

Making day care fit real needs ^[1]

Deregulation of Japan's licensed nursery system threatens its effectiveness

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EXCERPTS

The "day-care wars," a recent staple of newspaper lifestyle features, have been fueled by government-sponsored research in both the United States and Britain, suggesting day care might cause long-term harm to children.

Studies by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, among others, have indicated that Japan's extensive licensed day-care system, on the contrary, doesn't raise such concerns. The combination of highly trained, well-compensated caregivers working at regulated facilities has thus far guaranteed a uniformly high standard of care.

The battle here is getting a child into day care at all. Waiting lists are huge. In 2004, there were 24,245 children nationwide waiting to enter a licensed day-care facility.

Most municipalities require a swath of paperwork, including official certificates from personnel offices as well as tax documents.

Given that a family's economic fortunes — not to mention mom's sanity — may hinge on an acceptance letter from the city's day-care office, the response of one Tokyo mother is typical.

"When we got the letter saying that our 1-year old daughter hadn't been accepted to day care, I sat on the couch and cried."

Many families simply give up. A study in the *Asian Economic Journal* in 2005 estimated that the total number of families in Japan with mothers who would like to work but believe they cannot get a day-care spot was nearly equal to the total number of children in day care from ages 1 to 3. In other words, if day-care space were available, a much higher percentage of mothers would return to the workforce.

And the Japanese economy desperately needs them. With the nation's low birthrate (hovering around 1.4 births per woman, well below the replacement rate of 2.1) and an aging society, Japan faces a labor shortage that, according to the Japan External Trade Organization, "threatens the sustainability of the social-security system, reduces consumption, and strongly impacts the entire economy."

Since 1994, the central government has made a concerted effort to both expand the availability of day care and make it more flexible, primarily through extending hours beyond the traditional 6:15 p.m. closing time.

Day care was officially deregulated in 2000. Before then, the management of licensed day-care centers was limited to municipalities, approved nonprofit organizations or social-welfare companies. Now their management has been opened up to profit-making companies, and supervision of unlicensed day-care centers - centers that did not meet the government's stringent approval standards - was improved.

The most radical turn came in 2001 with a revision of the Child Welfare Law that encouraged municipalities to privatize their day-care centers. NPOs, social-welfare corporations and - most controversially - for-profit companies are now able to bid for management contracts for municipal day-care centers. In some cases, municipalities have even begun to subsidize the building of centers owned and managed by such companies.

This change has been greeted with alarm. Many parents worried that quality and safety would decline, and their fears were stoked by several well-publicized children's deaths in the early 1990s at unlicensed, for-profit day-care centers.

In 2003, a group of parents in Yokohama went as far as taking the city to court to protest the privatization of their children's day-care center. Though the judge did not rule directly on the concept of privatization, financial damages were awarded based on emotional distress to the children due to the process, in particular the loss - overnight - of experienced teachers well-known to the children.

Teachers are at the center of the controversy over privatization. Though the ostensible reason for privatizing the day-care system is to increase capacity, many detractors, including the Municipal and Prefectural Workers Union, say the real reason is financial.

Unionized day-care teachers have higher salaries than their private-sector counterparts. A white paper from the Prime Minister's Office in 2001 found that productivity between private and public day-care employees was indistinguishable, despite a difference in wages. Union officials say that higher wages result in higher quality and more stable care. Both factors are notably lacking in both the U.S. and British day-care systems, which are for the most part private.

"Day care is directly related to human effort," says Shunji Kawashima, president of the Nakano Ward, Tokyo branch of the Municipal Employees Union and also an employee in the ward's day care office, "so it is natural that the labor cost is high. But a private company has to maximize profit, so they tend to try to reduce the cost of labor which in turn leads to a reduction in quality."

In Nakano, Tokyo's most densely populated ward, the push for privatization coincided with a deterioration of the ward's finances, the third worst among Tokyo's 23 wards. Beginning in 2005, Nakano Ward Mayor Daisuke Tanaka froze the hiring of new teachers and began a privatization program in which two day-care centers a year are to be privatized. Although opponents of the plan were able to collect 57,000 signatures in a petition drive - nearly one-fifth of Nakano's total population, the plan has continued.

Tomoko Ichikawa's son attended a day-care center in Nakano from infancy through age 6. In 2006, management of his day care center was transferred to Pigeon Corporation, an established children's education and goods company. Ichikawa, a full-time company employee, was wary about the privatization at first and she concedes that teacher turnover was a real problem.

"Some teachers were really high quality," she says, "but most of the teachers were just out of university, so they didn't have a lot of experience. In the first year, more than six teachers left. When we asked them why, [they said] that they didn't feel the jobs were secure."

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