

International schools left out of free preschool education start

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Although the government pledged free preschool education across the nation starting Oct. 1, kindergartens and nursery schools are not included. Parents of Korean children march in Osaka's Kita Ward on Sept. 26 to demand eligibility for a new tuition-free program for kindergarten and nursery schools. Song He Suk, left, representative of a parents' association of Korean kindergartens, and other members hold a news conference to demand that miscellaneous schools be made eligible for a new tuition-free program on Sept. 26 at the education ministry in Tokyo's Kasumigaseki district.

Under the tuition-free program for kindergartens and nursery schools, targeting kids aged between 3 and 5, their fees will be subsidized by the government.

However, international schools that are categorized as "miscellaneous schools" are excluded from the program, including schools for ethnic Koreans.

"We don't understand why only miscellaneous schools are excluded from the program," said Song He Suk, representative of a parents' association of Korean kindergartens.

On the same day, the association submitted letters to the Cabinet Office, welfare ministry and others to demand that miscellaneous schools be made eligible for the free preschool education program.

"The government excluded (our kindergartens) without knowing the reality there and it is unreasonable," Song said.

According to the government and other sources, about 55,000 facilities across Japan are eligible for the tuition-free program. Kindergartens and nursery schools are deemed eligible, as well as unlicensed nurseries.

Excluded from the program are 88 miscellaneous schools' kindergartens, of which 40 are attached to Korean schools.

The excluded schools can be ruled eligible if they give up their preschools as miscellaneous schools and apply to be unlicensed nurseries by the start of the program in October.

In an international school in the Tokai region, its kindergarten, elementary, junior high and high schools are classified as miscellaneous schools. But as miscellaneous schools are not eligible for the program, the school will apply for its kindergarten, for ages 3 to 5, to become an unlicensed nursery.

Currently, 13 children are enrolled in the kindergarten of the international school at a monthly cost of more than 40,000 yen (\$371) per enrollee. Parents are unhappy that the school does not qualify for the tuition-free program like most other kindergartens.

"We are going to resolve it," a staff member said. "We are glad that the financial burden of parents will be reduced."

However, kindergartens attached to Korean schools won't take such measures like the international school. The subsidy for unlicensed nurseries is only provided to households that require their children to be taken care of, such as in cases where both parents work.

"Among parents, there are many whose eligibility for subsidies have not been allowed," a staff member said. "Gaps are created between parents."

Han Yon Shin, 40, chief of the kindergarten of a Korean school in Tokyo's Arakawa Ward where about 50 children aged 2-5 have been attending, said, "Our school serves roles as both a kindergarten and a nursery school.

"It is unfair that miscellaneous schools are excluded from the program although families whose kids attend Korean preschools have also paid taxes, which is a source of funding for the program."