

Make English mandatory for elementary pupils, Kosaka says

By Akemi Nakamura

The new education minister believes English education should be made
5 mandatory for elementary school students. “English does not have to be a formal
subject (at elementary schools), but I personally think it must be taught,” Kenji
Kosaka said Tuesday. Kosaka, 59, a Lower House member who was picked to head
up the Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry in the new
Cabinet formed on Monday, said English education at an early age would help
10 Japanese cope better with the international community.

“Japan is leading the world in information technology, and many Japanese
access the Internet and have opened Web sites, but such activities have not promoted
international communication due to the language barrier,” he said.

Elementary schools are not permitted to offer English as a formal subject
15 because it does not fall within the government’s academic guidelines for elementary
education. Nevertheless, an increasing number of elementary schools have begun
offering activities using English, including English-language games and conversation
lessons, during so-called comprehensive studies classes, which were introduced in
2002. According to the ministry, 92.1 percent of 22,481 public elementary schools
20 nationwide introduced English-language activities in fiscal 2004.

On Oct. 26, the Central Council for Education, an advisory panel to the
education ministry, published a report recommending that English education at
elementary schools be improved. “English education is not meant to teach (children)
grammar but to have them hear and speak the language. If (they) find pleasure in
25 communicating in English, it will motivate them to learn more about it,” said Kosaka,
who lived in the United States and Europe as an employee of Japan Airlines.

The education ministry needs to have experts discuss how English should be
taught to elementary schoolchildren, including how many classes they should have
annually and in which grade they should start learning it, Kosaka said.

30 Regarding whether the central government should continue providing
prefectures with subsidies to help cover teacher salaries, Kosaka said he will make
efforts to find “a point of compromise” as opinions on the matter are divided.

Half of the roughly 5 trillion yen in salaries paid to about 700,000 teachers and
other employees at public elementary and junior high schools nationwide comes from

35 the central government. But the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and the central
government are considering cuts in conditional subsidies from the central government
as part of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's reforms of the budgetary system. The
money saved would be transferred to local governments to give them greater control
over spending and policymaking. Local governments have demanded that the national
40 government cut and transfer to prefectures 850 billion yen in subsidies currently used
to cover teachers' salaries.

The Central Council for Education, however, recommended in the October
report that the current subsidy system be maintained to ensure equal levels of
education throughout the country. Kosaka said the central government should take
45 responsibility for elementary and junior high school education because compulsory
education is important to nurture capable people in order to develop society. "But I
understand (Japan) needs to promote decentralization. So I would like to listen to
opinions from various people and further discuss the matter," he said.

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