# 'Join us or no gifts for your kids': Why are PTAs in Japan so intimidating?

OSAKA -- A membership guidebook for an elementary school's PTA in west Japan has sparked criticism for its "intimidating" passages, such as ones implying that children may not be given graduation presents and other gifts if their households are not PTA members.

The document, which was distributed by the PTA to the parents of new first graders in November 2023, contained texts encouraging PTA membership by apparently referring to the gift perk as a means to keep children from experiencing disadvantages.

"We hope every household possible will join our PTA," the guidebook reads, citing two reasons. The first is to maintain the roster of student groups for commuting managed by the PTA, and the second is for giving gifts to children.

The guidebook explains that it gives out presents to children at graduation ceremonies and other celebratory events, and states, "If your household is not a PTA member, we may not be able to give gifts to your child."

The handbook asserts that it is impossible to collect fees for those gifts alone from nonmember households, and continues, "There is an option of not giving presents, but there have been reports of cases where children felt sad about not receiving them, so we hope to avoid that if possible."

**'Extremely bad conditions'**

The PTA document was part of materials obtained by Yusuke Nakayama, a Takarazuka Municipal Assembly member of Nippon Ishin (the Japan Innovation Party), through a freedom of information request he filed to learn more about the circumstances surrounding PTAs.

"The passages in the document appear to be intimidatory, and are sarcastic," Nakayama criticized.

In response to consultations received from the parents of elementary and junior high school students about PTA membership and activities, Nakayama has been working on PTA issues in the city assembly since 2024, posing related questions during general inquiry sessions.

Last summer, Nakayama filed a freedom of information request for all 36 municipal elementary, junior high and special needs schools in the city. Through documents he obtained, he found out that there were "extremely bad conditions" in a variety of items, from membership and withdrawal guidebooks to the selection of board members, the handling of personal information and how gift-giving practices should be carried out. "I got the impression that the number of schools that seem to have no problems was fewer (than otherwise)," the councilor said.

**Case even brought to court in past**

In 2016, the father of a junior high school girl filed a 20,000-yen (approx. $136) damages suit against her private school's parental association and others for inflicting psychological distress by not gifting her a small bouquet to be worn at a graduation ceremony at the school in Sakai, Osaka Prefecture. She was the only student not offered the gift because her father had quit the parental association. The Osaka District Court's Sakai branch in 2017 dismissed the suit, stating, "No illegal infringements were recognized."

Similar problems of PTAs' discriminatory treatment against nonmember households have emerged across Japan and even became a topic for Diet discussion.

In March 2023, then Prime Minister Fumio Kishida told a House of Councillors Budget Committee session, "It is up to parents to decide whether to join or leave PTAs." Regarding graduation gifts for children of households that have quit PTAs, Kishida said, "Instead of the national government giving certain views, it is appropriate for each PTA and school to work together in making decisions through thorough discussions and other means to prevent children from feeling unpleasant."

**Excessive scope of tasks and responsibilities**

Another document Nakayama obtained contained high-handed descriptions such as parents elected as PTA board members by lottery being unable to decline the post unless they had submitted the reason in advance, and those elected to the post in their absence having to accept it. There was also a statement that could be construed as forcing parents to consent to providing personal information to the PTA.

In regard to why the PTA uses overbearing texts, Nakayama pointed out, "The scope of tasks and responsibilities left to the PTA is excessive, such as managing student groups for commuting and watching over students on their way to and from school. Administrative bodies are also to blame for entirely relying on voluntary services by parents and continuing to leave them to do important tasks that those bodies would otherwise have to spend money to tackle."

He emphasized, "There is a structure that makes the PTA prone to problems precisely because it desperately encourages parents to join and tries to assemble board members to perform its tasks. They should go back to square one and correct the system to let those willing to serve in PTAs do it."

**Some value PTA's role as a bridge**

A self-employed man in his 40s who chairs a PTA network organization in a city in west Japan's Kansai region countered by saying, "It's not that the problem can be solved just by eliminating PTAs and frameworks for parents to gather."

The man, who has also long headed the PTA of an elementary school his child attends, commented, "I'm not obsessed with PTAs as an organization, but they are historically reliable. It's difficult to create a new organization that can act as a bridge between educational administration and parents, and it'd be more reasonable to retain the current framework."

Stressing the importance of PTAs in securing a system to give parents a voice, he continued, "At schools without a PTA, it is hard for parents to raise their voices, and administrative bodies may take advantage of it in the belief that it is easy to transfer problematic teachers to the school. If parents individually express their views about school lunch fee hikes, they wouldn't be heard."

The man does not think a PTA with problems should be retained as it is. He has carried out reforms at his child's elementary school PTA after finding it problematic for the association to coerce parents to join without confirming their intent and serve on the board. After much effort to elicit cooperation from local volunteer groups for when parents cannot serve their flagbearer role at pedestrian crossings while watching over children on their way to and from school, the number of nonmember households came to just a few.

The man noted, "If everyone turns to individualism (by leaving the PTA), the local community will be torn apart. The PTA essentially is an organization for children and the community. I'd say, 'Let's stop putting so much effort into pushing board membership onto each other.'"