

Attending Public School in Japan

Japan is a country of 125 million inhabitants, with a rich and ancient cultural tradition. The geography is varied, with many mountains and valleys.

The Japanese language is quite different from English. In fact, linguists (researchers who study to form and structure of languages) disagree on how Japanese evolved as a language and how closely it is related to other world languages. Because Japan is an archipelago (a series of islands), sections of the country were once quite isolated from one another. Even now, throughout Japan there are a number of different *dialects* (variant spoken versions of the language) that can make it difficult at times for a speaker of one dialect to understand a speaker of another dialect.

The food in Japanese public schools is generally very healthy but quite different than students are used to eating in America. Dishes may contain combinations of raw or cooked seafood, vegetables, noodles, rice, or seaweed. While meat is commonly served, the portions are smaller than are typical in American meals. Fast food has become popular in Japan, but diners must also be able to handle chopsticks.

In Japan, all children attend primary (elementary) school and middle school. Although high school is not mandatory in Japan, virtually all high-school-age students attend them. Unlike most American school systems, high schools in Japan are selective. Students must take competitive exams to be admitted to these schools, which are largely designed to prepare students for college. Many students choose to attend vocational schools, rather than academic high schools.

In public school, students must learn four separate writing systems: Kanji, hiragana, katakana, and romaji. The most challenging of these systems, kanji, is based on Chinese ideograms (words written as a pictorial series of brush- or pen-strokes) and takes years to learn to read and write properly.

Most high school students in Japan will tell you that they have no assigned homework. However, Japanese students regularly spend *several hours* per night reviewing their lessons and reading ahead on the material that will be covered in school the following day. Japanese students, like their American counterparts, love television shows, movies, computer games, and other forms of popular entertainment.