

Guaranteeing Upper Secondary Education and Educational Local Autonomy in Depopulated Areas: A Case Study of the Establishment of Hokkaido Ozora High School

Research Overview: This qualitative case study examines the guarantee of upper secondary education and educational local autonomy in Japan's depopulated regions. By clarifying how a small municipality maintained a high school through extensive resident participation during the establishment of Hokkaido Ozora High School, this research provides implications for educational administration.

Purpose of Study The ongoing population decline in contemporary Japan has led to the reorganization of regional high schools, resulting in the disappearance of schools from depopulated areas. In Hokkaido, the Hokkaido Board of Education has promoted the consolidation of small-scale high schools. However, some municipalities have opted to maintain their schools by transferring founding authority to the local government to revitalize the region and sustain education. The purpose of this study is to examine the case of Ozora High School, which opened in 2021, and to clarify the mechanism of "educational local autonomy". Unlike previous cases with dominant administrative leadership, Ozora's establishment was characterized by extensive resident participation. This study verifies the outcomes and challenges of such participation by analyzing how the administration formulated survival policies through dialogue and developed an educational vision.

Research Methods This research is a qualitative case study based on longitudinal fieldwork in Ozora Town. Data sources include:

- **Semi-structured interviews:** Conducted with key stakeholders, including the Ozora Town Board of Education, the private educational firm (Prima Pinguino Inc.), the principal of Hokkaido Ozora High School, and local residents.

- **Document analysis:** Analysis of town council minutes, the "Ozora Town Basic Ordinance on Local Autonomy," educational curriculum proposals, and materials from resident briefing sessions.

Results and Discussion

Results:

The analysis identified three key components of the establishment process:

1. **Legal and Organizational Foundation:** The "Ozora Town Basic Ordinance on Local Autonomy" (2012) mandated resident participation in significant policy changes. This ordinance regulated administrative efforts regarding reorganization and provided a democratic framework for participation.
2. **Structured Deliberation:** The town established the "Council for Considering High School Education," consisting of PTA members, alumni, and community leaders. Through "Fureai Talk" (town halls), over 500 residents engaged in dialogue, transforming the suspension of recruitment at existing schools into a proactive "evolutionary integration".
3. **Co-creation of the Educational Vision "Hiko-ki-bito" (Airplane People):** Residents and experts collaborated to define the ideal student profile. This "Hiko-ki-bito" vision was subsequently handed over to the teaching staff and became the core curriculum for the new Comprehensive Course.

Discussion: The case of Ozora Town demonstrates how small-scale municipalities can guarantee upper secondary education by co-creating educators' expertise and residents' local identity. Establishing a school supported by residents requires forming a sense of ownership among them. On the other hand, such education requires responsiveness to local needs while maintaining academic standards. This study suggests that institutionalizing resident participation through local ordinances is a vital "local innovation" for achieving global visions of educational equity.

Keywords

Educational local autonomy, Resident participation, School consolidation, Depopulated areas,
Hokkaido Ozora High School