

Zenkyo makes petitions to the government

14 times amid the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic in Japan has revealed the problems of neoliberal policies that put market principles first. Regarding education policies, the Japanese government maintains the upper limit of the number of children per class (40 children) and promotes school elimination and consolidation. Government policies that do not budget enough for education make it more difficult to control infectious diseases in schools.

In order to protect children and education, Zenkyo and its affiliated unions grasped actual conditions of schools as well as compiled the urgent demands of children, parents, teachers and local residents for the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (hereinafter MEXT). Since February 2020, Zenkyo made petitions MEXT for 14 times, and MEXT accepted the following requirements.

- Guaranteeing employment and decent wages of part-time teachers.
- Allowing teachers take time off from work if they or their family have COVID infection.
- Carrying out flexible operation of a financial support system for poor children.
- Increasing the number of school buses in schools for special needs.

- Providing each school with sufficient budget for anti-COVID-19 measures in the range of 1 million yen to 5 million yen.

Zenkyo thinks it's extremely difficult for teachers to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in schools with "top-down methods" led by MEXT. The government should improve education systems according to the needs of schools and local conditions.

All schools nationwide were required by former Prime Minister Abe to be temporarily closed from March 2020. Zenkyo also called on MEXT to allow schools and the boards of education to decide when to close a school based on the condition of children, parents, local community, and the scientific knowledge of experts.



A maximum 35-pupil class size fulfilled for the first time in 40 years

Japan has one of the lowest levels of education condition among OECD

In Japan, the maximum number of students per class in elementary schools, junior high schools, and high schools is 40 (only in the first grade of elementary schools it's 35) by law. The average number of students per class is 27.2 in elementary schools and 32.1 in junior high schools. According to Education at a Glance 2020: OECD Indicators, both elementary and junior high schools in Japan have the second highest average number of students per class among OECD countries.

After temporary school closure amid the coronavirus pandemic, many schools temporarily decreased class size to 20 students as an emergency measure to ensure physical distancing in classroom. Both children and teachers felt how wonderful the small-sized class was, saying, "I can raise my hand easily and ask a teacher a question if there is something that I don't understand" and "I was able to interact with each child carefully."



Aiming to realize the 20-student-size class

Zenkyo aims to realize small class sizes with 20 students or fewer in all schools to protect the health and life of children and guarantee their growth and development.



Zenkyo uses hashtags to share information about small class sizes on SNS and collects signatures requesting an increase in the 2021 budget of MEXT as well as signatures demanding national and local government to enhance education systems. In addition, Zenkyo builds relationships diverse organizations and individuals working to realize small classes around country.

Zenkyo strongly urges MEXT to allocate budget for small classes through these Zenkyo's various efforts.

The voices of citizens run the country

On March 31, 2021, a bill was enacted to lower the national standard for class sizes in public elementary schools from the current 40 to 35. More than 500 local governments and some political parties presented written opinions to the national government toward the realization of small class sizes, which also helped to amend the law. It was a big achievement that the voice of people moved the government.

However, Japanese school class size is still large compared with the global standard. Zenkyo will continue the campaign for better standard.

It's absolutely necessary to the standards for qualified special schools

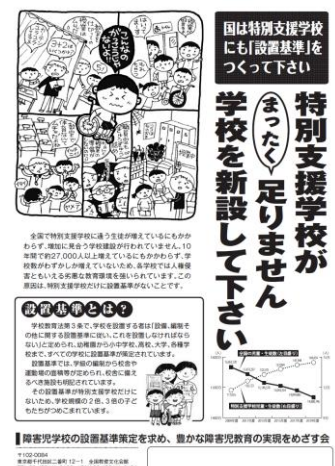
In Japan, kindergartens, elementary schools, junior high schools, high schools, and universities have national standards for establishment that stipulates facilities and site area required for a school. But MEXT does not set the standards for only special schools. Despite the increasing number of students attending special schools, MEXT is reluctant building a new school by using the lack of the standards as an excuse. So many special schools around the country have problems such as using one classroom for two classes and using the music room or the school library as a classroom. Parents and teachers have campaigned for 10 years, criticizing inequality that only special schools do not have the standards.

At last, the Central Council for Education's report submitted in January 2021 said that the government

would be required to develop the standards for establishment of special schools.

In response to this report, MEXT started discussions toward the establishment of the standards, but Zenkyo are concerned about the content proposed by MEXT that does not set an upper limit on the number of students per school and that is not legally binding on existing schools.

Zenkyo will continue the movement to call for the establishment of standards that will lead to a drastic improvement in the current poor educational environment.



Zenkyo strongly opposes the introduction of “variable working hours system”

Teachers work longer hours amid the COVID-19 pandemic than ever before. According to an urgent survey conducted by Zenkyo, 4000 teachers answered it from July to August 2020, 50% said working overtime, taking work at home, and working on holidays increased more, and 75% said they work overtime for more than 10 hours a week. Zenkyo demanded MEXT take necessary measures such as increasing the number of teachers to improve this situation. However, MEXT called for the enactment of ordinances to introduce a “variable working hours system” to local governments. In this system, an employer may have a worker work in excess of the statutory working hours for a day or a week, provided that the

average working hours per week for a specified period of 1 year or less does not exceed 40 hours. Zenkyo thinks that the variable working hours system will only conceal the fact of teacher's working long hours and will not solve the actual cause of this problem.

In December 2020, ordinances were enacted in Hokkaido and Tokushima prefectures. However, there was a lot of opposition voices from all over the country, and MEXT admitted that this system was not enforceable to individual teachers.

MEXT planned to start the system from April 2021, but local governments have not been able to introduce it due to too many ambiguities in operation.

10 years after the Great East Japan Earthquake and the Fukushima nuclear accident

Although 10 years have passed since the 2011 Japan Earthquake, radioactive pollution caused by Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant accident still forces more than 40,000 people to live as evacuees. Nevertheless, the government significantly cut the 2021 reconstruction budget, reduced rent subsidies and school expense subsidies to disaster victims as well as stopped adding support staff to schools in the affected areas. It is also promoting a project to return residents to areas near the Fukushima nuclear power plant where are insufficient decontamination level of radioactive materials and poor infrastructure. It can be said that the government's reconstruction plan is in apparent conflict with the demand of the victims. Zenkyo conducts a study tour to “see, walk, and

think in disaster-hit areas” every year after the earthquake and has grasped the reality and wishes of children and teachers there. Zenkyo also urges the MEXT and the Reconstruction Agency to provide the support that evacuees really want.

The national government aims to realize a carbon-free society on the premise of dependence on nuclear power plants, but Zenkyo will continue to struggle to abandon nuclear power so that a nuclear accident will never happen again.



For a world without nuclear weapons

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons came into effect on January 22, 2021. Hibakusha have urged the banning of nuclear weapons for over many years under the slogan of "There should never be another Hibakusha". The efforts of Hibakusha and many citizens wishing for a peaceful world without nuclear weapons led the United Nations to adopt the treaty and each country to ratify it.

By the end of December 2020, the number of the International Signature Campaign in Support of the Appeal of the Hibakusha reached 13,702,345, of which 60,000 were collected by Zenkyo. The women's committee of Zenkyo in Kyoto collected signatures at Kiyomizu-dera Temple on the 6th and 9th of every month for 50 years.

It will be important to convince the leaders of nuclear powers and countries that depend on nuclear umbrellas to change their policy. In Japan, about 530

local governments or about 30 percent of the total adopted a petition calling on the Japanese government to sign and ratify the TPNW. Zenkyo is working toward collecting 200,000 signatures demanding the government to join the treaty.

