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Students learn reality of business at Shinagawa girls' school

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Students hold products they planned. PHOTO BY TARO FUJIMOTO

TOKYO —

Japan's education system has long been criticized for cramming and mass production of students destined for the same career paths. The mentality was that if students attended a high-ranked university, they would get the best jobs at major corporations. Preparing students for the competition of university entrance exams has been one of the main tasks of high school education. Public, private and commercial cram schools are thought of as places to provide students with knowledge applicable to university entrance exams.

However, such outdated ideas are changing as more people realize that cram school education is less practical and unproductive in society. Students are now being encouraged to think of their future careers after higher education. Today, "career education" is the catchphrase for education in Japan.

Shinagawa Joshi Gakuin, a private school for girls, emphasizes the career development of students in its curriculum. Established in 1925, the school has recently been getting some attention for its "28project." Launched three years ago, the 28project is a partnership with beverage, pharmaceutical and other corporations. Students are involved in product planning as part of their career education. They are encouraged to take over projects from year to year.

Headmaster Shihoko Urushi says: "The 28project aims to help our girls plan their future careers and help them realize their goals up to the age of 28. We picked 28 because for many Japanese women, that is a turning point in their lives, such as the end of postgraduate study for professionals and the average marriage age." Urushi says that the project does not hinder students' study for university entrance exams and that there have been no complaints from parents or students.

Process more important than results

Since the school started the 28project with corporations and released some products on the market, the news media have taken notice. But Urushi always emphasizes that producing something profitable is not the purpose of the project. Learning the process of it is more important, she says. "Traditionally, Japanese people hesitate to teach children about business and money. So those who read the news coverage of the 28project often focus more on the commercial aspects of the projects." In fact, the school refuses large-scale promotions by partner corporations. All the joint projects are voluntary by the school and corporations.

Some partner corporations are not eager to publicize the joint project with the school. Urushi says they don't profit from the project although their product development and marketing sections join in as well. In one case, the president of a company directly gave his OK to support the project without

consulting his colleagues, because he was personally impressed by the students' passion.

Despite the positive news coverage nationwide, other schools have not shown any interest in following Shinagawa Joshi Gakuin. "Some teachers at other schools seem indifferent to this sort of project," says Urushi. "They often say the project is great, but don't seem motivated to try it at their schools. "Maybe they think the project has nothing to do with education and consumes too much time and energy. Some schools do work on 'career education' just because it's a trend. But there are fewer schools seriously working on it."

Any profits from the project are donated to charity by students. Urushi says, "Students learn what capitalism is like, but I'd like them to understand that the career path they choose shouldn't necessarily be just about money but rather something that is worthwhile for society."

Students learn reality of society and business

The 28project often helps teachers discover a new side to their students not evident in the classroom. "Since the project is run by groups of students, the diversified skills of each student, such as creative design, brainstorming and presentation ability, are important, even though such qualities are not always highly valued at school. Some students gain greater self-confidence after their skills are valued by corporations," Urushi explains.

Yuko Fuchida, 15, recalls difficult aspects of the project. "Sometimes, the decisions we reach about a product are not necessarily accepted by our partner corporations." But she adds that she was happy to find female role models in the partner corporations. "I was able to imagine what I should do to become a woman like them."

If nothing else, the 28project has given students a more realistic view of society. Ayaka Tsuchiya, 15, says she experienced the harsh reality of business. "I learned that while we think our ideas are good, that doesn't mean the product will be profitable. We must consider costs and other things."

Students involved in the project are not passive consumers anymore. They say they now care about how the product is planned, who made it, and who the target consumers are, when they go shopping.

The project has taught teachers a thing or two. Urushi admits that she and other teachers at the school have learned that they don't know anything about business etiquette. "We are learning about the management style of successful businesspeople. I was amazed to receive emails from them at midnight."

Looking ahead, Urushi says she has been pressured by her students to offer better programs with corporations every year. To do that, she says, schools and teachers need to know more about society and business. Thus, one of the purposes of the project — "building a bridge between education and society" — is being accomplished at the moment not only for students but for teachers as well.

While Urushi is happy to see her students enjoying the project, she is very interested in what they do after leaving school. Whether or not they go to high-ranked universities is less important, she says, than how successful their lives are.

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