

Japan school boards start to rethink 'black rules' on everything from underwear to protesting

More and more municipalities in Japan are scrambling to amend or abolish what are widely criticized as draconian school rules long imposed on students, heralding a rethink of a long-standing teaching culture that has prized conformity and docility.

In the latest example, the board of education in Gifu Prefecture has run a sweeping review of rules upheld by high schools under its jurisdiction. Such rules, known as *kōsoku*, typically refer to internal codes of conduct that each junior high and high school imposes on pupils under their care, often dictating a strict dress code that extends to the length and color of their hair.

The investigation by the Gifu Prefectural Board of Education found that more than 90 percent of its 61 full-time high schools had maintained rules so stringent that they risked compromising the human rights of the students.

Examples included those that stipulated girls' underclothes must be white, that students must notify schools in advance of their personal plans for long-distance travel, and that students must seek teachers' permission to join any assembly outside of school hours, education board official Masayuki Ishigami said. "Assembly" is generally interpreted to include political rallies, although few explicitly state so, Ishigami added.

Although the board has already instructed schools to remove those rules, the changes will officially take effect at the beginning of the new school year in April, Ishigami said.

"At the very least, we felt it necessary to revise those school rules that affect students' human rights," Ishigami said. "For example, the mere act of teachers trying to check the color of underclothes worn by girls would raise human rights questions," he said.

The official said Gifu's review has been prompted by a recent groundswell of public outrage against the rigorous rules. Although long taken for granted as part of the education system, the tradition of *kōsoku* ignited debate when an 18-year-old girl sued Osaka Prefecture for damages in 2017 after she was repeatedly forced by her teachers to dye her naturally brown hair black as per a school rule.

Those overly restrictive rules are now commonly dubbed "black *kōsoku*." In August, a group of campaigners seeking to eliminate them submitted an online petition signed by more than 60,000 people to the education ministry urging immediate action. Osaka Prefecture, too, took steps to address the issue, ordering all of its high schools to review their rules. As a result, about 40 percent of its 135 full-time high schools made changes, the prefectural government said in a report in April last year.

Japan began keeping a tighter rein on students when the nation went through a drastic increase in juvenile delinquency and violence against teachers in the early 1980s, prompting school authorities to stiffen rules in a bid to curb rowdy behavior, education

studies scholar Masaharu Hata wrote in a 1999 book.

But despite recent moves by municipalities to rethink their long-held codes of conduct, progress has moved at a glacial pace because many teachers still prize them as a form of education, said Ryo Uchida, an associate professor of Nagoya University who has written multiple books on school-related issues.

“The biggest objective of Japanese teachers is to keep their classes as orderly as possible and without any incident, and the most common way to achieve that has been to limit students’ freedom,” Uchida said.

Uchida said schools are “almost as though they were granted extraterritoriality,” where even the most absurd rules, such as banning students from wearing scarves and tights even in winter, are justified under the pretext of nipping delinquency in the bud.

“The logic is that if one student started showing off what might be considered a fashion accessory, other students may follow suit, which could encourage overall disorderliness,” Uchida said. “But how could denying students the simplest choices such as wearing something because of cold weather possibly help foster their independence and self-initiative?”

Going forward, the associate professor said the most effective antidote to black kōsoku is for education boards in each municipality to take steps to disclose the details of these internal school rules so they can be checked against the “common sense of the outside world.”

“Only then will the black kōsoku die off,” Uchida said.

Indeed, Setagaya Ward in Tokyo is gearing up to do just that. Its education board is currently in the “final phase” of its plan to make public a list of rules upheld by all of its junior high schools on their respective websites, having conducted a comprehensive update of any inappropriate code.

“Our big objective is to eliminate any unreasonable kōsoku for the sake of children’s human rights,” Setagaya Education Board official Yuji Aoki said. “We also believe that children should be left to make their own decisions about how they should act, not governed by a long list of rules, in order to harness their autonomy in these changing times.”

It is under this belief that all public junior high schools in Setagaya now allow their students to go to school wearing the clothes of their choice once a month — although some locals have argued such an initiative is inappropriate for junior high school students, Aoki said.