This chapter explores Japan's education reforms in the 1980s and 1990s. The present school system was built to promote Japan's industrialization, and has now become obsolete. The thrust of education reform over the past decade has been how to diversify schools away from uniformity and rigidity. Strategies include: introducing new curricula, implementing innovative high schools, and increasing the autonomy of universities to improve curriculum, teaching and research.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores Japan's education reforms in the 1980s and 1990s. Many of the reform initiatives in the last decade laid the groundwork for continued campaigns to overhaul schools in the 1990s. The main purpose of the chapter is to highlight major changes in Japanese education that have been occurring for the past decade.

Formal education is a function of society, and, although it is a conservative cultural agent, it gradually changes in response to societal demand. Japan underwent two sweeping school reforms since the Meiji Restoration, which repudiated Tokugawa feudalism in 1868, and ushered in the modern era. The first comprehensive reforms occurred in 1872, when Japan laid out a national school system in which elementary education became compulsory. It was a bold and progressive system, largely copied from the one current in France. The modern Japanese school system was perfected by 1890 through a series of overhauls and expansions. The second comprehensive reforms were launched immediately after World War II, and they altered Japan's pre-war school system fundamentally.

Whereas the first education reforms were initiated by Meiji leaders in response to the nation's urgent need to create the human resources required for modernization, the post-war education reforms were imposed and implemented under the close supervision of the Occupation authorities. In early 1946, the United States Mission on Education was invited to Japan to recommend education reforms. Members of the mission used the current U.S. education system as a model for formulating their recommendations. The Education Reform Committee, appointed by the Japanese government as a counterpart to the U.S. mission, played a critical role in reviewing the Americans' recommendations and drafting final recommendations for reforms to be legislated. The recommendations led to the establishment...
of a uniform system of co-education that offered six years of elementary, three years of lower secondary, three years of upper secondary, and four years of university education (Rohlen, 1983; Shimahara, 1979; Shinoda, 1979). This post-war education system has remained relatively unchanged until the present time.

Prior to the 1980s, the only major campaign to overhaul the Japanese post-war school system occurred in the early 1970s. In 1967 the minister of education charged his advisory council, the Central Council of Education, to deliberate on school reforms to meet changing social and economic demands. The Council completed its report in 1971, delineating a new vision of Japanese education (Central Council of Education, 1971). The 1960s witnessed industrial and economic expansion unparalleled in Japanese history. In response to the audacious personal “income-doubling plan” launched by the government in 1961, the Ministry of Education assumed centrality in embarking on many new initiatives: implementing a revised curriculum; enhancing science and technical education; implementing national achievement tests; expanding secondary and higher education; and further revising math, science, and technical education (Kinoshita, 1983; Shimahara, 1992; Yamaguchi, 1980). Personal incomes tripled within a decade, as did international trade. Industry was desperate for ever greater numbers of better trained people, and it demanded that education be upgraded. Reflecting the tenor of those times, enrollments in high schools and four-year colleges increased from 57.7 and 9.2 percent, respectively, of all youths in 1960 to 82.1 and 24 percent in 1970, a phenomenal change within a single decade. In short, the reform report was issued at a time when Japan’s unparalleled socio-economic transformation was taking place.

Notwithstanding the Central Council of Education’s audacious vision, it failed to receive undivided support from within the Ministry of Education and national legislators to implement its entire recommendations. The Ministry of Education was divided into the “internationalists,” who aggressively attempted to advance reforms, and the conservative bureaucrats, who rejected radical changes (Schoppa, 1991). Top bureaucrats within the Ministry, who guided the development of Japan’s postwar school system, stubbornly defended the status quo. The recommendations were partially implemented in the 1970s, however, and, perhaps more significantly, laid out parameters of reform issues during both the 1970s and 1980s.

EDUCATION REFORM MOVEMENT IN THE 1980s

Reform Issues

Whereas the 1971 reform concentrated on expanding the nation’s adaptability to further industrial development and concomitant social change, reformers’ principal concerns in the early 1980s were how to deal with negative social consequences of Japan’s school system and the advanced industrial and economic structure. The 1980s reform campaign was launched to deal with these problems on a much