2015. After years of repression and regimentation, with disastrous results, it is time to give American public education back to the people.

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