

The Japan Times **OPINION**

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Teaching or brainwashing?

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The education ministry's Textbook Authorization Research Council on Dec. 20 endorsed the ministry's new standard for screening school textbooks after holding just two sessions. Such hasty approval of the standard is deplorable and suggests that the Abe administration is seeking to strengthen its intervention in education so it can impose its views on students.

The education ministry's new standard seems to reflect a statement in the Diet in April by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe that the textbook screening system has failed to incorporate the spirit of the revised fundamental law of education, which stresses the importance of nurturing love of the nation and one's native place. The law was revised in 2006 under the first Abe administration.

The new standard says that textbooks that include "grave defects" when checked against education goals specified by the law will not be approved. The law's education goals covers a variety of things such as knowledge and culture, autonomy, equality, justice, responsibility and aesthetic sentiments as well as love of the nation and one's native place.

How can the ministry define what constitutes "grave defects"? In the absence of clear definitions of grave defects, it would be difficult to exclude arbitrariness in screening textbooks.

There may be cases in which certain textbooks will not be approved because their descriptions do not conform to the government's view on patriotism. Thus there is the very strong possibility that the government will attempt to mold children's thoughts and conscience to match its views.

The new standard also says that when dealing with certain issues in modern history, textbooks' descriptions must include the governments' unified views or finalized court rulings on those issues if any exist.

The ministry has not made clear what these issues are. But it is thought that they include such matters as territorial disputes between Japan and neighboring countries, the Nanjing massacre, "comfort women" who were forced to provide sex to members of the Imperial Japanese armed forces, and the status of the Self-Defense Forces.

This rule will exert pressure on textbook authors and may lead them to exercise self-censorship. Therefore it should not be imposed and textbook authors should be able to write freely. If screening officials believe that textbook drafts contain inadequacies, they can request revisions.

In addition, the government’s views on particular issues can change depending on the administration in power or new developments. What is most important is that textbooks contain academically tenable and accepted views and theories — not the government’s views.

The new standard also says that if textbook authors mention views or figures related to issues in modern history on which there are no commonly accepted views or figures, they must make this situation clear. But this raises the question of just how the education ministry would determine that there are not commonly accepted views or figures on particular issues. The new standard also carries the danger of textbook screening officials exercising self-censorship to avoid incurring government anger.

The education ministry’s move will clearly strengthen state control of textbooks and help to nurture parochial nationalism among children. Even more worrisome, it is being accompanied by steps to tighten government control over education, including giving local government leaders control over boards of education and teaching “morals” — as defined by the central government — as a mandatory subject.

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