

Compulsory Patriotism: Japan's national flag and anthem

Shimbun Asahi

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Asahi Shimbun editorial

Give the ceremonies back to the students.

We do not believe the board's methods will help nurture true affection for the flag and anthem in the minds of youngsters.

For the second year running, the Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education took disciplinary action against staff members of public schools for not rising during graduation ceremonies when the "Kimigayo" national anthem was sung.

That, the board says, constitutes a flagrant violation of ground rules that school principals enforce.

This year, the board took action against 52 teachers and other school staffers. Last year, 233 teachers and other staff members were disciplined for similar infractions.

According to a survey by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, only three prefectures, including Tokyo, and one other city disciplined anyone over the anthem and flag issue in fiscal 2003.

Of the total number of people disciplined, more than 90 percent were concentrated in Tokyo. This is certainly an abnormal situation.

The idea is not just to sing the anthem, but for everyone to rise, face the national flag and sing decorously. The education board refuses to

budge from that standpoint.

To this end, the board issued a 12-point memorandum two years ago, which said in part: The Hinomaru flag must be raised in the center of the stage; staff members must rise at their designated seats and sing the national anthem; students must be seated squarely facing forward.

Based on this memo, the board requested each school principal to order every staff member of the proper procedures for school graduation ceremonies.

The board even went as far as to prepare a seating chart for the ceremonies, and dispatched its own officials to watch over the proceedings.

We wonder how the graduating students felt in this awkward atmosphere.

Last year, some schools received "severe reprimands" after some students refused to stand. For this year's graduation, the clampdown on students was tighter than ever.

In the order of conduct issued by the principals to staff members, yet another clause was included, "to give appropriate guidance to the students." Under this clause, if a sufficient number of students refuse to stand, that alone could be grounds for punishing a teacher.

This year, at one Tokyo public high school, a graduating student received his diploma on stage, then turned to the audience and said: "I have a request for the people at the education board. Please don't bully our teachers anymore."

Another student followed suit and said: "The education board keeps surveillance over us students, checking to see if we stand or not, and if we don't stand, punishes the teachers. I consider this to be a form of thought control using the teachers as hostage."

School graduation ceremonies mark an important turning point in the lives of students. By rights, it is an occasion for them to exchange memories with teachers and friends, and to give cheer and be cheered for the future. For the parents, it is an event to mark their children's progress and to give thanks to the school.

In other prefectures, the ceremony styles are varied. Some schools have students sit facing each other, while others involve students in putting together the program, by preparing speeches and choosing songs.

Using the iron rod of disciplinary measures to force proceedings to follow a particular pattern

results only in a stifling and tense ceremony. We assume many students and parents are quite saddened by the turn of events.

This newspaper is not against raising the national flag and singing the national anthem at graduation ceremonies. However, we think the board is going too far by using punishments in order to enforce these rules.

We do not believe the board's methods will help nurture true affection for the flag and anthem in the minds of youngsters.

Graduation ceremonies are meant to be emotional events for the students, something they will later look back upon with fondness and nostalgia.

For that to happen, we urge the Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education to give the ceremonies back to the students.

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