

national

Modernizing education with principles

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When Evernote Corp. CEO Phil Libin visited Tokyo's Shinagawa Joshi Gakuin in May, the combined junior and senior high school for girls came under the media spotlight — not only because it was unusual for a successful Silicon Valley entrepreneur to visit a girls' school, but also because of the progressive nature of the school.

Starting from the current school year, all of the roughly

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200 second-year students in high school are provided with an iPad miniature tablet computer loaded with Evernote software, which the school introduced in October 2013.

Students use the Evernote "cloud" to share text, graphics and videos from classes. A question posed by a student is answered by classmates or the teacher. Students even discuss social issues with their counterparts at cooperating schools in Australia and Singapore.

Asked why her school adopted it, principal Shihoko Urushi replied that although she is not particularly technology-minded, "I try to think of the world and future for our students," she said. "Children will become adults and play important roles for this country 20 to 30 years from now. I always try to think, what will the demography and social environment be like, and what kind of people will be needed? And I think information technology at that point will be as basic as reading, writing and arithmetic."

Libin's visit and his address to around 100 students put Shinagawa Joshi Gakuin in the headlines. It was not the first time the school had drawn

Key events in Urushi's life

- 1985 — Graduates from Chuo University.
- 1986 — Completes advanced course in Japanese language, literature at Waseda University; becomes teacher.
- 1989 — Joins Shinagawa Joshi Gakuin, a private junior high and high school in Tokyo to teach Japanese.
- 2003 — Shinagawa Joshi Gakuin restates its mission by launching the "28 Project."
- 2006 — Becomes principal of Shinagawa Joshi Gakuin.
- 2012 — Joins advisory panel for government project to promote global human resource development.
- 2013 — Participates in World Economic Forum via East Asia conference in Naypyitaw.
- 2014 — Joins Education Rebuilding Implementation Council.

media attention. Earlier coverage focused on Urushi's achievement of dramatically turning around the 89-year-old school, which at one point had come close to collapse.

The great-grand daughter of Masako Urushi, founder of what is now Shinagawa Joshi Gakuin and a pioneer of women's education, chose to teach Japanese in Tokyo after graduating from college. Masako chose another school because she thought her passion would be in teaching rather than managing, which seemed to be what awaited her if she joined Shinagawa Joshi Gakuin.

Things took an unexpected turn when she learned that the girls' school, which then operated separate junior and senior highs, was suffering a serious decline in enrollment that was so bad one year its junior high school had only five students.

In the late 1980s, Urushi heard her mother had terminal cancer. That helped persuade her to jump ship and join the schools where her parents worked, with a new determination to save it.

She launched sweeping reforms that turned the school around in seven years, raising applications 60-fold and the school's "deviation value," which indicates the degree of

difficulty in entering the school, by 20 points.

The reforms included ditching the old-fashioned uniform, a middy blouse, in favor of a stylish plaid shirt. The junior high and senior high schools were then combined and renamed Shinagawa Joshi Gakuin. The premises were then rebuilt to give the school a more modern look.

The school's founding principles were aimed at giving women an education, enabling them to play a significant role in society.

When asked what she thought worked in bringing the school back to life, Urushi doesn't focus on one particular step. She feels the change was more philosophical than institutional.

Simply put, the success of the turnaround revolved on a return to their first principles.

"We thought about what the school was created for in the first place," she said. "That founding spirit had kept the school alive even through the war, and this made us view it with respect. Another important factor may be that we didn't give up and kept trying."

What she means is perhaps

best understood in an ethos introduced in 2003 dubbed "28 Project."

In reviewing the school's founding principles, Urushi and her staff realized they were aimed at giving women an education that would enable them to play a significant role in society. The 28 Project is a restatement of this mission in a modern context: It declares that graduates should become significant players in society by the time they are 28 years old.

This is the age, says Urushi, when women typically become capable of putting what they have learned to more effective use at work, but it also represents the age at which women typically give birth for the first time — or become aware of their biological clock. In either case, it is the time when women start trying to balance work with their private lives.

"As many as 60 percent of working women quit work (after giving birth), and only 20 to 30

Gakuin apart from its rivals. For example, the school is also known for assigning projects where students work directly with businesspeople.

In 2013, for example, groups of students worked with Itoham Foods Inc. to develop three ready-to-serve packaged products for the company, including Karatamacchi, a unique fried chicken stuffed with egg filling. The products went on sale nationwide in March.

In 2008, a group of 42 students from both schools learned about media promotion in a lecture from Kadokawa Pictures Inc. and took on the promotion and public relations activities for the film "Dive!" and the novel it was based on.

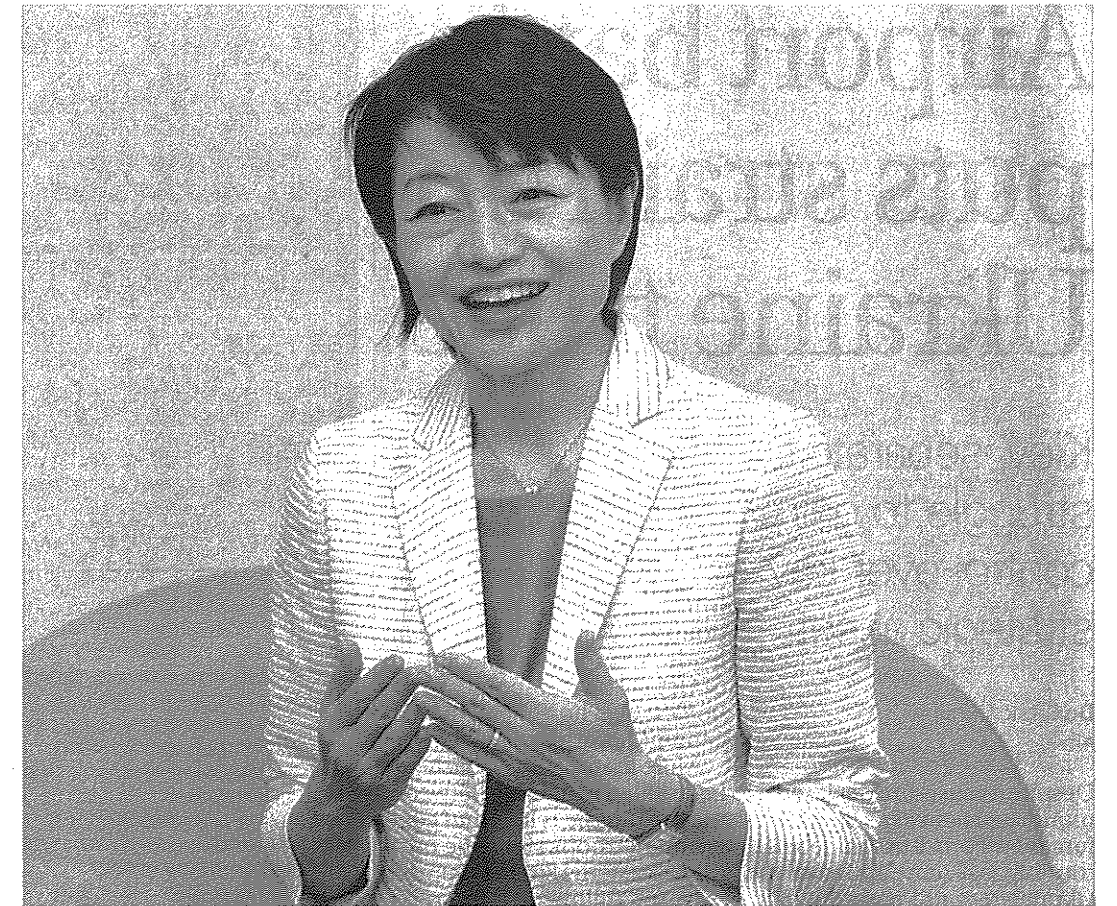
For Urushi, the knowledge and cooperation provided by businesses complements for teachers' lack of experience outside the education world. It forms part of what she thinks is one of the school's most important functions: connecting with society.

Despite the fact that students embark on various careers, teachers themselves typically remain confined to their jobs because they start teaching classes right after college. This, Urushi says, makes them ineffective at teaching business, which is where many of their students end up.

"We don't hesitate to admit this. But instead, we are aggressive in seeking help from businesses to fill the gap created by what we can't do. That's why we do these collaborative projects with businesses," Urushi said.

Nurturing women who can continue their careers after childbirth is just what is needed to achieve Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's goal of bringing more women into the shrinking workforce as the population grays.

Urushi, however, thinks that goal won't be achieved unless



Shihoko Urushi, principal of Shinagawa Joshi Gakuin, is interviewed by The Japan Times at her school in Shinagawa Ward, Tokyo, on Sept. 22. YOSHIKI MIURA

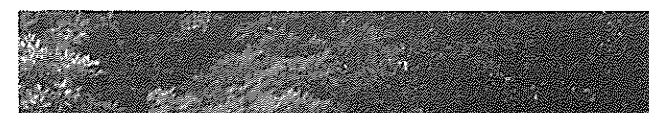
day care services are expanded.

"If you look at the teachers at our school, for example, you will find they are specialists. They're well-paid, and it's relatively easy to work at our school while rearing children. But even then, there are cases in which teachers can't return to work because they lack places to drop off their children for the day," she said. "They want to come back to work but can't — I think that's the biggest issue."

"Generational Change" is a new series of interviews that appears on the first Monday of each month, profiling people in various fields who are taking a leading role in bringing about change in society. Readers are encouraged to send ideas, questions and opinions to hodobu@japantimes.co.jp.



Shihoko Urushi poses with junior high students in her office at Shinagawa Joshi Gakuin in April. SHINAGAWA JOSHI GAKUIN



Parasite museum aside, you won't be saury for visiting Meguro