

EDITORIAL

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Students are not political pawns

Because of North Korea's provocations following its third nuclear test on Feb. 12, the general affairs section of the board of education of Tokyo's Machida City on March 27 made a unilateral decision — unknown to board members or the city assembly — to not provide personal safety alarms to students at a pro-North Korean school in the city.

After reports of the decision surfaced April 4, the board of education was inundated with protest telephone calls and emails, prompting it to reverse the decision. On Monday, the first day of the new school year, the board sent alarms to the Nishi-Tokyo Korean Second Elementary and Junior High School, where 68 students study.

Even if the decision was made without the knowledge of the city government and the members of the board of education, they must accept responsibility for the poor judgment shown by the general affairs section, which smacked of discrimination against students of the Korean school. The head and workers of the general affairs section should be disciplined for their actions.

According to the school, the general affairs section's chief and other employees visited the school on March 28 and cited the current political situation and citizens' feelings stemming from North Korea's provocations as the reason for not providing alarms to its students. In doing so they demonstrated their complete failure to understand the principle that all students must be treated equally regardless of their nationality or ethnicity.

It should have been clear to them that punishing children in Japan for the provocative actions of Pyongyang is both utterly ludicrous and ethically repugnant.

In 2004, the board started providing safety alarms, each costing around ¥300, to first-year students of municipally run elementary schools. In a threatening situation, children activate the alarm, which sets off a loud noise to attract help.

The board has been giving out the alarms to students of private schools and the Korean school upon request. In February, the Korean school asked the board for 45 alarms.

After the board received more than 1,300 protest telephone calls and email messages, the board members held an emergency meeting and reversed the original decision by the general affairs section. They should be praised for their quick action to uphold the principle that it is the board of education's responsibility to ensure the safety of all children living in Machida City. They also agreed that the general affairs section should have consulted with them before making its original decision.

What happened in Machida is part of a bigger, very disturbing trend that is sweeping the country. Several prefectural governments have stopped subsidizing pro-North Korean schools. On Feb. 20, the Abe administration excluded pro-North Korean high schools from the government's tuition-waiver program. These decisions should be reversed. It is wrong to use children as political pawns, and doing so will only fan anti-Korean discrimination in Japan.

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Treat all students equally

The education ministry on Feb. 20 revised an ordinance to exclude so-called Korean high schools or pro-North Korea high schools from the government's tuition-waiver program. This change will cause various problems.

First of all, the revision violates the principle of an education program designed to ensure that all high school students in Japan receive an education regardless of the financial condition of their families. Excluding children attending Korean high schools also violates the principle of equality under the law as stipulated by Article 14 of the Constitution.

The government will have difficulty justifying the decision as not discriminatory to students of Korean high schools because the tuition-waiver program covers so-called international schools and schools with close ties to China and South Korea as well.

The decision could also fan prejudice and intolerance in Japanese society toward people who have different views, especially with regard to historical issues.

Education minister Mr. Hakubun Shimomura said on Dec. 28 that the government would not be able to get the public to support a tuition-waiver program that includes pro-North Korea schools, because they have close ties with the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon), which acts as North Korea's de facto diplomatic mission in Tokyo, and because there has been no progress toward resolving the issue of Japanese nationals abducted by North Korean agents in the 1970s and '80s.

The Democratic Party of Japan government introduced the tuition-free program from fiscal 2010. There are 12 Korean high schools in Japan with about 1,800 students, including both South Korean and Japanese nationals, but two of the schools are virtually closed. Most national and private universities regard graduates of

these high schools as having the same qualification as graduates of Japanese high schools and allow them to take their entrance exams.

The DPJ government chose not to act on the tuition waiver for Korean high schools while it was in power. The education ministry's move last week reflects Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's tough stance against North Korea's rocket launches and nuclear-weapons tests as well as the abduction issue.

Even if pro-North Korea high schools were covered by the tuition-waiver program, the schools themselves would not be financially supported by the Japanese government. The beneficiaries are individual children who have to pay tuition. The ministry's decision targets them.

Children attending Korean high schools have had nothing to do with North Korea's nuclear weapons program or the abduction of Japanese nationals. Excluding them will not help to resolve these problems. The right of foreign residents of Japan to study their own languages and history of their countries at schools they have established also should be upheld. That said, it would be helpful if Korean schools made greater efforts to make themselves transparent through class visits and other activities.

The government should heed the words of Mr. Shigeru Yokota, the father of Ms. Megumi Yokota, who was abducted in 1978 by a North Korean agent. Tokyo Shimbun quoted him as saying: "It is unreasonable to discriminate against second- and third-generation Koreans living legally in Japan. I would like Korean schools to sufficiently teach the abduction issue. But I think it is unreasonable to make the children take responsibility (for the abductions)."

The government should also consider what the international community will say about the decision. Criticism of Japan will likely be strong.