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Japanese students fall in all three OECD academic tests

Kyodo News

Japanese students in their first year of high school have dropped against their counterparts in other areas of the world in reading and mathematical skills as well as scientific literacy, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development said Tuesday.

It was reported last week that Japanese students had dropped from second to sixth place in science among some 400,000 15-year-olds in 57 countries and regions. Now, detailed results of the 2006 survey show Japan fell to 15th from 14th in reading and to 10th from sixth in math.

In a previous survey in 2003, in which 41 countries and regions took part, Japanese students' math ranking dropped from the top to sixth place. The result shocked many in Japan and helped prompt the government to reverse its "relaxed and lighter curriculum" education policy and reform the education system.

While acknowledging that math literacy has fallen further, the education ministry noted overall academic competency was not below average among OECD members and that reading and scientific performances remained almost steady.

The ministry will analyze the math results and try to put more emphasis on reading skills and knowledge in revising its curriculum guidelines, possibly in 2011, an official said.

About 6,000 students from across Japan took part in the OECD Program for International Student Assessment last year — the third of its kind administered by the Paris-based club of 30 industrialized nations.

Designed to assess how much students near the end of compulsory education have acquired in terms of knowledge and skills needed in adult life, the tests are marked to make the average score of OECD countries 500 points.

Japan scored 531 points in scientific literacy, down 17 from the previous survey three years earlier; 523 in math, down 11; and 498 in reading, the same as before.

Finland came out on top in scientific literacy at 563 points, South Korea in reading at 556, and Taiwan in math at 549. Hong Kong and South Korea tied for third in math at 547, signaling a rise for East Asian students in that discipline.

Among Japanese students, the gap shrank between high and low scorers, indicating a rise in the overall level, but the number of high scorers decreased, suggesting a failure to enhance the abilities of capable students, the ministry said.

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capable students, the ministry said.

Waseda University professor emeritus Hiroshi Nakajima, an expert on international education, said, that addressing students getting left behind is important to raise the overall education level, and he is therefore opposed to the ministry's plan to alter the policy of relaxed curricula.

"The policy has just begun to show the effect of developing students' abilities to think for themselves and so should be further pursued," said Nakajima, opposing the plan to cut school hours for so-called integrated study classes, in which schools are allowed to decide what to teach to students, to spare more time for major subjects.

Questionnaires showed fewer Japanese students on average view science as a practical subject or are interested in it, far below the OECD average.

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