

Group sees ray of hope in long fight for more day-care centers ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A group of parents has pressed all levels of government to tackle the shortage of day-care facilities, spurred by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's flip-flopping on the issue and a blog entry that sparked controversy.

Most of the main members of the Mezasukai group based in Tokyo's Musashino city secured day-care spots for their children.

But they say their work is far from complete, and they will not rest until rejected applications for day-care centers become a thing of the past in Japan.

The key weapons in their effort are social networking services (SNS).

Using a hashtag that prominently displays a desire to enroll children in day-care facilities, the group's message spread quickly on the Internet, as did the support.

The hashtag represents the problem of so many children on waiting lists for authorized day-care centers, as well as the desperation of some parents who resort to unauthorized facilities, which can be expensive and do not satisfy government standards for such operations.

In September, when Abe announced the dissolution of the Lower House for a snap election, he told reporters that his administration would provide free day-care services and education for all children from 3 to 5 years old.

But after Abe's ruling Liberal Democratic Party won the election, Abe revised his plan in early November, saying that children who attend unauthorized day-care centers will not be included in the government's new policy.

The group posted complaints about the prime minister on Twitter, saying, "What he said before and after the election are different."

It used a new hashtag: "Isn't his child-rearing policy strange?"

Many parents began following the group on SNS.

The government soon changed its stance in the face of growing criticism. It said children attending unauthorized day-care centers would be included in its policy, in principle.

The group has focused on its primary goal of eliminating "taikijido" (children on a waiting list), using the hashtag, "We want to enter a day-care center."

It conducted a poll on Twitter, asking: "What policy do you want the government to prioritize if funding is limited?"

About 6,000 responses were collected within a week, and 77 percent selected the taikijido problem.

The group also collected about 30,000 signatures from people calling on the government to prioritize the taikijido problem over the free education policy.

Ten members of the Mezasukai group handed the petition to Upper House member Satsuki Katayama at the LDP's headquarters in Tokyo's Nagatacho district on Nov. 27.

The members included mothers carrying their sleeping babies strapped to their chests as well as fathers in suits who took the day off from work.

"From the political side, we are grateful to hear a summarization of the feelings of the people concerned," said Katayama, who is deputy general manager of the LDP task force in charge of an era when it is not unusual for people to live to 100 years old.

The group had earlier submitted a petition to the Musashino assembly seeking construction of day-care centers in the city. An ordinance was unanimously adopted in 2016, but neighborhood residents opposed, and not one day-care center was built.

The group members discussed where to go next, and they decided to take their cause to the national level.

After requesting meetings with Diet members of both ruling and opposition parties, the group discussed the issue with influential politicians at the Lower House members' office building in March and October in 2017.

Mezasukai group members said they were inspired by a blog entry from a mother in February 2016 that said: "My child didn't get into day care. Die, Japan!"

The taikijido problem became a social issue in the mid-1990s. Since the Junichiro Koizumi government in 2001, successive administrations have promised to resolve the problem.

Yet long waiting lists remain.

One reason is that such campaigns to steer government policy could not be maintained because activists lost interest after their children became too old for day-care centers.

But that could change.

The Mezasukai group remains committed to the taikijido problem, although nine of its 10 main members have managed to get their children into authorized day-care centers.

"We hold a strong sense of concern that the problem might be handed down to our children in 20 years if we do not change the situation now," said a 41-year-old group member who faced difficulties in finding day-care centers for his three children over the past seven years.

The man was one of the members who submitted the signatures to Upper House member Katayama.

Aki Fukoin, who heads a separate group of parents who want more day-care centers, also stressed the usefulness of SNS.

"It became significantly easier for the voices of parents to reach (the government) through the speed of SNS and the strategy of the people concerned," Fukoin said. "Rather than be satisfied with the current situation, we want to work together with such groups to monitor how policies are actually being implemented."

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