



Foreword

The Great East Earthquake in March 2011 brought human tragedies and unparalleled destruction over Japan. But it also revealed the unmatched commitment and capacity of the Japanese people to address the challenges and to build a new future for the country.

Education will be the foundation for this future. The high value Japan has traditionally placed on education and the unwavering belief of its citizens that all children can succeed have fuelled Japan's rapid economic rise already over many decades. The Japanese success story is based on world class educational standards.

But as the demand for skills in Japan's society is changing, continued success will depend on moving beyond providing more of the same education. Continued reform of the curriculum will be essential, in ways that shift the focus among students from reproducing educational content towards strengthening their capacity to extrapolate from what they know and apply their knowledge in challenging situations. The latest PISA assessment shows that Japan has made a promising start, but the following challenges need to be addressed.

First, the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers and school leaders – and the quality of teachers and school leaders cannot exceed the quality of work organisation, professional development and support provided by and to schools and local communities. Over the last decade, Japan has prioritised reductions in class sizes over investments in teachers, seeking to bring class sizes more in line with those in other OECD countries. In the future, improvements and investments in the quality of teachers can make an additional difference.

Second, Japan's "Basic Guidelines for Reconstruction in Response to the Great East Japan Earthquake" demand that the reconstruction efforts be directed towards "creative futures" instead of reinstating the status quo and they underline the central role that local capacity and initiative play in this. As PISA shows, Japan has already seen a significant shift from one of the more centralised to one of the more decentralised education systems. However, the challenge remains to enable teachers, schools and local communities to actively assume the leadership roles and responsibilities they have been assigned.

Greater local responsibility, in turn, will demand greater attention to equity-related issues. PISA shows that Japan's traditionally high standards of equity are beginning to erode. Devolved responsibilities therefore need to be accompanied with equity-related policies that attract the most talented teachers to the most challenging classrooms and the most capable principals to the schools most in need for effective leadership.

Third, learning does not begin in school nor does it end with school. A lifetime approach to education and learning is needed. Japan's effort to integrate childcare centres and "kindergartens" and to build a coherent educational framework will be central to provide all children with the best possible start in life. Similarly, it is no longer just the school or university attended but actual performance at the workplace that are shaping the economic and social future of Japan's citizens. Thus, Japan will need to better develop and leverage the skills of its adult population.

Last but not least, while Japan can pride itself to have achieved far better educational outcomes than most other OECD countries with fewer resources, the pressure to further improve value for money must not be underestimated. In the short term, the aftermath of the Great East Earthquake is demanding an extraordinary effort from citizens and taxpayers. In the longer term, reducing the public deficit as well as the dramatically changing demographics and their demands on health and social services may even put pressure on investment in education. But education will remain the key to Japan's future.

The comparative evidence produced by the OECD underlines that the long-term economic and social returns of better learning outcomes far exceed any conceivable cost related to their improvement. The OECD stands ready to support Japan in consolidating its position as top performer in education and innovation and making the best out of its investment in education.

Angel Gurría
OECD Secretary-General