

EDITORIAL

Pointless nationwide testing

In April 2007, the education ministry conducted a nationwide achievement test for school children — the first such test in 43 years — spending ¥7.7 billion. The results were partially made public in late October. There are plans to hold a similar test in 2008 and 2009. There are many reasons, however, for the ministry to rethink this decision.

About 2.25 million elementary-school sixth graders and middle-school third-year students took the test, which focused on Japanese and math. The test's ostensible purpose given by the ministry is to help improve teaching methods for individual students.

But when results were given, schools and students only received sheets showing whether questions were answered correctly or incorrectly. Without original answer sheets teachers and students cannot ascertain how and why students made errors in answering questions. Thus, the test is almost of no value to the improvement of teaching methods.

If the ministry wants to know the level of students' knowledge and their ability to apply that knowledge, a statistically controlled test covering a limited number of schools should be enough. The ministry made public only prefecture-by-prefecture test results. But schools and municipal boards of education were given the schools' test results, which they are allowed to make public. This makes the comparison of among municipalities and schools possible and could lead to the ranking of schools — something that would intensify competition and put further strain on teachers and students.

In general, the test results do not show a significant difference in performance among prefectures or between urban areas and rural regions. But the ministry must seriously consider how to improve the quality of schools whose test performances were particularly unsatisfactory. This requires

larger budgets and more personnel, and cooperation among government ministries since economic factors are greatly responsible for students' poor performances. The ministry should heed a comment made by a teacher from Nagasaki Prefecture: ¥7.7 billion is enough to hire 1,000 teachers for a year.

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