

Many Japanese schools fail to meet earthquake-resistant standards

Gary Alvernia
7 September 2018

Thousands of school buildings and structures in Japan fail to meet earthquake resistant standards, according to Tokyo's Education Ministry. This includes both the school buildings themselves and exterior walls found on school campuses. The danger was highlighted when one such exterior wall collapsed during a June 18 earthquake in Osaka Prefecture killing two people.

On August 28, the Education Ministry announced that 978 buildings at public elementary and junior high schools were not earthquake resistant as of April 1, putting the ministry three years behind its own schedule to have all buildings up to code. Despite this, the government only plans to reduce this number of schools to 360 by the end of fiscal year 2020.

An emergency review from the ministry published on August 10 also revealed that even more schools have external walls on their grounds that do not meet building regulations for safety.

The report identified 12,640 schools out of 51,058 surveyed nationally that had such deficient structures. The schools included kindergartens, elementary, junior and senior high schools, and universities. Given that only about 20,000 of the schools actually have external walls, this indicates that 60 percent of these schools have hazardous, unsafe structures.

Of these walls, 7,473 had clear signs of visible damage and degradation, heightening the risk of a collapse. Other structures violated height limitations or failed to have required buttresses.

The review took place after a wall at the Juei Elementary School in the city of Takatsuki, Osaka Prefecture collapsed during the June 18 earthquake. A nine-year-old girl who attended the school and an 80-year-old man were killed. The wall separated the school's swimming pool and a pedestrian path the two were using when the earthquake struck.

The entire structure stood at 3.5 metres, which included the wall itself at 1.6 metres, sitting on a 1.9-metre foundation. This placed the entire structure 1.3 metres above existing regulations. The wall also lacked necessary buttresses and had not been adequately reinforced by steel beams. Professor Yasushi Sanada of Osaka University, an expert in concrete structures and part of the government investigation team, noted "that the wall was already extremely unstable."

Sanada also stated that the steel rods found inside the school wall were too short, increasing the risk that the cinder blocks would detach themselves for the main structure, as happened during the earthquake. Many such walls were built before 1981, when updated regulations required the building of earthquake-resistant structures, a necessity in Japan where earthquakes are common.

This danger was already well known to local city officials in Takatsuki. Three years prior to the June tragedy, Ryoichi Yoshida, a disaster management expert, had informed the local education board responsible for Juei Elementary of the dangers inherent in the wall, which was close to a route to school taken by many students. He was ignored. The education board officials claimed to have "tested" the wall by hitting it with a hammer, and then told the school that it was safe.

Only 80 percent of the schools with dangerous walls identified in the report have taken measures to address the situation, with some removing the structures. Others merely placed warning signs for passers-by to stay away in the event of an earthquake. Following the deaths at Juei Elementary, the Takatsuki municipal authorities declared their intention to remove any concrete wall higher than 1.2 metres within the city.

The response from local authorities is indicative of a far wider problem. Under capitalism, vital safety issues are ignored or papered over in the name of saving money until disaster strikes, then officials posture as if they will make genuine changes to dispel anger and outrage, then drop their promises until the next tragedy.

Watch David North's remarks commemorating 25 years of the *World Socialist Web Site* and donate today.

In addition, there were significant regional disparities in the proportion of schools with dangerous walls, with 52 percent of schools in Okinawa prefecture found to have such structures, as compared to Hokkaido with only 4.5 percent, the highest and lowest rates in the country respectively. These numbers could be an underestimation, as the education ministry's review consisted of little more than a survey sent to education boards, with no external checks of the responses.

However, it is significant that Okinawa reports higher levels of dangerous school conditions as the prefecture also faces greater economic stresses than the rest of Japan. A third of Okinawan children live in poverty, more than double the rate on the mainland. Unemployment is more widespread and per capita income is also only 70 percent compared to the rest of the country. While poverty in Japan is by no means limited to Okinawa, this highlights that it is the poor and the working class who bear the brunt of attacks on education.

The condition of Japanese schools is not simply a product of neglect by local governments, but the result of decades of cuts in education spending. The government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has pledged no new funding to address school safety. It is only offering to re-direct funds from other school-related subsidies, while claiming that additional funds could be sought in the next fiscal year, which begins in April 2019.

The response by Tokyo is symptomatic of the broader slashing of funds for public education over the past 30 years. Japan currently spends roughly 3.5 percent of its GDP on education, well below the OECD average for advanced capitalist countries of 4.7 percent, and a marked decline from the 5.6 percent it spent in 1987.

The lack of funds has contributed to the continued use of deteriorating and unsafe structures by schools, which lack the resources to replace them or adopt safer alternatives. The lie that there is no money for schools

to keep children safe is belied by the fact that the government recently requested another record increase in military spending—a 2.1 percent jump from last year to 5.3 trillion yen (\$47 billion).



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact