Editorial:

Change of Government and Educational Policy Reform

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The Liberal Democratic Party (hereafter LDP) won a substantial victory in the December 2012 elections for Japan’s House of Representatives. The victory ended administration by the Democratic Party of Japan (hereafter DPJ), which had ruled for approximately three years since August of 2009. With its restoral to power, LDP immediately began to revise and change the educational policies that DPJ had put into place during its rule.

The first of these changes was a directive issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (hereafter MEXT) at the end of December, 2012 announcing the abolition of private high school tuition subsidies to Korean high schools. Under DPJ administration, tuition and fees for public high schools were abolished. Nevertheless, tuition subsidies were provided to all private high schools in Japan except for foreign high schools. Overall, a system was created of secondary school education that was in principle free for all students at Japanese high schools. In line with this policy, the question of whether Korean high schools in Japan could be eligible for this kind of support was also taken under consideration.

MEXT announced the deletion of the clause in the Ministry directive that provided a basis for subsidizing education at Korean high schools in Japan. The reason given for this deletion was that there had been no progress on outstanding problems between Japan and North Korea, such as the abduction issue.

In spite of this directive, there is no direct relationship between diplomatic problems between North Korea and Japan and the education of Korean residents living in Japan. Furthermore, it is not just the abduction of Japanese nationals that remains an unresolved issue. Originally, before the Second World War, Koreans were forcibly taken from Korea to Japan, and this issue also remains unresolved. Ignoring this unresolved issue—the forced migration of Koreans to Japan—while appealing to the unresolved issue of the abduction of Japanese, has no standing as

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a legitimate, objective argument. Denying the rights of a particular group of people to receive free education, as determined in accordance with principles of international human rights, is discrimination. This policy cannot be justified, and a great many misgivings have been raised about this measure.

Furthermore, as of January 2013, the DPJ’s policy of setting 35 as the maximum number of students in a class at all grades in public elementary and junior high school was revoked. Under DPJ’s rule, revisions were made in the law so that from fiscal 2011 the maximum number of students in an elementary school first grade class was reduced from 40 to 35. In fiscal 2012, budget measures were carried out that allowed the maximum number of students in an elementary second grade class to be reduced in the same way, from 40 to 35. MEXT had further planned to make 35 the maximum number of students in a class for all of the first three years of elementary school, over a period of five years. However, LDP administration decided not to continue this plan because it does not think the cost-benefit performance of the plan is clear.

Guarantee of the right to free education and class size reduction to improve the educational environment are both fundamental elements of the education system. These elements are part of the foundation on which education rests—they are not to be taken up or abolished at will with every change of political administration.

The LDP has been in power in Japan from the 1950s until recent years. Over this long period, educational policy came to be formed by the LDP and MEXT. The birth and growth of the DPJ, and the subsequent the recovery of power by the LDP have had significant effects on Japanese politics, due to the adoption of a single-seat constituency system for House of Representative elections. Japan is moving toward a system dominated by two major parties, in which a victory by one party and a loss by the other appears to lead to extreme changes in policies. Moreover, in a single-seat constituency system, the two major parties are required to clearly show their differences with each other and present themselves in an adversary relationship to the electorate. For the time being, economic issues such as whether to raise the consumption tax or not involves requiring a Yes or No answer, and the two-party system provides an effective framework for reaching conclusions to decide these kinds of issues. Yet broad questions of educational policy cannot easily be reduced to simple Yes or No decisions. Changing the educational system is not something from which effects will be immediately apparent. A substantial period of time is required to reach a social consensus over educational reforms. An educational system in which a consensus is not reached will be changed frequently, accompanying every shift in political power, and such frequent changes in the system will create chaos.