

Odd response to student's suicide

The Osaka City Board of Education has decided that the municipally-run Sakuranomiya Senior High School will suspend entrance examinations for its physical education and sports health departments this year.

The decision was made in response to a demand made by Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto in the wake of a suicide of the captain of the school's basketball team in December after being subject to corporal punishment by a teacher who served as the team's coach.

Mayor Hashimoto said that since use of violence by certain teachers at the school had become habitual and teachers, students and their parents had tacitly accepted it, the physical education-related departments of the school should not accept new students this spring to halt the "continuation" of violence.

But the board's decision and the process leading to the decision, which has been criticized by many parents as unfair to their children, will only deepen public distrust of the Osaka city's education administration.

On Dec. 23, the mother of the 17-year-old captain of the school's basketball team found him hanged at home. The day before, he had told her that the club coach had slapped him 30 to 40 times during a practice game that day. Although the board of education had known much earlier that corporal punishment was used at the school thanks to a tip-off to the Osaka City Government, neither it nor the school launched an investigation in earnest.

In his call for suspension of the entrance exams, Mayor Hashimoto accused not only teachers but also students and their parents of failing to stop the violence by certain teachers, despite the fact that in the past he made statements to the effect that some physical punishment may be necessary in certain cases and that "education is 20,000 percent coercion."

He also demanded that all the teachers in charge of the sports clubs at the school be transferred to other schools, saying that he would stop paying wages to those who remained at the school as of April. Thus all teachers in the departments related to physical education will leave the school.

Bowing to Mr. Hashimoto's demand, the board of education decided in a 4-1 vote to suspend the entrance exams for the physical education and sports health departments this year. This decision is most unfortunate as it punishes children who wish to enter these departments, forcing them to take responsibility for a problem they had nothing to do with.

The most important task at hand is to carry out a thorough investigation of developments that led to the student's suicide and to create a system and culture that will not tolerate corporal punishment and other forms of violence. It is hard to see the logical connection between this and the suspension of entrance exams.

The departments in question will be renamed the ordinary studies department, but applicants will be tested in the same subjects as before. The board of education even hinted that the new department may resume using the former names in fiscal 2014.

Thus it seems that the school board is more intent on engaging in political gimmicks than on enacting meaningful reform.

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