



Ken Ohshima

After the "more relaxed education policy" aiming at cutting down the learning contents by 30% was introduced in 1998, the academic abilities of Japanese people have declined swiftly. In addition to this, Japan now has an increasing number of young people called "Freeters" (freelance part-time workers) or NEET (young people Not in Education, Employment, or Training) that parasitize on their parents without taking on a steady job. When self-centered children brought up in a wealthy, carefree atmosphere were released from cram education, many of them began to pursue excitement rather than learning. At school also, the fixed idea that students naturally follow their teachers was disrupted. Teachers then exposed their fragility and the fact that there were a significant number of teachers that were lacking in teaching ability soon became apparent. Against this background, an attempt was made to employ civilians that did not have a teaching license as teachers. The following is a story of a man who switched from being an investment fund company president to a high school principal.

Struggle of A Civilian Principal

By Masaomi Ise

His First Utterance in an "Alien World"

It was April 2003 when internationally-active businessman Ken Ohshima who had been the president of an investment fund company in Boston went to a new post as the principal of Mie Prefectural Shiroko High School. Ohshima got his first culture shock as soon as the faculty meeting, which he was attending for the first time, started. The chairman said, "Please discuss this matter." Only a few teachers made remarks. Most teachers kept looking down and raised their hands only when asked for a show of hands. In fact, some of them were even snoozing. Calculating time, the chairman said, "We will take a vote now. All in favor, please raise your hand." "Wait a minute," Ohshima said before he could stop himself. He thought that this way would never work to newly create things. It was the first utterance of the civilian principal who had embarked on an "alien world" called a school.

Bringing up a New Type of Japanese

Ohshima had been a president of an investment fund company affiliated with Toshiba Corporation, where he was preparing for a new business

involving investments in venture companies in Japan. Upon obtaining agreements from American partner companies and Toshiba, an idea of making a fund of about 20 billion yen was taking shape. Just when Ohshima was about to go to Japan to achieve the final agreement, however, the 9.11 terrorist attack occurred. This incident turned the situation around. Both Japan and America were swept up by a recessionary mood. Ohshima tried to patch up the situation in vain. He felt more and more frustrated and finally quit the company.

When Ohshima was looking for new employment in Japan, he learned that Mie Prefecture was inviting public participation for "civilian principals." He thought that it could be a good opportunity to work on what he had been thinking while observing Japan from overseas. He wrote in his application documents "There is an urgent need to foster a new type of Japanese who can take risks by breaking away from the postwar education that simply aimed at fostering honor students who would never fail." Only two persons out of the 65 applicants were accepted. One of the two was Ohshima.

"That's As If in a Communist Country"

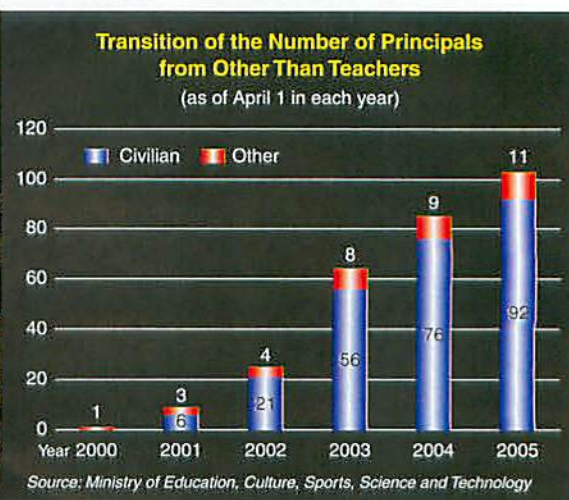
What surprised Ohshima next was the works committee of the labor union. Shortly after Ohshima assumed the post, several union members visited him and brought up a number of requests from the union. One of the requests was regarding the television coverage of the entrance ceremony that Ohshima was going to attend for

the first time as a civilian principal. The union members requested him to ask the TV station not to film teachers, if any, who would not stand up at the raising of the national flag and singing of the national anthem. Ohshima was amazed and said, "That's as if in a communist country."

"I can mention that only as a request. I cannot say anything like controlling the coverage. Will you be in trouble if you are filmed? Are you engaged in anything that could cause you trouble if you are filmed?" After some silence, the union members presented another request. They said that the rights they won as the union were the union members' rights and, therefore, they did not want to share them with teachers who were not members of the union. Ohshima said, "Teachers are teachers in the same way whether they are union members or not. If you say that you won't give rights to certain teachers because they were not union members, that's purely discrimination." The union members then fell silent again. Probably he could not get through to the residents of the "alien world."

Bathroom Lockout

It was shortly after the first term had started. When Ohshima was making the rounds of the school building, he found that one of the western-style toilet stalls was locked from within. Wondering how it had happened, he called a female teacher who was the cleaning supervisor and asked her. To his surprise, it was the teacher herself who had locked the toilet stall. When



Ohshima asked her for the reason, she said with an indignant expression on her face, "Some students have repeatedly used that toilet stall to smoke cigarettes. The toilet was sometimes clogged and full of filth. You've never imagined such trouble, have you? Maybe you should start standing guard from now on." She had made a female student lock the toilet stall simply because some students had gotten it dirty, and never reported it to the administrator. Principal Ohshima pointed out that that was not quite right. The teacher then got upset, stood up and stalked away. Ohshima realized that the common sense in the "alien world" called school is very different from that out in public.

Argument over Bathroom Repairs

After a while, Ohshima received a telephone call from an engineering staff of the school. He said that a part of the school building was very dirty. There were cigarette butts discarded on the floor, which was stained with cigarette burns. The walls were also broken and torn here and there. Principal Ohshima decided to close the bathroom for about a week and have it repaired by the engineering staff with the help of professional repairpersons. When Ohshima explained this project at the faculty meeting that morning, a teacher raised an objection. It was the female teacher who had locked the toilet stall. She said, "There are some students who suffer from bladder inflammation. They will have trouble. The bathroom need not be closed. We can clean it up if we work harder on regular cleaning."

"This problem has occurred though we have been doing regular cleaning until now. We now have to take a different approach. I will explain the situation to the students who suffer from bladder inflammation. If there are any students who have an objection, I will listen to them, too. I will also consider individual responses to those students."

For all his words, Ohshima could not convince the female teacher. After the meeting, she sent him a number of e-mails to say this and that. While repeating his explanation in reply to her e-mails, Ohshima had a feeling of despair. She seemed to reside in a world where common sense did not apply. When any of the toilets of which she was in charge of cleaning got dirty, she got angry and simply locked it as a matter of choice.

When Ohshima tried to fundamentally solve the problem as a matter of school policy, however, she raised an objection by bringing up the personal situations of one or two students.

A Dirty Environment Darkens and Coarsens People's Minds

In the end, Ohshima told her, "Even if you remain opposed to the idea, we will still go ahead with this project because all of the other teachers have agreed." The engineering staff was fired up and replaced the floor and walls by themselves to reduce the cost. They made the bathroom sparkling clean. "A dirty environment darkens and coarsens people's minds. By continuously working on the beautification of the environment, we have to show students the importance of taking good care of things," said Ohshima. A theory called the Broken Windows Theory has been introduced in the United States. This theory states: If a few broken windows of a building are not repaired, a few more windows tend to be broken soon. Problems will then escalate little by little resulting in the dilapidation of the entire building.

In the initial days after arriving at the school as a principal, Ohshima had a keen feeling that the school was very dirty. However old a building may be, it can retain its beauty if it is kept cleaned and well maintained. But the building of Shiroko High School was littered with trash, which gave it the impression of a run-down place. That is why Principal Ohshima first attempted full-scale beautification of the bathroom. His policy began to gradually change the students. Later on, when soccer club members visited another school to have a practice game, they cleaned not only the lockers but also the bathroom they had used. The parent of a student of the other school was very impressed with them and sent an e-mail to Ohshima saying, "You have really wonderful students."

Struggle for Starting "10-minute Reading"

Another project Principal Ohshima tried to start was "10-minute reading in the morning." Though its educational effect had been proven and even a book titled as "10-minute Reading in the Morning Created a Miracle" had been published, only about 10 out of the 74 high schools in Mie Prefecture were implementing this reading project.

However, Ohshima came to learn how much you had to be determined just to make students read a book for 10 minutes at most.

At the faculty meeting held in May shortly after the first term had begun, the morning reading committee consisting of Japanese language teachers proposed the "10-minute reading in the morning" project. But the proposal was overpowered by some "resistance forces" that did not want to get involved in troublesome work. Ohshima sent the members of the reading committee to other schools to collect successful examples and tenaciously tried to persuade the teachers. After several meetings, the teachers finally agreed to give it a try. That was February near the end of the first school year.

Soon there were a number of responses from teachers who realized the effect of the reading project, such as "I was very happy to see all students except one were reading enthusiastically." Nevertheless, some teachers were still upset with the fact that their lunch break had been shortened by five minutes.

As the end of the first school year approached, however, a teacher sent an e-mail to Ohshima saying "Recently, I feel that the teachers including myself have been changing." Another teacher raised his voice at the faculty meeting, "All of us teachers should work together to lead students." The silent majority had thus begun to change.

Setting up a New Course for Reforming School

Principal Ohshima kept thinking: What should be done to give the teachers an incentive for reforms and foster the students' sense of purpose? For this purpose, what kind of potentials does Shiroko High School have? Ohshima finally found an answer in the brass band club. The Shiroko High School brass band club had been participating actively in the Mie Prefectural and Tokai Regional tournaments. The club members also had a



reputation for their good manners. Ohshima thought that boosting their awareness that they were representative of their school would have a good effect also on the other students.

Ohshima wondered if it was possible to set up a new course related to music. In conventional music courses, students learn a single instrument such as a piano or violin. Rather than such special training courses for fostering future professionals, Ohshima thought that wind-instrument music played by a number of people using various instruments would be effective in cultivating the aesthetic sentiments of the students. When he suggested his idea at a faculty meeting, however, the teachers' responses were cold. In Mie Prefecture, there had been no high schools that had a music course. Even if the setup of a music course were approved by chance, the approval would be given first to the big-name schools that had higher college-going rates. Shiroko High School would have no chance. That was the teachers' common perception.

Nevertheless, Ohshima selected seven teachers and had them consider and discuss the idea of setting up a music course. They prepared a written proposal and submitted it to the prefectural boards of education at the end of the school year. In the process of deliberations, the boards of education sent Shiroko High School a number of questions one after another such as "Is your academic course well prepared?" and "How do you guarantee that you can collect 40 students for the course?" The boards of education also requested them to make an estimate for the repair of the school building and submit it within several days. Principal Ohshima called up all office clerks and a building constructor he had known to prepare a written estimate consisting of more than 200 pages, which surprised the boards of education.

Applause at Morning Gathering

During the deliberations at the prefectural boards of education, Principal Ohshima sometimes ran out of patience and burst into the boards of education ready for a fight. In his mind, he was also calculating that he should take a firm attitude to make the boards of education more serious about the proposal. In the end of May, Shiroko High School submitted a recreated proposal to the boards of education. At that time, Principal

Ohshima had given up halfway. Nothing was heard from the boards of education for long after the prefectural assembly had been over. "Now, there's nothing I can do but trust to my luck," Ohshima prayed every morning before leaving home.

One evening, Ohshima received a telephone call from the boards of education. That was an informal notice of the approval for the proposal. The next morning, the first thing Ohshima did was to visit the boards of education to express his gratitude. Everybody he met there congratulated him with a smile. At the faculty gathering the same morning, he notified the teachers of the approval. Then, unexpectedly, the teachers broke into applause. It was a happy surprise for Ohshima.

"We never thought that only making this new course complete would be enough. From first to last, we had been striving to get the entire school revitalized including our regular academic courses. Our final goal is to build a new "Shiroko High School brand" and realize a place where students can make friends and share their dreams with one another. For this purpose, we have a plan that, when the students of the new course finish their first year, we will have those students together with the students of other courses to produce an original musical." Ohshima's dream has been getting bigger and bigger.

There is no end for Ohshima's challenge. It seems to me that his enthusiasm for reforms is the basis of education. Education is that adults light the fire of ambition in the hearts of the next generation. To do this, educators must have the fire in their own hearts.

The fire of ambition in one educator's heart will spread to other educators. It will then fire the students' hearts to change their lives into more fruitful, happier ones. After all, this is the only thing educators can do to realize the reconstruction of the education system. I am not talking about "civilian principals" only. I expect that as many schoolteachers as possible will raise themselves up for this purpose. ■

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