

**Learning Objective:** Students will learn about various aspects of Japanese education to prepare for writing an opinion newspaper article that compares the United States education system to that of Japan. At the end of this lesson students will answer verbally and in writing the following prompt: “What are the benefits and drawbacks to the Japanese Education system and how does it compare to the United States?”

**The topics covered in this lesson are:**

- School Calendar and Curriculum
- Parental Involvement
- School Uniforms
- Kumi (homeroom)
- Clubs
- Preparation for Entrance Exams
- Entrance Exams

**Procedure:** Depending on the students in your class you may place students in mixed ability pairs, small groups, or utilize this activity and lesson as an individual assignment. Step one is to have student use the Japanese Educational readings and resources to complete the note template. This note template will be utilized as the primary source material to write their opinion piece. Step two is to have students outline and prepare their article. Step three is to have students share their opinion pieces in a short socratic seminar to share their research and ideas surrounding the question: What are the benefits and drawbacks to the Japanese Education system and how does it compare to the United States?”

This activity is designed to introduce students to the basic features of Japanese junior-high and high-school education. After they learn about these features, students are challenged to write an article comparing Japanese and American education for a newspaper. They will use this opinion piece as to both demonstrate their understanding and knowledge of the Japanese education system as well as prepare for a socratic seminar to verbally discuss and share their opinions with their classmates.

Tell students they will be learning about various aspects of Japanese junior high and high schools.

Hand out guided note sheet and materials and supplemental resources. Have students preview materials and resources so they can ask any questions that they may have before formal introduction.

Group students into pairs, small groups, or assign as individual assignment.

Provide students with time to begin reading materials, viewing supplemental videos, and taking notes on the Japanese Education System using the provided note taking template. It is recommended that the class work independently on the same topic first, then discuss and model before allowing students to work freely.

After students have analyzed the materials and taken notes, have students discuss with peers the key points and interesting aspects related to the topics covered in the materials provided.

Have students begin to outline their opinion article.

Have students write their article as homework.

Next class period, have students bring their outline, completed article, and reading materials and have them use these to participate in a socratic seminar (discussion) to demonstrate their understanding of the content to their peers. A socratic seminar must be student led. Use the following prompts to guide the discussion, but only pose these (or other similar open ended questions) and then let students regulate and control the discussion. The teacher in a socratic seminar does not participate or lead the discussion, instead, listens and assess’ student understanding and knowledge.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

ASEA

## Writing an Opinion Article on Japanese Education

**Introduction:** You are a reporter for a local newspaper who has been assigned to write a feature article comparing the education systems in Japan and America. Your article is attempting to address and answer the question: “What are the benefits and drawbacks to the Japanese education system?”

**Directions:** Use your notes from the readings on *Introduction to Japanese Junior and High Schools* to write the article. Follow these guidelines:

1. Give your article an appropriate headline that reflects whether you agree or disagree with the teacher’s statement.
2. In the article’s lead paragraph, explain the purpose of this article and state the answer to the question: “Is education for Japanese and American students more similar or different?”
3. In the rest of the article, provide evidence that supports whether or not you think education for Japanese and American students is more similar or different. Make comparisons between Japanese and American education ***on at least six of these topics: school calendar and curriculum, teachers and instruction, parental involvement, school uniforms, kumi, clubs, preparation for entrance exams, and entrance exams.***
4. You must also incorporate one quote from our Japanese Foreign exchange student related to the topic(s) covered in your research reading at some point in your article.
5. In the article’s final paragraph, discuss the relative merits (strengths) of Japanese and American education making sure to answer the question: “What are the benefits and drawbacks to the Japanese education system?”
6. The article should be about two pages in length and typed with 1” margins and 12pt font.

## Comparing Japanese and American Education: Note Taking Template

**Directions:** Use this template when reading, viewing, and examining the materials on Japanese Education provided. Write down key points and interesting information that relates to the question: "What are the benefits and drawbacks to the Japanese Education system and how does it compare to the United States?"

School Calendar and Curriculum	
<b>JAPAN</b>	<b>OUR SCHOOL</b>
Teachers and Instruction	
<b>JAPAN</b>	<b>OUR SCHOOL</b>
Parental Involvement	
<b>JAPAN</b>	<b>OUR SCHOOL</b>
School Uniforms	
<b>JAPAN</b>	<b>OUR SCHOOL</b>

<b>Kumi (Homeroom)</b>	
<b>JAPAN</b>	<b>OUR SCHOOL</b>
<b>Clubs</b>	
<b>JAPAN</b>	<b>OUR SCHOOL</b>
<b>Preparation for Exams</b>	
<b>JAPAN</b>	<b>OUR SCHOOL</b>
<b>Entrance Exams</b>	
<b>JAPAN</b>	<b>OUR SCHOOL</b>

**Questions to consider in small group key points discussion after reviewing and reading materials provided:**

- What are the strengths of the Japanese Education System?
- What are the weaknesses?
- What parts of the Japanese Education system do you wish were replicated in the United States?
- Which aspects of the Japanese Education system are you glad we don't replicate at our school?

## School Calendar and Curriculum

All children in Japan must attend 6-year elementary schools and 3-year junior-high schools. Although attending high school is not required, about 90% of Japanese students graduate from high school. Junior high and high schools generally begin at 8:30 AM six mornings a week and last until 3:00PM Monday through Friday and until 12:30 PM Saturday. Typical school days include six 50-minute periods and a 30-minute lunch break. Some junior -high and high-school students have as much as 3 to 5 hours of homework each night.

The school year begins in April and ends in mid-March. Vacations are in summer (6 weeks), at New Year (2 weeks), and in late March at the end of the school year (2 weeks). In addition, school is closed for about 10 public and informal school holidays throughout the year. In total, Japanese students are in school approximately 240 days a year; by contrast, most American students are in school 180 days a year. Japanese students have attended more hours of school by the age of 18 than have American college graduates.

Japanese junior highs follow a standard curriculum. Across the nation, students of the same grade are expected to learn the same topics with the help of the same textbooks and teaching materials. This is done to preserve a general level of educational opportunity. The curriculum includes Japanese language, english language, social studies, mathematics, science, health and physical education, and art. Once a week students have a class in moral education, in which they are taught Japanese values such as gaman, which means to endure in the face of difficulty.

High schools, too have a standard curriculum, though it varies among the different types of high schools. In a school week consisting of 34 class hours, for example, students in an academic high school spend all but 9 class hours in academic subjects, such as English, Japanese, mathematics, science, and social studies. In the remaining hours, boys have four periods of physical education, and girls have two periods of physical education and two periods of home economics. (Some schools have recently made home economics coeducational.) All students have 2 hours of electives (music or art), 1 hour of health, and hour-long homeroom meeting, and 1 hour of club activity. Students at vocational (job training) high schools have the same core subjects (with different textbooks) but take them for fewer hours each week.

School Lunch in Japan - Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hL5mKE4e4uU>

## Teachers and Instruction

Teachers in Japan are afforded great respect and status. Students, in fact, usually bow to teachers as they enter the class. Called sensei (a term of respect and a title of special honor that is applied equally to kindergarten teachers and university presidents) by students, teachers are expected to assume a parental-like attitude toward their students. The ideal teacher is devoted and involved with students while still demanding respect from them. Faculties in junior highs and high-schools are predominantly male; only 20 percent of teachers are female.

Junior-high and high school teachers teach only for about 15 hours per week, but they have many other duties, including coordinating homeroom duties, planning special activities, and sponsoring clubs. In addition, they have extensive responsibilities for following the progress of their 50 or so homeroom students. These include communicating frequently with their parents, reading and responding to students' journals, and completing report cards. Teachers generally are expected to remain at school until 5PM, but many work well beyond until 8 or 9 PM.

Japanese teachers do not have their own classrooms. Instead, students stay together in one classroom throughout the day, and teachers rotate from room to room. Teachers have a desk in the teachers' room, usually near the desks of other teachers of the same subject or grade. This helps teachers check on the progress of students they have in common. Students venture into the teacher's' office frequently to seek additional help.

During class, the teacher's primary role is to provide information for the students to learn. Common teaching strategies include lecture, question and answer, drill, and board work. These forms of instruction are considered most efficient, in part due to large class size (38 to 45 students) and in part because students are expected to acquire a wide range of knowledge. Teaching strategies that emphasize student self-expression and discover - class debates, small-group activities, simulations - are infrequent and almost never used. In fact, students are sometimes shy about asking teachers questions during lessons at all.

Typical school days comparison - Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOw4mNWjwes>

### **Parental Involvement**

Parental support for educational success is strong in most Japanese families. Japanese mothers- who in most families are the primary caregivers for children- are particularly dedicated to helping their children succeed. Active involvement in their children's education - helping them with homework, encouraging them to study for many hours, urging them to attend juku (after-school, private tutoring) - is typical for most mothers. Mothers also visit their children's class or invite teachers to their home to discuss how their children are performing. The active role played by mothers is so common that the Japanese refer to some mothers as Kyoiku Mama, or educational mother.

Japanese Independent Children - Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7YrN8Q2PDU>

### **School Uniforms**

Students are required to wear uniforms in most schools, which promotes unity and group harmony. Uniforms generally consist of dark pants, a blazer, brass buttons, and a chin-high collar for boys, and a matching skirt and blazer for girls. Dress codes are often quite detailed. One middle-school dress code instructed that "the white shirt must be pure white, with no wrinkles, no decorations, and no buttons on the collar.: Educators believe that students who follow the details of the dress code show moral and educational dedication. A principal from one middle school posted a sign outside his office: "A clean uniform means a clean heart." Outside of school, Japanese students are often fashion conscious and dress in contemporary styles similar to those in the United States.

My Japanese School Uniform - Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxp4n4WrjqY>

### **Kumi (Homeroom)**

In junior highs and high schools, a group of between 40 and 50 students are assigned to a kumi, or homeroom class. This single class usually stays together all day, all year, and often from one year to the next. During kumi, teachers monitor students' academic progress and help them prepare for exams. Most important, students learn the value of positive group relations and experience a sense of community throughout the school. This, coupled with a virtual absence of crime in schools, makes students feel safe and comfortable.

A variety of activities help kumi members develop a spirit of unity and community. Athletic activities, musical events, and overnight field trips are common. Special events designed to instill group loyalty take place throughout the year. In many junior highs, for example, kumis engage in choral competitions: each kumi selects a class song, practices it for several months, and presents it as part of a long choral contest. In high schools, the annual Cultural Festival allows kumis to practice and perform musical serenades and skits. These activities allow students to work together and to show the pride they have in their kumi and their school.

In addition, students are responsible for cleaning their homeroom daily, including sweeping the floor, straightening the desks, and cleaning the chalkboard. Because students spend most of the day in this room - often even eating lunch there - they are inclined to keep the space clean. In some schools, students clean common areas of the school, like hallways and restrooms, on a weekly basis. This instills a sense of community and ownership over the school that the students spend so much time working and studying.

Kumi Homeroom Performance - Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RrdRdlySoG8>

Japanese Bathrooms - Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A6hgHq7MLsc>

## Clubs

After-school clubs are an important part of students' lives. Virtually all junior-high students, and about half of all high-school students, join a club. Clubs are usually sponsored by a teacher, and the effectiveness of the club often depends on the teacher's leadership. At many schools, students can only be a member of a single club and must remain a member for the entire year. This continuity of membership in clubs reinforces Japanese values like commitment, group identity, and the development of strong relationships.

In high schools, the largest and most active clubs are sports clubs, including volleyball, baseball, table tennis, judo, soccer, and tennis. Both girls and boys belong to many of these clubs, but they generally practice and compete separately. Cultural clubs, like music, art, drama, and literature groups, are numerous but small. Few cultural clubs meet more than once a week, while sports clubs meet every day and often for the entire year. In junior highs one class per week is devoted to club activities, such as basketball, baseball, English, tennis, gardening, or swimming. In addition, clubs may meet before and after school or on weekends.

Japanese Archery Club Example - Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFGppp4PH1g>

Japanese Baseball Club Example - Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbTSj717UYo>

## Preparation for Entrance Exams

Many Japanese students attend juku, or cram schools, in preparation for the rigorous and highly competitive high school and college entrance exams. How well students perform on these two tests largely determines what type of career choices they will have throughout their lives. About three fourths of all junior-high students attend "after-school school", and a majority of students in academic high schools go to juku. Some juku schools are franchised chains, owned by large companies. But most are quite small, typically run at home by homemakers, college students, or former teachers.

While some students attend juku only once or twice a week, others attend up to 20 hours per week. During a weekday, students attending juku generally finish the school day at 3:00PM, attend club activities until 5:00PM, go home for dinner, attend juku from 6:30PM until 8:30 or 9:30PM, and then return home to complete homework. In addition, juku programs often fill during summer vacations. Instruction at juku primarily consists of drilling students on a range of subjects and giving practice tests.

## Entrance Exams

Japanese students take grueling entrance exams for both high schools and universities. The exams, which last from one to several days, generally consist of fill-in, multiple-choice, and short-answer questions that cover many subjects. High schools within a district, for example, are ranked, and admission into top schools is intensely competitive. The preparation for entrance exams is akin to running a marathon: great stamina is required to study diligently for several years. The time during February and March, when exams are given, is referred to by some as juken jigoku, or exam hell.

For more than half of high-school students, college entrance exams are the central focus of the high school experience. An individual's future is shaped to a large extent by the results of the exam: the quality of the university one is admitted to has a direct effect on the quality of job one can obtain. Furthermore, exam results are usually posted publicly, which can bring pride or shame to students, families, and schools. Excessive concern with exams has been highlighted as a national problem. Once students are admitted to universities, however, the academic demands on them decrease significantly. In contrast to the highly rigorous high-school experience, universities are often called yasumi, or vacation, by students.

## Socratic Seminar - A HOW TO

- 1. Student lead, teacher poses question but does not further prompt students.**
- 2. No hand raising - it is up to the seminar group to maintain decorum and civil discourse.**
- 3. Respect different opinions while also respecting individual speakers - don't interrupt or shout.**
- 4. You are discussing ideas, not attacking the idea holder.**
- 5. Ask clarifying questions - this is often the best way to move discussion forward.**
- 6. Listen to the entirety of the idea or statement before you respond.**
- 7. Allow and encourage those around you to participate.**
- 8. Do your best to stay on topic.**

