

Schools for Special Needs Education in Japan

Schools for special needs education in Japan are those for the purpose of allowing children with disabilities to receive education aligned with the education provided at regular kindergartens, elementary schools, junior high schools, and high schools, and to overcome academic and/or lifestyle difficulties caused by disabilities and achieve independence.

Until March 31, 2007, the law specified individual special education schools (now called schools for special needs education) as schools for the blind, schools for the deaf, and schools for people with other disabilities (called “special education schools” overall). According to the revision of the School Education Law which came into force on April 1, 2007, these are now a single type called schools for special needs education.

1. Overview

The purpose of schools for special needs education is to provide education aligned with the education provided at regular kindergartens, elementary schools, junior high schools, and high schools for students with visual, auditory, intellectual or physical/motor disabilities or students with health impairments, as well as providing the knowledge and skills necessary to overcome academic and/or lifestyle difficulties caused by disabilities and achieve independence (School Education Law, Article 73). Educational activities are carried out according to the principles of special needs education.

Schools for special needs education have kindergarten, elementary, junior high, high school, and high school vocational divisions, and qualifications for admission are aligned with those for kindergarten, elementary school, junior high school, high school, and high school vocational sections. For children (hereafter “students”) with a single disability, each class may not exceed 15 students, and there is frequently more than one homeroom teacher for each class. For students who have difficulty commuting from their home and who are severely disabled, teachers may visit their homes, establishing a “visiting class.” As well, when medical support is required for a short time only, students may transfer temporarily to a different school for special needs education which has the required functions.

According to the revision of the School Education Law, the system which, until March 31, 2007, had divided these schools into schools for the blind, schools for the deaf, and schools for people with other disabilities was streamlined from April 1, 2007, into simply schools for special needs education.

This name change took place in order to do away in name with the distinctions based on functional differences between schools. Each school for special needs education was then charged with making clear to which populations it offered education, as determined by the Minister of Education: students with visual, auditory, intellectual, or physical/motor disabilities, or health impairments (School Education Law, Article 73). Education is now also required to be matched to each student's individual special education needs rather than divided by disability, based on the principles of special needs education. It is also acceptable to offer education to students with two or more different disabilities.

As well as educating students enrolled therein, schools for special needs education are also charged with performing center functions, including providing advice and support to students with mild developmental disabilities at local kindergartens, elementary schools, junior high schools, and high schools. They are to provide comprehensive overall support and assistance in the community and at schools, for students with disabilities in the traditional sense and for those with mild developmental disabilities.

From the elementary division through the high school division, classes such as Japanese, mathematics (arithmetic), science, social studies, English, technology and domestic science, information technology, physical education, music, and art are taught with the same content as in regular elementary schools through high schools, but in order to develop the ability to overcome and move beyond disabilities, the teaching is appropriately modified.

At schools for special needs education, self-independence activities (*jiritsu katsudou*) also take place according to students' disabilities. During this class time, students learn methods and skills through which they can safely make their way in life. Teachers who specialize in this training rather than working as homeroom teachers are also assigned here.

In the high school division and high school vocational division, schools can have both standard courses, which include standard educational content, and vocational courses, which focus on vocational education. Most of the courses in the high school vocational division focus on vocational education.

2. Brief History¹

The history of special education schools in this country begins in May 1878, when Furukawa

¹ For historical accuracy, some terminology no longer considered appropriate is used here.

Taishiro, a teacher at Kamigyo Nineteenth Elementary School in Kyoto, took charge of the establishment of the Institute for the Blind and Deaf-mute (*Môa-in*), followed by the establishment in Tokyo of the Institute for the Blind (*Kunmou-in*) in January 1880, by the Rakuzenkai, a group organized by Nakamura Masanao and Yamao Yozo. Kyoto's Institute for the Blind and Deaf-mute became a municipal organization in 1889, and Tokyo's Institute for the Blind became the Institute for the Blind and Deaf-mute, accepting deaf-mute students as well, in 1884. In November 1885 the latter came under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Education, and was reorganized in December 1887 into the Tokyo School for the Blind and Deaf-mute.

Encouraged by the establishment of these public schools, the movement to create a system under the law for special education schools grew stronger, with those involved in support for people with disabilities as its prime movers. In response, the Ministry of Education, in its Second Revised Elementary School Ordinance of 1890, added, along with kindergartens, libraries and so on, schools for the blind and deaf-mute to its list of schools aligned with elementary schools, and regulated their establishment and abolition. Thus education for the blind and deaf-mute acquired its first legal approval. The Third Revised Elementary School Ordinance of 1900 clarified the compulsory education regulations, but stipulated that children with disabilities were to be exempted or given deferments from compulsory education. This served to raise the new issue of how to guarantee education for children exempted or deferred from compulsory attendance.

In April 1909, the Ministry of Education revised the system of schools under direct ministerial supervision, and established anew the Tokyo School for the Blind; next, in April 1910, the Tokyo School for the Blind and Deaf-mute was renamed the Tokyo School for the Deaf-mute, separating blind and deaf-mute education for the further development of each. A situation in which special education was largely established and managed through dependence on the efforts of civil philanthropists began to give way to one where it was considered a social issue, and those involved called for special education to be improved, made compulsory, and taken up by the authorities. As democracy in the Taisho era and the thriving post-World War I economy reached their peaks, in August 1923, the relevant articles of the Elementary School Ordinance were expanded and separated out to promulgate the first independent rescript on special education schools: the "Ordinance on Schools for the Blind and Deaf-mute." This confirmed the separation of schools for the blind and for the deaf-mute, made compulsory the establishment of such schools in each prefecture and in the Hokkaido territory, and allowed municipalities to establish them as well. Schools for the blind and for the deaf-mute were composed basically of elementary and secondary divisions, with possible preparatory, research, and additional divisions as well. In addition, the elementary and preparatory divisions of public schools were forbidden from collecting tuition or entrance fees. In the same

month, the regulations for public and private schools for the blind and for the deaf-mute were set out: schools for the blind were assigned a six-year elementary division and four-year secondary division, and schools for the deaf-mute a six-year elementary division and a five-year secondary division. Entrance qualifications for both were being the age of six or older for the elementary division and having completed elementary school or similar for the secondary division; the laws also regulated classes and subjects, staff qualifications, facilities, etc. in detail. While this still applied only to schools for the blind and for the deaf-mute, an impressive development from the former dependence on charity programs to a public school system had taken place in Japan.

Special education other than that for the blind and the deaf-mute also developed from the late Meiji era. Education for students with intellectual disabilities first took place as part of elementary education after the latter became widespread, and based on the Taisho-era perspectives of respect for the individual and of human rights ideology, a good number of special classrooms were established in elementary schools. However, the first formal steps to protect and educate students with intellectual disabilities were taken by Ishii Ryoichi in 1906, establishing the Takinogawa School in Tokyo's Kita-Toshima County; this was followed by the Shirakawa School in Kyoto in 1909, and the Toka School in Osaka in 1916, among ten or more schools established around the country. The first medical facility for children with physical disabilities was the Kashiwa School, established by Kashiwakura Matsuzo in Tokyo in 1921. At the time, neither physical nor intellectual disabilities were well understood, and it was not uncommon for students with physical disabilities to be educated in classrooms intended for students with intellectual disabilities. The first independent school for students with physical disabilities was Tokyo Municipal Komei School, a school for students with other disabilities aligned with the elementary school level, which opened in 1932. Until the post-war period, this remained the only school of its kind, but there were fourteen elementary schools in prefectures across the country, including Ibaragi and Osaka, with special classes for students with physical disabilities. The education of children with health impairments had been an issue from the mid-Meiji period, due to the focus on school hygiene, but it was not until the mid-Taisho period and later that it was taken up seriously. Already, as of 1905, Tokyo pediatricians had worked to establish a rest home at the foot of Mt. Myogisan for Kanda Seika Elementary School, as a summer convalescent home for students with health impairments, but the first permanent care and education facility was the Tokyo Municipal Care Facility, Awa Branch, opened in Katsuyama, Chiba, in 1910. The first special needs school as such was the Rinkan School, established in Chigasaki, Kanagawa, in August 1917, by the White Cross Society, an anti-tuberculosis organization. Similar schools were subsequently opened in Osaka, Chiba, Shizuoka, etc. Special classrooms for students with health impairments, called nutrition or care classrooms, numbered 209 across the country by 1935.

In its Response on National People's Schools of 1938, the Council on Education proposed establishing special educational facilities for students with disabilities and rapidly proceeding to make education compulsory for the blind and the deaf-mute. In the planning stages of the Ordinance on National People's Schools, the Ministry of Education considered making education for the blind and the deaf-mute compulsory, but it was not followed through due to budgetary constraints. However, schools for the blind and the deaf-mute were considered to be aligned with the national school system, and regulations stated that schools or classrooms may be established for students with feeble health, intellectual disabilities, or other physical or intellectual abnormalities who need special care. These facilities came to be called special education schools or classrooms. Further, secondary schools and higher girls' schools were also permitted to establish special education classes. Because of this advancement of policies promoting special education, and because of the rise in decreased physical capacity and malnutrition resulting from lack of food during the war, special education classrooms in national schools increased sharply at one point, but as the war progressed they were closed one after the other.

In March 1947, the School Education Law, passed at the same time as the Fundamental Law of Education, renamed schools for the deaf-mute as "schools for the deaf" and made education for deaf children compulsory. At the same time, the special education school system, for the education of students with intellectual disabilities, physical/motor disabilities, or health impairments, was established. Thus, three forms of school, schools for the blind, schools for the deaf, and schools for students with other disabilities, were passed into law as schools carrying out special education (now called "special needs education").

Because special education schools were not organs of compulsory education until 1979, they focused on the students with mild disabilities, and students with severe or multiple disabilities were exempted or deferred from education, staying at home or entering institutions for people with disabilities. After special education was made compulsory in 1979, students with severe or multiple disabilities also came to attend special education schools; however, expulsion of students with disabilities from regular local schools took place as well. There was also continued criticism that the segregated education system persisted.

On the other hand, making special education compulsory caused the ratio of students with severe or multiple disabilities to rise. In some cases, it was impossible to properly educate students with mild disabilities. For this reason, some prefectures established special education high schools, intended for vocational and specialist education, separately from existing high school divisions of special education schools. The general rule was that the students without a disability could not enter or

transfer into special education high schools.

In Japanese education, diverse approaches according to the disability have historically been taken up, but on April 1st, 2007, all schools educating students with disabilities were unified into schools for special needs education.

3. Number of schools, students enrolled, and teachers

The number of schools for special needs education, students and teachers as of May 1st, 2012, is as below.

Number of schools, students enrolled, and teacher in special needs school

No. of Schools			
Total	National	Public	Private
1059	45	1000	14

No. of Students												
	Grand total			National school			Public school			Private school		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Total	129,994	84,631	45,363	3,056	1,983	1,073	126,159	82,194	43,965	779	454	325
Kindergarten division	1,569	889	680	75	52	23	1,459	821	638	35	16	19
Elementary division	37,097	24,478	12,619	860	572	288	36,094	23,829	12,265	143	77	66
Lower secondary school division	28,829	18,804	10,025	820	547	273	27,865	18,156	9,709	144	101	43
Upper school division	62,499	40,460	22,039	1,301	812	489	60,741	39,388	21,353	457	260	197

No. of Teachers					
Total	National	Public	Private	Male	Female
76382	1502	74578	302	30502	45880

Source: School Basic Survey 2012, MEXT

Next is the number of schools for special needs education and students enrolled by disability.

Variety	Schools	Students
Total	1,059	129,994
Visual disabilities	66	2,556
Auditory disabilities	91	5,381

Intellectual disabilities	491	77,951
Physical/motor disabilities	136	3,855
Health impairments	63	2,389
Other	212	37,862

Note: "Other" indicates combinations of multiple disabilities.

Source: School Basic Survey 2012, MEXT

4. Classrooms for special needs education

As well as schools for special needs education, regular schools also establish classrooms for special needs education for the support of students with comparatively mild disabilities. Special needs classrooms are established in elementary schools and junior high schools by disability, and are small classes with an upper limit of 8 students, including classes for students with intellectual disabilities, physical/motor disabilities, health impairments, visual disabilities, aural disabilities, speech/language-disabilities, or emotional trauma. Special needs classrooms may be established at will by the local board of education. The number of special needs classrooms, students attending, and staff as of May 1st, 2012, is as follows.

Number of classrooms for special needs education, students attending, and teachers

Disability	Elementary schools		Lower secondary schools	
	No. of classrooms	No. of students	No. of classrooms	No. of students
Intellectual disabilities	14,968	52,959	7,448	27,140
Physical/motor disabilities	1,892	3,205	675	1,060
Health impairments	849	1,541	341	588
Visual disabilities	223	272	86	101
Aural disabilities	544	926	206	336
Speech/language disabilities	434	1,411	73	110
Autism/emotional trauma	11,457	40,705	4,814	15,077
Total	30,367	101,019	13,643	44,412
Number of staff	32,544		14,753	
Number of schools	15,501		7,380	

Source: School Basic Survey 2012, MEXT

Brief history of classrooms for special needs education

Common among the reasons for existence of special needs classrooms before the war was the need to ensure a chance to attend school. From the 1940s through the 1950s, the establishment of special education classrooms was a major issue, and the focus was placed on the chance to attend school. In the background to this was the fact that students with intellectual disabilities in regular classrooms became forgotten students, their studying affected by the problem of there being no education suited to their needs. For this reason, parents and educationalists urgently desired the establishment of special education classes. In that sense, the problems of enrollment and studying at this period were one, and the reason for existence of the special education classes was to guarantee both. Thus it can be said that the reason for existence of special education classes has developed along lines of guaranteeing education suited to special needs = guaranteeing learning.

From the early 20th century on, the four conditions of making struggling learners visible through exam systems, achieving uniform quality of classrooms as teaching units, teachers' interest in special needs education, and possibility of plural classrooms through increased attendance were met, and thus the environment for establishing special classes was created; therefore, special classrooms increased in schools throughout Japan.

The difference from the modern day was the breadth of students educated in special needs classrooms. For instance, the Ministry of Education Research Council of 1931 reported that roughly 20% of students at regular elementary schools had an IQ of 90 or lower, categorized as "intellectually retarded students." Students with mild intellectual disabilities, or IQs of 70 to 90, were to be placed in "encouragement classes," and students with severe intellectual disabilities, or IQs below 70, were to be placed in "support classes." Given that the modern standard for intellectual disability is usually an IQ of 70 or lower, we see that their borderline was very high. As well, since the percentage of IQs 70 or lower is roughly 2%, by raising the borderline 20 points they increased the number of students involved by a factor of 10.

Modern special needs classes have very small class sizes, but it was not unusual for early special classes to have as many as 40 students, including those who simply had low grades or students with borderline intellectual abilities (also, this was a time when class sizes could reach 80 students, so 40 was not considered unusually large).

5. Issues

It was thought that, in keeping with the decreasing birthrate, the number of students in schools for special needs education would also decrease; however, the number has increased in the last ten years, from 94,171 students enrolled in 2002 (the total of students in schools for the blind, schools for the deaf, and special education schools), to 129,994 in 2012. In particular, there has been a notable increase in students with intellectual disabilities (from 57,078 in 2002 to 106,920 in 2012).

There is no clear explanation for the increase in students enrolled in schools for special needs education in recent years. One factor that can be considered is the 2006 revision of the School Education Law, which included under the rubric of special education students with mild developmental disabilities, such as attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities (LD), and high-functioning autism without intellectual disabilities, who had not previously been considered subjects for special education. As well, another factor may be increased social understanding of education for special needs due to the social spread of research on developmental disabilities.

In addition to students with mild disabilities, the increase in students with intellectual disabilities whose intellectual development is borderline has also been pointed out. With the increase in students of this kind, each school is thought to be facing urgent tasks of improving its educational environment and the manner of its educational approach, such as facilities, staff arrangements, maintenance and increase of specialization, work with autistic students, curricula, and educational organization. Consideration of how to organize and improve these tasks is necessary for dealing with the tasks arising from the increase in students and the factors thereof. With regard to reorganizing the educational environment, as an approach for the cramped conditions prevailing in schools in more than half of the prefectures and major cities across the country, branch schools and classrooms are now being planned for. However, with regard to the educational approach needed for these issues, the situation calls for the discussion of specific policies.

Reference and URLs

MEXT (2008) Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education (Provisional translation)

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White Paper on Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology 2009, MEXT,

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28/02/2013
(Taro NUMANO)

特別支援学校（記述の要点）

特別支援学校とは、障害を持つ者が「幼稚園、小学校、中学校、高等学校に準じた教育を受けること」および「学習上または生活上の困難を克服し自立が図られること」を目的とした日本の学校である。

2007年3月31日以前は、盲学校・聾学校・養護学校（これらを包括して、特殊教育諸学校と称していた）は、特殊教育（現在の特別支援教育）を行う学校として個々の学校種として法令に規定されていたが、2007年4月1日に施行された学校教育法の改正により、特別支援学校という同一の学校種となった。

1. 概要

特別支援学校は、視覚障害者、聴覚障害者、知的障害者、肢体不自由者、または病弱者（身体虚弱者を含む）に対して、幼稚園、小学校、中学校または高等学校に準ずる教育を施すとともに、障害による学習上または生活上の困難を克服し自立を図るために必要な知識技能を授けることを目的としている（学校教育法第72条）。教育活動は、特別支援教育の理念に則って行われる。

特別支援学校は在籍する生徒に教育を施すだけでなく、地域の幼稚園、小・中・高等学校に在籍する生徒の教育に関する助言・支援、いわゆる「センター的機能」も担うよう定義されている。従来の障害に加えて、発達障害などの子どもたちにも、地域や学校で総合的で全体的な配慮と支援をしていくことになる。

2. 沿革

明治初期：黎明期における善意の個人による開設から官立学校へ移行

明治中期：法制化運動の高まりと法制化および就学の義務化

明治後期～大正・昭和初期：特殊教育の振興、公共化の進展。対応障害者の多様化

戦時下：国民学校令における障害児の取り扱い

戦後：盲学校・聾学校・養護学校・特殊教育諸学校の法制化

1979年：養護学校の義務化

2007年：特別支援学校への統一

3. 学校数・在籍者数・教員数

4. 特別支援学級

特別支援学級は、小・中学校に障害の種別ごとに置かれ、8人を上限とした少人数の学級であり、知的障害、肢体不自由、病弱・身体虚弱、弱視、難聴、言語障害、情緒障害の学級がある。

5. 課題等

近年の特別支援学校在籍者の増加について

障害の多様化とそれに対する対応について