

WESTCHESTER
OPINION

By PETER H. GIBBONS

IN cinderblock buildings, 45 students, all dressed alike, sit in barren classrooms and learn from paperback texts with no pictures. This hardly sounds like an educational Utopia. Nevertheless, the typical Japanese high-school graduate has the skills and knowledge of many of our college graduates; and, on standardized tests, Japan's students outperform the world's.

It is no secret that the Japanese borrowed from us for their economic achievements. I spent the summer trying to learn from them how to improve our schools. What can we learn from the Japanese?

¶ *Honor teachers and raise profes-*

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sional standards. In Japan, not anyone can teach. Education colleges are selective. Local schools have more teacher applicants than openings, and applicants must pass difficult screening tests. Professional growth is important. Teaching is a respected and well-paid lifetime career.

¶ *Assume everyone can learn.* Unremitting effort, say the Japanese, can raise anyone's intelligence. Teachers aim high and insist that all measure up. There is no preoccupation with learning disabilities, individualized instruction or "learning styles" to curtail effort and erode standards.

¶ *Equalize expenditures.* Money for education is more evenly distributed in Japan; therefore, educational experiences nationwide are similar. Rural and poorer students get equal treatment. The glaring American inequities in teacher quality and money spent per pupil — depending on state, school district and social class — are unknown.

¶ *Stress mathematics and science instruction for all.* In a century noted for scientific discoveries and mathematical applications, America takes very good care of its scientific elite while it condemns the majority of its citizens to mathematical and scientific

illiteracy. Japan provides qualified teachers and more class time in these subjects for all Japanese students.

¶ *Simplify the curriculum.* The Japanese insist on achievement in the basic disciplines. Customized schedules are unknown; consequently, demanding courses cannot be avoided.

¶ *Consider lengthening the school year.* There are only so many constructive activities to occupy a two-and-a-half month vacation, and much information is forgotten in that time span.

Then again, we can also teach the Japanese.

What are some of the convictions I found instructive underlying the Japanese educational system?

The Japanese believe that students must first learn in order to think, that facts and information precede creativity and intuition. For several years now, American reformers have been arguing that even to read, our young children need basic information that many of them lack.

The Japanese also believe that proper group behavior and concen-

tration in class are essential and teachable. Some educators have estimated that in America teachers spend one-fourth of their time on "class management."

And the Japanese generally keep the "youth culture" in its place. Teenagers do not drive or date. They go to classes on Saturday and wear uniforms. On survey forms, at least, they do not put sex as their major interest. Glorification of hedonism, violence and drugs is not a threat to adult standards and values.

Japan, however, is hardly perfect. The American century is not over; and we are not going the way of Rome. I learned that our educational system has some lessons for the Japanese.

¶ *Lectures dictated by a national syllabus and delivered to classes of 45 are not ideal.* They favor the intelligent and the adjusted and ignore or penalize those not academically inclined. Lectures merely impart information. They do not permit the instructor to be individual or original, nor the precollege student to be engaged or reflective.

¶ *Large classes do not permit assigning papers.* And papers are the testing ground for ideas and the discipline of thought. Without papers, education becomes the absorbing of large quantities of state-ministry information and the repeating of this information on national exams. Occa-

sional, necessary drudgery becomes endless boredom.

¶ *Let teen-agers have more fun.* Japanese students put off leisure until the college years and then indulge in an orgy of activities, athletics and socializing. Our mingling of athletics and other activities with academics permits a more balanced, less stressful middle school and high school.

¶ *Give students a second chance.* In Japan, a student's fate is determined by high school and college entrance examinations, with no consideration given to personal qualities and activities. In the sprawling American educational system, you can always re-make yourself.

It is clear that the Japanese take precollege formal education more seriously and, as a result, the achievement of their average students — at least as measured by standardized tests — is superior to that of our students. The discrepancy is particularly noticeable and dangerous in mathematics and science.

The Japanese are proud of their achievements, but aware of the costs and deficiencies. They worry about a single-track system culminating in "examination hell," about large classes that lose slower students and about a loss of childhood and leisure. They worry that their children are stuffed with facts but can't think and that virtue is slighted in the pursuit of information.

But because the Japanese are self-critical, we cannot be complacent. Yes, we have Nobel Prize winners, patents, entrepreneurs and an envied and imitated culture. Our top students rival the top achievers in Japan; and our workforce, if not as highly educated, is energetic and resourceful. But such achievements are jeopardized by an uneven and slack educational system.

Our average students do not have enough information. Their effort is hardly intense and steady. Too many parents forget that they are the most important educator and must align themselves with the teacher. Our schools in the suburbs are lavish, while our schools in the city are in decay. Teachers are taken for granted. Our illiterates, although a minority, shame the nation.

It is interesting that as American educators call for cultural literacy, rigorous standards and accountability, Japanese educators call for fewer facts, more attention to the individual and less testing.

To me, this indicates that the two nations can learn from each other's educational experiences and culture, because teachers and parents in Japan and America have very simple and similar goals.

They want their children to be hard working, informed and orderly; they also want them to be happy, analytical and spirited. ■

Schooling in Japan Offers Some Insights