

Text version

Struggles and Promises
Japanese Saturday School of Bloomington-Normal, IL USA
1996-1999 Research Report

What is the Japanese Saturday School?

Japanese Saturday Schools (JSS) exist to help Japanese young people who are living in the United States maintain their knowledge of Japanese language and culture. Most JSS students are in the United States because their parents work at American locations of Japanese companies. On average, JSS students spend approximately four years in the United States. Due to the high academic standards and rigorous testing of the Japanese educational system, Japanese Saturday Schools are important in helping to ease students' transition back to Japanese educational institutions. Japanese Saturday School instruction focuses on Japanese language, mathematics, and social studies--areas where students returning to Japan after several years' absence are most likely to be behind their peers.

The Japanese Saturday School (JSS) in Normal, Illinois, was established in 1986. It is administered through Illinois State University's (ISU) College of Education and located in Metcalf School, ISU's laboratory elementary school. The JSS employs nine teachers and one administrator. Of the 59 students enrolled in July 1999, 36 attend grades one through six and 23 attend grades seven through nine. The JSS curriculum is based on materials provided by the Japanese Ministry of Education, or Monbusho. Students attend the JSS for six hours per day on 42 Saturdays a year.

Why this study?

To inform plans for the future, in 1997 and 1998 former and current students, parents, teachers, and administrators were asked for information about challenges faced by JSS students, both in the United States and after their return to Japan. Study respondents also provided their views about the JSS program and ways it can be improved.

Who provided information for this study?

Survey instruments were completed by 12 former students, 22 current students, 22 parents of students, 5 teachers, and the principal. Most current JSS students who completed surveys are elementary school students aged between 8 and 11. Almost all students (90%) are children of parents who work for Japanese companies and are temporarily located in the United States. A small percentage of students are children of ethnically Japanese university faculty members or have spent considerable time in Japan. Parents of JSS students are well educated and employed in "white-collar" jobs. Fathers typically are engineers (32%) and work in office settings (60%). Mothers are homemakers (95%).

Twelve former JSS students completed survey questionnaires. Fifty-eight percent of these students returned to Japan between 1996 and 1998; the rest returned before 1996. Seventy-five percent of these respondents had started their education in the United States. The average length of former JSS students' stay in the US was three years.

Japanese Saturday School teachers and administrators must be fluent in Japanese and educated to a high standard in subjects covered by the school's curriculum. There are no formal Monbusho guidelines for selection of Saturday School instructors. Teachers responding to the survey have taught at the JSS for between nine years and five months. Although one teacher had taught for five years before starting to teach at the JSS, the others had had little or no previous teaching experience. No information about the principal's background was provided.

What do students like and dislike about living in the United States?

Regardless of age or grade level, most students said that when they first arrived in the United States, "I was not pleased." Major causes of displeasure were leaving friends behind in Japan and difficulty with the English language. However, despite a painful beginning, most current students find life in the US enjoyable "at the present moment." They particularly value "having lots of friends to play with" and say that "making new friends" was an important reason for their change in perspective. The only common dislike among students is "school lunches." Japanese Saturday School students who have returned to Japan echo the perceptions of current students. About one-third of these young people say they would like to return to the United States and 37 percent report that they particularly valued "making American friends" and "the American culture of the peer group."

Recommendations:

Since peer relationships apparently have the greatest impact on students' experience of life in the US, it would be helpful to develop or enhance communication between former, current, and future students. These young people could provide helpful information and emotional support; they could also foster realistic expectations about transitions between Japan and the United States. Potential ways of facilitating communication include pen pal, video-conferencing, and Internet-based (e-mail or Web site) programs.

How do students adjust to life in the United States?

According to responses of JSS parents, most children do not participate in any kind of orientation or formal preparation before relocating to the United States. Thus, students select their own coping methods. Age influences the ways students adjust to life in the US. Younger students in grades 2 through 4 study English, while older students in grades 5 through 9 use social contacts as their means to adjust.

Recommendations:

Participation in a carefully developed orientation program before moving to the United States might ease students' transition. In addition, teachers and parents might consider developing age-appropriate strategies to help students adjust to life in the United States. Language learning and socializing are inter-connected. Extracurricular activities emphasizing learning English in social settings might assist the adjustment process for students of all ages. Since older JSS students particularly like the "friendliness" of American students, a "students-teach-students" approach might be successful. Japanese Saturday School students also appreciate the "open-mindedness" of American students; thus, they might react well to an informal environment encouraging participants to express opinions.

Do students find it difficult to learn English?

A large proportion of current students (23%) reports that they cannot speak English well. Nonetheless, students view their current struggle with English as a good investment that will give them an advantage when they return to Japan. Only half of JSS parents report that their children participate in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classes at their American schools.

Recommendations:

Reinforcing the view that speaking English will be a future asset should help to motivate students to continue their struggle with the language barrier. However, it is also important for schools to offer appropriate and high quality ESL instruction and for parents to seek good ESL instruction for their children.

What do students think of the American school system?

Despite their difficulties with English, almost all JSS students (96%) report that they understand most of what they are taught in American schools. Students' favorite classes are mathematics, art, and physical education. They least favor spelling, music, social studies, and *genetics* (*science?*). In addition, students often mention "learning environment" as one of the things they dislike about life in the United States.

Recommendations:

More information is needed to understand the differences between Japanese and American learning environments to better prepare students for these differences before their arrival in the US. In-service training for local teachers about the differences in learning environments may improve teachers' sensitivity to their Japanese students' expectations and needs.

What do students think of the Japanese Saturday School?

Students enjoy the opportunity provided by the JSS to talk, play, and eat with Japanese friends. However, many also struggle with JSS instruction. Study difficulties may result from weak Japanese language skills, since about two-thirds of JSS students say they speak "so-so" Japanese and about 80 percent consider their Japanese language ability as "average." Predictably, Japanese language ability declines over the period students live in the US. Study difficulties also are related to the fact that the curriculum prescribed by the Monbusho requires very rapid study and assimilation of material. Some students report having more homework from the JSS than from their American school.

Recommendations:

To meet the ultimate goal of helping students be competitive upon their return to the Japanese educational system, parents and teachers must continue to use all opportunities to reinforce students' Japanese language skills during their stay in the US. It is also important for teachers and administrators to review, optimize, and streamline the JSS curriculum to meet realistic learning goals. It is not realistic for the JSS to try to cram a year's full 240-day curriculum into 42 days of weekend instruction. Successful

implementation of the full curriculum would only be made possible by adoption of the European model of "foreign language schools" where all classes would be taught in Japanese, with English being offered as part of the curriculum. The school would keep the same time schedule as schools in Japan, and meet both US and Japanese standards.

What are students' concerns about returning to Japan?

Current JSS students are mainly worried about being behind their peers when they return to the Japanese school system. Concerns about performance increase with students' age, since older students face highly competitive secondary school and college entrance examinations. These concerns are valid, because of the number of characters that students are expected to have mastered before secondary school and the high math performance of Japanese compared to American students. It is noteworthy, however, that although 41 percent of former JSS students reported difficulties in readjusting to life in Japan, almost all of their problems were associated with Japanese language and customs. Most of these young people reported relying on friends to help them adjust and said that it took them between one month and one year to make the transition.

Recommendations:

Because most JSS students are enrolled in grades 1 through 3, the focus is on their needs for foundational language skills, and an elementary atmosphere pervades the school. Older students' need for intensive instruction in critical content areas receives comparatively less attention. The JSS should review its focus and provide greater emphasis on the learning needs of older students as they prepare to return to Japan.

What do parents expect from the Japanese Saturday School?

When asked about abilities they want their children to develop through JSS participation, parents emphasized social and character development over the acquisition of knowledge or skills in particular content areas. Less than one-quarter of parents mentioned development of skills in subjects such as English, music, and Japanese, over half of parents want their children to develop qualities associated with thinking, independence, character, creativity, and friendship. Parents want their children to acquire culturally important abilities such as understanding and developing "a system of knowledge compatible with the one in Japan." Parents expect the JSS to teach Japanese culture and discipline, inculcate the "Japanese style of work with an emphasis on cooperation," and provide a supportive environment. It is also noteworthy, however, that during the time JSS families are in the US, parents' expectations shift from "basic learning" to "good extracurricular activities," "meet Japanese friends," and "practicing Japanese language."

Recommendations:

Because of the limited time students spend at the Japanese Saturday School, parents' expectations may not always be realistic. Parents should be thoroughly informed about what they can reasonably expect from the JSS before enrolling their children. Furthermore, regular meetings of parents, teachers, and administrators would help, both to generate realistic expectations on the part of parents and to deal with important issues as they arise.

How do parents help students maintain their Japanese language skills?

Approximately half of the parents surveyed help their children maintain Japanese language skills through one or more of the following approaches: reading to them and encouraging them to read Japanese books, speaking Japanese to them, making Japanese videotapes available, and arranging for correspondence courses. Parents also say that enrolling their children in the Japanese Saturday School is an important way they support students' Japanese language skills. Just under one-third of parents report they "seldom" use any methods of supporting these skills. It is noteworthy that when families first arrive in the US, they are most active in helping children maintain Japanese language skills. However, in the second and third years of their stay, there is a decline in this activity. Shortly before returning to Japan, parents intensify efforts to help their children improve their Japanese language skills.

Recommendations:

Providing guideline to parents about ways to support language ability may assist parental involvement in student learning. "Homework" assignments that involve parents might ease the need for parents to devise their own methods of helping students maintain their Japanese language skills.

What do parents think about their children's American school experience?

Parents indicated that their children's American school experience is helping them become broadminded, internationally minded persons. The fact that the parents view these attributes positively may impact the outcomes of Japanese society and economy, especially in the context of an increasingly interdependent and interconnected world.

Recommendations:

Japanese students and parents with experiences in America are better suited than persons without international experiences to enter and work within international contexts. Attributes derived from international experience and language acquisition should be recognized and rewarded.

What do teachers say about the Japanese Saturday School?

Japanese Saturday School teachers say that their job is teaching, supervising students, exchanging ideas with other teachers, grading, planning school events, and participating curriculum development. Their focus is on completing the prescribed curriculum; indeed, one-quarter of teachers responding to the survey suggested a decrease in JSS extracurricular activities to make this possible. Several teachers called for closer alignment of the JSS with other Japanese schools and requested a manual of teaching methods. Many teachers said that the teaching materials they use are fine, but suggest development of an archive to include both materials and teachers' notes. A few also suggested that new teachers hired by the JSS should have a Japanese teaching certificate or, at minimum, teaching experience in Japan.

Regarding weaknesses in the Japanese Saturday School, teachers mentioned the shortage of time, both to prepare and present lessons and to discuss teaching materials with other teachers. They also mentioned the JSS's weak relationship with American schools and turnover of teachers during the year.

Teachers suggest a number of possible improvements in the Japanese Saturday School. Foremost is their call for more help from parents, particularly with supervision of students at school. One comment suggested that "Parents should be more informed about JSS, attend teacher-parent meetings, do school chores, and help children with homework." Teachers also recommend that the principal "listen to suggestions that are coming from teachers" and develop "a more realistic view of the American school system."

Recommendations:

Several important recommendations emerge from teachers' survey responses:

- It is clear that development of realistic goals for what can be achieved by the JSS would make it possible for teachers to do a better job and enjoy greater job satisfaction.
- The JSS would also be well advised to foster closer relationships with students' parents by holding regular parent-teacher meetings and asking parents to volunteer for supervisory and educational support activities during the school day. Parents should be involved in review of JSS goals.
- An overseas exchange program would both enhance the preparation and qualification of JSS teachers and provide timely information to the Monbusho about the real challenges faced by the Japanese Saturday Schools.
- Finally, to help students with the difficult challenge of integrating their JSS and American school experience, it would be useful for the JSS to develop links with the local public schools.

The Japanese Saturday School administration's perspectives. . .

While the principal indicates that "the school has been on a plateau" and there are "no remarkable problems," nonetheless he describes challenges coming both from without and within. An important challenge for the future will be posed by the shift in educational philosophy and curriculum development that is currently occurring in Japan. This shift "will change the educational process from encouraging the students to make correct answers automatically to educat[ing] the students to become persons who have individual characters depending on each individual's capabilities." The administration would like to see a corresponding shift in the JSS curriculum to make it "open-ended towards an education for the future."

Internal challenges are posed by 1) fluctuation in student numbers in a small student population, 2) some disagreement between the school and parents about students' grade-level assignments, and 3) coordination between school staff, parents, and Board members.

1. Recently, a case arose where there would be only one student in the 6th grade class. Parents requested that the student, who had just completed 5th grade, be placed in the 7th grade class. The situation was resolved because a new 6th-grade student will be entering the school in August. However, the principal believes that there is an underlying problem in that "the school administration lacks a sense of confidence to convince parents what needs to be done based on the vision and goals that the school set up." Since this situation is likely to arise again, the JSS may want to develop policies for how to handle it.

2. In two cases, the JSS recommended that students repeat grades because of difficulties with class work. Parents objected to this decision and ultimately withdrew the children from the school. The administration maintains that the teachers' decisions must be final, and should be supported by the JSS board.
 3. Perhaps most significantly, the administration calls for more "effective coordination among the school staff, parents, and community (the Board members)." This coordination is needed to initiate a serious review of the JSS curriculum. However, there is also a need to clarify the responsibilities of the principal, on the one hand, and Board members, on the other.
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Conclusions and recommendations

The Japanese Saturday School is needed to help Japanese students maintain language, mathematics, and social studies skills and contact with Japanese school culture. However, research indicates that there are ways the JSS program could be improved.

1. *Develop realistic goals for the Japanese Saturday School.* Parents, teachers, administrators, JSS Board members, and representatives from Monbusho should agree upon goals that reflect both outcomes that can reasonably be achieved during a 42-day school year and the real and changing needs of students during their stay in the United States.
2. *Review and revise the JSS curriculum to reflect new goals.* Again, this should be a collaborative effort of parents, teachers, administrators, and JSS Board members. It might also be useful to get feedback from former students who have returned to Japan.
3. *Develop communication programs involving former, current, and prospective JSS students.* These programs should ease the adjustment from Japan to the US and back to Japan. They will build *esprit de corps* and social support among young people associated with the JSS experience.
4. *Foster communication and coordination among JSS parents, teachers, administrators, Board members and local schools.* The Japanese Saturday School is very small; it must make the best possible use of all potential resources. Parents are an underused resource. If they were more involved in decision-making, supervision, and classroom activities, both families and staff would benefit. Furthermore, the JSS could develop mutually beneficial links with local schools--particularly elementary schools. Japanese Saturday School staff members would learn more about the educational environment their students encounter five days a week, while public school teachers would learn more about the educational requirements and cultural backgrounds of their Japanese students.
5. *Initiate an exchange program involving JSS and Japanese school teachers.* Such a program would improve the skills and support the motivation of JSS teachers. It would also provide a useful international learning experience for Japanese school teachers, who could also take advantage of graduate programs offered by nearby higher educational institutions (Illinois State University and the University of Illinois

- in Urbana). Finally, it would support better information for the Monbusho about the real circumstances of Japanese Saturday Schools in the United States.
6. *Develop training programs and a teaching materials archive for JSS teachers.* Many JSS teachers have no formal teaching experience. Furthermore, since most were educated in Japan, they also have no personal experience of the American school system and educational culture in which their students are immersed. Finally, frequent turnover among JSS teachers means that there are frequently new members of staff who must quickly develop the skills necessary to teach students and manage classrooms. Self-study materials, perhaps delivered by computer, could enhance teaching skills, while an archive of teaching materials and notes would avoid the necessity for teachers to "re-invent the wheel" every time they develop a lesson plan.
 7. *Develop and publish a JSS manual incorporating school policies and operating guidelines.* This document should include job descriptions for teachers, administrators, and board members. It should list policies for handling problems that have occurred in the past. It should also include guidelines for matters including parent involvement in the school, programs the school might wish to initiate, regular evaluation of JSS effectiveness, and other matters. This manual should be a collaborative effort of JSS staff, Board members, and parents.