

## **Article 2. Recognition of Japanese as a Heritage Language (JHL) in Education: A Successful Orchestrated Global Effort by JHL Educators, Researchers, and Parents**

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This article describes a successful campaign organized by JHL (Japanese as a Heritage Language) educators, researchers, and JHL learners' parents all over the world to reach a cross-party group of lawmakers in Japan. The purpose of the petition was to have the Japanese lawmakers recognize the importance of JHL education outside Japan and to request that the governmental support for JHL education be clearly stated in the legislative bill. The success of this petition presents an example of an orchestrated grassroots campaign that made the impossible possible.

Regardless of tireless advocacy by JHL educators and researchers for governmental recognition of and support for overseas JHL education, the value of this education has been overlooked by the Japanese government for decades. The Japanese government has been allocating its overseas funding either for Japanese as a foreign language education, or for a limited number of Japanese supplementary weekend schools and Japanese weekday schools that adhere to the Japanese national curriculum, that aim to educate Japanese children who will eventually return to Japan with their family after a short period of stay in foreign countries. The JHL schools that were founded to cater to an increased number of JHL children who permanently live in foreign countries, however, have not been the subject of governmental support. These schools, therefore, are operated independently, primarily by parents, with tuition and fundraising as the only financial resources.

In Japan, the urgency for foreign workers to learn Japanese is important also, just as it is important for JHL learners to learn Japanese in foreign countries. This importance can be seen as Japan faces an unprecedented population decline in the near future, which will cause a significant shortage in the labor force. Consequently, Japan will have to rely heavily on a labor force from foreign countries in many fields. The Japanese government plans to permit 345,000 non-Japanese citizens to work in Japan during the upcoming five years. With an increasing

number of non-Japanese residents who do not speak Japanese, bolstering Japanese language education for them has become a matter of urgency for the government.

Facing with this urgency, a cross-party group of lawmakers drafted the *Basic Act on the Promotion of Japanese Language Education (Nihongo Kyoiku Suishin Kihon Houan)*, a bill that would become Japan's first-ever law defining the government's responsibility to provide non-Japanese residents in Japan with Japanese language education. The bill also called on the government to support Japanese language education for Japanese children who reside overseas. The ambiguity of the wording, "Japanese children residing overseas," however, concerned overseas JHL educators and researchers. It was not clear whether the wording includes JHL children who live permanently in foreign countries, or only the Japanese children who learn Japanese at the aforementioned limited number of Japanese supplementary weekend schools and Japanese weekday schools, and will return to Japan.

In order to clarify the definition of "Japanese children residing overseas" and to clearly request governmental support for the overseas JHL children, the JHL SIG (Special Interest Group) of the American Association of Japanese Teachers in the U.S. and the Japanese Heritage Language Education SIG of the Japanese Society for Mother Tongue, Heritage Language, and Bilingual Education in Japan jointly sent an open letter to the lawmakers of the cross-party group with eleven signatures of prominent JHL educators and researchers in Australia, Canada, Japan, and the U.S. The letter was published on the website "Nihongoplat" (platform for promotion of Japanese language education) to make it publicly and widely available.

At the same time, these two SIGs asked their members and Japanese teachers' organizations in Australia, Asia, Canada, Europe, and the U.S. to sign the online petition to support the request in the open letter. This request spread at once from members on several mailing lists to their friends and parents of JHL children, from one organization to others, and to local Japanese community magazines. Within two weeks, the petition gathered 2,005 signatures from all over the world. It was a crucial period just before it was planned to submit the bill to the Diet. As the result of this globally orchestrated effort by JHL educators, researchers, and parents of JHL children, the draft of the bill was revised. The new draft, with a revised title, *Act on the Promotion of Japanese Language Education (Nihongo Kyoiku Suishin*

*Houan*) includes governmental support for the Japanese language education of Japanese children living overseas permanently.

The bill was submitted for its deliberation at the Diet session, which ran from January 28 to June 2 in 2019, and unanimously passed. The successful outcome of the petition campaign has proven that grassroots efforts can make the impossible possible: The advocacy of JHL educators, researchers, and parents over the decades has finally produced a successful result.